

QUEER PERFORMANCE IN THE POST-MILLENNIAL SCRAMBLE

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Abstract

The subject of this dissertation is contemporary queer feminist performance in Canada. My practice-informed research takes a unique approach to studying performance through what I call the “queer performance scramble”—a term that draws on the multiple meanings of “scramble” to understand the aesthetics of queer performance and its challenges to stable conceptions of both identity and temporality. I investigate works that are happening now and that scramble the sticky elements of their own cultural constructions and queer temporalities. The temporal turn in queer theory supports my engagement with the effects of temporality, performativity, and history on queer performance, and, conversely, the effects of queer performance on time. I am equally interested in the formal and material dimensions of the work I study. I look to the content, style, material conditions, and social scenes of queer feminist performance from the perspective of both an academic and an artist to make accessible work that is often marginalized within Canadian cultural production ecology.

Chapter 1 investigates queer feminist hauntings with an analysis of Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue’s *Killjoy’s Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*. Chapter 2 argues that cabaret is the primary site for queer feminist performance in Canada, and when framed as a methodological problem/solution matrix, both the celebratory and limiting potential of the form can be explored. In chapter 3 I analyze performances by Jess Dobkin, Dayna McLeod, and Shaista Latif to excavate forms of durationality that expose the complex interplay of life and art. And, in chapter 4, I turn to practice-based research methodology to explore the concept of queer resonance in a trans feminist performance called *trace*.

This research will give rise to new conversations about the Canadian performance ecology and its performance archive. It will enrich theoretical considerations of “queer” as

always already transtemporal and intractable and make an intervention into the ideological space between queer and feminist performance studies. Thinking within the rubric of the queer performance scramble means thinking differently about performance and time—while always keeping the art at the very centre of the investigation and always returning to it for guidance.

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Introduction

The subject of “Queer Performance in the Post-Millennial Scramble” is contemporary queer feminist performance in Canada. My research analyzes and describes phenomena I have witnessed in queer feminist performance in Toronto and Montreal over the past decade or so, among artists whose work is known to one another. The scramble is mobilized differently in each chapter as I investigate collaborative practices, material conditions of production, and collective and individual acts of “going-on” that constitute the scene(s) of contemporary queer feminist subcultures in Toronto and Montreal.

The multiple denotations of my keyword “scramble” provide productive touchstones for understanding and critiquing contemporary queer performance. Scramble denotes the act of moving or climbing over something (especially using the hands); acting quickly to do, find, or get something; a disarrangement of the elements of transmission (a code or phone signal); a random process of floating to the top; a disordered mass; a collection of things; or making way as best one can. These multiple denotations are used in my research as frameworks for the investigation of contemporary queer performance practice in Canada.

The queer performance scramble is an embodied practice that can be taken up in multiple divergent ways through a variety of means. A concept synchronous to “queer,” the scramble is mobilized as a way to articulate the unexpected outcomes of queer performance and life. Queer performance generates subcultural assemblages wherein being in the scene, on the scene, and contributing to the scene as part of a collection, or scramble, of things is central to the world-making practice of queer culture. The queer performance scramble revels in the dishevelment of tidy identity-based confines inside and outside queer subcultures, and the indecipherability of one part from another. Scrambling is a willful act, a self-conscious self-fragmenting that

celebrates not being pinned down. It is a wriggling brand of disobedience that is independently motivated and never inert. Queering and scrambling are sympathetic, but never co-dependent, cycles of interaction and disruption.

This research aims to reveal the tensions between narratives of progress that buttress institutionalized representations of queer and the slippery performativity of contemporary queerness. Each chapter has particular performances or events at its centre—works that give form to new understandings of the layered constitution of gender, temporality, subjectivity, and identity—while asserting a conviction that feminism is a vital and integral aspect of progressive queer ideologies. My research foregrounds the performances under investigation and views the texts and objects it seeks to address as theoretical foundations in and of themselves. Theorizing a post-millennial scramble helps to define the parameters of a body of work created in Canada after the millennium by queer feminist artists who identify as such. My scope is limited to performances and events emerging from Montreal and Toronto, with some reference in chapter 4 to a trans-Canada tour. Limiting the scope in this way allows me to productively analyze the material conditions of production that are integral to an understanding of this body of work. How and where the work is made influences what and why the work is. A theorization of queer feminist performance artists and events in Montreal and Toronto responds to a need for a more nuanced and sustained examination of queer performance in Canada where such work, generally speaking, is not thickly described or analyzed. Through their embrace of the scrambled reckoning of the contemporary performance ecology, the artists represented here assemble queer archives within the very performances they scramble to present.

The concept of the scramble is used to theorize new temporal formulations. The artists represented in this dissertation do not adhere to immutable temporal structures; disappearance,

reappearance, and redux are time and again properties of the post-millennial scramble of queer performance. This dissertation engages with a plethora of forms and temporalities to show queer feminist performance acts as a scramble between theatricality and performativity. In the post-millennial environment of post-feminist, post-queer, and post-colonial assumptions, the queer performance scramble is a challenge to universalizing ideologies that confront the tension between identity politics and anti-identitarian critiques. The scramble is a response to the knowledge that “[t]he price of gain in self-representation is often paid by the service that follows, as one is repeatedly asked to appear dressed in identity clothing” (Wiegman, *Object Lessons* 7).

The theatrical process of “trying on” a persona, of “trying out” representation, is at the heart of the malleable and unstable identity formation known as queer. Performativity, after Judith Butler, names the embodied repetition of social codes that determine and reiterate our position in the world—a world composed of both the private and public realms. Agency, then, “is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 198). This dissertation is invested in engaging with a queer performance archive in the post-millennial scramble; one that will expand the notion of agency within performativity (and performance) by moving beyond the individual to a collection—a collage of acts that persist in performing themselves into being through multiple acts of agency. “Queer Performance in the Post-Millennial Scramble” sifts through problems of condition and possibility. It replaces generalized identity formulations with a world of interconnected small acts, for, as Susan Bordo suggests, “when we bring marginalized aspects of our identities into the central arena of culture they are themselves transformed and transforming” (42). This dissertation asks what assumptions underlie the assessment of queer performance by engaging with queer feminist performances of the present moment to reveal the interconnectedness of seemingly scrambled one-off

performances through their formal, political, and material conditions. By theorizing the cultural production of contemporary queer women's performance in Canada, I open a window onto the larger institutional conditions of theatrical production in the country at the present moment taking place in environments that increasingly want to declare themselves post-queer and post-feminist—even as our need to resist universalization acquires increasing urgency.

My theorization of queer performance is in conversation with contemporary queer theory, particularly temporal theory. Identities are formed collaboratively and cross-temporally. The theorists and artists with whom I am engaging attempt to break the regulatory structures of straight time—they dream of an escape from the ideological pressures of life in normative temporal restraints. The queer performances that constitute my subjects persist in their scramble to emerge on the surface without the security of dedicated institutional support, or known futurity. The scramble is a temporal condition that acts as a point of dissonance to the contrapuntal tensions between Lee Edelman's "no future" and José Esteban Muñoz's "utopia," while incorporating Gertrude Stein's nervousness at being out of time and Carolyn Dinshaw's and Elizabeth Freeman's efforts to touch across time. Edelman argues for queer as a disruption of the heteronormative logic of the innocence of the child as a symbol of all that is good and meaningful. Dinshaw and Freeman posit visceral and affective connections to history that allow for a queer sort of touch across time. When thinking through contemporary queer feminist performance within the context of all of these temporal theories together, a unique resonance of the present begins to emerge. Edelman doesn't offer any solace or any hope, only a spiralling end to the future as we know it, whereas Freeman embraces the concept of generations as a queer way of not disavowing but jamming and complicating reproductive futurity. Freeman argues, as does Dinshaw, for an image of time that is expansive in the present, flowing out in concentric

circles to encompass the past, in dialogue with both past and future. Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, extends the present to an always imminent futurity—unfolding and folding back on itself, suggesting that “the world that the here and now organizes [is] not fixed—[it] is already coming undone in relation to a forward dawning futurity” (29). Stein, in the early twentieth century, developed the concept of theatre as landscape to tackle her own nervousness at the out-of-time experience of the theatre. My dissertation absorbs and intervenes in these established theories with an emphasis on restarts, returns, loops, and ongoing goings-on, which appear to be chronic (S. Warner, “Chronic Desires”). I tap into (and expand on) these formulations in order to set-up the scramble of post-millennial queer Canadian performance as a temporality that accesses everything in the now, tries it on in the moment of its performance, and contemplates its potentiality without ever losing sight of its past.

As a temporal phenomenon, the scramble is about remediating (simultaneously reclaiming and reconfiguring); it is a syncretic temporal mash-up that celebrates the very pleasure in scrambling. The scramble allows for a new style of comprehension that extends beyond the circuits of waves, and, paradoxically, includes “a circuit that is *renewed* by a force turning back on itself” (S. Warner, *Acts of Gaiety* 27) to reactivate some of the unfinished business of twentieth-century feminist and queer art and activism.

My dissertation is in direct conversation with contemporary feminist theory, as well as feminist theory of the twentieth century, both of which worked to reveal the very basis of meaning-making by expanding beyond the tireless work of retrieving women from buried histories to open investigations into the structural marginality of those gendered female. The feminists of the twentieth century sought two things: redistribution of power and public representation. All they got was representation. Feminism, in the global version of now, is

legible only as a time-limited offer presumed to be resolved by representation. The queer performance scramble likens representation to a mirror ball or a funhouse mirror, fragmenting and distorting it to reclaim it within performances that generate new performances and new ways of being and knowing.

In Canada, queer women's performance often falls between the folds of disciplines and institutions. The queer feminist is marked as "other" even within the politically identified institutions such as queer theatres like *Buddies* in Bad Times Theatre and feminist theatres like Nightwood Theatre.¹ The discourse follows suit with a number of excellent essays and volumes dedicated to the work of gay theatrical production in Canada (Bateman; Cowan; Dickinson et al.; Halferty; McLean; Wallace; Zisman Newman) and an ongoing scholarly practice around the documentation and theorization of feminist or women's performance (Bennett; Forsyth; Jones; Mars and Householder; Scott). Recent, and imminent, work on the Canadian festival and cabaret circuits touch on the conditions of production that sustain the queer and feminist performance ecology. Shelley Scott's work on feminist festivals demonstrates the impact of collective gatherings on the development of feminist performance, and the overall vibrancy of these performance scenes. T.L. Cowan's survey of cabaret events in Canada in *More Caught in the Act* provides a unique resource for the sheer volume of work that emerges from such circuits. Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder's edited collections of essays that profile Canadian women's performance art (*Caught in the Act* and *More Caught in the Act*) make accessible an important body of art and criticism on feminist performance art in Canada that emerges from the visual arts tradition. Rosalind Kerr's anthology, *Lesbian Plays*, and her critical anthology of queer performance, *Queer Theatre in Canada*, are important contributions to the presence of queer women in theatre in Canada. The recent publication of a new set of texts—one critical and

one performance anthology—edited by Peter Dickinson et al. is a welcome addition to the critical discourse offering a culturally diverse collection of works by some emerging and some established theatre and performance artists and scholars from across the country. But these interventions leave a vast territory of contemporary theatrical, paratheatrical, and performance-based work by queer Canadian women unrepresented and untheorized; including queer feminist festival and cabaret culture, the networks and social scenes that exist among queer feminist artists in Canada, and the queer interdisciplinary performance practices that emerge from visual, sonic, and theatre arts-based traditions.

My research emerges from my own personal experience as a theatre and performance artist, writer, and curator. This project is an extension of my previous research into the material conditions of queer women's theatrical production and the aesthetic and stylistic trends in contemporary queer women's performance in Canada. My book chapter in *Theatre and Performance in Toronto*, "The Foster Children of Buddies: Queer Women at 12 Alexander," celebrated the contribution of queer women artists to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre from 1995 to 2010, while investigating the nature of this work as systemically marginalized or "easily marginalizable—the kind of work that can take up less space for less pay" (200). "Queer Performance: Women and Trans Artists," the issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* that I edited in 2012, sought to examine the contributions of queer women and trans artists on a national level and to infiltrate the theatrical discourse with ideas and work from some of the unsung leaders in theatrical innovation, multi-disciplinarity, and experimentation.

The research outcomes of my doctoral study include this dissertation as well as a new anthology of contemporary queer women's performance in Canada entitled *Queer/Play*, both of

which represent a significant intervention into the field and a substantial expansion of existing scholarship within performance studies and the queer performance archive in Canada.

Canadian cultural criticism, which engages with queer theoretical considerations of women and transgendered artists in performance, does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is heavily influenced by international scholarship and cultural production (Aston; Berlant; Brown; Case; Diamond; Dolan; Freeman; Halberstam; Jones; Lord; Lorenz; Love; Phelan; Reckitt). Artists and thinkers engage in cross-border flows of influence and collaboration; however, my intervention engages with specifically Canadian cultural production to expand and complicate the queer theoretical discourse. To delineate my topic as Canadian is to impose a number of conditions, not the least of which is a temporal one. As a nation, we experience things together (the legal status of queers and women; the integration of diverse peoples; the erratic reinstatement of Indigenous rights; and the waves of cuts and increases to arts and educational funding). These temporally situated experiences are unique to our national experience and cultural identity (Tremblay). A queer Canadian feminist perspective is a marginal perspective, and an investment in it means simultaneously examining and contributing to the broader archive of queer performance and culture.

Methodology

This dissertation considers the context of the performances, and the goals of the artists creating them, to shed new light on contemporary queer performance through production analysis, cultural materialist analysis, and a critical investment in the idea of performance as theory. After Freeman, my commitment to production analysis is a commitment to “close reading: the decision to unfold slowly a number of imaginative texts rather than amass a weighty archive of or around texts, and to treat these texts and their formal work as theories of their own, interventions upon

both critical theory and historiography” (*Time Binds* xvii). My approach will concurrently expose the web-like genealogies of various texts and events to reveal the intersections among the bodies of work investigated. My methodology takes its cue from the artists I theorize, and from queer and feminist theory that calls for the parsing of “small acts” and an investment in the deep theorization of “the rear guard” (Ferguson). Like J. Jack Halberstam, I am committed to a willful form of archival assemblage and to “celebrating, and analyzing queer subcultures before they are dismissed by mass culture, or disheartened by lack of exposure or dogged by what might be called ‘subcultural fatigue’” (*In a Queer Time* 156).

My positionality is within the very culture I investigate as a queer feminist theatre and performance artist. I use my resources as both an academic and an artist to make accessible the practices and processes of subjects whose work is often marginalized within Canadian cultural production ecology. However, my observations do not aim to constitute a totalizing ideology, for, as bell hooks has said, when a theory is transformed into an ideology “no one can tell it anything new” (10). It follows, then, that feminism is a vital through-line in my overall methodology because, as Amelia Jones has stated, “[f]eminism has, whether intentionally, explicitly, or not, *slowed down* the quick super-glue certainties of art criticism and related discourses,” with its “rich and conflicted tendency to expose the circuits of meaning making as inexorably productive of and supported by structures of power” (*Seeing Differently* 174).

The discourse analysis and production analysis within this dissertation are augmented by interviews with some of the artists whose performances I discuss. The information I emphasize shifts from chapter to chapter, with different aspects of the works being foregrounded in each chapter. I use my position as an insider within the culture I seek to investigate to access grant applications, determine production methodologies, and tease out the detailed sources of

inspiration behind the works. Aside from seeing the works live (which I have done with all of the works under consideration), I draw on performance documentation and other traces of the works, including scripts, text excerpts, storyboards, and inspirational ephemera from the creation and production process. I examine all of this information alongside audience reception and occasionally media representation (where applicable). I trace certain works over various iterations, and track the changes that come with time and space. The temporality of production, creation, and development are critical to a deeper understanding of the works with which I am engaged. Equally, we shall see the influence of space on the methods, means, and practices of the artists studied within this dissertation. How and where the work is produced shapes what the work is. In this area, Ric Knowles's *Reading the Material Theatre* provides a methodological starting point for a cultural materialist analysis (in a Canadian production context) that resists universalist readings of performance.

All of the works I investigate here have already happened—some of them are still happening, and some of them will happen again in new iterations and locations. The methodology I employ is in direct conversation with the temporal theories that support the critical intervention this dissertation seeks to make in the fields of performance studies and queer theory. Yvonne Rainer, in a lecture at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2015, suggested that in “the post-everything climate of contemporary life neutrality is an impossibility.” What does the prevalence of nominal post-ness do to the understanding of the works, identities, and sexualities within the queer performance milieu? I posit that queer performance breathes life into the ongoing process of being and becoming, always knowing that “neutrality is an impossibility,” and being and becoming are inherently sites of performance and performativity. This dissertation seeks to animate the archival traces of queer feminist performance's own, endless identifications.

After Mel Y. Chen, I embrace the challenges of the “current circulation of terms like postqueer” by employing queer “as an analytic and a method” (57). Citing works that are going on and ongoing is the foundation of my methodological compulsion because it is precisely this kind of unfixeness that the scramble addresses.

Placing the performances and events of queer feminist cultural production at the heart of this research foregrounds them and maps their trajectories—trajectories that identify the gaps and absences that are otherwise undocumented. As I demonstrate in chapter 2, absence gets forgotten, and disappearance becomes an unmarked erasure. The gaps and absences in a subcultural performance record are always already ignored by the mainstream, but are ignored by queer scholars as well because they are not seen, valued, or documented. My research allows for the excavation of these gaps and activates these absences because they contribute so much to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a part of a queer performance scramble where artists are so often struggling to make way as best they can over the steep and rough terrain of their material conditions of production. The ephemera and temporality of interruption, restarts, returns, and loops are significantly representative of the very scramble that this dissertation theorizes.

I look to the content, style, material conditions, and social scenes of queer feminist performance from a perspective that oscillates between scholar and artist. As a scholar, I take up Halberstam’s charge that “queer academics can—and some should—participate in the ongoing project of recording queer culture as well as interpreting it and circulating a sense of its multiplicity” (*In a Queer Time* 159). As an artist, I engage with practice-based and practice-informed interventions that both challenge and enrich traditional scholarship. My curatorial practice informs my methodology in so much as I seek to gather performances around central

themes and aesthetics, in this case related to my theorization of the post-millennial scramble. The temporal turn in queer theory supports my desire to pursue a line of investigation that considers the effects of temporality, performativity, and history on queer performance, and the effects of queer performance on time. In order to do this, I investigate works that are happening now and that scramble the sticky elements of their own cultural constructions and queer temporalities.

Chapter Breakdown

“Queer Performance in the Post-Millennial Scramble” is about the ways that queer feminist performance in Canada is developed, produced, disseminated, and sustained. This dissertation’s chapters share an investment in exploring these concerns while focusing on different forms and methods in each.

I begin in chapter 1 (entitled “*Killjoy’s Kastle: A Monstrous Collaboration*”) with an analysis of Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue’s *Killjoy’s Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*. This chapter asserts that queer feminist performance is subject to the ideological hauntings of feminisms past. Doing feminist performance now is not anachronistic. Entirely present, the queer feminist is ghosted by identifications accumulated over time. *Killjoy’s Kastle*, which adopts as its form the carnival haunted house, summons these ghosts from across time to illustrate the ways that queer feminist subjectivities are formed from representational impersonations in the present. The mirror ball/funhouse mirror the show holds up to queer and feminist types, tropes, and ghosts destabilizes the spectators’ relationship to a subculture that is dramatically and often parodically displayed in a setting that is part visual art display, part interactive performance, and part freak show. My analysis draws on feminist theory and queer theory alongside practice-informed research to create a lively scramble where theory and creative

processes intermingle. Investigating feminisms from a queer theoretical standpoint means embracing incompleteness, scrambling linearity, and challenging the limits of progress narratives.

The chapter's subtitle, "A Monstrous Collaboration," is a gesture toward some of the central arguments it seeks to make. The subculture it represents is often perceived as monstrous: marginal, deviant, and scary. The work itself is of a scale not often seen within the realm of queer feminist performance (monstrous), and the collaborations it engages include collaborations with time as well as with living artists and ideological hauntings. Collaboration, as will be seen, is a topic that runs through the various chapters of this dissertation in multiple diverse ways.

In chapter 2 (entitled "Queer Feminist Cabaret: Disappearance, Resurrection, and Return") I shift my focus to the form most commonly engaged to make and sustain queer feminist practices and audiences: cabaret. I argue that cabaret is the primary site for queer feminist performance in Canada, and when framed as a methodological problem/solution matrix, both the celebratory and limiting potential of the form can be explored. I give close consideration to two cabaret events with long and unstable histories: Montreal's *Edgy Women/Edgy Redux*, and Toronto's *Strange Sisters/Insatiable Sisters* cabarets. Additionally, I draw on the content of Alex Tigchelaar's *Dirty Plotz* cabaret as a performed critique of the very marginalization that it enacts to investigate the circuits (and limits) of cultural flow in Canada that are available to queer performance makers. Here, the scramble of post-millennial queer performance highlights not only a disarrangement of the elements of transmission emitted by subcultural lives and identities but also the eager passions and heterogeneous fragments of queer cultural production that persist in their scramble to emerge on the surface, only to be resubmerged into a disordered mass and ready themselves to scramble back to the surface again and again.

As a mode of production, cabaret offers the artists very limited (if any) financial or developmental support. A material analysis of select events demonstrates the structural marginality of this performance milieu where work is often produced with little developmental time for little pay. But in the time-out-of-time reality of cabarets, the participants (artists and audience alike) can engage in a productive disavowal of their own structural marginalization. This disavowal is theatrical in itself; it reveals the creative self-realization and self-performance of queer life and art—a revelation of its present moment of enactment.

Queer feminist cabaret demonstrates what all live performance aspires to: the living exchange. The performances discussed in this chapter demonstrate the way performance gains its significance by bringing live bodies together in real time and real space to create an environment where queer desire, performativity, and performance coalesce. A significant part of the socio-political impact of cabaret rests in its direct address, where spectators are *seen* to be on the scene. Their presence inflects and guides the work of the performers, even as the acts go on. Cabaret is a uniquely collaborative form where artists interact with audience members and this interaction asserts influences that ricochet between artists, audience, and then other artists to reinforce a concept of performance as a community-making practice. Cabaret performance is a vital subcultural practice that constitutes the ways and means of much queer performance in Canada now. The assemblages that emerge from and affect the work of cabaret performance are part of the greater collaborative methodology that defines cabaret as a form. Cabaret, like the scramble, is relational; each element of it exists in relation to all the other elements and to the overall framing and to the audience it attracts.

Multiple beginnings are a queerly consistent component of the queer performance scramble. As a temporal phenomenon, queer feminist cabaret is subject time and again to

disappearance, reappearance, and redux. This chapter shows that, in order to understand queer feminist performance productions, one must trace not only the histories of that which is done but also that which is not done, the undone, the gaps, and the absences in the fragmented trajectory of queer feminist cultural production. Much like temporalities discussed in chapter 1, *Killjoy's Kastle*, we see how the performance scramble engages with returns, restarts, and refusals to end because queer women's visibility is in constant dialogue with its own disappearance.

In chapter 3 (entitled "The Performance Has Started/The Performance Is Still Going On") I shift to the in-depth study of specific performances by artists who are part of the very same communities that make and sustain cabaret culture and larger collaborative practices. However, collaborations, here, shift into meaningful relationships with one's own survival—a shift that involves ongoing revisions of what was, what is, and what may be. In this chapter I examine three solo performance works that were generated through (and germinated in) cabaret and other collaborative practices. These works intersect with the networks that exist across the queer feminist performance cultures of the cabarets discussed in chapter 2 and the personal and sociological hauntings discussed in chapter 1. Here, we delve into an exploration of sustained practices through specific projects that demonstrate the complex interplay among life, performance, time, and art to observe new manifestations of the performance scramble within the work of three queer artists whose life and art are always inevitably inter-textual, and whose commitment to self-construction, deconstruction, and regeneration is ongoing.

Attention in this chapter is given to the significance of individual survival (the act of going on) to the larger ideological field of queer feminist performance. Here, I identify new formulations for the queer feminist durationality with an analysis of three performances that demonstrate the ways that performance and life intersect. Each of the performances discussed—

Dayna McLeod's *Cougar for a Year*, Jess Dobkin's *The Magic Hour*, and Shaista Latif's *The Archivist*—reframes the concept of durationality in performance so that duration is sometimes the performance form and sometimes the unbroken thread between life and art. Each of these works has a temporal condition embedded into its very title that suggests a shared investment in the questions of when-ness, then-ness, and next-ness. Examining these works through the lens of durationality allows me to analyze the works from the perspective of time in performance alongside time in relation to material contexts and lived experience.

This chapter seeks to excavate the confluence of being and performing at once, and the formal ways that the scramble to do both is enacted. The performances in this chapter finds themselves on the tipping point between conscious self-performance (theatrical acts) and unconscious performativity (the compulsion to repeat) to generate work that is about the ongoing act of going on...and performing oneself into authenticity. Each of these performances is invested in troubling the concept of the stable subject and confronting the out-of-controlness of acts that show the artist to be who she is, always, even in performance.

When artists perform on the tipping point between theatricality and performativity they rely on temporal formulations that go beyond pure repetition to access an embodied knowledge of the way straight temporalities fail to be effective structures for understanding the impact of trauma and memory in their capacity to distort and reorder time. Performance is experience, and the artist's very survival creates the possibility for her to rework that which defines her survival and make of it a durational performance of endurance. Here, the scramble is a willful act, a self-conscious self-fragmentation that scrambles the time of performance with lifetimes of experience. The works in this chapter (and the dissertation more broadly) demonstrate just how hard beginnings are to pin down.

The final chapter of my dissertation (entitled “Queer Resonance and Transtemporal Collaboration”) focuses on the performance *trace*, which Tristan Whiston and I created. This chapter is unique in that it is the product of a practice-based research methodology that took place at the beginning of my dissertation research. The project and the research began with these questions: How do we reconcile all of who we have been with, who we are now, and who we have yet to become? How do we show the show of our past, which is always with and around us, that tugs on our subjectivity and inflects our identity, without getting caught up in a chrononormative narrative? The performance and the research emerge from a study of, and experiment with, the vocality of gender transition as a symbol for queer being and becoming. This chapter addresses how the sonic can be used as a performative means of extending queerness: not to queer, but instead to acknowledge the ways that queerness resonates outward beyond queer bodies to reveal a sonic counter score of the multiply-constituted queer subject-in-process.

Sound is a major component of performance, and, as we shall see, of performativity. This chapter articulates the centrality of resonance as a modality through which to understand performance and excavate sonic modes of performance creation and analysis. Resonance is invoked literally and figuratively in this excavation of queer sound and time (and sound as a way of scrambling time) to demonstrate the way the queer subject is forever and repeatedly constituted from a collage of self-representations and meanings. Many of the concerns addressed in the above chapters are revisited here within the context of trans feminist performance creation, which seeks to scramble the concept of time with being, engage with collaborations across time, centre individual experience as a valid and vital source of inspiration, address the material conditions of production that have a significant impact on what gets done and not done, and use a

hybrid of practice and theory to generate new knowledge about the ways and means of queer feminist cultural production in Canada.

Queer feminist performance in the post-millennial scramble gives voice to subjectivities that are otherwise lost in the totalizing containers of categorical identity narratives. In this dissertation, I examine multiple divergent examples of queer feminist performance because, as Wiegman has said, “like it or not, under the auspices of identity knowledges, what we share the most begins and ends in divergence” (*Object Lessons* 135). Wiegman takes as axiomatic “that the complexities of our attachments are not ours to consciously behold” (134), so that self-fragmenting rather than self-cohering gets closer to the heart of self-representation and self-knowledge than attachments to stable categories and forms.

I see my investment in this work as a useful and willful form of archival assemblage, one that will enrich the contemporary queer performance discourse as well as challenge disciplinary boundaries and the institutional mandates that rely on such discourses. This research will give rise to new conversations about the Canadian performance ecology and its performance archive. It will enrich theoretical considerations of “queer” as always already transtemporal and intractable. The scramble is nimble and slippery. It defies the very post-ness it feeds on. It is historical and ongoing. It is queer.

Note

1. Founded in 1979 by Sky Gilbert, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre is the largest and longest-running queer theatre in Canada. Located in downtown Toronto, the theatre has two performance spaces: the main space with flexible seating and a capacity for about 300 patrons, depending on the seating arrangements, and the cabaret space, which has a capacity for about 120 patrons, a very small stage, and a bar. Nightwood Theatre was founded in the same year by Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe, and Maureen White with a mandate to produce plays by women. Nightwood's administrative office and rehearsal space are located in the Distillery District of Toronto. Nightwood does not have a theatre/performance venue of its own.

Chapter One

Killjoy's Kastle: A Monstrous Collaboration

Feminism in the post-millennial scramble does not signify a single entity or designation in time—the waves that came before now continue to circulate just under the surface of whatever we define as contemporary. If queerness, as José Esteban Muñoz suggests, is “essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (*Cruising Utopia* 1), then the queer feminist intentionality in *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House* summons past feminisms into new landscapes for queer feminist utopias and dystopias. Through its ideological hauntings, its mirror ball/funhouse mirror modes of reflecting and refracting, and its monstrous dimensions and sexualities, *Killjoy's Kastle* is a sculptural performance event whose materials consist of the animate, the thought, the considered, the judged, the real, and the performed, to destabilize the spectators' relationship to a subculture that is excessively, and sometimes parodically, displayed. In this chapter the queer performance scramble is used to theorize new temporal formulations relative to understanding feminist ideology past and present. As manifested in *Killjoy's Kastle*, it is an aesthetic strategy that embraces multiplicity—because one way to be in time with feminisms' past and present is to dive straight into the mess of the not yet there, nor done, nor ever there. In the scramble, linearity is, if anything, a random occurrence, because scrambled parts go everywhere in all directions, here and there, and new potentialities for multiple concurrent identity attachments and formulations are realized.

In the Toronto (2013) and Los Angeles (2015) productions of *Killjoy's Kastle*, I played one of the Demented Women's Studies Professors. The Demented Women's Studies Professors acted as guides, leading groups¹ through the work by approaching everything from a pseudo-

pedagogical position and inserting bold (and subjective) theorization into every stage of the experience. In this chapter I will examine the temporal, aesthetic, and theoretical strategies that mark this performance event as exemplary of queer feminist performance in the post-millennial scramble. But first, I will introduce the oppositional inspiration for the project and its collaborative beginnings, and lay out some of the theoretical terrain over which the work traverses and against which it struggles to exist.

On Saturday, 26 January 2013, Allyson Mitchell and her partner, Deirdre Logue, held a meeting at their home in Parkdale, in the west end of Toronto, to introduce an idea that Mitchell had been developing over a number of years. Logue acted as coordinator and Mitchell as creative lead in the introduction of a project called *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*.² Among those invited to this community consultation-cum-brainstorming session were graduate students from the Department of Gender, Feminism, and Women's Studies at York University (where Mitchell is on the faculty), select members of the queer and feminist arts community in Toronto (including me), and a group of young artists that Mitchell and Logue refer to as the Montreal Millennials.

Mitchell had been developing an idea inspired by her exposure to a film called *Hell House*, a documentary about one of the largest and longest running Christian fright nights in North America. This film uses the form of the carnival haunted house as a tool for the conversion of non-believers to Christianity and as a performance of affirmation for the already convinced. Her idea was to create a lesbian feminist haunted house using the sensational tropes of the carnival haunted house and the passionate conviction of Christian fright nights to create a hybrid experience that scrambles the very foundations upon which it is built. The meeting at Mitchell and Logue's house in early 2013 was a trial space for the ideas that had been percolating

throughout a process that included arts' grants applications and presenter pitches. Mitchell and Logue had at that point secured the Art Gallery of York University as the supporting gallery, and Emelie Chhangur, AGYU's assistant director/curator, was at the meeting to express the institution's interest in presenting the project as an off-site event. Additionally, Mitchell and Logue had submitted applications to the three levels of government arts funding agencies available to Toronto-based artists (Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council) and had secured confirmation of support from the Canada Council at this stage.³ With a gallery on board, and the beginnings of the required funding in place, Mitchell and Logue knew that the project was going to happen. The entrance to the *Kastle* (see Fig. 1.2), a gaping mouth with giant fangs jutting into its opening topped by large letters spelling out the words LESBIAN RULE, had already been designed (see Fig. 1.1) and was one of the few images shown to us at the meeting.

In a way, the performance of *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House* began that day when the idea was let loose on a group of artists and thinkers who instantly took up its charge; from the announcement of the project's title in a community think-tank environment, *Killjoy's Kastle*, a monstrous collaboration, was born. In this chapter I draw on my experience as one of the tour guides (the Demented Women's Studies Professors) in the show. My position as a collaborator and performer in the work in direct contact with audiences provides unique potential for first-hand insight. In addition to my own experience inside the work, I base the observations in this chapter on interviews, grant applications, websites, public talks, artist statements, television, radio, blog and magazine reviews, and social media threads alongside critical queer theory, feminist history and theory, and performance studies. The simultaneous merging of theory and practice drive this chapter.



Figure 1.1: Rendering of entrance by Allyson Mitchell, courtesy of Allyson Mitchell, 2013.



Figure 1.2: Entrance to *Killjoy's Kastle*, photo by Lisa Kannakko, 2013.

Killjoy's Kastle is an act of feminist historiography and queer theory come to (larger than) life; one that teases out the activist impulses that underscore the Christian Hell House performances that were its inspiration, and dabbles in the dramatics of this oppositional model. John Fletcher, in his theorization of Christian conversion performance, reminds the reader that “activism—performance activism particularly—has no natural configuration,” no universal or ideal end. “Evangelicals evangelize,” Fletcher says, “they seek to convert” (6). Hell Houses, like all activist performance projects, are intended to function, after J.L. Austin, as “felicitous performative[s]” (42); they want to *do* something; they want to affect real change and manifest real consequences, in this case, in the form of Christian conversion. *Killjoy's Kastle*, on the other hand, seeks not to convert, but to deconstruct; its goal is to process the fragments of information, histories, and bodies that render the queer woman abject, monstrous, and marginalized. Mitchell says that she was “blown away” by the campy elements of the film *Hell House* and by the “way that the community builds the Hell House together,” and by “the sheer theatricality of it all” (Personal interview). The earnest haunted house performances based in Evangelical faith take everything to the limit: the wrath of God made manifest with devils at the ready to punish and to damn. The camp theatricality and absolute conviction that Mitchell saw in these performances inspired the paradoxical conversion of a Christian scare tactic into feminist performance art—a type of “brain flipping,” as she put it, that made her ask “what would be scary” about a lesbian feminist haunted house, and “who would be scared” by it (Personal Interview)? The creation process of *Killjoy's Kastle* resulted in a carnivalesque rendez-vous with humour and chaos. The *Kastle* is a topsy-turvey theoretical foray into subcultural sexualities, rituals, tropes, types, and practices.

In her application to the Canada Council for the Arts, Mitchell references some of the contemporary Canadian sexual politics to which her work responds by invoking, among other things, the divisive nature of same-sex marriage rights—a topic of regular concern for Christian conservatives. For some Canadians, Mitchell writes,

things are how they ought to be. To others, who believe that marriage is a “holy” union between man and woman, same-sex marriage may represent a harbinger of doom and the nigh end times as morals corrode...[but to] some radical queer identified folk, the recognition of same-sex relationships as the same as heteronormative ones is apocalyptic—the erosion of decades of activism that called for a reordering of society rather than an assimilation of queer culture.

The Christian Hell House and *Killjoy's Kastle* both stage a set of transgressions that frame the homosexual as monstrous (dangerously and delightfully so, respectively). The Christian Hell House relies on a limited arsenal of sinful tableaux “always reserving two of the five ‘social sins’ scenes to cover homosexuality and abortion” (Pellegrini 921). In their representations of gay marriage (*the* defining issue for many Christian conservatives), *Killjoy's Kastle's* and the Hell House's critiques of gay marriage demonstrate the divergent styles of practice and tactic that each deploys. In the Hell House, homosexuality is represented as elective (not determined by God), cardinal (on the register of sins), and motivated only by unchecked lust. The aim of this representation is to convert the viewer by showing homosexuality's dangerous but preventable nature. The gay lifestyle is staged as a cautionary protest against the assimilation of homosexuals into mainstream institutions such as marriage. *Killjoy's Kastle*, on the other hand, is unlimited in its potential to forge representations of the “gay lifestyle.”

In the *Kastle*, gay marriage and its assimilationist position are addressed sideways (and queerly expanded upon) in an exhibit entitled “The Polyamorous Vampiric Grannies” (see Fig. 1.3). This tableau features a group of fanged, stuffed, panty-hosed grannies, all with engorged woolen genitalia, covered in cobwebs and variously supported by walkers, a wheelchair, and a macramé swing. The stuffed “Grannies” are accompanied by a single live performer (also covered in a thin nylon bodysuit) under a large banner that reads “Just Not Married” (see Fig. 1.3). The sly redress of marriage, in *Killjoy’s Kastle*, becomes a witchy, octogenarian orgy waiting to happen—a fantasy that out-performs and out-perverts the imaginings of the conservative Christian haunted house by manipulating a set of phobias and displaying them under a sex-charged banner. These old, queer, polyamorous feminists talk back to the youth-obsessed, anti-gay, anti-feminist ethos of the Hell House in ways that are beyond the conservative Christian ken.



Figure 1.3: The Polyamorous Vampiric Grannies, photo by Lisa Kannakko, 2013.

Where the Hell House invests in regulating sex, *Killjoy's Kastle* invests in the potential of sexuality to exceed the bounds of its controversy. Where the former seeks to convert, the latter seeks to incite. Mitchell's anti-assimilationist take on gay marriage disrupts binary logic and dyadic social structures and subjectivities. This twisting of normativity's ideological binaries is precisely why a hermeneutic of the post-millennial scramble is a vital addition to the lexicon of queer feminist performance analysis. If queer performance in the post-millennial scramble holds a mirror up to the phobic representations of queer and feminist lives, it is not clear nor well lit; rather, it is a funhouse mirror that refracts, shatters, and redistributes the cultural anxiety around queer sexuality and the image of the queer feminist.

What is deemed horrific in the world of the Hell House becomes a gateway to radical potential in *Killjoy's Kastle*. The ongoing now of queer performance (both on and off the stage) queers the threat of eternity in the pedagogy of fear that posits the future as an eternal afterlife in Christianity (both on and off the stage). For the time of its performance, the Hell House categorically demonizes vivid sexual exploration and feminist self-actualization even as it dabbles in these very transgressions by staging and enacting them. Simultaneously (and paradoxically), these re-enactments of queer and feminist lifestyles provide access to ideas and imagery which themselves queer the experience of the show for the audience. The ways that spectators at a live performance make meaning together, the ways that live interactions between bodies in performance interpellate and summon identifications on the part of the spectator are impossible to control—a fact that is the foundation of anti-theatrical prejudice in puritanical Christian consciousness of the past and the present. The Hell House stages and engages in a complex layering of messages and effects simply by showing its ideological horrors.

Queer Feminist Hauntings: A Theoretical Reflection

Grounded in the craft aesthetic that is Mitchell's signature style across her many diverse projects, *Killjoy's Kastle* is a sculptural reflection on and of queer feminist identity. Here, queer and feminist theory act as primary sculptural materials and are even at times quite literally embedded into the work. For example, a two-dimensional replica of the library at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn forms the backdrop for the "Gender Studies Professor and Riot Ghoul Dance Party," one of the many immersive exhibits within the *Kastle*. The pedagogy of queer and feminist theory also underpins the style and content of the performances of the Demented Women's Studies Professors, who act as tour guides through the *Kastle*. This theoretical underpinning is layered into the entire *Kastle* and sharply highlighted in "The Processing Room," which on opening night in Toronto in October 2013 was occupied by real-life feminist theorists and activists, including Ann Pellegrini, Ann Cvetkovich, Sarah Schulman, and Kim Katrin Milan, who were ready to deconstruct the whole experience with spectators at the (near) end of the tour in a ritual of lesbian processing. *Killjoy's Kastle* embraces the ethos of constant investigation embedded in queer feminist ideologies; there is no getting over, nor over it, nor over to the other side.

Doing feminist performance now is not anachronistic. Queer feminism stands ghosted by endless identifications accumulated over time and the challenge for contemporary feminist performance is not to "banish these ghosts to find some pure unghosted authenticity" but rather, as Rebecca Schneider has suggested, "to summon the ghosts, to bring them out of the shadows and into the scene where they already exist, to make them apparent *as players*" (*Explicit Body* 23). The complex realities of queer feminisms (historically and now) are vastly under-represented in performance. Making apparent these ghosts (and bodies) provides, as J. Jack Halberstam has suggested, "exciting opportunities for collaborations between queer cultural

producers and queer academics” (*In a Queer Time* 161). In this chapter I am writing as both queer academic and queer cultural producer. I am theorizing from inside of the performance as both show and show-er. The *Kastle*, in Richard Schechner’s terminology, engages with “showing doing,” which is performance that is understood in relation to “pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing,” in addition to “explaining showing doing,” which is the work of theory (*Performance* 22). In the *Kastle* theoretical reflection and performative enactment double into each other, representation and social constructivism animate each other in a place where the ghosts and shadows of the done, doing, been and being are always at the ready for their imminent return. Rebecca Schneider points out that in contemporary social reality “we are always a step or more behind or ahead or to the side, watching through the open windows being watched, performing ourselves performing or being performed” (*Performing* 25). As a feminist performance event *Killjoy’s Kastle* is not separate from social reality; it is a direct correlative that relies on, refracts, and talks back to the perceptions, operations, and disgust that are projected onto the mysterious and contestatory multiplicity of the lived realities of queer feminism and the agents of its cultural production. *Killjoy’s Kastle*, in Elizabeth Freeman’s terms, “mines the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions” (*Time Binds* xvi). Mining for “undetonated energy” from the past means seeking inside the cleavages of representations to follow new veins of logic—the logic of ghosts, intuition, and fantasy to scramble the truth claims of systemic historical narratives and calcified stereotypes. In our so-called post-feminist culture, Angela McRobbie says that, “feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife...” in the present (“Post-Feminism” 255). To suggest that there really is an ‘after’ of feminism, a ‘post’ that seals our agony in the past, repeats

a historical disavowal of the significance of feminism's role by the very promise of its transcendence.

Monstrous Representation

The word monstrous is defined variously by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “strange and unnatural; gigantic (having extraordinary often overwhelming size); teeming with monsters; shockingly wrong or ridiculous; very great; and deviating greatly from the natural form or character.” “All human societies,” Barbara Creed suggests, “have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (44). A “narrative about the difference of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness” (Creed 44) renders the queer woman doubly different and, as Hélène Cixous has said, “sublime, abject, and riveted, between the Medusa and the abyss” (885). Ghostly and chimerical, the lesbian is more likely to suffer from disavowal than prohibition, and when she does register in the field of the visible she is often seen as monstrous—sterile, hideous, and filled with rage. *Killjoy's Kastle* disparages representations like this by participating in them, by blowing them up to show their component parts—through exaggeration, theatricalization, and metonymic conflation—to a monstrous degree. Monsters have the capacity to transform and destabilize; they lurk, always shadowlike, in the margins. They possess the fear-inducing power of the unknown, and tap into the giddy and ridiculous aspects of the uncanny and the grotesque. *Killjoy's Kastle* is a large-scale performance piece filled with feminist monsters that illustrates their histories of marginalization and abjection to trouble the popular stereotypes that engulf their representations and to grapple with some of the very real and very scary skeletons hiding in feminist closets. The work's carnivalesque humour and chaos demonstrate its objective to entertain even as it engages in “showing doing,” and “explaining showing doing.” This

performance grabs onto feminist and lesbian stereotypes and tries them on for size to trouble the way that queer subjectivities are formed from, as I said in the introduction, representational impersonation in the present.

Sifting through feminism's progressive foundations and the problem of being in time with feminism (Wiegman, "On Being"), I will show how contemporary feminist performance works as an intervention in the rift between life and theory. By describing and deconstructing the live performance of *Killjoy's Kastle*, I will show that non-linearity and plethora allow for an inhabitation of the performance's action without narrative continuity. And, after Lee Edelman, I will consider this absence of story as an experiment wherein "the refusal of story will always enact the story of its refusal" (Berlant and Edelman 3). This performance of refusal uses humour to relieve the shock of its seemingly grotesque exhibits via the silliness of its re-uptake of phobic representations to create a unique playing field for a close meeting with an abject subculture. This unique and monstrous collaboration engages a layered form of sculptural manipulation and, in doing so, it confronts the out-of-control nature of live performance. With that in mind, I will consider the narratives of rejection that emerge in the different critiques of *Killjoy's Kastle* to show how they are invested in expectations based in the particular representational biases they know and favour.

Killjoy's Kastle remediates (simultaneously reclaims and reconfigures) both mainstream phobic representations of the lesbian and some of the subcultural manifestations of her identity. The practice of disidentification, Muñoz's theorization of the subcultural process of reclaiming phobic representation, is central to the methodology employed in *Killjoy's Kastle*, which "is about rethinking and recycling encoded meaning," and using the codes of "majority identities and identifications" as "raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality

that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture,” and in doing so it “[cracks] open the code” (*Disidentifications* 31). The “unthinkable” nature of lesbian feminism in the post-everything politic of contemporary culture is demonstrated by many of Mitchell’s disidentificatory exhibits within the *Kastle*. The “brain flipping” (Mitchell, Personal interview) that went in to the translation of the Christian Hell House to *Lesbian Feminist Haunted House* was not a straightforward one. *Killjoy’s Kastle* is not a direct inversion of the Hell House; rather, it is a recuperation of its phobic politics and a critical intervention into the potential of the haunted house form. The Hell House in its misogynistic and queer phobic ethos is not confronted with its binary opposite in the *Kastle*, nor is the form directly inverted. Rather, *Killjoy’s Kastle* scrambles to move over and move past the moralistic imperatives of the content by reabsorbing and (at times) embracing them.

The *Kastle* plays out in a non-linear mode of presentation that embraces the possibility that ghosts can sometimes return to places and times that they never were or return from places they never left. Lee Edelman, in conversation with Lauren Berlant, parses the nature of story to remind us that without a “framework of expectation,” a story isn’t a story, “just metonymic associations attached to a given nucleus” (3). Applied to performance analysis, Edelman supplies a unique starting point for thinking through the scrambled and syncretic nature of *Killjoy’s Kastle*. Perhaps what is queerest about a queer methodology is its inability to stay on message, its “fragmented and changing views,” which liken it, in Annamarie Jagose’s formulation, to the effects of a mirror ball (14), a system of networks always in conversation and reflecting back onto each other. The systems of networks at play in *Killjoy’s Kastle* are made of malleable sculptural materials that are shaped by a series of agents throughout its creation and presentation, and change with each hand (or mind) that touches and refocuses the materials and their intentions.

Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House

On 16 October 2013, *Killjoy's Kastle* opened to the public in Toronto with a special one-time full performance presentation scheduled to open at 6:00 p.m. and run until 10:00 p.m. that night.⁴ The opening night involved a cast of nearly fifty people (lesbian, queer, trans, and other feminist performers) playing a variety of roles. By 6:00 p.m. a lineup had formed that extended from the *Kastle* entrance, which was situated in a warehouse space behind the corner of Lansdowne and College Streets, down the alley and onto St. Clarens Avenue.⁵ The lineup would continue to grow throughout the evening's performance until more than six hundred people had toured *Killjoy's Kastle* in a single evening. After entering the *Kastle* under large papier mâché fangs topped by a rainbow and three-dimensional lettering spelling out the words LESBIAN RULE, spectators walk through a hallway of hand-painted signs. Part warning and part foreshadowing, the signs declaring "Warning. Danger. Supernatural Pussy Ahead," "Don't Trip Over the Severed Penises," and "Back Tickling & Hair Braiding Indoctrination Ahead," introduce a paradigm shift that implicates a collage of lesbian rage and woo (see Fig. 1.4).

The ridiculous and the unthinkable are staged with humour and craftiness. This hallway of signs is a loose and open introduction of what is to come. "This is lesbian feminist performance art," the entrance signs seem to say, "you will be triggered; consider yourselves warned." And while these signs are humorous they are also intentionally vivid in their desire to remind the spectators that the conjectural world they are about to enter signifies the messy potential of feminist rule in all its gory incompleteness and division.

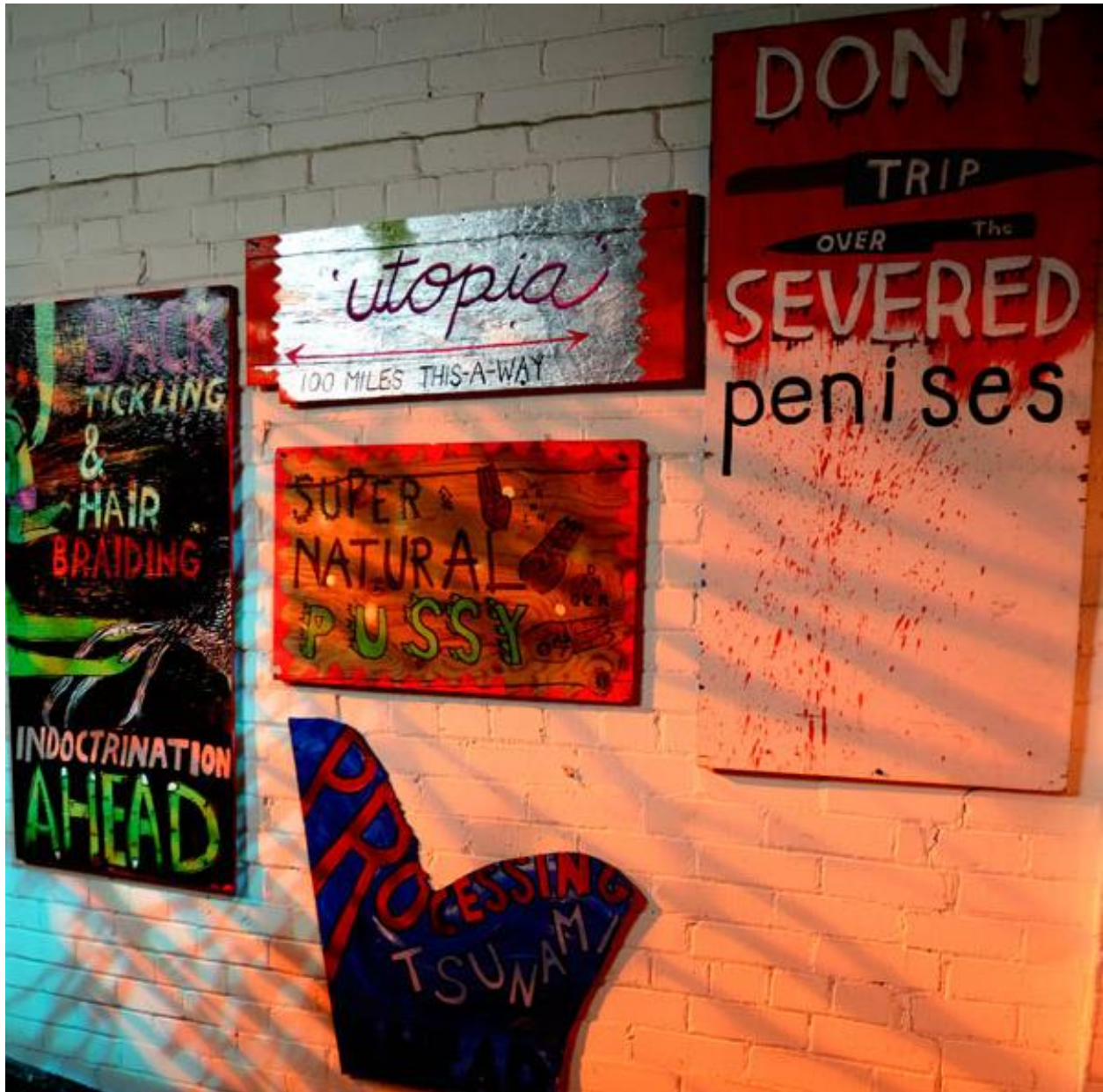


Figure 1.4: The Hallway of Signs, photo by Lisa Kannakko, 2013.

Emerging from the hall of signs one enters “The Graveyard of Dead Feminist Ideas and Organizations”—a space that doubles as the lobby area where spectators wait for their guided tours to begin. “The Graveyard” also functions as a sort of lesbian coffee house complete with Lesbian Zombie Folk Singers where the ghosts of lesbian feminism are foregrounded in classic-haunted-house style—weeds and moss overtake tombstones, dim lighting casts shadows, and the tree stumps that double as café-style seating seem to be vaguely watching the spectators with

random eyeballs embedded in their trunks. Among the tombstones stationed in “The Graveyard” are, for example, Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*, *The Lesbian Avengers*, and *The L Word*. These three examples proffer the *Kastle*’s complicated incorporation of feminist and lesbian identities, with each example tied to vastly different eras, intentions, and political underpinnings. Solanas, of the 1960s, is the individualistic badass who took on mankind and the world of popular art with her writings and her actions; *The Lesbian Avengers*, of the 1990s, were a group of activist artists who organized and staged political interventions in an effort to make the illegible lesbian visible and heard; and *The L Word*, from the early twenty-first century, took television by storm with its non-radical but tantalizingly sexual portrayal of the assimilated lesbian—fully immersed in the neo-liberal economy but boiling over with deviant desire and in active pursuit of passionate girl-on-girl relations. “The Graveyard,” like the entire performance installation, does not serve one single point of view, but rather is a layered representation of the ongoing and sticky performativity of queer sexualities and identity attachments that are still going on.

On 16 October 2013, the performance of *Killjoy’s Kastle* worked like this: The audience would line up outside where performers animated the alley near the entrance. New York-based performance artist and sex activist Felice Shays delivered a riveting and terrifying portrayal of Valerie Solanas quoting the man-hating verbiage of *SCUM Manifesto*, while Andrew Harwood, a Toronto visual artist and curator, portrayed a transvestite ghoul who sprinkled glitter over the waiting crowds. After a sometimes very long wait, the audience would gradually be admitted to the venue in groups of six to eight people at a time. These small groups would traverse the hall of warnings and signs and arrive at “The Graveyard of Dead Feminist Ideas and Organizations” where they would be entertained by the rotating lineup of Lesbian Zombie Folk Singers. From

here they would be selected by a tour guide to begin their tour. The Demented Women's Studies Professors would lead spectators in groups through the *Kastle* and, near the end, deposit them in "The Processing Room" where they would be encouraged to contribute to an ongoing discussion about the experience.

Each of the Demented Women's Studies Professors assumed an individual character based on her interpretation of the *Kastle* and the script. My character sought to represent a scrambled form of temporal drag, culled from lesbian and feminist fashion trends of the late twentieth century. I wore black combat boots (de rigueur footwear of the 1990s riot grrrl), a black one-piece short-legged pantsuit (a contemporary queer fashion must: the onesie), a long side braid (reminiscent of early feminist hippie styles), and a red vinyl cap tipped to the side (a nod to BDSM uniform fetishes). Our makeup was excessive, drawing on ghoulish stereotypes complete with scars, black circles around the eyes, and an overall greyish pallor. My original idea was to make my character perimenopausal, but I found it too difficult to add the dripping sweat of hot flashes to the already thick makeup. The Demented Women's Studies Professors were encouraged to bring their own personal characterization to the roles, and to integrate these choices into the introduction given at the beginning of each tour.

The script that Mitchell provided us was an outline. It was created to establish certain key points about each of the exhibits; it did not try to fill out the full interactive time of the tour. The six Demented Women's Studies Professors for the opening night show were mostly professional artists,⁶ and the *Kastle* itself was occupied by a mix of professional and non-professional performers, artists, academics, and queers. The introduction established the Demented Women's Studies Professors as authorities in the subcultural knowledge that was staged in the *Kastle*. As "Women's Studies Professors," we were to play a pedagogical role in the forced education of our

audiences. Our introductions varied a great deal but all extended from a few basic principles that were laid out in the script. We were there to edify and so our introduction began with our credentials. I established myself as a freelance feminist studies professor. The script began by saying, “Welcome to *Killjoy’s Kastle*. I have been selected by a committee of killjoys who confirm that I am qualified to lead this tour” (Mitchell, *Killjoy’s Kastle*). “I fired my pimp,” I would add, to the stunned spectators, “so I can teach where I want, when I want, and how I want, and right now I choose to teach you.” These introductions were given in the far corner of “The Graveyard of Dead Feminist Ideas and Organizations” so we began the tour by, basically, yelling into the faces of the audience over the sound of the musicians just a few feet away. We introduced the concept of the killjoy stating that “millennium upon millennium of persecution, ridicule, erasure, and abject misunderstanding would put anyone in a bad mood” (Mitchell, *Killjoy’s Kastle*) and, after yelling some dogmatic feminism into the wide-eyed faces of the audience, I would say, “I understand, it can all be very confusing, even I get caught up in the ideological crush of the linguistic grid once in a while. So, if you have any questions...just keep them to yourselves, there will be plenty of time for processing at the end of the tour.”

The *Kastle* begins with multiple beginnings. Beginning with performances in the lineup outside gives way to the beginning of the *Kastle* with the hallways of signs, which in turn leads to the beginning of the show performed by the Lesbian Zombie Folk Singers, from whence the spectators are chosen to begin their *Kastle* tours. The *Kastle* is a temporal scramble of beginnings—multiple, repeated, and inchoate. Entering the inner sanctum of the *Kastle*, spectators are first introduced to “The Giant Bearded Clam,” a large papier mâché figure with glistening liquid and a giant finger protruding from its maw along with long strands of goeey hair straggling from its edges. Many of the exhibits were accompanied by substantial

descriptions but this one needed only its title as the introduction. “The Giant Bearded Clam,” I would say, and spectators would laugh as we proceeded under its tentacles as the thing was opened and shut by a basic pulley system operated nearby. After that, the *Kastle* performance begins...again.

The audience enters a large room filled with images, sounds, and smells. Look one way and you will see a mirrored chamber filled with half-naked women chanting and crying out in ecstasy (see Fig. 1.5). Look a few feet over and you will see a small carpeted nook where a trans man sits reading Pat Califia’s *Macho Sluts*, his beard glistening with pussy juice.



Figure 1.5: The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers, photo by Lisa Kannakko, 2013.

Turn around again and you will find a stairway that, according to the sign at its base, leads to “The Terrifying Tunnel of Two Adult Women in Love.” Then, right in the middle of it

all is a monstrous plush goddess with a horde of kittens emerging from her split-open belly, and a bucket between her legs where apples bob in her menstrual blood. The trajectory of the *Kastle* does not build one layer upon the next. It is too much. It is too muchness. It is scrambled. And, in its scrambled trajectory, it seeks to offer a queerer set of possibilities while the guides, with their brazen performances, direct the attention of the audience to one exhibit at a time.

We begin by directing attention to “The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers.” A shimmering reflective cave is occupied by four performers dressed only in hip-length ghost costumes (a sheet over their heads, eyes and mouth cut out) facing each other in a circle with mirrors aimed at their naked and glistening vaginas. They rock and howl and exclaim in a state of sexual excitation. Their haunting presence summons the politics of twentieth-century feminism that gleaned its tactics from the civil rights movement to mobilize the very potent concept that *the personal is political*. The consciousness raisers knew that telling it like it is can be a powerful tool for social change. By proclaiming the personal as a political concern, this movement sought to infiltrate the regimes of power by altering the very realm of political (redrawing the boundaries of public and private) and disrupting a system of values that stratified and segregated issues as worthy or unworthy of broader political debate or concern. The movements that perpetuated the proclamation that *the personal is political* understood that to shake off the fear and shame of so-called personal problems might change the very fabric of society. In contemporary society consciousness raising has been reduced to a stereotype, a pitiful image of bored white housewives staring at their genitals, a stereotype that attempts to return the personal to its diminished status as merely personal.

“The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers” are staged into a version of a “natural” habitat. They are on display, separated from the audience by a cord of thick nasty hair. *Killjoy’s Kastle*,

in many ways, adheres more to the formal conventions of a freak show than a haunted house (see Fig. 1.5). The subcultural others are exaggerated and put on display for the audience (who represent normal members of society) to gawk and laugh at. Staging queer feminism as a freak show displays queer feminism like a funhouse mirror that projects normative belief systems back to the audience to confirm their normalcy in the face of these freakish characters who are simultaneously recognizable and inscrutable. The funhouse mirror, like Jagose's mirror ball, embraces a scrambled representation in its "fragmented and changing views" (14), which resists the imperative of a two-dimensional representation, an imperative implicit in normal mirror reflections. A freak theory may be seen as an intervention into the concept of performativity (Lorenz 27); one that suggests iterations not to produce norms, nor to produce normative anti-normativity; as non-normativity that is recognizable and inscrutable; as non-normativity that is comforting in its reassertion of one's own normalness. Additionally, a freak theory is an intervention into queer theory in so much as it returns queer to its historical association with deviance and deviance studies. As Heather Love reminds us, "queer theory borrowed its account of difference from deviance studies" ("Doing Being Deviant" 75). The freak show draws connections to binary concepts of normativity and anti-normativity by differentiating them in the extreme. Returning queer to its pathological state, as defined by its categorization as deviant, scrambles systemic historical frames to suggest the very real way in which political positions do not progress, that there is always the potential for circling back—for better or for worse.

The exhibits in the *Kastle* deploy a number of tactics to destabilize the spectators' relationship to the subculture that is excessively, and sometimes parodically, displayed. Scrambling, flipping, too much, too muchness—these are just some of the layers of tactical remediation in this monstrous collaboration—tactics that seek to unshackle feminism from its

systemic historical entrapment (as over and sealed in the past) and stage an intervention into the impossibility of being in time with feminism. The exhibits exploit the perception of queer feminism as shockingly wrong, ridiculous, and unnatural. The monstrous frames of feminism and lesbianism, past and present, are humorously deconstructed and brought to life in a series of tableaux and installations. The use of humour relieves the shock of, for example, a bucket of menstrual blood with apples bobbing in it, trans carpet munchers, butch ball-busters, and a theory infused “Gender Studies and Riot Ghoul Dance Party” where everything, especially the audience, is problematic. The politics of the *Kastle*, emerging through its scrambled representational propositions, loosen the dualistic models of essentialism and performativity, and wade into the muddy middle terrain between and beside the two. The *Kastle* is messy.

Monstrous Collaboration

Before opening the doors to *Killjoy's Kastle*, as the lineup formed down the alleyway and onto the street, the entire cast and crew gathered in “The Graveyard of Dead Feminist Ideas and Organizations” for a pre-show gathering and bonding session. Allyson Mitchell, from her position on the small stage built for the Lesbian Zombie Folk Singers, addressed the group of nearly fifty people, each in their ghoulish makeup and costumes ready to perform. “Even though this project has my name on it,” Mitchell began, “we all created this work together, and it is the product of many people’s ideas and work. But,” she added, “I’m not saying I’m not a genius, of course I’m still a genius!” and we all laughed. Declaring herself genius seems at first like a monstrous act of self-congratulation given the number of collaborators involved in the *Kastle's* realization and execution. However, there are a few things we have to bear in mind: first, Allyson Mitchell is a very funny person and the timing and delivery of her statement was received by the group in the spirit of humour with which it was offered, and, second, the

statement is true. The work was developed and made by many people, *and* the work emerged from the genius impulse of one person. In order to understand how the work is what it is we need to embrace these two, seemingly contradictory truths, and consider new models of collaboration and authorship, models that include a unique (and genius) vision to execute a monstrous collaboration.

Mitchell's inspiration, her genius moment, began with an attempt to envision a dystopic utopic world that embeds the feminist killjoy into the tradition of the haunted house and talks back to the exploitation of the form by certain conservative Christian groups. "The thing I liked most about the project is riffing with people in social situations where," Mitchell says,

people would offer suggestions like a river of menstrual blood, or menstrual blood popsicles, or whatever comes to mind. I would then try to understand these suggestions and really think about them. So, in this case, the menstrual blood popsicles tie into the idea that lesbian sex and pussy eating would inevitably involve menstrual blood eating and this ties into an abject bodily secretion that would freak people out. (Personal interview)

Within Mitchell's creation process, suggestions and ideas are not directly integrated; they inform the direction of the piece and the detailed elements of its ethos. "It's fun," says Mitchell, "to figure out the gross-out spectacle and to play with this stuff." There are no menstrual blood popsicles in the 2013 installation, but there is, for example, a monstrous goddess figure simultaneously menstruating and giving birth to kittens via caesarian section. Outside interpretations of a work in progress are not always invited or even welcomed, but Mitchell, who wanted to build this project with and for her community had to, as part of her development process, figure out what her culture was. "I'm not very good at keeping secrets" (Personal

interview), she says of the personal impulse that leads to an open and social engagement with her work. Mitchell frequently admits that she doesn't know everything, and that her intention is never to be the spokesperson for a vast and diverse community. Collaboration is a way of engaging support and implicating a large number of subjectivities into the work. Drawing in ideas, and drawing on social issues, personal experiences, and political positionalities from queer and feminist communities are essential elements in her creative process.

The title was the toggle switch between the idea and the project. Just saying the title arouses interest. In its catchy phrasing of the key ideas that Mitchell is interested in testing, the title starts the wheels turning. What, one wants to ask oneself, might this look like, this *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House?* Sarah Ahmed, in her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, suggests that we take the “figure of the killjoy seriously” (65). “Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy?” Ahmed asks in her quest to understand the hollow promises of happiness in contemporary feminist life (65). The feminist killjoy, as an appellation and reclamation, is mobilized to give substance to the cantankerous demeanour stereotypical of the angry feminist. The feminist killjoy gets at the heart of the “dizzying is-and-is-not politics of the reclaiming of insults” (Chen 35), because as Ahmed asserts, “feminists do kill joy in a certain sense: they disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places” (*The Promise of Happiness* 65). The feminist killjoy, validated by a famous academic writer, is then re-reclaimed and set up in a castle (a haunted one) by Mitchell. Giving the killjoy a domain over which to rule becomes an act of reversal—stemming from a disavowal of the systemic oppression of women and queers in society at large. For the time of the performance the killjoy is authoritative, commanding, and purposefully scrambled. In this

creative work of art, the assumption of *Killjoy's* leadership (designated by her position as worthy of a castle) is a disavowal of the post-millennial assimilation of feminist and lesbian identities that emerges from a hypothetical inquiry: “Feminism and lesbianism have the potential to be super queer but they also have the potential to be super assimilated. So, the struggle is to resist the assimilation and to think about what things could look like if they hadn’t been or weren’t assimilated” (Mitchell, Personal interview).

Killjoy's Kastle is a hypothetical world—replicating a system of hegemonic hierarchies with a stereotype at the helm. This theatrical reversal makes for an original version of power that challenges the boundaries of the public and private spheres. The designations of private and public are intimately linked to gender and sexuality. Michael Warner addresses these issues in *Publics and Counterpublics*, reminding the reader that historically (and now) the female and sexuality are distinctly private and that the transgression of spheres from private to public by the female (especially where her sexuality is concerned) renders her unfeminine, to say the least—she becomes uncouth, unwomanly, outlawed (virago, ball-buster, whore). Staging a lesbian sexual identity as the queen of the castle is a radical inversion of contemporary power hierarchies. “Any organized attempt to transform gender or sexuality is a public questioning of private life,” Warner suggests, that “entails a problem of public and private in its own practice” (31). Staging the lesbian feminist killjoy as the “queen” of a subcultural community is doubly scandalous, because it also scrambles the feminist concept of community that it seeks to exalt.

In her grant application to the Canada Council in 2012, Mitchell describes the project as having roots in “lesbian and feminist direct action...as well as feminist artists working in large-scale domestic installation work.” Disentangling feminist performance from its activist roots leads to the complacent post-feminist and post-queer cultural tendencies of the new millennium.

Elaine Aston, in her essay, “The ‘F’ Word, Feminism’s Critical Futures,” reminds the reader that feminism has made significant contributions to performance art and to performance theory but, “at this time,” the futures of feminist theatre and scholarship “are far less certain” (8). She lays out a series of proposals to argue for a more “progressive future for the project of feminism and theatre,” one of which is “a proposal for communitIES of feminism and theatre, locally and globally” (11). The active exchange and activist impulse implicit in this large-scale collaboration is an extension of Mitchell’s radically queer and feminist methodology, not the sole driving force.

What’s Scary and Who Will Be Scared?

When Allyson Mitchell launched an artistic inquiry motivated by the question “What would be scary about a lesbian feminist haunted house, and who would be scared?” she was diving straight into the mess of the post-millennial scramble by embracing an aesthetic and a position composed of multiple and concurrent identity attachments that troubled assimilationism and defied homogenous categorization. Summoning the challenge of feminist temporalities past and present and staging them in a gory, graphic, and parodic setting (the haunted house) was an effort to make connections that go beyond the disgust and past the trigger warnings to let queer life and identity be as messy and multifarious as it actually is. The mirror she holds up to the community for its self-and-other reflection is neither clear nor well lit. It is a queer mirror. It is a reinscription of the queer mandate to unsettle, a mandate that is severely endangered by the assimilationist views of the post-millennial, post-feminist, post-radical culture that late capitalism cherishes and rewards. But the threat to queers’ ability to unsettle is not solely restricted to pressure from without, those that we may tag “normative,” “mainstream,” “the man,” or simply “straight.” The unsettling nature of historical feminisms and the airing of its shame and fear also challenges the community of communities that make up the vast array of

people who align themselves with queer and feminist identities. *Killjoy's Kastle* is a work of art about a complex web of histories and identities that are undeniably problematic to say the least.

The weight that was placed on this single work of art to represent not one but indeed multiple queer feminist communities is the result of the much larger issue of contemporary material conditions for queer women's cultural production in Canada. The scarcity of queer women's cultural production in Canada resulted in the fact that Mitchell's show was, at the time of its presentation in 2013, the first large-scale queer women's performance production in Toronto in over three years.⁷ The result of this scarcity is that a great deal of pressure is placed on the rare and few events that do emerge—a pressure to do *all* of the work that cultural institutions (especially those who claim feminism and queerness within their mandates) fail to do. In other words, because queer feminist performance work rarely gets produced, queer feminist subjects rarely get to see themselves represented within it. Without the support of mandated and funded organizations for queer women's work it is difficult to find funding for it and slow to produce it. In Canada, queer feminist performance rarely gets produced on this scale. When *Killjoy's Kastle* opened in October 2013 everyone wanted to be in it. And by being in it I don't mean only performing in it, I mean seeing their mode of being represented within its walls; everyone wanted (and some expected) to be included in it. That is simply too much for one performance to take on; too much for a single production with a budget of \$49,343.21⁸ to live up to.

The individuals that negatively critiqued the *Kastle* on social media⁹ are not wrong to wish for some kind of representation; where they err is in their frame of expectation of Mitchell's work. *Killjoy's Kastle* is not a "safe space"; it is a haunted house. Its haunting can, and indeed it must, trigger the sensibilities of complacent and compartmental identity categories in order to delve deeply into the kind of disidentification that can crack open the code of enduring phobic

representational limits. The work is not exclusionary, but it does emerge from an ideological referent that has a history of exclusion and a history of being excluded. The *Kastle* performs queer feminist subculture and its haters, excessively and parodically. Humour has long been regarded as an effective tactic for dealing with difficult knowledge. The humour here is self-reflexive; it is a boomerang humour that is thrown out by the feminist artist to clock mainstream phobias of queer and feminist identities and swing back to land in the lap of she who hurled it. “The Ball Bustas” exhibit is an excellent example of this (see Fig. 1.6).



Figure 1.6: The Ball Bustas, photo by Lisa Kannakko, 2013.

On the *Kastle* tour, after emerging from the “kitchen” which is the domain of “The Polyamorous Vampiric Grannies” whose “Just Not Married” attitude artfully stages the anti-assimilationist ethos of the queer performance scramble (as discussed earlier in this chapter), the

audience is lead through a low passage with a hinged double-sided labyris as its door. The labyris is mythologized as the weapon of choice in ancient Amazonian culture, a symbol that lesbians have adopted as one of independence, power, and self-rule. As you traverse the labyris threshold, you can hear the monotonous sound of hammering coming from the exhibit on the other side. Through a hole in the wall one can see a dust-filled red-lit room occupied by two butch dykes methodically smashing truck nuts made of plaster of Paris into piles of dust.¹⁰ As I approached this room as a Demented Women's Studies Professor tour guide, I would speak very slowly and clearly—emphasizing my role as keeper of subcultural knowledge and theory:

These are “The Ball Bustas.” They work hard day and night trying to smash out patriarchal rule. It's a lot of work, and as you can see they can barely keep up with the demand! Now, it's very important that you understand that the balls are symbols. They are, what we call in academia, a form of metonymic conflation where patriarchy and the male are conflated, and that conflation is here represented by the symbol of the truck nuts. You all understand symbolism, right? So, you understand that we are not advocating the crushing of any actual balls. Anyone care to join them?

Derogatory names like man-hater and ball-buster are not ones that women attach to themselves, they are labels that emerge from hate and fear. They are attached to us. They haunt us. Mitchell's “The Ball Bustas” is a performance of disidentification, which is a method by which the queer, marginalized subjects reconstruct “narrative[s] of identity formation” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 6), which engage in efforts to defuse the power of phobic labels by incorporating, or trying on, the very essence of their phobic ethos. This kind of trying-on, the kind that embraces phobias along with the messiness of queer resistance to assimilation gets to the very heart of the queer performance scramble.

In the second iteration of *Killjoy's Kastle*, the one that took place in Los Angeles in October 2015, in response to some of the critiques on social media in 2013, Mitchell and Logue (now credited as co-creator) added some new exhibits such as “The Intersectional Activist” and “The Lesbian Feminist Internet Troll.” Additionally, they changed one of the warning signs, which originally said “Don’t Trip Over the Severed Penises” to read “Don’t Trip Out—There’s No Severed Penises.” Mitchell’s vision to execute a monstrous collaboration is ongoing, all who pass through its doors, all who offer their critiques become part of the work and part of its function as a critique itself.

Killjoy's Kastle, again, is not a safe space; it is a haunted house, and its hauntings pose a vibrant threat to a broad spectrum of people both inside and outside the presumed communities from which it seems to speak. The negative critiques that emerged in response to the *Kastle* came from different and diverse political points of view.

Toronto’s right-wing sensational news outlet, Sun News, reported on *Killjoy's Kastle* for three days leading up to the closing night on October 30th. What was interesting about this reportage was not the obvious sensationalism of rolling taglines on televised reports announcing “Lesbian Fright” and “Government Funding This!” on *Sun TV News* (Semkiw), or even the repeated and predictable rape jokes about how to get rid of a lesbian ghost by getting her “banged by the right guy” on the Mike Bullard radio show (Bullard). What *is* interesting is the way that this reportage wanted to define and cement the identities of the artists and performers involved in the work as unperformed, that is, as evidence of contemporary lesbianism itself rather than a theatricalization of its most sensational stereotypes. Mitchell, in these critiques, is repeatedly identified as “*the* feminist” or “*this* feminist” (Semkiw) in an excitable speech act whose content is neither false exactly, nor true, because, as Judith Butler articulates, the purpose

of excitable speech is not to describe, per se, but “to indicate and establish a subject in subjection,” and “to produce its social contours” (*Excitable Speech* 33). Tagging Mitchell “*the feminist*” is meant to trap her in an identity category. The process of categorizing Mitchell is an attempt to dehumanize her and objectify her. Chen asserts that nominal labelling articulates a bounded and knowable position, hence objectifying and rendering one’s identity finite (74).

Dainty Smith was the performer who, as a Demented Women’s Studies Professor tour guide, led *Sun* reporter, Marissa Semkiw, on the tour that she documented in her televised report for *Sun TV News*. Smith remembers Semkiw, saying that her “spider senses started tingling because I had her in my tour group and as soon as I saw her I remember thinking something wasn’t right” (Personal interview). Semkiw, who video recorded Smith’s tour (her taping being undercover, of course, since all spectators were asked not to record but were permitted to take photos at certain predetermined sites), tried to bait her with ridiculous questions, which Smith deals with like a pro, never really falling into Semkiw’s trap. For example, while in front of the den of “The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers,” Smith, after describing the den, asks the group if any of them would like to take this opportunity to look at their own vaginas—to which Semkiw asks, “How would I do that?” and Smith replies, calmly and precisely, “Well, I suppose that you would lift up your skirt and look at your vagina” (Semkiw). Under Semkiw’s reportage Smith is identified as an overpaid academic with a government-funded salary. Dainty Smith, a storyteller, dancer, and performance artist, is in fact being paid \$100 a night (for a four-hour shift) to perform a role. She is not, as Semkiw reports, the authoritarian women’s studies professor with a tenure-range salary, she is simply a queer performing a different kind of queer in an art project. Smith says of the media exposure,

I remember feeling a little betrayed. I think that art is an intimate exercise between the artist and the audience no matter what form of art it is. And I don’t believe that art is a

passive exercise, I believe that we are both participating. So, I felt that I was betrayed. She came along, she participated in the art and then she took the art and mocked it and ridiculed it for everyone to see. I just felt surprised, a little embarrassed, and a little betrayed. (Personal interview)

In the midst of papier mâché bearded clams and rooms filled with crocheted cobwebs this performer is taken to be real in her representation of a feminist professor. This misrecognition demonstrates the enduring stickiness of phobic stereotypes and identity categorizations; a stickiness that the queer performance scramble tries to trouble by confounding these types even as it stages them.

In contrast to, and yet paradoxically in sync with, the *Sun News* report, an article written by Jess Carroll in a new Toronto online art journal called *Carbon Paper* came out in February 2014 (four months after the closing of the *Kastle*), criticizing Mitchell's performance and accusing it of backward politics and a non-inclusive atmosphere. In her article, "Dear Allyson Mitchell," Carroll lobs random bits of ideological mush into an incomprehensible ring of hate for the project. She asks, at one point, "Where were the trans and cis-gendered community?" and later, "Where was the non-craftivist community?"; both are confounding questions, indeed. When pointing to an exclusion of trans and cis participants, it becomes clear that she does not know the meaning of the words she is using. She is confusing gender and sex terminology to equate cis with heterosexual, I guess. In which case what she is trying to suggest with her criticism is that there were simply too many lesbians in the *Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*, and that the craft aesthetic of Allyson Mitchell's work is simply too, well, crafty.

The problem with the *Kastle*, from the perspectives of these two divergent but aligned critiques, those of right-wing media outlets and that of a straight-art critic, is queer feminism.

These critiques reveal the chronic anxiety around the border creatures that continue to lurk on the shady fringes of ideal womanhood and homoliberalism, and demonstrate the hysteria that crops up when such representations are scrambled and performed, and when the cultural production that stages them is funded and supported, and achieves some level of success. Jess Carroll, Marissa Semkiw, and Mike Bullard all enjoy performing their disgust in the face of identifications, genders, and sexualities that confuse and exclude them. These responses to the *Kastle* remind us that by representing queer feminism, by doing and being queer and feminist, we trouble the smooth waters of our mandated silence and invisibility. And that this doing and being is still met with censorship, violence, and disgust.

Moving Right Along

If what is queerest about a queer methodology is its inability to stay on message, or its “fragmented and changing views,” to reinvoké Jagose’s mirror ball analogy (14), then the networks at play in the ideological systems of identity formation and fragmentation repeat, reiterate, and reflect each other in an ongoing act of moving on. *Killjoy’s Kastle* ends as it begins, in a temporal scramble of too-muchness, multiple, messy, and inchoate. After “The Ball Bustas,” the tour continues on to “The Gender Studies Professor and Riot Ghoul Dance Party” where young ghouls that occupy this space belittle and harass the audience for being problematic, under-informed, and out of touch. After a tour through “The Straw Feminist Hall of Fame,” the audience is deposited at the entrance to “The Marvelous Emasculator.” The guides wish their group luck and send them off, implying that this exhibit is to be the end of the tour. Inside “The Marvelous Emasculator,” spectators walk through a dark passage, one that replicates the sensory deprivation scare tactics of a classic carnival haunted house and that ends with a projected clip from Chris Crocker’s 2007 viral YouTube video featuring the fifteen-year-old

crying and pleading for the public to “leave Britney (Spears) alone.” When the spectators re-emerge into the light, they are greeted, once again, by their tour guide.

The *Kastle* ends with multiple endings. Ending with “The Marvelous Emasculator” gives way to ending up back in the hands of the tour guides only to be introduced to “The Stitch Witches,” a group of gender queers who work on crafts and offer spectators a shot of witch piss from a prosthetic penis. After this “last” exhibit, the tour guides once again bid adieu to their charges and send them into “The Processing Room,” where they are told to expect a tsunami of processing.

In order to enter the *Kastle*, you will recall, one had to walk under an arched and fanged doorway topped by large letters spelling out LESBIAN RULE. What does lesbian rule look like? Does the rule of lesbianism come with rules? What might the lesbian rules be? Are the monsters that populate the exhibits manifestations of these rules? We know that the Christian fright nights, like the one represented in the documentary *Hell House*, are designed to remind us of certain Christian rules; indeed, they even want to convert us into the adoption of these rules. The Hell House ends with a prayer session, where church representatives are present to help one find the light and get one onto the righteous path of Christianity. *Killjoy's Kastle* ends (or nearly ends) in a chilly looking room awash with pale blues and decorated with Styrofoam icebergs. Here, rather than church representatives, one is confronted with real-life queer feminist academics and activists (real-life feminist killjoys) who encourage discussion about the spectators' *Kastle* experience. Here, rather than conversion, one is confronted with deconstruction. This staging of lesbian processing is a theatricalization of the stereotype that says lesbians need to discuss, process, and deconstruct *everything*. During lesbian processing, one is expected to contribute, to be accountable, to reflect on their experiences and feelings, and to share honestly their insights

and questions. Lesbian processing is yet another mirror ball that provides yet another set of reflective surfaces with which to look back at ourselves. Lesbian processing, like the *Kastle* itself, is a sort of scramble—multiple, messy, and inchoate—it is a living effort to address the chasm that always exists between theory and life and to get to the bottom of why everything is such a fucking mess.

“The Processing Room” (you guessed it) is still not the end of the work, one has to walk through the gift shop, exit the building, pass a dumpster animated by ghoulish spectres such as a pro-choice activist in a knit jumpsuit covered in yarn-wrapped coat hangers, and then stop for a taco at the taco truck parked behind the dumpster before returning to the regular outside world and leaving the *Kastle* altogether.

Conclusion

The here and now is ghosted by the radical potential of queer activism of the late twentieth century; ghosted and not bolstered because so many radical intentions have given way to assimilationist values and homonormative aspirations. *Killjoy's Kastle* speculates on a world of queer activism unfettered by assimilation; it threatens *with* that vision. What is terrifying to some is comforting to others, and what is progress to some is failure to others. As a performer in the show, I felt completely at ease with the immersive world of the *Kastle*, I enjoyed going to work each night for nearly two weeks to a space (practically extinct in the present moment in Toronto) that was dominated by queer women. I dare to speak from such a personal position because, as Ann Cvetkovich states, “the personal voice has persisted as an important part of feminist scholarship, enabled, if not also encouraged, by theory’s demand that intellectual claims be grounded in necessarily partial and local positionalities” (*Depression* 9). The integration of the local and artistic voice as foundational to my theoretical discussion of queer art and culture in

Canada is essential to this dissertation. The artists I study, including my own self as performer, creator, writer, or curator, seek to intervene in the theoretical discourse that surrounds them.

What counts as theory counts because it is in relation to other theory and is part of a theoretical field and set of referents. When I suggest that theory emerges from queer cultural production, I am suggesting that there is a theoretical field, one that is local, personal, and active, even if it is not often written about or analyzed comparatively in academic settings or publications. We are affected by the impact of our queer cultural experiences and, as Ahmed writes, “to be affected by something is to evaluate something” (*Willful* 23). Evaluations, as we have seen, take many forms: on social media, on radio and television, and in art criticism to be sure. But to be affected and to evaluate can also be a personal practice that insinuates itself as a queer practice of turning and not turning toward our own always-in-process relationships to power, and turning or not turning to our own always-in-process identities.

In this chapter, I have shown how the queer performance scramble functions as an intervention into the impossibility of being in time with feminism in a post-feminist, post-queer, post-millennial culture. The *Kastle* is not a museum dedicated to the stories and realities of feminisms past; it is an active engagement with queer and feminist world-making that stages its ongoing self-reflexive investigations, phobic representations, and troublesome existence.

Killjoy's Kastle embraces constant investigation; there is no getting over, nor over it, nor over to the other side. In the post-millennial scramble, queer feminist performance struggles over and over with the limits of its material conditions, the disavowal of its significance, and the realities of its systemic marginalization. The too muchness of the *Kastle* stages a paradoxical gesture to the paucity of queer feminist cultural production in Canada in the present. *Killjoy's Kastle* is a

cultural contribution to the queer loop of representation that involves explaining doing being; doing being; evaluating doing; being affected by doing being; and struggling to just be.

Notes

1. The groups consisted of six to ten people until the end of the night when time was running out and the long line of spectators had to be rushed through in larger groups of nearly twenty at a time.
2. Later, it would become evident that Logue was also making a vital creative contribution to the project; in the second installment of the project, which took place in Los Angeles in October 2015, Logue is credited as co-author of the work. Prior to that Logue was credited as co-author for the mediated portion (which featured some sculptural installations and an edited video of the Toronto show) of the haunted house produced in London at the BFI in 2014.
3. At the time of the meeting the Canada Council had committed \$20,000 to the project; later the project would get funding from both the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council in the amounts of \$8,000 and \$7,500, respectively.
4. While the installation was scheduled for a run in Toronto from 18 to 30 October 2013, the opening night was the only one wherein a full cast of performers was contracted to animate the *Kastle*. In the end the creators discovered that this was a flaw in their presentation plan. Without performers the *Kastle* failed to deliver its full intention, and without the guides specifically, the *Kastle* was vulnerable to vandalism. After the opening, Mitchell and Logue scrambled to extend the contracts of some of the guides, and to populate some of the exhibits within the *Kastle* to the best of their abilities given budget limitations that plagued the project. In the subsequent presentation of the *Kastle* in Los Angeles in 2015, the installation would be fully performed every night
5. Over the twelve-day run in Toronto, nearly five thousand spectators would visit the *Kastle*.

6. The other five tour guides were New York actor and playwright Moe Angelos; Winnipeg performance artist Shawna Dempsey; Toronto-based visual artist and academic Natalie Kouri-Towe; Toronto-based comedian Carolyn Taylor; and Toronto-based burlesque performer and storyteller Dainty Smith.
7. The 2009-2010 season at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, my last season as Associate Artist and Curator, saw an unprecedented amount of work by queer women on the main stage. The season included the final Hysteria Festival, a production of Nathalie Claude's *The Salon Automaton*, and a mainstage production of Nina Arsenault's *Silicone Diaries*. After that season there were three barren years where not even one queer woman's performance or play was seen on a mid-size or large stage in Toronto.
8. Most of the \$49,343.21 came from the three levels of arts grants councils, with a portion coming from AGYU (who paid the rent for the venue). The remaining \$20,000 of the total budget came from the pockets of the producing artists themselves.
9. There was a heated discussion on a Facebook thread that debated the failures and exclusions of *Killjoy's Kastle* with passion, and sometimes, vitriol:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/166258290234212/permalink/172523529607688/>
10. Truck nuts are symbols of masculinity that are hung as decorations onto the back underside of trucks.

Chapter Two

Queer Feminist Cabaret: Disappearance, Resurrection, and Return

The queer performance scramble stages concerns that are central to the debates of its time. This chapter takes as axiomatic the centrality of cabaret, as a genre and as a site, in staging the interests, ideas, sexualities, ideologies, and styles central to contemporary queer feminist communities. Nowhere are the concerns and issues of queer life more effectively and directly enacted than in the cabarets that are ubiquitous in queer culture. Cabarets reflect the social, political, and erotic scenes of their time. They make space for the staging of affective associations, histories, lives, and jokes that act as antidotes to the absence (and/or otherness) of queer feminisms in mainstream theatre and performance institutions. The queer cabaret is a strategy of survival and an active and ongoing way to collaboratively and intransitively test and press the contours of queer being. T.L. Cowan argues that cabaret is “the most resilient form of grassroots, transfeminist and queer live performance that happens in our scenes.” Popping up, as it does, “in every city in Canada in bars, cafés, sex stores, theatres, university and high school cafeterias, community centres, and theatre work spaces” (“Introductory Statement”), cabaret can be this strategy because it does not suffer prohibition due to a lack of resources in the same way that other types of shows or theatrical forms can and do, and because, as a form, it is already outside the normative frame of theatrical production—and by normative here I also mean legitimate and so-called professional. Its resilience and its ubiquity are enhanced by (and enhance) its malleability; cabaret has the ability to respond to current topics, and to do so in the moment of their occurrence. Cabaret’s fluid and largely unscripted form leaves plenty of room to jimmy ideas into the crevices of its address.

Queer performance histories and the history of the variety show are inextricably interwoven. Gender non-conforming people (queer women, trans folk, and gay men) could be found in cabarets, freak shows, vaudevilles, and private salons well before they were ever found in plays, movies, operas, or other mainstream performance forms and events. Trans performance historian Morgan M. Page says that “in the early twentieth-century trans women performed alongside cis-gendered butch women, trans men and bearded women in vaudevilles,” where diverse performance styles, genders and cultures were staged as cheap entertainment. “Gay and trans people found a foothold in vaudeville,” Page suggests, “because of its bawdier, lowbrow humour.” Later, when alternative genders and sexualities *were* represented in theatre, as, for example, in Mae West’s *Sex* in 1926 and *The Drag* in 1927, they were often set within the world of variety performance. *Sex*, for example, is set within the world of nightclub strippers and sex workers behind the scenes of a Montreal burlesque club. *The Drag*, the first American play to openly depict the lives of LGBT people, was set in the world of New York’s underground drag balls. *The Drag* featured a cast of trans women, drag queens, and (of course) West herself, and when the theatre was closed after the tenth performance, the entire cast was arrested on obscenity charges. Later, Kander and Ebb’s 1966 musical, *Cabaret*, another prime example of queer sexualities as represented in the mainstream culture via their cabaret performance context, stages German cabaret culture in the Weimar Republic of the 1930s as rife with alternative sexualities and political ideologies.

The history of cabaret and the history of queer performance are interconnected histories of rebellion and transgression. Shane Vogel, in his essay “Where Are We Now? Queer World Making and Cabaret Performance,” suggests that “from its inception cabaret has functioned as a crucible not only for artistic collaboration but also for counterdiscourses to dominant ideologies”

(34). Cabaret is a form built on performing resistance and its resilience and openness make it a site, both historically and in the present, for diverse and transgressive artistic expression. Early European cabaret cultures such as that of Le Chat Noir founded in the Montmartre district of Paris in the late nineteenth century, for example, sought to disrupt normative values, satirize the bourgeoisie, develop new intimacies with audiences, and penetrate the fourth wall. “Inextricably bound up with notions of gender, race, sexuality, and nationality,” Vogel asserts, “cabaret has provided an opportunity to interrogate the status quo through performance” (34).

Twentieth-century American cabaret culture developed parallel to its European counterpart and featured unprecedented diversity of form, culture, and gender identification as evidenced in visual histories, plays, and other historical literary documents about cabaret, and about the venues that staged them. It is not within the scope of this dissertation to excavate the entire history of cabaret; however, I offer this very brief historical foray as a way of situating the scramble of queer cabaret within an ongoing history of resistance and radical expression.

An investigation of contemporary Canadian cabaret culture is an inquiry into the subcultural ways and means of queer performance. When I posit such an assertion, I do so from knowledge based in practice. Outside of Cowan’s work on cabaret culture across the country with emphasis on Vancouver and Montreal, there is very little foundational literature upon which to base any such an assertion. This chapter draws on information gleaned from my own curatorial practice and my attendance at multiple cabarets over the course of my career as an artist and now as an emerging scholar. From my position inside I am able to scan cabaret culture for the trends, changes, and challenges that it has concerned itself with historically and now.

My experience as a festival director and cabaret curator is deeply embedded in this chapter. I co-curated Queer Culture, a festival that took place across Toronto in the mid-1990s and framed

the annual 4-Play festival of new work by LGBTQ theatre artists. I was the co-director (with Kirsten Johnson, then Franco Boni, then David Oiyee) of the Rhubarb! Festival of new work for a total of six years. In 2003 I was approached by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre to help them address the lack of women's representation at the company at that time. The solution to this problem began in the form of a festival. That festival was *Hysteria: A Festival of Women*, which was originally a co-production with Nightwood Theatre, Toronto's feminist theatre company. At the time it seemed to be a good idea to take Buddies back to its history of feminist co-habitation. (Buddies in Bad Times was founded in 1979 along with a small cabal of companies, including Nightwood Theatre, under the umbrella of The Theatre Centre. Indeed, the Rhubarb! Festival had also originally been a Buddies–Nightwood co-production.) In addition, as a cabaret artist and presenter, I have performed in and curated many queer and feminist cabaret events over the years, including *Cheap Queers; Heart, Wrench, and Hammer; Mass Hysteria; Hysteria @ Edgy Women; City of Freaks; Anne Made Me Gay; Explain Yourself; and Queer/Play* to name a few.

My curatorial endeavours in Toronto (primarily) and Montreal (occasionally) over the past twenty years were motivated by a number of overlapping agendas, namely, to infiltrate the discourse with queer world views, to challenge limiting definitions of self and other, to develop an arts practice in tandem with my peers, to gain a sense of community, and to be an integral part of that community—in short, to not feel so alone. The research that has emerged from this practice is a direct extension of it. I seek to account for the enduring potential of live performance for marginalized communities and to analyze cabaret as a vital yet marginalized form in and of itself. By discussing, in the chapter, three contemporary queer feminist cabaret performance events, I aim to tease out the important ways that cabaret stages the concerns of the queer community and stimulates dialogue between performers and curators, *and among* artists, presenters, and audiences.

This chapter discusses in detail the efficacy and limitations of cabaret as a form by exposing it as the primary site for queer women's performance in Canada and showing how the conditions of its production are chronic; how the conditions that marginalize it are interconnected and historically premised; and how queer women's performance is often situated as a satellite to the sustained orbit of theatre and performance institutions in Toronto and Montreal.

This analysis of queer feminist cabaret is a critically queer project driven by practice and steered by theory. Cabaret history exists outside the historical narratives of Canadian theatre. Cabaret is not taught in Canadian university arts programs, nor is it contextualized within the frame of Canadian theatre history. It follows, therefore, that a critique of its material conditions, its formal contours, and its methodology must be gleaned primarily from the experiences of practitioners. I draw on my own experiences as well as those of my peers to stitch together a foundation for the emergence of a critical conversation that includes cabaret as a vital and vibrant form with a rich and sustained history within queer Canadian cultural production and beyond. The peers to which I refer have emerged as collaborators and as supporters throughout the course of my research. I am indebted to collaborative relationships I have had with queer curators such as Miriam Ginestier, Keith Cole, Jess Dobkin, Kim Katrin Milan, Mariko Tamaki, and Dayna McLeod, for example, and to the many artists whose cabaret work I have admired, followed, and programmed over the years. Additionally, I am indebted to the work of Cowan, whose sustained commitment to cabaret methodology has provided an essential theoretical referent for critical writing on Canadian cabaret and with whom I have collaborated on two important queer feminist critical performance projects—"The Cabaret Long Table" at Congress 2014, and "Not Like Sisters," an essay/conversation about the relationship between Toronto's Hysteria Festival and Montreal's Edgy Women Festival, which is to be released in a special issue of the *TRiC (Theatre Research in Canada)* dedicated to festivals in 2020.

Cabaret: A Chronic State of Precarity

We have seen, in chapter one, one of the ways that queer women's performance operates independently, outside the institutions of theatre. In this chapter we will begin to see how queer women's performance operates in and around these institutions but maintains its status as other and non-integral. Cabaret is the primary site for queer feminist performance culture in Canada. It is the stage of emergence for many queer artists and simultaneously the pinnacle of queer cultural capital for some.¹

Studying cabaret demonstrates the precarious material conditions of queer women's performance as chronic. Sara Warner, in "Chronic Desires: Theater's Aching Lesbian Bodies," points out that labelling the paucity of representation of women by women in theatre a *crisis* identifies the problem as "a temporary disruption or destabilization of normal conditions, not a constant or *permanent* state of precarity" (50). Issues of lack in the representation of women by women, which permeate the history of arts, culture, politics, and so on and which continue into the present day, are more "accurately described by the term *chronic*, defined here as an ache, as a psychic, corporeal, and/or political injury that has become habitual, routine, ordinary. *Chronic* implies a radically different temporality than *crisis*, entailing both a distinct sense of duration and a divergent affective intensity" (50). Cabaret is the solution, the offering, the balm that soothes the ache of a chronic condition that can only, seemingly, be managed and never, apparently, cured.

To define the problem as chronic embraces a logic that asserts that the problem *is* the problem. Chronic, meaning as it does of time, persisting through time, or constantly recurring, invokes a sense of historical lack that creates a lack in the present when applied to the issue of contemporary performance. This lack, both historical and ongoing, is an important aspect of the seeming insignificance or—to invoke Jagose's term—the "inconsequence" of many queer women in Canadian culture that naturalizes hierarchies, leaving her often off-side (Jagose xi).

The queer woman as a historical category, caught as she is between feminism, which privileges gender and power relations over sexuality, and queerness, which thinks ideology through sexuality and gender together, is partially excluded from both of these related but divergent dominant discourses. Her chronic ache is a historical issue stemming from its lack as a historical discursive category. The problem of queer women's cultural credit is a naturalized extension of queer women's lack of cultural credit historically and now. If one solution to this lack is cabaret, in the arena of performance at least, then we must endeavour to understand how this solution both perpetuates the problem of exclusion from institutional support *and* provides a stage for her vital cultural contribution at the same time.

This chapter, in studying select examples of cabarets that function as satellites within the orbit of theatre and performance institutions in Toronto and Montreal, demonstrates how cabaret gets to the very root of the material conditions that surround and define queer women's performance practices in Canada.

Touching, as it does, on a cultural materialist approach and indebted, as it is, to the work of Ric Knowles and Jen Harvie, this chapter relates the social, material, and historical networks that (sometimes invisibly) frame queer women's performance culture. Cultural production of any kind is soaked in a complicated system of relations of people, resources, ideals, and politics that dictate where, when, and how projects get done, or as we shall see, *not* done. Identifying these relations provides a more nuanced understanding of the literal scramble *to make way as best one can* because "cultural practices such as art and performance do not exist in some kind of material and historical vacuum, hovering in an idealized realm outside of time, political signification, social relations and material processes and conditions" (Harvie 16). Harvie, in her deployment of actor-network theory (ANT), highlights the fact that "no person or thing acts alone" but all

bodies and systems that intersect with a project (or performance, in this case) “are important in the network and all contribute to the developments and also contribute to the network breakdown” (17). As agents of cultural production, many queer women work from a self-made, always-in-process knowledge of self, other, and cultural identity. Under the precarious conditions of contemporary cabaret production, the queer feminist performer is “always scrambling and leaping to the next ice floe” (Tigchelaar, Personal interview).

The Cabaret Solution/Problem Matrix

Theorizing queer cabaret allows for a consideration of the sexuality of space and the space of sexuality because cabaret is vital to the methods by which queer women’s sexuality and ensuing sociality take up space. Cabaret provides an opportunity for the surfaces of queer identifications to “surface through the impressions made by others” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 145). It touches and responds to its audience. Asserting the power and potential of cabaret and the vitality of its role in the subcultural milieu of contemporary queer life is an easy sell. Indeed, as Cowan has pointed out,

if you are a feminist, transgender, transsexual, sex worker and/or queer musician, performance artist, comedian, poet, juggler, hip hop artist, dancer, storyteller, burlesque artist, aerialist, drag performer, agit-propist, contortionist, improvisateur or provocatrice, you have most certainly performed at a cabaret, probably at dozens or hundreds of them [because] the cabaret (broadly, the variety show) is of vital importance to marginal and marginalized performing artists—new, emerging, and established—and the political, social, erotic, cultural scenes that evolve along with them. (*More Caught in the Act* 15)

Cabaret is a vital intervention into the lack of literal and discursive space for queer feminist identities because it brings people together in real time and creates space from the desire to impress

and be impressed by one another. These spaces demonstrate the performativity of desire—how queer desire reaches, touches, alters, and repeats the culture within which it is enacted. Queer cabaret curators create shows that summon their publics with evocative titles, images, and line ups of acts (see Figs. 2.1 and 2.2). Members of a queer counterpublic are hailed through their identification with performances that reflect and extend their always-in-process identities. By bringing bodies together, cabaret events advance the potential for meaning in a queer life because meaning, as Jean Luc Nancy asserts, “is its own communication,” which is to say that it makes itself in circulation (Nancy 2). One can identify with a specific sexuality in isolation, but to be queer one has to go out into the world and engage with the world-making practices of queer subcultures. These subcultures suggest “different modes of affiliation,” ones that are transient and oppositional (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 154). At a queer cabaret, even if you aren’t in the show, you can participate in its style and its ideological premise. At queer cabarets, artists and spectators together scramble the codes of propriety to mobilize different messages—to be *in on* the joke rather than *be* the joke. Since “lesbian art is increasingly homeless,” framed as it is by the dominant discourses of feminism and queerness (Katz 72), the temporally limited space of cabaret provides a vital solution to the problem of meaning and communication within the categorical subculture of queer feminism. Culture, like the meaning embedded in it, “is a practice, not a kind of person,” and this practice is tied to “genres of discourse...and genres of social interaction” that are exemplified in the cabaret setting (Halperin 135).

Queerness is a directional relation; it is a social experience that emerges “as an interpellation,” according to Judith Butler, “within performativity” (*Bodies that Matter* 228). Interpellation, as theorized by Althusser, and later taken up by Butler in what she calls “the figure of the divine voice in its ability to bring what it names into being,” is often theorized as a

normalizing practice that is enacted to “indicate a subject in subjection” and “to produce its social contours” (*Excitable Speech* 32–33). But unbecoming, or failing to turn to the interpellating call of heteronormativity, is a form of being and becoming too (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 32). When we strive to make an impression, as do queer cabaret curators and artists, we strive to recalibrate the surfaces of a subcultural context marked by the cultural production that fills to expand the potential of these impressions on the bodies that inhabit the subcultural space. The queer feminist performance cabaret in the new millennium acts as a hail shouting out its hopeful call, inspiring queer subjects to turn toward it.

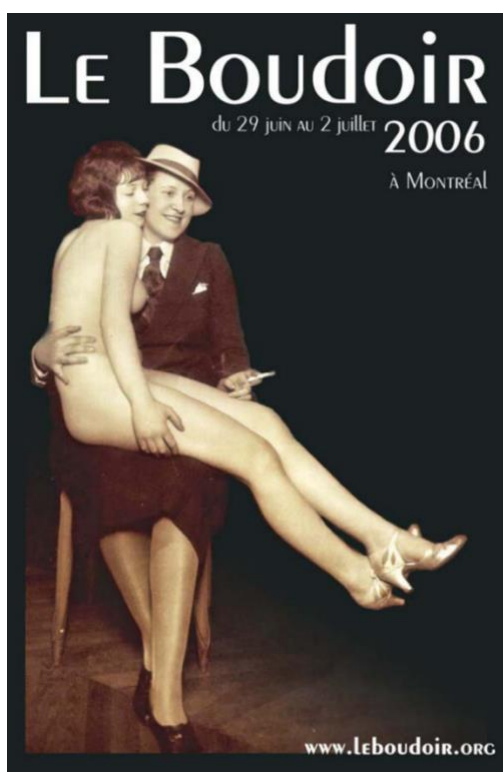


Figure 2.1 (left): Queer Cabaret Poster Example, Le Boudoir, 2006. Figure 2.2 (right): Queer Cabaret Poster Example, Queer/Play Poster 2017.

If, as Sara Ahmed suggests, queer is an orientation and therefore about the lines we follow, then it is worth noting the etymology of the word “queer,” which, as Ahmed states, is derived from the word for twist (*Queer Phenomenology* 76). Ahmed extends this spatial concept to suggest “oblique” or “off-line” and states that queer is a practice of “non-normative sexualities that” involve “a personal and social commitment to living in an oblique world” (161). Queer feminist cabaret demonstrates that queer is both an orientation and a practice.

The generative potential of cabaret can likewise turn into a form of entrapment. Cabaret can be rendered “good enough for minoritized artists” and serve the need for diversity where institutions “offer up a night or two for short performances by women and leave the lion’s share of commissioned feature-length works to male artists” (Cowan, “A Little Show”). The homelessness of queer feminist art renders the short and fleeting nature of cultural production implicit in the cabaret form very often the only one available to queer women’s performance practice. The queer feminist, within the post-millennial institutionalized structures of artistic production, maintains her queer, that is, oblique, status by operating outside the institutions or by occupying institutional spaces in only very temporary ways. Cabaret is the staple of this precarious position, perpetuating (and solving) the problem of non-representation within the institutions. Observing the conditions implicit in the limitations that organize the work under a banner of “unassimilable” and even “unmarketable” provides an avenue for a new and sidelong glance at chronic conditions of queer feminist cultural production in Canada.

In the broader neo-liberal culture of contemporary Canadian society—the culture that reifies dominant normative values and supports these reifications with capitalist logic—it’s easy to dismiss the value of queer women’s performance. These broader cultural dismissals are supported by the multiple material factors that create the conditions of production under which

queer artists and curators labour. Art in Canada, be it theatre, music, dance, or visual art, is classified in hierarchical stratifications that rely on specific referents to validate its importance and its excellence. These referents include competitive awards, visibility in established venues and on their mainstages, publicity in the mainstream press, a record of government grant support, and high-profile touring records. Under this qualifying rubric, great artists have international reputations, a list of awards, and a lively presence in the discourse where their work is discussed and critiqued in both the academy and the popular press. The best art, this logic dictates, will come with such credentials, and the best art, in a normative formulation, is what Canadians want to support and identify with. But, as Knowles has pointed out, the ideology that supports a neutral or universal qualitative assessment of art operates “on the assumption that artistic inspiration transcends what are considered to be the accidentals of historical and cultural contexts,” effacing in the process the significant material differences that exist within the cultural sphere (9). Not all genius can survive the material conditions of its manifestation.

If, as I am suggesting, the primary mode of production for queer performance in Canada is cabaret, then we must look closely at the limitations of this form and its place in the hierarchy of artistic structures in order to understand how the artists who work in cabaret are systemically exempt from the rubric of “greatness” that would render them valuable and worthy of support. Cabaret is not considered high art; it is considered low or popular art, and as such it is exempt from most council-granting opportunities unless it is within the context of a festival or producing company that may include it in its overall programming. Garnering an arts council grant for a cabaret as a curator or for the individual short-form works that make up its content is nearly impossible; the systems and conditions that underpin them are simply not set up for that. Margo Charlton, who was the theatre office at the Toronto Arts Council and who has sat in on multiple

theatre committee and jury deliberation sessions during her ten-year stint (2006–2015) there says that “there is an idea of what the pinnacle is” in Canadian theatre production and it’s “something like getting Canadian Stage to pick up your work and tour across the country in venues like that” (Personal interview). Short works and cabarets are seen as seeding grounds. They are where these “pinnacle” things might come from but the “scrappy lower end is seen as needing fewer resources. Those artists don’t need to be paid as well as the ones that are on this trajectory, going for the big theatre and the tour” (Charlton, Personal interview). Short works are not valued as works in and of themselves; they are always seen as a starting point, a stop on a path to somewhere greater. Even artists who wholly embrace cabaret as the primary form for their work, like Alex Tigchelaar discussed later in this chapter, are condemned to a disavowal of the professionalism of their work. Additionally, many theatre artists from outside the queer world view have a hard time acknowledging the cultural value of the queer cabarets that are so vital to the subcultural artists who produce them and audiences who attend them. As Charlton suggests, based on her experience witnessing juries in deliberation:

Some members of the jury didn’t see queer work as a cultural expression. They couldn’t acknowledge it as a distinct culture with a unique aesthetic. To them the references or points of view seemed awkward or strange. Not everyone can get that sexual and gender identities can lead to actual choices of language, style, even gesture. They couldn’t admit, somehow, that our identity, and our culture, is connected to our sexuality. There is so much discomfort about that. It makes them have to think about sex. (Personal interview)

While queer cabaret *does* challenge the hegemonic values of society at large, that is not the only reason for its exclusion from elite performance circles and circulation. If the artists engaging in such cultural production are excluded from grants, ineligible for awards, and lack

access to fair remuneration for their work, how are they to rise to the ranks of “great” artist? And who, ultimately, is going to care if they do?

The paucity of support for queer women’s work is not, in an assimilationist view, an issue of any grave significance. The lesbian, some Canadians would say, is entitled to the same rights and privileges as any other body in society; she can marry, adopt children, and move and work freely without hindrance in public. While this does ring true to some degree, these rights and privileges are bounded by the regulations of neo-liberal capitalism and hegemonic assimilation. The queer woman can go along and get along as long as she is willing to play along. Woman-identified queer sexualities in Canada are authorized as long as they are invisibly integrated into the dominant culture.

Festivals, the frame for many queer feminist performances including cabarets, are where the scrambled and fractured elements of identification cohere. Seeking a scaffold for representation, feminists throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have gathered around and through festival structures, which mirror the precarity of the cabarets they often present inside their programming. Starved for representation, women create festivals to shift the perspective of subcultural identity into a temporary centre. In the context of this chapter I elaborate on one event that is directly tied to a festival (*Cabaret Edgy* and the Edgy Women Festival), one that was temporarily absorbed into a festival (*Strange Sisters* and *Hysteria*) and one that was staged as a late-night event within the context of a festival (*Dirty Plötz* at Rhurbarb!). Women’s festivals and queer performance festivals have long been the mainstay of queer feminist cultural production that not only parallels but also seeds cabaret productions for these communities.

Festivals serve to attract appropriate audiences for alternative practices without disturbing the set mandate and methods of the given institutional producer, the artists and shows that are prioritized for full production, or the funding that comes with that priority. Effective in reaching an audience of shared ideological principles, festivals come with their own set of problematic material conditions; conditions that parallel cabaret production conditions. They rarely supply any rehearsal or development time, space, or developmental remuneration. They get only very limited access to the space of their production in order to stage so-called professional productions, and they have, generally speaking, very few lighting choices, minimal time for cue to cues, level setting, and set up time. Making way, as best one can (i.e. scrambling), is an enforced condition of most queer and feminist performance festivals and cabarets. Additionally, these events are sometimes not required to meet minimum fee standards set out by the likes of CARFAC² or CAEA.³ Festivals like Rhubarb!, Buddies in Bad Times' annual festival of new plays and performance, are, for example, granted waivers from the CAEA, allowing them to pay artists within the festival context below scale. Festivals can offer only limited runs of any project, be it cabaret or another performance form. And prestigious awards like the Dora Award, Toronto's most recognized and established theatre award, stipulate a number of eligibility requirements that exclude much queer performance and cabaret, including, importantly, a minimum run of nine shows excluding previews (TAPA, "Eligibility Criteria"). A run of nine shows is, in the cabaret, festival, and queer performance world, an extremely long one—and essentially impossible to achieve under the material conditions that most queer feminist performance creators work.

Within the cabaret solution/problem matrix, the two sides are equally and heavily weighted. The scene of the queer woman's becoming through subcultural delights and shared

world-making and meaning-making is simultaneously the scene of her unbecoming in the hierarchical frame that controls and categorizes not only what is deemed great art but what is deemed art in the first place. The process of subject formation that halted her and caused her not to turn to the interpellating call of heteronormativity and led to the scene of her always-in-process creative identity is the very scene that then normalizes her limitations as an artist and subject within society.

This chapter gives close consideration to the question of queer women's access and to how the debates and concerns of the time are staged within the cabaret circuit by discussing the cases of three different cabaret performance events: Montreal's *Edgy Cabaret: Final Last Words*, Toronto's *Strange Sisters* cabaret, and Alex Tigchelaar's *Dirty Plötz* cabaret. I will use these three events to unravel and expose the conditions, circuits, and limits of cultural capital that are available to queer feminist performance makers in Canada, and to demonstrate the vitality of the cabaret as a stage for hot contemporary debates and concerns. Here, the scramble of post-millennial queer performance highlights not only a disarrangement of the elements of transmission emitted by subcultural lives and work, but also the eager passions and heterogeneous fragments of queer cultural production that persist in their scramble to make way as best they can over steep and rough terrain.

Edgy Women/Redux

On 5 March 2016, I attended *Edgy Cabaret: Final Last Words*, which was the final event of the last iteration of Canada's longest running feminist performance festival, Edgy Women. *Edgy Cabaret* was publicized as a memorial and the publicity for the event drew on end-of-life imagery (see Fig. 2.3 and 2.4). In a series of flyers and posters for the final festival (renamed

Edgy Redux for its final three years) it was anthropomorphized as a twenty-three-year-old who will be remembered for *her* “undisciplined and unapologetic personality” (Edgy Redux, “Calendar”).



Figure 2.3 (left) *Cabaret Edgy* flyer, 2016. Figure 2.4 (right): *Cabaret Edgy* flyer, 2016.

For twenty-three years Edgy Women/Redux had been a staple for the feminist performance community where, year after year, it was manifested as a collective action that generated and regenerated artists, audiences, and collaborations. Miriam Ginestier, the festival founder and curator for the first twenty of its twenty-three years, developed Edgy as a response to the dearth of performance events for and by queer feminist artists. When she came out as a lesbian in 1989 she says that she “felt like an alien in the LGBT community” (Personal interview), and so, in an effort to seek out and work with like-minded queer feminist artists, she

developed (over the next five years) a number of important events. In 1992 she started working as an administrator and associate curator at Montreal's Studio 303. Shortly after that, in 1994, she began to apply her burgeoning skills as a producer and curator to the creation of lesbian, feminist, and queer artistic events in order to create the kind of community that she "craved through shared experience" (Ginestier, "Statement").

Ginestier's first curatorial endeavour was an annual retro cabaret called *Le Boudoir* (see Fig. 2.5). *Le Boudoir* would become an annual event for the next twenty years. The event took place at Cabaret Lion D'Or in Montreal, which is a beautifully preserved art deco style cabaret built in the 1930s. The atmosphere at Lion D'Or sweeps one back to the sensation of an early twentieth-century Paris nightclub. The audiences that attended *Le Boudoir* were swept back too—into the retro aesthetic of the venue and the performance event itself that drew on its associated cabaret history. At *Le Boudoir* performers and audience alike succumbed to the aesthetic of its historical referent (think 1920s *Folies Bergère*). Fabulous and glamorous attire was encouraged and the audiences rose to the occasion as the performers (primarily queer-identified women) displayed a variety of talents from dance to magic; from tableau vivant to comedy; from scripted Vaudeville-style farcical dramas to striptease.

Bolstered by the popularity of this event and its power to build queer community from "shared experience," Ginestier then started a monthly event called *Meow Mix*, which she referred to as "Le Boudoir's scruffier little sister" ("Statement"), an evening of dancing and performance "for bent girls and their buddies," which is a phrase borrowed from Ginestier's now-defunct organization called Mim Productions that produced cabaret performances in Montreal from 1994 to 2015. In 1994, along with New York-based dancer and comedian Karen Bernard, Ginestier started the Edgy Women Festival, an interdisciplinary festival of feminist performance and art of

which Ginestier would be the director for another twenty years before passing the reigns to upcoming curator Andrea J. Rideout in 2014. Unique in many ways, Edgy was also a fully bilingual festival, one where francophone and anglophone acts and artists were programmed side by side. The potential of queer feminism to challenge hegemonic boundaries is made apparent by this fact. Rarely in Canada does one see a truly bilingual show. And language, in Quebec, is the fundamental boundary that divides cultural production. Here, in the queer feminist context, that boundary is transgressed. *Le Boudoir* and *Meow Mix*, like *Edgy Women/Redux* after it (all bilingual events), were able to incubate, generate, and inspire queer alternative potentialities by scrambling the regulatory boundaries of cultural priorities.



Figure 2.5: Flor de la Canela, by Miriam Ginestier (centre), *Le Boudoir*, photo by Sasha Brunelle, 2006.

In March 2016, after years of escalating financial precarity due to the de-prioritization of queer and feminist performance and dwindling festival resources within the existing funding agencies and sources, the Edgy Festival was laid to rest. The end of Edgy was celebrated through a series of interrelated performance events. The first was a visitation of the body (of work), wherein Ginestier curated an evening of retrospective videos drawn from the Edgy archives, and the last was a cabaret curated by Andrea J. Rideout called *Cabaret Edgy: Famous Last Words*. *Cabaret Edgy* was framed as a funeral-style event. Unraveling the thread of loss that Edgy's closure signifies demonstrates the precarious conditions of queer women's cultural production in Canada then and now.

Cabaret Edgy

Dressed elaborately in black mourning costumes of fantastical proportions with headdresses, tassels, veils, and exaggerated eye makeup that emphasized the grief-stricken aspect of their faces—streaked with tears and dripping mascara—the hosts of the evening's proceedings, long-time Edgy regulars, Nathalie Claude and Dayna McLeod, began the show with a ritualized procession through the audience. (see Fig. 2.6 and 2.7). From the back of the house to the front of the stage, they weaved their way through the crowd, comforting the audience, thanking them for coming, and handing out Kleenex as they went. Occasionally they would stop to offer a spectator a hug or take a moment to mourn together in small groupings of the packed house.

“The world and its continuity,” suggests Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, “are carefully created in rituals and ceremonies,” and these rituals and ceremonial practices are “enactments and performances,” wherein “all participants are called upon to jointly weave a world with a pattern in which all contribute to the outcome” (150). The ensconced ritual of the annual gathering of Edgy

artists and audiences is here transformed to the familiar ritual of funerary rights. *Cabaret Edgy* sought to engage the audience in an affective process that put their emotions centre stage in an environment of public intimacy. The emcees, Claude and McLeod, were in close contact with the audience throughout the show. McLeod said that both she and Claude were always very interested in engaging with the audience, and as performers they were “very like ‘you, you over there,’” reaching out and drawing them in throughout the show. Attending to the specificity of this show as an end (end of era; end of opportunity; end of festival with a twenty-three-year history), McLeod confirmed that she and Claude felt that it was their job to encourage the audience to experience this end together. “We were giving them permission to mourn,” asserts McLeod, “by coming out of the audience and being able to navigate and connect with them.” There were some clear emotional attachments to Edgy, and Claude and McLeod decided to dive straight into the experience of public mourning, “to put it right out there, that was our job, to encourage the audience to experience it together” (McLeod, Personal interview).

The role of the emcee, especially in the context of a subcultural production, is a critically neglected one. The emcee can reach across the footlights and open a channel of intersubjectivity, engaging the audience directly as if to say, *we hear you, we see you, we are you*. This intersubjective exchange holds the audience in a radical (public) safe space of vulnerability. After the procession, and once on the stage proper, Claude and McLeod began to cry exaggeratedly before launching into a song:

Dayna: This is the end, beautiful friends.

Nathalie: C’est la fin, D’Edgy Women, la fin.

Dayna: Of all our feminist schemes, the end.

Nathalie: De ce qu'on trouvait si inspirant, la fin.

Dayna: No « encores » or curtain calls, the end.

Together: I'll never look into your eyes, again.

Oh Dayna, Oh Nat, I can't, I can't, I can't.

(Spoken simultaneously in French and English)

Nathalie: Peux-tu imaginer, ce qu'on aurait étéées, avec des subventions illimitées, vivant, dans une, société d'Art Matriarcale?

Dayna: Can you imagine what we could do, with unlimited support, Living in an artistic matriarchal land? ("Performance Text")



Figure 2.6 (left): Dayna McLeod Figure comforting audience member, *Cabaret Edgy*, 2016.

Figure 2.7 (right): Nathalie Claude onstage, *Cabaret Edgy*, 2016.

Rather than summoning ghosts, as in *Killjoy's Kastle* discussed in chapter 1, these artists engaged in a ritual to separate spirit from body—to let Edgy die. Ritualized as such, *Cabaret Edgy* existed at the intersection of performance, desire, exile, mourning, displacement, and faith. Using a death/grieving/mourning ritual as a structural frame for the show inverted the usual process wherein performance is part of ritual—making ritual part of performance—by having performed a ritual while doing a performance. Thus, the concept of ritual was exploited to draw attention to the affective dimension and sacred quality of subcultural performance traditions, and to show the attachments that are formed by audiences and artists whose representations are scarce, precarious, and often illegible. This memorial, like any memorial, was a performance for and by the living. Sacred space was made through ritual, and this event represented a touchstone for that affective space (*I was there, in that place where that event happened; I am part of that community, I am one with those people and events*). Ritualizing the celebration of the end of Edgy Women gave voice to its cultural memory and its capacity to link a cultural touchstone with an embodied experience.

As the event's emcees, Claude and McLeod embraced their role as initiates in the art of short-term memory-loss, in which this and all cabarets could be said to engage. Like J. Jack Halberstam's reading of Dory in *The Queer Art of Failure*, each moment brings an opportunity for a new beginning and a new experience (54). After a mournful journey to the stage, and then a song of lament about its ending (quoted above), Claude and McLeod begin to make haphazard and elaborate plans for next year's event; Claude envisions a flotilla on the St. Lawrence River; McLeod informs us that Bjork might be interested in performing at the festival; and so on. This indulgence in theatrical denial—denial of the imminent demise of a beloved event—comes easily

to artists who are always in the process of re-emerging, reimagining, returning, and resurrecting.

T.L. Cowan, performance theorist and cabaret artist, the first act up after the emcees' introduction, presented a staged lecture on the importance of feminist performance *not* as a cultural endeavour but as a vital form of technology with the absurd but convincing assertion that “feminist rage + performance = energy” (*Cabaret Edgy*). Cowan, as Mrs. Trixie Cane, her femme drag character styled after a suburban soccer mom (sporting a pink track suit and blonde bob), proposed an elaborate new fundraising initiative, in the category of technology for a hypothetical GoFundMe campaign, called “Edgy Women Memorial Institute for Long Feminist Performance Art Programming that Goes On and On Forever, Forever Into Eternity, or EW MILF PAP GO OFFIE” (*Cabaret Edgy*). “Feminist performance art exists,” she says, “because feminist experimental artists make art instead of building weapons and armies to kill all the hundreds of thousands of motherfuckers who screw them over every day.” Feminist performance, she suggests, is a technological force that can save the world by diverting the power of feminist rage away from acts of violence and using that rage to fuel positive change. Turning nothing (the negative energy of rage) into something (the institution of feminist performance festivals in every city every year) is a proposal with a fantastical sheen. Productive disavowal, both as a strategy and as a performance trope, permeates the scramble and the resolutely absurd dimensions of its forever uphill battle.

After Cowan's hilarious but oddly convincing funding initiative, the emcees return to the stage in a state of rage. It is now clear that the show will traverse the stages of grief across its diverse cast of performers and acts. No longer in a state of denial, or what I have termed productive disavowal, they have given over to the rage. “Fuck this shit,” chant Claude and McLeod. “Fou cette merde!” Following which, Claudia Chan Tak, a contemporary dance artist,

comes on stage to enact an elaborate tale of rage (told exclusively through the body)—a rage that was triggered by the discovery that Hello Kitty is not Chinese. This discovery creates for Chan Tak a hilarious crisis of identity and identification. Next, trans performer and sex worker Judy Virago stages the real circumstance of her threatened deportation for being who she is (a trans activist). Following Virago is Alvis Choi, who demonstrates their nagging sense of inadequacy with a karaoke drag performance that takes them back to China, then to Canada, forever questioning their right to be and perform. In between each act, Claude and McLeod return to the stage with a new take on the state of affairs that is the end of their beloved Edgy, as they weave their way through the stages of grief. At the end of the show, another long-time Edgy performer, Alexis O’Hara, comes on stage, in the form of her drag character Guizo, to sing a drunken love song to curators Ginestier and Rideout. The audience is rapt, lost, and then found again, together.

Fin/End

The queer artist who lives to create another day must believe that the normative temporal frame of beginning and ending, of being and becoming, are not immutable. In my interview with Ginestier I asked, “So now, Edgy is done?” “Except,” she answered with a grin, “I’m presenting an Edgy in New York in June” (Personal interview).⁴

Edgy Women/Redux articulated its identity as “undisciplined” and “unapologetic,” within a tradition of programming that is “imbued with a love of experimentation and a thrill for emerging practices in performance that spark conversation and mesmerize audiences” (Edgy Redux “About”). Edgy’s emphasis on conversation and experimentation is central to feminist and subcultural performance festivals whose function is to present and, ideally, elevate the work to broader visibility and also to enrich performance practices and facilitate vital creative exchange. The feminist performance festival is marked not only by the work presented but also

by the exchange of ideas and aesthetics that happen in these liminal temporal frames. The public that Edgy attracts is not the “biggest” audience, hoping to see the “best” work, but rather a public that is ideologically and emotionally invested in its desires and ideas. When Ginestier started the festival, she was exploring the potential of performance to fulfill a lack that made her an “alien” in the LGBT scene. Through an investment in shared cultural experience she demonstrated Apffel-Marglin’s assertion that performances and enactments create the conditions for people to constitute the world together.

Strange Insatiable Sisters

On 25 October 2013 (three years before the final *Cabaret Edgy* in Montreal), a long-standing Toronto-based queer feminist performance event in Toronto, the *Strange Sisters* cabaret, *returned* to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre after a five-year hiatus with a newly extended title: *Strange Sisters: The Insatiable Redux*. Redux, it seems, was becoming a key term that resonated with young curators—curators who sought to reimagine and reframe the queer feminist identity and aesthetic. *Strange Sisters* had been an annual queer women’s cabaret associated with Buddies in Bad Times from 1987 to 2007.⁵ Upon the announcement of the return of *Strange Sisters*, the press and the theatre itself publicized the re-emergence of this one-night cabaret much as I have above, as returning from hiatus after a number of years.⁶ The press quotes from the curators Gein Wong and Kim Katrin Milan⁷ focused on the line-up of performers and how, if at all, it had changed since the last installment. No one commented on the hiatus itself. No one questioned the absence of this vital event or wondered where it had gone, why it had gone, and under what circumstances. It had simply been on hiatus as though, perhaps, there had been no need or desire for a queer women’s performance cabaret on the mainstage of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Canada’s (and the world’s) largest and longest running queer theatre. Framing

the break in continuity of *Strange Sisters* as a hiatus cultivates an image of passive disappearance; as though, from sheer exhaustion, the event and the agents of its production went on a break and *Strange Sisters*, in its entirety, decided to absent itself for a (long) period of time in order to regain strength—like a hysteric on a rest cure—only to re-emerge as the *Insatiable Redux* version of itself.⁸ The renaming of the event is brilliantly appropriate inasmuch as it identifies the passionate desires of queer women and trans folk that cannot be immobilized (that are “insatiable”) and reimagines these passions in a cabaret revival (redux) format. While the title supports the magical re-emergence of this event without explanation of its disappearance, it simultaneously tells the truth of its existence. Disappearance, reappearance, and redux are time and again properties of the post-millennial scramble of queer feminist performance.

The history of *Strange Sisters Cabaret* tells a story of how queer women’s performance operates in and around the institutional settings of Canadian theatre and how queer women’s performance practices fall between the folds of the institutional diversity mandates that claim to represent them—a story that is told through its refusal. The gaps in the lineage of *Strange Sisters* are reflected in the archive, and the archive, in turn, posits a theory of cultural relevance. The construction of history within a systemic historical frame produces a narrative from evidence of documented productions. Absences, in such a frame, are the sign of failure, and not all failures, even queer ones (with apologies to J. Jack Halberstam who suggests in his book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, that failure is a necessarily queer and queerly necessary aspect of life) are productive. The failure to go on, the failure to *be* (produced and experienced) perpetuates an aura of insignificance. Absence gets forgotten. Disappearance becomes unmarked erasure. What gets remembered is what gets done. The not done, not there, not remarked on are forgotten, and the gaps these leave are smoothed over by linear narratives that latch onto the points that pop. To

understand the full story of queer women's performance practices in Canada, one must trace the absences and gaps of (non)production in its history alongside its present-day productions.

The re-emergence of *Strange Sisters* in 2013 speaks directly to this history of absences and gaps. In fact, the event was revived by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre to fill a gap of its own—a gap in the production of work by queer Canadian women artists that had been growing since 2010.

When the 2013–2014 Buddies in Bad Times Theatre season was announced, *Strange Sisters* was represented in a glossy full-page promotional image alongside a suite of full productions (full-length plays with rehearsal periods and substantial runs) by male artists and one visiting (non-queer) female artist in the season brochure (see Fig. 2.8). This one-day cabaret was billed in its marketing and promotional materials as though equivalent to the full productions that absorbed the real and substantial resources of the theatre's main-stage programming.⁹

Reimagining *Strange Sisters* as on par with such productions in terms of its material conditions brings new resonance to the use of the term “redux” in the show's subtitle when this one-night cabaret is presented as single-handedly filling the gap in queer women's representation on the mainstage¹⁰ at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.¹¹

The history of *Strange Sisters* tells another story too, one of identification and difference in the queer performance milieu in Canada. Queer feminist self-representation and socio-erotic energy fuelled its dramaturgy when it emerged into the burgeoning cabaret and festival scene in Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹² From its inception, *Strange Sisters* strived to be an erotic aesthetic space that celebrated the diversity and talent of queer women in performance. The event's popularity was built on a queer call-and-response that began with the event's name and promotional materials, and continued on through to the end of the show itself. This

intersubjective identification between audience and artist spawned an erotically charged environment that permitted, even encouraged, a lusty and bawdy atmosphere. Each annual installment presented a different line-up with various curators and hosts across its long historical trajectory.



Figure 2.8: Photo of Kim Katrin Milan for Buddies 2013/14 Season Brochure, photo by Tanya Tiziana, 2013.

The absence of *Strange Sisters* in the years leading up to the 2013 *Insatiable Redux* version was quite simply a matter of the privilege of artistic direction. Brendan Healy became artistic director of Buddies at the end of 2009, in the middle of a season composed almost entirely of women. He launched his tenure by cutting the women's performance festival, *Hysteria*, into which *Strange Sisters* had been absorbed, and replacing it with nothing. The return

of *Strange Sisters* in 2013 was a response to building dissatisfaction about the exclusion of women from core programming at Buddies—a fact that was made public with projects like Laine Newman’s 2012 short documentary *You’re Not My Target Audience*—wherein queer feminist artists, including myself, Jess Dobkin, and Nari Kamal, spoke out about the systemic marginalization of women at Buddies and the lack of space for their work in Canadian theatrical institutions in general—and Alex Tigchelaar’s *Dirty Plötz*, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter. Folks were getting sick of the lack of equitable gender representation, and were offered one flashy night of programming framed as the revival of a long-lost queer women’s event as a solution.

The space that was claimed by *Strange Sisters* at the time of its original emergence in the late twentieth century was taken without permission. It claimed a space of difference that, at that time, identified as dyke. Dyke said: *Welcome to the third wave: we are not lying on our sides, we are shouting our desires from stages as musicians and comedians; we are fucking, dancing, and joking; we are diverse, we are sexy, and we’re taking up all the space we want! ...*for at least one night a year. Absorbed into Buddies in Bad Times’ regular season programming in 1994, the event had been started as a satellite fundraiser for Buddies and was staged at a variety of venues: usually venues associated with the rock music scene, such as Lee’s Palace and The Opera House. The original *Strange Sisters* was started by a group of art dykes that included Suzie Richter, the lead singer of the then popular queer band The Nancy Sinatras. Indeed, *Strange Sisters* has always had close ties to the queer music scene, hosting, over the years, the likes of Fifth Column, Carole Pope, Peaches, and Lesbians on Ecstasy, to name a few. Drawing on a range of performance genres, *Strange Sisters* exalted its artists and its audience to the status of subcultural genius. Halberstam suggests that, “when taken separately, riot dyke bands, drag kings, and queer

slam poets all seem to represent a queer edge in a larger cultural phenomenon. When considered together, they add up to a fierce and lively queer subculture that needs to be reckoned with on its own terms” (*In a Queer Time* 154). *Strange Sisters* was the place in Toronto where they were “taken together” for a celebratory reckoning—a reckoning of queer feminist homo sex—where women could get on top of each other’s ideas as well as each other’s bodies. Queer women’s cabarets such as this one provide space for getting it on: politically, intellectually, and sexually. *Strange Sisters* was a unique space where *everyone* was sexually available on a philosophical level.

Functioning much like a very short festival—a form premised on Dionysian celebration, liminal temporality, and ritual devotion—*Strange Sisters* aspired to be a phenomenon of the senses; thriving on imagination and suspending reality, founded in a sense of queer differentiation. This differentiation is motivated by desire, a desire that produces identification with/as sexual subjects who turn to each other for expression. Differentiating as a means of forming connection is familiar territory in queer feminist ideology. Difference and the performance culture that rehearses its differentiation create cultural distinctions. Queer art has the potential to incite performative distinctions that denormalize the queer experience. Differentiation, though, also threatens to categorize, and categorization always threatens to de-queer. But trying on a categorization in the fictive space of queer cabaret opens up increased access to ideas and images, which heightens the queerness of the experience. For queer art to incite denormalizing practices, it must approach a temporally contoured state of categorical identity difference. Peggy Phelan argues that “identity is only perceptible through relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other” (*Unmarked* 13). Cabaret is the

perfect place for such a state as it embodies in miniature the subcultural ethos of a queer world; “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (Berlant and Warner 558). In its material precarity and its formal polyvocality, cabaret revels in a state of productive incompleteness.

Insatiable Redux

The *Insatiable Redux* version of *Strange Sisters* presented on the Buddies in Bad Times’ mainstage on 25 October 2013, was, like all *Strange Sisters* before it, a product of the communities and curators in place at the time. In this case, Milan and Wong demonstrated a distinct commitment to femme-specific identities within the queer community, and to increased visibility for women of colour. In addition, Wong was the first trans woman to ever hold the position of curator of a *Strange Sisters* and Wong and Milan’s curation radically shifted the presence of women of colour from margin to centre in the event’s programming. In addition, the *Insatiable Redux* made a concerted effort to enact the performance of care. This “care” took the form of trigger warnings and active listeners (on-site to discuss anything that might cause an audience member distress or discomfort), in addition to the implementation of some important measures for inclusion, such as ASL interpretation—all of which were unprecedented. For some curators working in the queer and feminist art and culture scene today, the performance of care is an important issue. Interpreted generously one might consider it, in this context, another amorous gesture toward an audience of beloved community members. Or, on the other hand, one might see it as a confusing admission of queerness as a state of perpetual victimization. On the topic of trigger warnings in general, the queer, trans, and feminist community is split. Some think that they threaten to sterilize the radical and messy potential of queer performance, others that they

make performance safe, inclusive, and accessible to a larger portion of society. The debates that began to rage on the internet in 2014, through the critical engagement of J. Jack Halberstam,¹³ were already being staged in queer women's cabarets in Toronto in 2013. While *Strange Sisters: The Insatiable Redux* expressed a deep investment in the kind of care that trigger warnings stand for, Tigchelaar's *Dirty Plötz* performed a deliberate act of potential triggering to get at the complicated web of expression within which queer performance is soaked. Tigchelaar raises questions about *who* is cared for when the care of trigger warnings is performed.

The original title of the show, *Strange Sisters*, was a twisted identification with the lesbian pulp fiction novels of the 1950s and 1960s that characterized queer women as society's outcasts and miscreants. This title, under Milan and Wong, was remodeled in the first year of its re-emergence and abandoned in its second when the event was billed as *Insatiable Sisters* (see Fig. 2.9). Milan suggests that the name change, from *Strange Sisters* to *Insatiable Sisters*, acknowledged that the "transformation was about defining what we want, as opposed to who we are." "We are not countercultural; this *is* our culture as we practice and envision it, and" she goes on to assert, "we are not necessarily strange, but we are definitely hungry" (Milan and Wong, "Insatiable Sisters" 33). Milan's suggestion that queer feminist performance culture is not about being antithetical to the mainstream of contemporary culture but about asserting a unique and real identity based on desire—based on what we want and what we hunger for—resonates as an optimistic disavowal of queer feminism's very real position in contemporary society. Her optimism might be seen as an effort to negotiate instability and hegemonic incoherence. But her optimism is not simply, as Lauren Berlant theorizes in *Cruel Optimism*, an illusion of coherence. Rather, it is a queer coherence of impermanence, a coherence that is temporally bounded within the confines of the devotional space of queer feminist cabarets, a space that is supported by the living exchange between performer and

spectator. Appealing to audiences of shared politics and identities, Milan and Wong's *Strange Sisters: The Insatiable Redux* called out to all *Strange Sisters* past in its inheritance of "a long legacy of incredible queer womyn and trans folks making sexy, radical art" (Milan and Wong, "Insatiable Sisters" 32) and gestured toward an imagined future that is "sexual in the queerest of ways, meant to inspire feeling rather than reproduction" (Rodriguez 1). Renamed and reclaimed, this celebration of queer women's art and sexuality was, or so the curators thought, to be reinstated within the Buddies mandate and regular programming. In Milan and Wong's program notes for the 2013 event they write, "this revival of *Strange Sisters* is just the beginning," and in a cruel act of optimism they suggest, "you now have a home with us, this year and into the future" ("Program Notes"). This restart, the curators claim, is *the* start. The cruelest thing about optimism is that, without it, it's hard to go on. Optimism is bound to the future. Desire, the manifestation of hope, is always in motion; it drives and moves; it clamours for imminent gratification (Menon 19).

Multiple beginnings are a queerly consistent component of the post-millennial scramble of queer performance where disappearance, reappearance, and redux speak to a transhistorical trajectory of queer feminist performance that emerges again and again. Indeed, this is the quality of its queer future, the one that is driven by its always-in-motion desires, to resurface again, and again. Queer futures rely on queer forgetfulness (Halberstam, *Queer Art* 15) and on productive disavowal. *Strange Sisters: The Insatiable Redux* shows what queer women can do by forgetting, then reimagining through reappearance the appearance of always being right there and always about to be there in the future. The 2014 installment of *Strange Sisters* (by then titled *Insatiable Sisters*), a luscious and diverse event, which played to a packed house as soon as it was announced, was the last one. As I write this, in 2018, there is no sign of its re-emergence, no "home" for us "now and into the future," right now.

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Figure 2.9: *Insatiable Sisters* Poster, 2014, photo by Tanya Tiziana.

Returns, Restarts, and Re-visions

Queer women carve out spaces for their artistic expression whether permitted by the institutional cultural order or not. The extraordinary process by which they do this is an ongoing scramble of temporal and spatial reclamation and iteration. Queer feminist performance artists like Alex Tigchelaar fight back for what they already had, lost, seemed never to have had, and fought for again. The general exclusion of women from the annals of art history is more a disavowal and erasure than a real absence. The temporal dissonance of the post-millennial scramble of queer women's performance necessitates endurance, repetition, and return. The ongoing now of queer performance is part of a fragmented genealogy, one that (re)makes itself known with each new work, each new audience, and each new phase of its tidal presence—rolling in to the shore to touch the edges of a solid cultural position in society. The ephemerality of performance in conjunction with the boundless potential of queer and the solidarities of feminist methodology together perpetuate the conditions for a performance practice that is always in motion; that is always imminently possible. The provisional potentiality (provisional because contingent on a set of variable conditions) means that somehow the work (that is feminist performance) will somehow go on whether permission is granted or not. This chapter, in many ways, is about the strategies that make this possible—the strategies that germinate the conditions for production regardless of the unfavourable conditions that these artists often face.

Cabaret is an important strategy for queer feminist performance making—even in the most hostile conditions. It can nimbly critique the inequalities that marginalize the very work that it embodies. Heather McLean argues that “women artists are contesting inequalities and nurturing new solidarities within the contradictory spaces of feminist cabaret” (2). This method of contesting inequalities is an intervention into the “visibility-invisibility dialectic” that, according to Annamarie Jagose, can lead to a clutch of temporal considerations and terms such as “sequence,

derivation, retrospection, belatedness” (qtd. in Dinshaw et al. 181). As a result, we come to understand that queer feminist visibility is not a solution to the problem of lack of representation or systemic erasure but rather a variant of invisibility, one that is in constant dialogue with its own disappearance and the appearance of its provisional unity within the systemic historical frame (Dinshaw et al. 179). As a variant of invisibility, the temporary, recurring, and retrospective reclamation and iteration of queer feminist presence in culture, visibility itself is contingent, imminent, and retrospectively. In identifying contemporary queer feminist cabaret and performance as retrospectively, I am invoking Patricia White’s concept of “retrospectatorship” as a mode of seeing contemporary performance from a position that is formed by splicing fantasy, experience, and affect into intersubjective correspondence between audience and spectator (197).

In the previous section of this chapter we saw how artists and curators turn to cabaret as a method by which to stage the issues of the current moment of queer and feminist cultures. Here, we observe a re-visioning of the cabaret form by Tigchelaar (in collaboration with the Dirty Plötz collective—a queer feminist aggregate) in the creation of a unique play-cum-variety show. Cabaret, for the curators of *Strange Sisters: The Insatiable Redux*, was an opportunity to imagine their selves at the definitional centre of a stable cultural formulation that reveres and includes them in a traditional theatrical venue. These curators assert themselves as holders of an essential cultural truth, that is, “not countercultural” and not antithetical to cultural norms. For Tigchelaar and her collaborators, cabaret is to traditional theatre what queer is to normativity—a circumvention of and disobedience to its codes of conduct. It is a turn to and an embrace of that which brings into focus the othered and the inconsequential.

Dirty Plötz activates the precise critique that this chapter itself hopes to stage: it sustains a transtemporal critique of the historical and present exclusion of women in the arts, it generates

theory as an intervention into social norms, it demonstrates the potential of sexuality to exceed the bounds of its controversy, and it functions as both an analytic and a method for the queer marginalized expression.

Cabaret offers the spectator a worldview that refuses narrative linearity in its performance collage; in its oblique trajectory from act to act, from body to body, from voice to voice, all held together by the emcee. In her cabaret representations of self, Tigchelaar simultaneously embraces and effaces the stereotypes that are cast onto her body and her queer feminist ideology. As a feminist, a sex worker, and sex trade activist her marginal status is explained by “the difficulties women encounter when they try to make their voices heard” in a culture that has “simultaneously used and excluded them” (Irigaray 30). Luce Irigaray shines a light on the partial nature of female representation as stereotypical and limiting due to “rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary,” which “puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of dominant ideology” (30). Experiencing oneself in fragments resonates very well with the multiplicity of the cabaret variety form. Cabaret is an assemblage of fragments, a collage-like format that, through the multiplicity of its many voices and bodies, progresses via a series of jolts, twists, and breaks. Halberstam asserts that “collage precisely references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original. In this respect, as well as in many others, collage (from the French *coller*, to paste or glue) seems feminist and queer” (*Queer Art* 136).

For Tigchelaar, variety acts as a counterpoint to the representations of women “like” her in mainstream culture: queers, whores, and loud-mouthed women who appear as stereotypically grotesque, desperate, or hysterical. She says that cabaret is “perfect, absolutely perfect.” As a sex

work activist, performer, and auteur, Tigchelaar insists that cabaret is really “our only choice” because, “when you come from these bodies that are segregated, incarcerated, and stigmatized simply for being what they are, you require a gang” (Personal interview). Tigchelaar as curator, emcee, and writer moderates and responds to the audience’s experience by transforming her role as emcee into a sophisticated theatrical framing device that maintains the queerness of the variety form while harnessing it as a whole. The role of the emcee, in Tigchelaar’s case, is to speak truth to power.

I love cabaret. I love it! It’s absolutely perfect. And I mean that not in some slap-dash kind of “let’s throw this this thing together to make some money for the theatre or invite all our friends on stage to talk about whatever the fuck we’re talking about,” but really, as a genre, cabaret works very well with my material. I like there to be someone who comes in and speaks directly to the audience, I like that conceit. I love the polyvocality. I love a variety of different voices telling a story together. (Personal interview)

Dirty Plötz, according to Tigchelaar, was in part “a homage to the poet, artist, proto-punk rocker, sexual libertine, fashion avatar and unrepentant trouble-maker” Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven, “whose maiden name was Plötz” (Tigchelaar qtd. in McLean 10). Baroness Elsa was what Elizabeth Freeman might call “the loser in a bygone battle” over what history was meant to be, to allow “access to a counter history of history itself—an antisystematic method that informs other, much later artistic productions traveling more explicitly under the sign of queer” (*Time Binds* 95). Tigchelaar and other contemporary and gender-play performance artists view her as “very distant great-aunt of feminist performance art” (Gammel 5). She was a spectacular flâneuse who “single-handedly took art out of its designated museum spaces and performance out of the theater and the dancing halls” (Gammel 185). A foundational character of the Dada movement, a movement that sought to deconstruct the every day, she enacted the daily as a subject in process who made her own

being the focal point and practice of her art. And like so many great female artists she was “pushed to the fucking crazy-making margins” (Tigchelaar, Personal interview) and erased from the history of the movement that she helped to found. *Dirty Plötz* is part homage to Baroness Elsa and part jeremiad against the erasure of women in the arts, both then and now.

Dirty Plötz tells the story of unabashed endurance masked as a series of returns and restarts. At the beginning of the show, Tigchelaar, as Baroness Von Hag, enters from the back of the house (see Fig. 2.10). She is dirty, dishevelled, and covered in barely a scrap of fur with her tits out and her vulva on full display. She dances through the audience with the Moss Maiden and The Wood Nymph to join the live Sheela Na Gig¹⁴ already hunkered on a pedestal on the stage, naked with her legs spread and her hands placed on her vulva, opening and emphasizing her genitalia. Tigchelaar begins by drawing direct attention to her own abject and sexualized self-presentation, saying, “Well, I guess it’s too late for a trigger warning, HUUUUUUHHHHH?” Attempting a critique of the millennial propensity for the performance of care that she, but presumably no one else, finds hilarious, a detail that is revealed in her banter with Sheela Na Gig where the two back and forth about whether or not what the Hag has said is funny. “Yes it is.” “No, it’s not.” “Yes it is,” asserts the Hag, and continues:

It’s so funny I could just die. I COULD JUST DIE. Well I could you know. And then what would you do? Would you petition the government on Change.org? Would you have an I COULD JUST DIE IN for me? Would you lie in the middle of an intersection wearing red with your legs splayed to the left? WOULD YOU? Of course, you wouldn’t. And why should you? Because here I am again, huh? Late night show-time me again. CABARET THEATRE me again. *Plötz* with an umlaut me again (she makes a two fingered poke—the British fuck you symbol), and always with the crotch eh? Alwaaaaays

with the crotch. WHY DOES SHE ALWAYS HAVE TO SHOW US HER CROTCH
CHA CHA CHA? (Tigchelaar, “*Dirty Plötz*” 76)



Figure 2.10: Alex Tigchelaar in *Dirty Plötz*, photo by Laine Newman, 2015.

Tigchelaar, with the introductory rant above, has set the stage formally, temporally, ideologically, and aesthetically. True to the cabaret form, she addresses the audience directly. (The cabaret emcee is sometimes a fictional character, sometimes the artist as performer, and sometimes a combination of the two.) In *Dirty Plötz* she appears as a transtemporal version of her own artist persona. Her death, like those of all the disavowed artists before her, will not be mourned because she has/will returned/return, because here she is again invoking the “resilience of the seemingly forgotten (that nevertheless occurs)” (Schneider, *Performing Remains* 6). From the recent past and historical events Tigchelaar constructs a distant present that is always

receding and always on the verge of return. When she suggests the institution of a new fantasy performance space called “The Moynan King Memorial Avocado for Lesbian Performance” (“*Dirty Plötz*” 93) in response to the sudden closure of Toronto’s Hysteria Festival in 2009, of which I was the director, she is bridging histories of failed, lost, disavowed feminist efforts in order to reimagine new futures. Tigchelaar’s proposal renders me (Moynan King) undead and invokes my memory alongside the actually dead Baroness Elsa by memorializing the potentiality of such a space—a space made from nothing but an avocado. “Avocados,” Tigchelaar demonstrates with one in her hand, “are remarkably versatile. You simply scoop out the meat and you can create a shell shaped backdrop like the Sydney Opera House” (“*Dirty Plötz*” 93).

By reanimating Baroness Elsa, Moynan King, and others, along with her own self in the process, Tigchelaar is engaging in the vital feminist tactic of recovery. She is recovering the history, nearly forgotten, of important artists of the “past,” and she is recovering, literally, from her own relegation to the “fucking crazy-making margins.” While Baroness Elsa is partially represented in Tigchelaar’s voice, she is simultaneously represented in the form of a tacit dancer (performed by Tina Fushell) who is woven through the work as a recurring presence costumed in one of the Baroness Elsa’s classic body art costumes—a black-and-white body suit and headdress (see Fig. 2.11). As a multiple being, Tigchelaar stands in for, and up for, all forgotten and discarded women artists and activists as a living collage of these herstories. Her direct address to the audience positions her on the “stage’s edge,” a term gleaned from Felicity Nussbaum’s *Rival Queens* that identifies a space for the actress as always simultaneously herself and her character, to reveal the intimacy and authority of her communications by smashing through the fourth wall to talk straight to the audience.

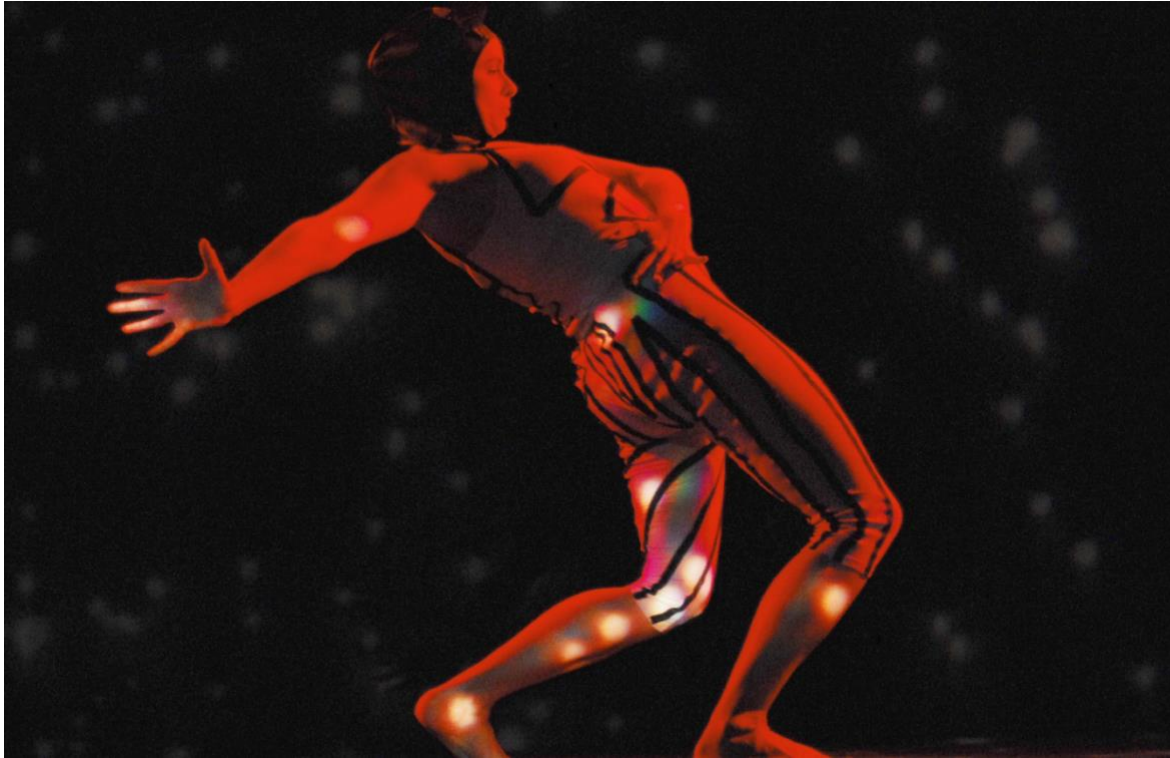


Figure 2.11: Tina Fushell as Baroness Elsa, photo by Laine Newman, 2015.

The direct address in cabaret is an invitation to collaborate, to make meaning together in the present. It reminds the audience that we are all here together, reinforcing the temporal now by implicating the audience in the show's proceedings (Lehman 127). It is a moment of queer visibility where the audience sees the likeness of their own subjectivity by seeing like. Being seen makes one part of the scene, and this reciprocity between artist and audience and among audience members intensifies the experience so that the border between mimesis and daily life, between performance and performativity, erodes. The potential for the direct address to transfer ideas from the performance to the world outside the theatre is laid bare along with the socio-political efficacy of cabaret.

Tighehaar's repetition of "me again" is a sly redress of her own seeming marginalization, which reinforces the fact that she has been here before. The audience members, whether they've

seen her work before or not, are notified of the fact they are in the hands of an experienced professional. “Me again,” establishes her as an authority. She has done this before and she will do it again. She is not a one-off “pop-up” experience and, even though her conditions of production are increasingly precarious, she is coming from somewhere and will be going somewhere else, imminently and inevitably. She does not, to reinvoke Harvie, “exist in some kind of material and historical vacuum, hovering in an idealized realm outside of time, political signification, social relations and material processes and conditions” (16), but is part of a complicated system of relations of her own and others’ feminist self-reflexive performances past, ongoing, and returned. “Me again” is a reminder of history’s returns, of temporal loops, and of the “irruptive experience of what Adrienne Rich has termed voluntary and redressive acts of ‘re-vision’” (Schneider, *Performing Remains* 6), which are acts of “looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text with a new critical direction.” “Re-vision,” Rich suggests, “is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival” (qtd. in Schneider, *Performing Remains* 6). Tigchelaar’s embodiment of the time travelling hag, the nagging voice, the killjoy, reminds us of the breaks and fissures in our own comfy neo-liberal Canadian culture. Even if we don’t “see” her (having denied her access and the opportunity to be on the scene), she can see us. The disavowed queer feminist artist is not demanding space for herself, she’s always already just here whether she is validated or not.

The presence of Alex Tigchelaar, in the first iteration of *Dirty Plötz*, on the cabaret stage as late-night one-off programming for the Rhubarb! Festival at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, is a return and a restart. Tigchelaar made her Buddies debut with her company The Scandelles in collaboration with Cat Nimmo (aka Kitty Neptune) in 2004 as part of the Hysteria Festival. That show was *Under the Mink*, “A night of red hot chicanery celebrating reel women in cinema, and

featuring Toronto's leading ladies and gentlemen of reduced virtue...THE SCANDELLES" (Program for the Hysteria Festival). David Oiyee, the artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times at the time, saw *Under the Mink* at Hysteria. "That was how the whole thing took off," says Tigchelaar. "Hysteria was the launching point for our yearly cabaret shows at Buddies" (Personal interview). Within the period 2004 to 2009, in addition to a couple of cabarets within Hysteria, The Scandelles presented three thematic cabarets that were presented on the Buddies mainstage. These shows were extremely popular. Eventually, the Scandelles developed a fully scripted play that was produced by Buddies with full rehearsal time and a mainstage production budget called *Neon Nightz*. Even then, though, Tigchelaar stayed true to her cabaret/burlesque performance roots and set the play (much like Mae West before her) in the scene of a contemporary strip club. *Neon Nightz* enjoyed a subsequent trans-Canada tour, including a stop at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal in 2011. After the new artistic director took over the company in 2010, The Scandelles were, along with the Hysteria Festival, not produced at Buddies in the mainstage season again.

Conclusion

Queer, it has been said, over and over in the post-millennial, post-everything culture of now, does not *work*; it can no longer *work* because it encompasses too much. This chapter reminds us that not only *does* queer *work* but that it's *hard work*. The liminal space of queer feminist performance in the form of cabaret offers a queer methodology with which to do that work.

Institutional programming is as much the product of its administration as its mandate. Queer-ish spaces become queered by the identities of the artists that rub off on them. Queer cultures evolve so rapidly that the ever-shifting nature of queer moves and transforms space and time as it goes. Some spaces, like Studio 303, are queered from the inside (with artistic producers

such as Ginestier). Others, like Buddies in Bad Times, carry the burden of representation of a vast and heterogeneous queer arts community. And spaces like Buddies take up a lot of space, and the artists whose identities it claims to represent find their selves orphaned if they are not included.

Cabaret, for the queer artist, presents a universe of potential that acts as a loose network of satellites to the stable masses (the institutions) to which most of the funding (government and corporate) is funnelled. As satellites, cabaret events are much easier to cut loose, much easier to miss, much easier to turn away from and move on from. The chronic conditions of queer feminist performance in Canada are soothed by this vibrant and dynamic form, but the systemic issues that render this work marginal, fostered, satellite-like can only ever be managed, it seems, and never actually cured. However, working, as these artists do, on the margins, embodies the ethos of the cabaret solution/problem matrix. Denied security and granted freedom, they float in the margins, a space of radical freedom, ungoverned by the demands of capitalist versions of success, where they can indulge in dreaming a way into being, and by doing so can live in a fanciful state of unbecoming.

Notes

1. By pinnacle I mean that it is the highest level of achievement some queer feminist artists reach, and for some of these artists, a source of real notoriety and cultural capital.
2. CARFAC is the Canadian Artist Representation (Front des Artistes Canadien) association that sets acceptable fee scales for artists' shows, including performance art.
3. The Canadian Actors' Equity Association (CAEA) sets fee scales for actors, stage managers, and directors in Canadian theatre.
4. Along with a short love affair with Hysteria Festival in Toronto, Edgy Festival has sustained a number of producing partnerships including the one with Performance Mix Festival in New York, to which Ginestier brought a group of Edgy performers in June 2016, after the grand finale memorial.
5. For more on various incarnations of *Strange Sisters* over the years, see Noble; Halferty; Milan and Wong; and King.
6. The numbers varied from 10 to 5 years, depending on the source. The actual number of years is six. Prior to 2013, the last *Strange Sisters Cabaret* presented at Buddies was in 2007 as part of Hysteria: A Festival of Women;, however, from 2008 to the 2009-2010 season, there was regular programming of Canadian queer women's performance work on Buddies' mainstage, including *The Beauty Salon* by Moynan King; *The Salon Automaton* by Nathalie Claude; *Neon Nightz*, by Sasha Van Bon Bon and Kitty Neptune; and the biannual Hysteria Festival. For more on the 2013 re-emergence of *Strange Sisters*, see <http://buddiesinbadtimes.com/show/strange-sisters/>,

<http://torontoist.com/events/event/strangesisters-the-insatiable-redux/>, and

<http://www.dailyxtra.com/toronto/arts-and-entertainment/sister-act-72048>.

7. Kim Katrin Milan went by the name Kim Crosby at the time of this event. However, I will refer to her by her new chosen name throughout this chapter.
8. *Strange Sisters* was started as a queer women's performance cabaret organized by a group of independent performers and musicians, including Suzie Richter of the The Nancy Sinatras, as a fundraiser for Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in 1987. When the theatre moved to its permanent home at 12 Alexander Street in 1994, the event was absorbed into the company as a Buddies production. It was a major annual event in the queer women's community from its inception for nearly twenty years. In 2003 the event was incorporated into Hysteria: A Festival of Women (of which I was co-founder and director) in order to exploit its popularity and share the devoted *Strange Sisters* audience with the emerging festival. The final official *Strange Sisters* (prior to the 2013 Redux installment) was in 2007. In 2008 I replaced the popular event with a new one-off cabaret in celebration of the 100th anniversary of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* entitled *Anne Made Me Gay*. In 2009 (by now Hysteria was a biannual festival), we did not include *Strange Sisters* in the Hysteria Festival programming, which was full of queer women's performance and cabaret, including, notably, *The Invert Parade*, an all-queer cabaret event hosted by Nathalie Claude.
9. The budget for *Strange Sisters* was approximately \$15,000, according to Charissa Wilcox, Buddies' production manager. The amount of \$15,000 is unprecedented for *Strange Sisters* or any other queer women's cabaret at Buddies or anywhere. In fact, the event had always run on

a minimal budget and acted as a fundraiser for the company rather than being robustly supported by the company. This lush budget for a one-night event accounts for the very flashy promotional materials and the unusually high percentage of talent imported from the United States.

10. The distinction that I draw with reference to the mainstage at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre is an important one. The theatre has two performance venues. The first, most commonly referred to simply as “the cabaret” but officially named Tallulah’s, is a small venue with a stage measuring 8 x 12 feet. The cabaret space is essentially a bar with room for approximately eighty seated patrons on a show night. There is a wide staircase that runs directly through the middle of the space that challenges sight lines. The cabaret is also severely acoustically challenged. The mainstage, on the other hand, is a dream space for performance. It is a flexible black box that can seat up to three hundred spectators depending on the arrangement of the risers and the chairs. Acoustically, it is perfect. In a quiet house one could hear a dime drop on the stage from anywhere in the venue. It is well equipped with professional and up-to-date lighting, sound, and video projection equipment.

11. Incidentally, *Strange Sisters: The Insatiable Redux* was staged during the run of *Killjoy’s Kastle* in the fall of 2013, and Kim Katrin Milan, who curated it, was featured as one of the Feminist Killjoy’s in the Processing Room at the opening performance of *Killjoy’s Kastle*. In a rare instance of queer feminist abundance, I had to take a night off from my duties as Demented Women’s Studies Professor Tour Guide at the *Kastle* to attend the *Strange Sisters* cabaret!

12. The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of culturally framed, arts-focused festivals such as the Ashkenaz Festival, Queer Culture, Women in View, Weesageechak Begins to Dance, and Edgy Women. These festivals mapped themselves onto countercultural identities and extended the presence of culturally diverse voices without necessarily increasing the scarce resources with which the featured work was produced.
13. See Halberstam's article, "Trigger Me, Triggering You: Making Up Is Hard To Do," 15 July 2014, bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/15/triggering-me-triggering-you-making-up-is-hard-to-do/
14. A medieval symbol of fertility/lust in the form of a female gargoyle whose legs are splayed with the vulva held wide open.

Chapter Three

The Performance Has Started/The Performance Is Still Going On

We have seen in chapter 1 how queer feminist performance can be constituted as an act of historiography and queer theory come to (larger than) life. And in chapter 2 we saw how cabaret functions as a vital subcultural practice that generates and responds to the ways and means of much contemporary queer feminist performance in Canada. The world-making and self-making practices of events like the cabarets in chapter 2 and the monstrous collaboration outlined in chapter 1 may, at first glance, seem fleeting and unsustainable, but if you look out from there, if you follow the tributaries of art and being that flow into and away from these events, a more sustainable, holistic, and generative scene starts to emerge.

Here, in chapter 3, we shift our focus from gathering to continuing, from attending to enduring, from celebrating to surviving in order to examine work that is on the tipping point between conscious self-performance and unconscious performativity. Addressing the tipping point illustrates how precarious each move, each act, each word is – how each of these has real consequences in performances that go on without a safety net. Scrambling, here, is a willful act, a self-conscious self-shattering that celebrates the endurance of queer feminist artists whose scramble to go on is forever ongoing.

Attention in this chapter is given to the significance of individual survival (the act of going on) to the larger ideological field of queer performance. I particularly want to tease out the ways that performance affects ongoingness. What the artists in this chapter do is create space in performance for the palatable vulnerability of being activated and out of control: Shaista Latif is “in the middle of an epic f*cking meltdown” (“Program Notes”), Jess Dobkin will “run out of here after the show, and won’t let [her] girlfriend touch her” if it doesn’t go well (*The Magic*

Hour 177), and Dayna McLeod is dressed to kill and “literally asking for it” (Personal interview). The idea of queer feminist survival is mirrored in the danger of performances that are powerfully charged and consequential; that are real and ongoing.

Each of the performances discussed here reframes the concept of durationality in performance so that duration is sometimes the performance form and sometimes the unbroken thread between life and art that demonstrates just how hard beginnings are to pin down. Durationality in this chapter allows me to analyze the work from the perspective of time in performance alongside time in relation to material contexts and lived experience. Each of the performances analyzed in this chapter maps a different aspect of queer feminist durationality.

By way of introducing the durational form in its more traditional construct, I will begin with a description and brief analysis of Dayna McLeod’s *Cougar for a Year*. I will then delve deeply into a discussion of Jess Dobkin’s *The Magic Hour* to show how it may be perceived as a unique extension of the durational form. Then I will link the show’s visionary ending to Latif’s invocation of the song “A Whole New World” from the Walt Disney film *Aladdin* via Muñoz’s theorization of queer utopia. Muñoz’s concept of potentiality in *Cruising Utopia* is tied to the queer performance scramble through its engagement with queer temporalities, and across the chapter I will investigate the ways that durationality implicates utopian futurities. In addition, I will consider the concept of the utopian performative and the way that utopia appears on the horizon of queer futurity by privileging the will to travel over arrival. In my excavation of Latif’s *The Archivist*, I will show how the durationality of being other and immigrant creates a hybrid space for long duration from archive to utopia and show how belonging can sometimes only be achieved within performance itself. As I go I will continue to delve into issues of production and

reception and then end the chapter by returning to McLeod's *Cougar for a Year* to explore the ongoing temporalities of a multi-platform performance and aging as a feminine person.

Queer Feminist Duration

McLeod, Dobkin, and Latif are each uniquely involved in scrambling the time of performance with lifetimes of experience. Peggy Phelan suggests that “part of what performance knows is the impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal tenses, between an absolutely singular beginning and ending, between living and dying” (Phelan and Lane, *Ends of Performance* 8). The performances discussed in this chapter do not *start* with their stagings in a theatrical or other audience-focused venue; rather, their *going on* is contingent upon the artists' own survival—up to and including the time of each performance event. At the beginning of each of these performances the performance has always already started and the performance will continue on after the show is done (because the show is never done). These artists are uniquely engaged with what Elin Diamond describes as “the challenge...to transform performance time into temporality,” a challenge with which queer feminist performance art always deals.

Temporality in performance, according to Diamond, makes for “a shifting time-sense, a receptivity both to the contingency of the present and to the mimetic figurations of what we might call historical experience” (142). All of the artists discussed in this chapter embrace Diamond's challenge to transform temporality into performance time (and then make an intervention into it) where the act of going on is played out and played with in an effort to seize control of (by performing) survival itself.

On her fortieth birthday, Dayna McLeod embarked on a durational performance project borne of the desire to deconstruct and experiment with her own identity as an aging queer femme. She committed to wearing animal print, day and night, for an entire year. In *Cougar for*

a Year, McLeod tries on (and keeps on) these sexualized feminine signifiers to test the limits of (age) appropriate femininity. The duration of this performance is like a parenthetical statement in the durational performance that is the rest of her life. *Cougar for a Year* places performance into the temporal frame of life experience by going on day after day, night after night, in public and in private. As Adrian Heathfield reminds us in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, “In artworks of long duration in the 1970s and 1980s, performance art became a vital form of cultural resistance to orders of temporal regulation and acceleration. Taking time itself as a subject and a malleable phenomenon, durational works made the spectator aware of time as an alterable construct” (29). McLeod’s work follows this tradition by exploring the potential of long duration for its unique ability to draw out the interrelated nature of temporality and performativity (insomuch as they both produce effects and phenomena that work on and with representation and identification through iterations).

Survival in *Cougar for a Year* is inherently woven into McLeod’s performance of aging past forty. She is summoning the effects or trouble of the past (a lifetime of representational misfires, misogyny, and illegibility), *and* is grappling with present (and imminent) aging as a feminine person. In *Cougar for a Year* she is negotiating an onset—of disappearance, distress, and failure—by meeting her representational limits head-on in a durational performance that is *about* aging and is performed through the *act of aging* itself. McLeod aged into her forties in costume and so she was never *just* Dayna in her fortieth year nor ever *not* Dayna either. Rebecca Schneider says that “constructed as natural unnatural, an unreal real, woman has existence relative only to her representation: her representation both precedes and succeeds her, she is always chasing after it” (*Explicit Body* 51). *Cougar for a Year* is a durational tribute to this chase wherein McLeod embodies her stereotyped representation (the cougar, or an

inappropriately sexualized older woman). In doing so she is enacting a survival strategy; she is protecting herself against internalizing or digesting misogyny, because her “celebration of the older woman, the queer femme, depends on the misogynist readings of failure and disvalue” (Personal interview). Thus, *Cougar for a Year* becomes a mode of self-defence, a form of armour that protects her from the potential distress and trauma of live encounters with misogynistic readings of her sexuality by, quite simply, getting a jump on them.



Figure 3.1: Dayna McLeod as the Cougar in a park in Montreal, photo by Michèle Pearson Clarke, 2013.

Marked as she is by a temporal formulation known as “middle” in the construct of her aging process, the calamity of her sexuality is troubling, inappropriate, and titillating by turns. She is engaging in a study of her own femme-ness by overemphasizing the crises that occurs at the intersection of femininity and aging where representation imposes a particular dramaturgy

that shapes the story of her survival. In *Cougar for a Year*, McLeod is intervening in that dramaturgy by exaggerating a narrative and absorbing it into her daily ongoing performance/routine. Since she cannot escape the expectations placed on her body she embraces them in a performance that tests the limits and confines of femininity, and the boundaries that define its success or failure. “Queer feminist durationality,” Amelia Jones asserts, “[is] a term that itself is performative and temporal” (*Seeing Differently* 174). Deeply embedded in *Cougar for a Year* is a temporally charged problem because the horizon of femininity, unlike the horizon of utopia, slips away as you approach it through time (that is, as you age). The effort of trying to achieve ideal femininity is rewarded differently at different life stages and the failure to make (age) appropriate attempts at femininity is met with pity and disdain.

McLeod’s work demonstrates the ideological concerns raised by Dobkin’s inquiry about exactly when a performance starts (“Are we there yet?”) in her performance art project *The Magic Hour*, and intersects with Latif’s pronouncements of the ongoingness of performance in her one-woman show *The Archivist* where she says: “Yes, it’s the performance that never ends. It’s the performance that keeps going, on and off stage, no matter what you do.” McLeod has inset a durational form of performance into her ongoing self-staged life experience to demonstrate the way that performativity and performance intersect and to set the stage for “the performance that keeps on going, on and off stage, no matter what you do,” while always and forever chasing the impossible demands of femininity, and questioning the arrival time of its onset and disappearance (“Are we there yet?”). Phelan’s assertion that “[p]erformance’s only life is in the present” (*Unmarked* 146) is scrambled into a sort of forever-ongoing presence by the performances in this chapter, performances that are enacted as extensions of the artists’ existence and survival. Performance *is* experience, and experience is part of an ongoing temporal

framework that can never be confined to an isolated present, or, as Schneider has articulated, “we are rarely exactly ‘in time’ or ‘in place’ but always also capable of multiple and simultaneous elsewheres, always a step or more behind or ahead or to the side, watching through the open windows being watched, performing ourselves performing or being performed” (*Performing Remains* 25).

The idea that the performance is ongoing recalls a familiar temporality in the queer performance scramble, which is always “disorienting the post-feminist ‘now’ of its own moment” (Freeman, “Packing History” 731). The temporalities of the performances in this chapter plunge into “the echo of the past—of what is no-longer-conscious—in the present so as to discover a potentiality for the future” (Ruti 171). This is a potentiality for the future that appears to be one thing and then another, a potentiality that can manifest as camp reappropriation, healing after-effects, and archival interventions. It is a potentiality that is always about survival, and always about the desire to keep going on.

Performance, here, is a space of collaboration and creativity that speaks to and for the inchoate multiplicity of being and becoming, and enjoins a more nuanced way of coming into being—a coming into being that is falling back and stumbling around, a coming into being that is amazed and vulnerable in its submission to the space of performance as a space of life experience. The artists in this chapter don’t just break the fourth wall, they blow it up. They shatter it to smithereens and leave its fragments in a state of (seeming) disarray over which even the artists do not have complete control. These shatterings and offerings work within a temporal scramble where being, doing, done, and becoming converge in a performance-based proposition that embraces fragmentation and speculative multiplicity as a way of being whole, as a way of envisioning a new horizon of potentiality. Diana Taylor, after Diamond, articulates the

“DOING/DONE lens” as something that “allows us to understand performance across temporalities—present and past” (7). Here I seek to extend the focus of that lens out toward a future that has the magical potential to infiltrate both the past and the present. Here the doing and done are scrambled by the potential (and the threat) of what is yet to come both inside and outside performance.

Performing the queer magic of survival means enacting the scramble between theatricality and performativity, which in turn relies on temporal formulations that trouble what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity, “the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life” (*Time Binds* xxii). What we expect to encounter in the present is determined by these “interlocking temporal schemes” and can be scrambled to create new potentialities and expectations by blurring the lines among now, then and next, between performance and performativity, and among theatre, performance, storytelling, visual art, and life.

In this chapter I am considering the way that queer performance in the post-millennial scramble repeats and intervenes; at how it sits in the productive space of repetition with difference, using repetition as a force rather than a habit. The concept of performativity, in this sense, challenges the idea that we are trapped in unconscious performative confines. This assertion summons performativity’s creative potential and the contingent dimensions of subject formation. Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity suggests that performance presupposes the existence of a subject while performativity does not. What happens when performance and performativity are scrambled together? This question plunges us directly into the heart of what we might call creative process. The job of creative process is to both answer and generate questions—questions that drive the work forward even as they shape its contours.

The artists examined in this chapter use their own creative processes as vehicles for shuttling back and forth between performance and performativity.

The Magic Hour

The Magic Hour, a show about sex abuse, trauma, and survival, is a container for the chaos of being and performing at once. It starts in the lobby, which is “performing the role of LOBBY” (*The Magic Hour* 177) and ends in the lobby (which is by then something altogether different). Dobkin’s work, like McLeod’s, creates space for the enactment of a scramble between theatricality and performativity—a space where the force of performance is exerted onto an ongoing performative exploration (of feminine failure by McLeod and trauma by Dobkin)—by merging the time and space of performance with the time and space of experience (or life). McLeod stages *Cougar for a Year* over an ongoing continuous span of time, and Dobkin stages *The Magic Hour* within the traditional theatrical frame of a *showtime*, but both are engaged in durational practices because Dobkin’s iterative duration, which starts again and again (like showtimes and like trauma), is composed in parts from fragments of experiences past and yet to come. Her performance plucks a series of moments from a life of self-questing and self-fashioning, and makes of them a magic hour—one that temporally compresses the contours of her identity as an artist, a queer, a sex abuse survivor, a mother, and seeker of ecstatic states and magical horizons.

Centred on Dobkin’s early childhood experience of sexual abuse (rape) and the ensuing trauma that chases and reiterates that abuse, *The Magic Hour* is “a performance art presentation of a theatrical convention—where we break the artifice and spoil all the fun” (*The Magic Hour* 177). The staged exploration of her ongoing experience draws both artist and spectator into a plethora of forms and a scramble of temporalities. Dobkin is not so much performing *for* an

audience as she is working *with* an audience to manage a hybrid composite of performance art, theatre, and life. In *The Magic Hour*, the artist is host to a fragmented deconstruction and (near) reenactment of her sense memories of childhood sexual violence.

As a show composed in fragments, it is best described in fragments too.

Lobby

The artist welcomes us warmly, trigger-warns us (of bad dancing and fog machines to come), reminds us that “there’s the possibility that all this is scripted, or that [she has] no idea what happens next” (*The Magic Hour* 177), and then awkwardly swirls herself around on a tiny revolving stage and performs a sudden magic trick where a flash of fire materializes from her hand. When Dobkin invites the audience “inside” the theatre proper, she places her hand on her heart, “playing with the interpretation of ‘inside’” (178) in a gesture that is apprehended in the folds between the real and the performed. With this brief introduction, she has opened up a space where experience and performance converge. What happens next has happened already and what is happening in the show will happen again and again because, when she invites us “inside” (hand on heart), she is, in effect, inviting us into her performance and herself; a self that is subject to iterative trauma that the show seeks to excavate and which she forever and always must endure.

Inside

The Magic Hour is shaped to hold ideas in a transformative state. Inside the theatre, Dobkin’s performance space is circular (a circle of chairs for the audience all facing the centre) with tributaries and extensions (four elevated playing spaces sit outside of the circle) and a centre (for the creation of ritual space). The circle brings time and form together as a shape that is cyclical and responsive to repetition. The nature of trauma can be likened to performativity in its

creative potential and methodology, which intersect with the contingent dimensions of Jess's ongoing subject formation both inside and outside of the performance container.

Once everyone is seated, the artist carefully draws a large spiral inside the circle of chairs. The spiral represents a contemplation of trauma's temporality, where the waves of experience can zero in, ripple out, disorient, or seem to have dimensions beyond the flatness of lines or linear time. The spiral is a spatial representation of time that forces us to ask, *when is the beginning and where is the end?* It reflects the artist's own efforts to discern when and if the performance has started, which puts pressure on the boundaries between life, art, artist, and survivor—a pressure that opens the door to a new mode of being, a durational span that demonstrates a continuance of time across performance and experience.



Figure 3.2: Jess Dobkin drawing the spiral, photo by Dahlia Katz, 2017.

Running

In a careworn nude suit, the artist runs, circling the audience in dim, peripheral lighting. The effect is disconcerting because the spectator is in a position of not knowing where to look, not knowing if they should look, and not wanting to do the wrong thing. For Dobkin this feeling “relates to trauma, the feeling of someone being behind you or of looking over your shoulder” (Levin 203). Chasing after that which she is running from, she asks:

Am I performing now?

Now am I performing?

Am I a performance artist now?

Now am I a performance artist?

Are we there yet? (Dobkin, *The Magic Hour* 181)

As Dobkin’s race around the audience intensifies, the lighting becomes fabulous, K.C. and the Sunshine Band’s “Get Down Tonight” plays at high volume, and the fog machine shoots a thick haze into the audience. Dobkin is winded, depleted, and ready—ready to show herself exploded by trauma, fractured by time, and transformed by experience.

Scratching at Trauma

In *The Magic Hour*, Dobkin performs a variety of characters and scenarios including a woman cut in half (like in the famous magic act) whose legs then wander in the dim afterglow of a violent separation from the body; a stand-up comedian who jokes “I read a story in the newspaper the other day about a father who paid his daughter for sex. I know, I was absolutely disgusted. What kind of daughter charges her own father” (*The Magic Hour* 184); a drag queen doing lip-synch; an academic theoretician losing her train of thought in a lecture who says “I have a Judith Butler quote in my notes if I can find them” (187); a burlesque performer who

emerges from a garden lawn bag; and an upside-down woman in cardboard cut-out where the artist's head is the cut-out's crotch whence she pulls a long coil of paper and a condom. Each of these acts is an attempt to find "the right form to 'scratch' at trauma," and to share in fragments and images a past that is unspeakable (Levin 202).

The Trauma Is Still Going On

Dobkin sets the excavation of her childhood trauma in the heart of the magic hour. The magic hour is a liminal space, a time *in-between* when the light is just appearing to, or disappearing from, the day. It is a liminal time that is defined, for photographers especially, by its fleeting nature and its intense beauty. The magic hour doesn't last, but it never fully disappears either—its return is always imminent. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma "registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned" (151); it is a force that shows itself in gaps and pieces in a given moment. "To be traumatized," Caruth says, "is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (5), which is precisely the style of experience and form that can be identified and mapped in Dobkin's show. *The Magic Hour* does not seek to tell the story of a child raped by her father in the night: *The Magic Hour* is an excavation of images, sensory memories, and symbols drawn from the artist's personal archive of feelings—feelings that have accumulated in Dobkin through survival, trauma, and performance.

The dynamic relationship between trauma and creativity is theorized by Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings* where she investigates the subcultural manifestations of trauma that reveal themselves to be vital forces that emerge from the sometimes creative tensions between shame and exposure. Because, as expressed in the writing of Caruth, trauma emerges as a "crisis of truth" (6), it can, as Anne Whitehead has said, "extend beyond the individual to affect the ways in which historical experience can be accessed at a cultural level" (8). However, due to the

near incomprehensibility of trauma's temporal trajectory and mode of surfacing, its truth may need to be transmitted "through a refusal of a certain framework of understanding, a refusal that is also a creative act of listing" (Caruth 154). Dobkin's refusal of story (linear narrative), and rejection of the imperative to testify, which is often associated with therapeutic practices, makes for a performance that relies on an intuitive transmission of meaning through images and fragments. This pastiche of fragments toys with the temporal paradoxes that determine trauma's path because although trauma cannot be reconstructed it *can reconstruct* the subject of the traumatic experience. Fragments and waves of trauma are translated in *The Magic Hour* via a performance that draws on a plethora of forms such as theatre, performance art, visual art, cabaret, magic shows, and ritual happenings all in an effort to inspire the magical and revelatory space of what Jill Dolan calls the utopian performative, a concept that I will return to later.

Performance, like trauma, starts and restarts in an ongoing accumulation of experience and investigation. Dobkin's work seems to ask: What is the time of trauma; when is survival, and how do you represent it? Trauma, Cvetkovich suggests, "can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often leaves behind no records at all" (*Archive* 7). Is the time of survival no time at all and simultaneously forever ongoing? Is the time of survival composed of performative (re)iterations hoping to recalibrate a new horizon in a fluctuating frame of truth? Feelings of trauma that emerge from sexual violence and incest can be transformed in queer cultural productions that, according to Cvetkovich, "reclaim that which has been debased" and make of it "a queer healing practice," that can turn a prescription for negative affect and shame "on its head by embracing rather than refusing it" (*Archive* 88–89). Thematically, and formally, *The Magic Hour* rejects the fixed identity attachments that emerge when trauma becomes a survivor's story. Dobkin, by transforming story into practices and actions,

engages in a collective effort at transformation, a collective acceptance of events as unfolding, and a willingness to believe in magic.

Performance and Experience

“When I was younger,” Dobkin says, “I was attracted to performance art because of its ephemerality—it’s there and then it’s gone—but now I see it differently because it’s experience and experience is something that is cumulative” (Personal interview). Survival is the act of “going on.” And by going on, here, I want to invoke the double entendre that connects the quotidian reality of simply carrying on to the theatrical ideology of inevitable performance: actors go on (on stage) because *the show must go on* (cannot be delayed). Scrambling these concepts destabilizes the categories of performance and life, beginning and ending, and introduces the possibility of performance as a way to manage trauma.

“A performance,” says Dobkin, “has a lifespan that starts before people enter the room” (Personal interview). For Dobkin, this performance started decades before its staging and, for any given spectator, the performance might start in any number of ways through a variety of channels. It could start by hearing about the show, or being familiar with the artist’s work and anticipating the show. It might start with seeing the poster, which features Dobkin as a floating figure dressed in a purple flowing dress with broad wing-like sleeves backed by streetlamps on a foggy and seemingly wet city street. Her elevated state, afloat in the city, seems effortless but impermanent. She hovers so close to the street that one gets the impression they could reach up and hold onto her foot like the string of a balloon if they were to find themselves inside this dream-like image. The audience is “not going to see that image in the production,” Dobkin says, “but it’s totally lodged and permanent” (Personal interview). The poster, too, is a fragment, an iteration, a piece of the show, and for some the show starts and ends with that.

For me, *The Magic Hour* started nearly five years before the 2017 run at The Theatre Centre in Toronto at a cabaret called *Explain Yourself*, which was an event presented by Hardworkin' Homosexuals to celebrate the launch of a queer feminist issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* that I edited called "Queer Performance: Women and Trans Artists." At *Explain Yourself*, artists were asked to create work that explained their queerness in their own words and performances. The goal was to comment on the way that queer theory can be generated through queer performance, and to acknowledge the contribution of queer performance to queer theory. At *Explain Yourself*, Dobkin appeared with her body whitened like a marble statue and dressed in scant and tattered strips of white drapery. She opened by saying that "explaining yourself is a lot different than expressing yourself, and a lot harder to do," and then she went on to explain that her queerness was predicated on the fact that she had been raped by her father when she was a child. Thus, Dobkin reinforces the stereotypical explanation for lesbianism as a reaction to something done to the lesbian by a man, or men (raped, rejected, abhorred). By associating herself with this identitarian cliché, she was performing that aspect of the scramble that is about trying on a phobic stereotype, and, perhaps more significantly, she was refusing the formal expectations of a cabaret act by bearing truth to a tragedy and showing herself simultaneously theatricalized and completely vulnerable.

The Magic Hour like much of the work in this dissertation was developed across multiple iterations—starting with the cabaret act described above. Later she pitched an idea called *Take Back the Nuit* to Nuit Blanche, a twelve-hour overnight performance event that takes place annually in cities across Canada, and around the world. For *Take Back the Nuit*, Dobkin envisioned an all-night dance party that centralized the nighttime terrors related to trauma and "what it means to some people's experience of the night" (Personal interview). Nuit Blanche, however, wasn't

interested in presenting what was essentially a rape-acknowledgement dance party. Later Dobkin proposed the project to the Hemispheric Institute for its performance festival *Encuentro*, renaming it *In the Middle of the Night*, a web-based project that would act like a public access television program for people who were up in the middle of the night troubled by past traumas. That proposal didn't pan out either. Elements of *The Magic Hour* can be seen in past projects such as Dobkin's performance for Martha Wilson, *How Many Performance Artists Does It Take to Screw in a Lightbulb?*, and various cabaret performances. *The Magic Hour* was formally developed over a two-year residency period at The Theatre Centre in Toronto but informally drew on a host of previous attempts to consider and perform the impact of her experience of sexual abuse.

When The Theatre Centre committed to the development of Dobkin's show, she was already an established artist with an international reputation. She had been widely acknowledged professionally, had been written about by performance studies scholars (Dolan; Levin; Mock), and had developed a loyal following of fans. However, *The Magic Hour* was the first of her shows ever to be continuously supported through development and production by an institution. After an already highly productive and celebrated career, at the age of forty-seven, Jess Dobkin had her first full run of a show. In 2011 I wrote about the way that Dobkin's previous full-length show *Everything I've Got* was removed from the main stage season at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and diverted to the far less prestigious (and less supported) *Rhubarb! Festival*—pointing to this transfer as an example of “the bounded spaces of women's artistic creation” (“Foster Children” 200). *Everything I've Got* is a show about having too many ideas and not enough time. It is about an artist giving us everything she's got and pulling it off with a scarcity of space and paucity of support. The highly successful run of *The Magic Hour* at The Theatre Centre was a landmark event for Dobkin, and for queer women's

experimental performance in Canada more broadly. With this production Dobkin rose above the material conditions of systemically unsupported production in a cultural climate that rejects her.

The success of *The Magic Hour* would seem to prove an exception to the “no future” fate of queer feminist performance in Canada. But, if we stop for a moment to ask, more than two years after the successful and critically acclaimed run of the show, *where did the future of this hit show go?*, the answer is ‘nowhere, right now.’ The practice of being and performing at once as a queer feminist performance artist confounds Canadian theatrical institutions. By creating and controlling the forms in which they work, queer feminist performance artists often find themselves stranded outside streams of opportunity that are available to more conventional forms, ideas, and bodies. Dobkin has promoted, packaged, and pitched her work to a number of Canadian presenters (including The Theatre Centre that originally supported the performance’s development and production), but her show remains in limbo and its artifacts in storage.

The Performance Is Still Going On

The material conditions of production discussed above reflect the thematic concerns of the performance in their temporal disruption and fragmentation combined with their forever ongoing and iterative nature. There is no progressive narrative that builds toward an expected end for these artists. The artist has abandoned linear narrative in her performance because linearity has already abandoned her. The trauma that clings to her throughout her life experience has created a temporality that is echoed in her performance and, incidentally, in her overall career. As *The Magic Hour* goes on, the fragments continue until the audience has accumulated pieces of her memories and stored them as memories of their own.

Adult/Child

Helen Reddy's "Angie Baby" plays as the artist, in a flowing purple cape-dress with wings, "performs a kind of crazy dance about a kind of crazy girl: a grown woman performing as a child performing a grown woman performing a song about childhood" (*The Magic Hour* 185).

The artist shines a flashlight onto artifacts of her past: a pair of skates, a picture of Farrah Fawcett, and a lion's head in a cage. The lion's head is then lowered and transferred onto Dobkin before a disturbing manipulation of a small stuffed tiger on an overhead projector is performed.

These images and acts are part of a sequence of events that jump around in time to merge past and present, adult and child, as the performance edges toward its climactic moments. Two things are happening here: Dobkin is performing her memories and performing the way memory works—in fragments, and often through a fog. Remember, the artist has already warned us that there would be fog. And so, through the sensory and fragmented fog of memory, sometimes staged within a theatrical haze created by an actual fog machine, she shows us how temporality can be indeterminate and unfixed. Throughout the work she cites recognizable artifacts (such as Nadia Comaneci's perfect "10" for her performance on the uneven bars at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games; the 1976 glamour pin-up of Farrah Fawcett) that trigger our own memories along with hers and, while she queers the codes associated with them, they are regardless universally recognizable to a contemporary Canadian audience.

As she approaches the climactic moment of the show, a proposed and abandoned re-enactment of the night she was raped, Dobkin continues to build an archive of memories attached to the performance's artifacts and its formal dimensions. Memory works like a constellation in our minds. We store essential qualities from a lifetime of events and encounters that are held and archived in ways that are unique to each of us. The fragments she uses to convey her premise and her ruminations on trauma are infinitely more effective than a story would be because story, in

its very telling, leads to embellishment and conclusion. And *The Magic Hour*, as Laine Zisman Newman has suggested in her essay about the show's multiple efforts to get started, is also a performance that refuses to end (152).

Rebecca Schneider has theorized re-enactment “as an activity that nets us all (reenacted, reenactor, original copy, re-event, by passed, and passer-by) in a knotty and porous relationship to time,” which is about the “temporal tangle, about the temporal leak, and about the many questions that attend to time's returns” (*Performing Remains* 10). In *The Magic Hour* Dobkin is engaged in a practice that fulfills Schneider's formulation by drawing on her own memories along with those of the audience to create a sort of temporal tangle of memories and minds.

Living through trauma should not necessarily be framed as performance, but when performance, life, and performativity are braided together, as is the case in this chapter, it is worth acknowledging the way trauma's return resonates with the boundaries and contours of performance in its transformative and iterative qualities, especially in, as we shall see, re-enactment. Re-enactment, as Schneider says, is

hounded by the paradoxes of performativity and the fecund question (one as long-beloved of feminist theory as it has been of sociology, linguistics, and performance studies) that all representational, and indeed all communicative behavior, is composed in reiteration, is engaged in citational practices, is *already* a practice of reenactment, or what Richard Schechner has termed “restored” or “twice-behaved” behavior. (*Performing Remains* 10)

In Dobkin's hands, trauma's iterative returns remind us how “repetition is, paradoxically, both the vehicle for sameness and the vehicle for difference or change” (*Performing Remains* 10).

Reenactment

“Okay,” the artist says to the audience, “I’m going to need your help with this. We are going to perform a re-enactment” (*The Magic Hour* 188). She then puts on a tight gymnastics leotard; tight as though it was the very one she might have used as a child, and says, “I guess I’ll play myself.” Next, she sets the stage for the proposed re-enactment: “It’s suburban Chicago in 1976. And it’s winter, so record snowfall, deep snow. Bicentennial, nuclear testing, space race, oil shortage, energy crisis” (188), and then begins to dole out roles for the characters in the event. As she does this, she hands the assigned audience members a child’s toy at the end of a cord attached to a large mass of pink fabric that she has dragged to the centre of the circle. She hands a troll doll to an audience member meant to play her mother, another troll doll to the person playing her sister, a Ronald McDonald doll to the person playing the doctor who lives on the street, and a Barbie doll to the person playing his daughter, and so on until she offers the final troll doll to someone, while saying, “You can play my father. It’s a big part! Don’t worry, it’s okay, you’re gonna be great” (189).

As she hands these out, she is involving the audience in a very subtle way by drawing on the codes of familiar childhood toys. These objects are not ambiguous, they cannot be mistaken for something else, and, even if they do not resonate with the images of one’s own specific childhood, everyone has been a child and understands their significance. She draws us into our own childhood and simultaneously draws on the memory of the performance that the spectators now have—the audience has accumulated experience across the fragments and restarts that have been presented to us thus far and their accumulation means that the mere threat of a re-enactment of a dark event from childhood is enough. An actual re-enactment would be simply too much, inaccurate, and toxic. After handing out the toys, the artist takes a seat in the circle and on her cue the “performers” pull together to unfurl and uplift the parachute, thus creating an entirely

new space—a space of ritual sanctity. The performance, at this point, is literally unfolding and encompassing. As the pink parachute unfurls, the audience is transported into the temporal dynamics of limbo and ritual.

The tragedy (of the impending rape by re-enactment) can be averted in performance because the tragedy (the actual rape) has, in fact, already happened—thirty-odd years ago. But the tragedy is not over because, as Anne Whitehead explains, trauma “is not experienced as it occurs, but is fully evident only in connection with another place and in another time” (13). Trauma tangles the threads of temporality and, as the audience pulls the strings of a massive parachute-tent, the threads smooth themselves into a fulsome moment that is the performance of ritual healing that encompasses past, present, and next. This binding of performance and performativity works to “*temporalize* perception, producing new means of imbricating the psychic and the historical” (Diamond 143). This process leads to a sort of purgation or catharsis that makes new the possibility of an “other order of aesthetic time” (143) where a past tragedy is revealed in the present moment and opens the door to a magical transference of now and then.

Limbo/Ritual

Under the parachute, which is eventually collapsed onto the artist, is a place that is physically a non-space, a ritual space. In cinema, location is qualified as either “in studio,” “on location,” or “in limbo.” The limbo location is one that is not easily identified in the regular world, nor limited by the structures of regular time. In limbo, events still happen, time still passes but all in a liminal way that is non-determined. Under the parachute is the space inside her mind that she has prepared us to go to.



Figure 3.3: The parachute opens in *The Magic Hour*, photo by Dhalia Katz, 2017.

In *The Magic Hour*, self-fragmentation is followed by self-coherence, which opens up the potential for a transformation that is celebrated in the end with a dance party that remakes and reframes the past and the future in the form of one, unique, queer feminist utopia. Mari Ruti posits a psychoanalytic counterpoint to Lee Edelman’s bleak fate of a subject without a future (undone by suicidal jouissance) that might be useful to contemplate at this juncture. Ruti suggests that the subject can die “so as to be reborn into new processes of becoming and humbled-yet-still-viable agency” (176)—not in the Christian sense of resurrection but rather by “‘revolt’ in the Kristevan (1997) sense of regaining enough psychic aliveness to be able to rethink, revisit, revise, and rework what does not work” (176). Dobkin is reperforming herself through trauma to carve new pathways from those that do not work. But rather than using

psychoanalysis as a way to survive her past she performs a magic show, a ritual, and a celebratory dance on the horizon of a queer utopia.

The Magic Hour ends as it begins, in the lobby. After the main stage acts have culminated in a collaborative re-emergence into the present, and Dobkin has woven an image of transtemporal connection through endurance, performance, and ritual, the audience is led back to the lobby where two young girls dance together to Captain & Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together." Dobkin, now dressed in a loose purple garb, reminiscent of the one from the image on the poster, offers her guests punch and invites them to stay and dance at her 1970s-themed party (complete with streamers and light snacks), and revel in the utopic image of young girls, unscathed, and safe from sexual violence, dancing together on a shag rug.

Dobkin's show, *The Magic Hour*, and Latif's show, *The Archivist*, make literal the idea of survival as creative practice. When Dobkin summons her experience as a sexual violence survivor into the performance space, she asks when and how this "story" can be told. Dobkin says "in framing it as story, or considering myself a survivor or a victim, it becomes identity-based" (Levin 201). And the fixity of becoming "identity-based" means it becomes something about "who" she is, something *about* her, when in fact, it has nothing to do with her (Personal interview). Like many of the works discussed in this dissertation, *The Magic Hour* was composed in iterations. Dobkin worked with and around the ideas that form the nucleus of this performance (ideas and questions about how and when to share, without traumatizing herself or others, the experience of childhood rape by a family member) for a number of years finding the "the best way to 'scratch'" at trauma (Levin 200). During *The Magic Hour*, Dobkin burrows into her past, reclaims her own experiences, subjects those experiences to magic (through

performance, ritual, and dance) and survives to perform again. There is, indeed, a queer magic to all of the performances in this chapter.

Scrambling Toward Utopia

Staging versions of utopia is one of the ways that artists in the queer performance scramble exert the force of performance onto their own ongoing survival. In Dobkin's performance, we can detect the essence of what Muñoz calls the "blueprints and schemata for a forward dawning future" (*Cruising Utopia* 1). She unhinges time through her excavation of an unspeakable past in order to reveal a new doorway that opens up onto a queer utopian potentiality. The two young girls that dance together under a disco ball at the end of *The Magic Hour* offer the promise of a queer future that is "fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter" (189) than the experience from which it is shaped. Utopias are often used to help map out concrete ideas of hope and the horizon for that hope.

For Latif, as we shall see, the horizon of utopia displaces her individual displacement as a subject defined by loneliness and lack of belonging. Her one-woman show *The Archivist* mobilizes a form of utopian imagining that is "fuelled by the past" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 106), to demonstrate the ways that "both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness" (1). When Latif mounts a magic carpet to invoke the stereotypes embedded in it, she stages her racialized queerness as a rejection of the "here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for *another world*" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1; emphasis added)—or, in the words of the song from Disney's *Aladdin*, "*a whole new world.*" Utopia is an idealistic state that is never, in fact, arrived at. The hope and promise of utopia are all in the ride. The magic carpet of Latif's ongoing performance represents a "surrender to knowing that you will never feel whole or completely stable or completely have a sense of

arriving” (Personal interview). *The Archivist* is an unscripted performance that is staged among ornamental and quotidian objects to present a landscape for the queer of colour experience that is ongoing and traverses her life and her art.

In “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” Jill Dolan argues that the “intense present of performance offers us, if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like” (456). Latif is invested in the “intense present of performance” as a gateway to the utopia she seeks when she summons a community to travel with her on a magic carpet ride that takes her back through her family history and across her performance career. She draws on memory, both lived and reconstituted, making connections across time, to what was and to what will have been fulfilled, on a journey that mirrors her desire for connection in the present. Both Dobkin and Latif compose a utopian potentiality out of the then and there of a reconstituted past in the very space and time of performance. These reconstituted pasts allow for a relationality composed of the utopically imminent memories that await her on the horizon. Perhaps, as Dolan asserts, “utopian performatives create the *condition* for action; they pave a certain kind of way, prepare people for the choices they might make in other aspects of their lives” (*Utopia in Performance* 169–170). Experience can and does have an impact but memories are not inevitably immutable. Reaching back to re-story an archive can create a new horizon and a new portal to a new potentiality. Dolan’s utopian performative is more concerned with the audience than mine is. My analysis of the utopian performative is more concerned with how the very real experiences of artists within and outside of their performance practices go on—that is to say, how they have lasting effects for the artists. Dolan suggests that “[l]ike emotions and affect, utopian performatives can’t be predicted; they exist as wishes, as desires, crystallizing from our labour to construct a temporary public that constitutes a

multiplicity of presence, hoping to be recognized, extended, and shared” (*Utopia in Performance* 170–171). Here, I hope to build on Dolan’s formulation by asserting that the utopian performative *is* the space created within the performance, and since utopia is built on memory, it *can* be imagined, because sharing is sometimes sharing with one’s past and future self as well as with one’s audience.

The temporality of utopia is embedded in the queer performance scramble where, in this chapter for example, the performances have started, the performances have happened, and yet the performances are still going on. The temporalities of these ongoing performatives demonstrate ideas of a utopic scene like Dobkin’s forever immanent and magic hour, Latif’s retro-constituted archival assemblage, and McLeod’s durational chase after an impossible femininity, all of which invite a public to believe in, and contribute to, a form of utopian potentiality that was always already coming, happening, and ongoing.

The Archivist

The Archivist begins when Latif wanders onto an unlit stage to watch a video projection of a woman’s braceleted hands moving gracefully across the screen. The hands encircle and respond to each other as Afghan music plays. Latif, the spectator to her own show, eventually begins to mimic the movements on the screen with her own hands. Latif dances, her hands in silhouette, as the projection gradually expands to reveal the full figure of a woman dancing with her. The onscreen dancer is the chalky outline of a figure in a hijab. She is a ghost of the cultural aesthetic that Latif longs to embrace but can only reach in mediated form. Articulating her desire for connection, Latif says to the audience, “I want to go back to Afghanistan. I’ve never been, but I want to go back.”

Dina Georgis, after Frantz Fanon, suggests that “postcolonial subjectivity is not simply the work of social construction but the outcome of psychic pressures and processes” (3)— pressures and processes that link the subject to histories that are sometimes manifested in the present via cultural practices and aesthetics, which trigger memories that are not necessarily the subject’s own. Psychic pressures and processes, like trauma, can appear unexpectedly and transport the subject to places they have never fully been. *The Archivist* is about accumulated experience, and the way that time and affect double back, repeat, and extend into places that are utterly vulnerable and out of control. Latif, in performing her connection to a chimerical dancer who is timeless and merely an outline, is proffering an aspect of her psyche and her archive. She is attempting to simultaneously uncover and transform her personal and cultural history by showing and scrambling an image of her post-colonial pressures. In *The Archivist* Latif is both artist and audience to a “past” that she herself constructs *for performance in performance*.

This chapter seeks, in part, to excavate aspects of the confluence of being and performing at once and the formal ways that the scramble to do so is enacted. Here, it outlines a different formal way of doing the scramble of queer feminist durationality; different from Dobkin’s in its cultural content and aesthetic, but similar in its subjection to unsolicited returns and its investment in theatre as a container for fragments of memory and image that draw the artist and audience together into a transformational space. Where Dobkin performs her efforts to scratch at trauma, Latif draws out the structuring forces of race, class, and gender through a series of images, songs, videos, voice overs, and stories to show the audience fragments of her experience growing up immigrant, queer, and othered in a nation not her own (and as an artist of colour emerging into a theatre and performance culture that is also not for her). The past and present, the real and the performed, the conjectural and the whimsical are scrambled in *The Archivist* in

order to comment on and complicate her experience as both assimilated and unassimilable in ways that are both embodied and chimerical, both interminable and imperceptible. Similar to Dobkin, in an equally metatheatrical opening that reminds the audience that the character is the artist she says: “Welcome to the performance. Yes, it’s the performance that never ends. It’s the performance that keeps going, on and off stage, no matter what you do. You know what I’m saying, Fuckers?” (*The Archivist*).

There is, in *The Archivist*, a “fuck you” embedded into the very fabric of the work; Latif challenges the audience’s assumptions head on as she draws on the marked signifiers of her culture, including her own body, to deconstruct her own representation and not just tell the better story but create the better archive. Georgis’s *The Better Story* delves into the “reparative potential of narrating and renarrating difficult experiences” (11). Latif taps into this potential by performing the construction of a new archive created from fragments of experience and affect to confront the ghosts of her familial and cultural trauma and dislocation. “As long as ghosts exist,” Georgis says, “the story is interminable, sketched and resketched from the unassimilated traces of experience and being itself” (11).

The Archivist chronicles Latif’s arrival in Canada, the ensuing poverty of sudden emigration, the disorientation of assimilation, and the trauma that rendered her speechless up to the age of five. The themes with which it deals are themes that can be witnessed across her body of work. With a background in comedy, improvisation, and cabaret, Latif’s first full-length play, *Graceful Rebellions*, was her first and only foray into traditional dramatic fiction. It a beautifully written story that parallels three lives lived with varying degrees of queer identity, freedom, and hope. I edited and published the play for the anthology *Queer/Play* wherein Latif says, in the interview published alongside the text, “When I reflect on *Graceful Rebellions* it almost amazes

me that I ever performed it because it is totally not what I do now” (qtd. in Stranges 20). In the interview she goes on to say of *The Archivist* that, in the Summerworks production (which is the one to which I refer and describe in this chapter), “the preview, the opening, and the closing were completely different from one another” (qtd. in Stranges 21). Latif put *The Archivist* through a very different development process than that which was imposed upon her by the demands of the Young Creators’ Unit at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. In fact, her new methodology emerged in part as a response to the limitations of her dramaturgical experience with *Graceful Rebellions*.



Figure 3.4: Poster image for *The Archivist*, photo by Shaista Latif, 2017.

The Archivist began as a totally different project called *How I Learned to Serve Tea*, a work she would continue to develop alongside *The Archivist* through a residency with Why Not Theatre in its RISER Project in the spring of 2017. In the program notes for the 2017 iteration of

How I Learned to Serve Tea, Latif addresses the double bind of serving, and adhering to, the limits of diversity mandates in Canadian theatrical institutions that claim to set the stage for the integration of “unique cultural narrative[s]” (“Program Notes”). Latif scrambles these limits by addressing the intersecting issues of class, race, and queerness, and by calling to task the “greater dominant powers that be,” all while confessing to being “in the middle of an epic f*cking meltdown!” In the middle of the *How I Learned to Serve Tea*, Latif invites audience members, whom she has divided into groups, to work together to unscramble a series of anagrams written in chalk on the floor. In the process of unscrambling these chalk anagrams, we uncover the terms by which she is expected to define herself in order to secure the funding and inclusion she requires in order to continue her practice (minority, diversity, colour, marginalized, etc.). After this, she (literally) serves tea to concretize the expectation of her gratitude for being included in institutional production models.

Latif developed the first version of *How I Learned to Serve Tea* at Buddies as a way of talking back to the institution in her own unmonitored voice and style, which includes improvisation and experimental audience interactions. “That’s where the magic is,” Latif said in an interview, “I want to create performances that are about a world of possibilities.... Not working with a script means I don’t have to do the same thing over and over again and I can get away from being caught or confined and remain opaque in some way,” because, as she says, “even if I make myself as clear as possible, that doesn’t mean that I am legible or understood” (Personal interview).

Recalling the words of Mari Ruti, Latif wanted to “rethink, revisit, revise, and rework what does not work” (176). Like Georgis, Latif, attempts to “identify the hopes and dreams of postcolonial people, and the challenges and complexities of surviving racial injuries and

traumas,” by asking (and demonstrating) what we can learn from “the aesthetic archive” (Georgis 5). The archival impulse in *The Archivist* is subjected to the raw vulnerability of being activated, triggered, and ultimately out of control in order to make an aesthetic intervention into survival and ongoingness. “I am a living person and my practice is a living thing,” Latif asserts, “it’s not static, it has to continue to evolve” (Personal interview), and like the durational work of the other queer feminist performance practices and careers in this chapter, it celebrates survival by refusing to end and daring to hope.

Latif’s work (*The Archivist; How I Learned to Serve Tea*) explores the institutional appropriation and tokenization she experienced as a young artist emerging onto the Toronto theatre scene. It delves into questions of how a queer woman of colour is expected to cater to the demands made on her by mandate-based theatre companies while continuing to serve her own artistic vision. The material conditions of production within which Latif struggles to survive (to go on) are now limited to festival venues, cabarets, and self-production. This is not because she is unwelcome to participate in the institutional turn to what Hiram Pérez calls the “politics of difference” (99) and its resultant craving for selective experiences of cultural diversity, but, rather, because the demands placed on her, once inside these institutional frames, are contradictory to the desires of her queer performance scramble and her ongoing intervention into the chaos of being and performing at once as a unique artist with her own artistic and personal goals. Pérez, in his book *A Taste for Brown Bodies*, critiques the hollow chants of inclusion in the realm of queer theory in the academy, but his critiques can just as readily be applied to the institutions that dominate Canadian theatrical production where mandates for diversity do not preempt “masculinist biases and patriarchal privileges” (108) and all the formal restrictions that come with them. Latif’s experience of being tokenized by artistic directors led her to wonder: If

they can't understand what these impositions mean to her artistic practice and freedoms, how, as Pérez asks, could she "be sure that [she is] ever intelligible to them as a human?" (114).

Roderick A. Ferguson asserts, in *The Reorder of Things*, that "[w]hether as intellectuals, artists, or simply people trying to live examined lives, engaging minority difference today means that we must negotiate with and struggle against the steady closure of critical universes brokered in a time of affirmation" (226). Ferguson suggests that we need to engage a "counter-calculus" to disrupt the steady foreclosure that comes with contemporary efforts at inclusion. One of the ways to do this, he says, is to zero in on small acts, to be "more considered about the activation of minor details" (232). Interpreting this attention to minor details and small acts as attention to individual ghosts and lived experiences, Latif invests in her own acts (both on and off stage) with a sort of nimble willfulness that can (and does) make space for her to improvise her own ongoing survival both on and off the stage. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed reminds us, "When we are trying to intervene in the reproduction of power, we have to think differently; we have to think on our feet" (93), which means embracing an improvisational model, such as the one integral to Latif's performance style, which is not scripted, and which exerts the double potential of *going on* as both survival and performance; to invoke the idea of carrying on alongside the urgency of the theatrical imperative that says the show (which in this case never ends) *must go on!*

The Performance Has Started

After Latif welcomes the audience (with her opening question, "You know what I'm saying, Fuckers?"), she is interrupted by the squeaky recorded voice of, presumably, an immigration officer who in turn welcomes her and asks if she has trouble understanding, to which Latif promptly answers: "Yes." Nothing has yet been said, really, for Latif to understand or misunderstand, but the squeaky official affirms: "Of course you are [having trouble

understanding]” and launches into a series of declarative assumptions that draw on white authoritarian biases and racial profiles. The immigration official’s address includes, at the end, a reading of Latif’s rights and obligations inside an interrogation that implicates the criminal justice system into her process of assimilation. At the end of the swearing-in (to citizenship), Latif agrees to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” leading us to ask “what exactly is she meant testify and how does this relate to her Canadian citizenship?”

Right after her swearing-in she does a quick survey of the audience to find out if there are brown people at the show, and if so, how many, whence have they come, and when (generationally). This inquiry is an extension of her active efforts to attract and perform for an audience of colour. In its promotional materials, *The Archivist* was advertised to attract a diverse audience. Latif offered sliding scale (or free) tickets to POCs (common parlance for People of Colour). Latif wants to know, even as the show is going on, if she is reaching her target audience—the audience who will make her performance a satisfying relational experience, who will be able to see her as more than her representation. As she said in an interview with me:

I’m actually trying to explore this deep sense of loneliness...a kind of an untouched, unnamed loneliness that you get from feeling that you don’t belong to any one particular place, or that you’re not attached to any one particle place, or any sense of nationalism... that deep sense of having to surrender to that lack knowing that you will never completely have a sense of arriving. (Personal interview)

After being sworn-in through an absurd hybrid ritual of citizenship and truth-affirming, followed by a demographic assessment of the audience, Latif introduces the objects on the stage saying, “We’ve got the classic, classic tropes on stage,” which are the ornamental and quotidian objects mentioned above:

The biggest carpet I could find. That's a classic! I think I've had a carpet for every show I've done, just to prove how ethnic I am.

The tablahs (*She points to the tablahs and waits for a response but none comes*). Okay, wrong audience.

Little woven shoes (*She points to the shoes*).

The little kettle where the Genie might pop out, you never know, cross your fingers (*She picks up the kettle and caresses it gently then puts it back down*).

Most of these objects are never used or even referred to again in the performance (at least in the iteration I saw, because, remember, Latif is improvising and changing the show each night). By presenting them thus, she recognizes the white cultural dominance of the space she is working in while mobilizing opposing readings of these “foreign” objects (that are different for insider and outsider; readings that are familiar regardless of insider or outsider status). These objects are staged as cultural referents for clear and familiar exoticization, a familiarity and clarity that she exploits to create an environment from which to enact her performance of disidentification, which, according to Muñoz, “is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” (*Disidentifications* 31). Latif purposefully introduces these objects to set them up for a willful act of scrambling.

In a similar fashion—and echoing central themes in Dobkin’s show—Latif admits that she is always circling around “a set of ideas and things that [she is] exploring as an artist,” which have to do with

...how the story is told and the manipulation of that story and the idea of the performance never ending. It’s always a continuation, the performance is just life, and I think for me it has to do with the ways narratives are constructed but it also has to do with loneliness. I

thought I was alone but it's actually not true, I have the audience and all I have to do is change the narrative. (Personal interview)

I liken this to Dina Georgis's theorization in *The Better Story*, because Latif is working to “stage the significance of human relationality and help us access the queer memory of history,” which makes it possible to tell “the story differently” (11). The concept of the better story, and in this case, the better archive, highlights the tipping point between performance and experience, a tipping point that is shaped by individual will and by willful ongoingness because, as Ahmed says, we have to “become willful to keep on going, to keep coming up” (*Willful* 83). In *Indifference to Difference*, Madhavi Menon suggests that theatre, through its “inability to settle down...allows us to rethink the ground on which we stand” (96). By staging herself surrounded by cultural artifacts that bear particular meaning to her—even as their meaning is coated with assimilation—Latif is scrambling their codes. She is performing with and against them as the backdrop for her intersectional queer identity in flux; performing her desire and attention to their potential for relationality, performing the afterlife of the trauma of her separation from them, performing the concept of utopia as a better story—one where Latif comes to know belonging right there in the no-particular-place of the show.

At one point in the show, Latif solicits a volunteer from the audience to sing with her asking: “Will someone come on a magic fucking carpet ride with me?” Then, once the audience volunteer is settled onto the carpet, having been warned of potential turbulence, they launch into a karaoke version of the theme song from the 1992 Disney film *Aladdin*, “A Whole New World,” but not before Latif says to the audience, “Just to be clear, we’re not doing karaoke, we’re performing artwork.” Performance space for Latif, as for Dobkin, is the space of belonging and transformation, and in her performance she defines its terms.

The Performance Is Still Going On

As an improvised performance with a series of rehearsed structural frames Latif sets up and enacts a number of multi-media interventions into her archive and her ongoing and collaborative performance of self. Home movies depict her mother as a very young woman dancing for her father, a much older man, to whom she was pledged in an arranged marriage. Excerpts of propaganda videos summon the circumstances of the harsh dislocation of her family from their homeland during the Afghan Civil War. She shows us wall hangings that depict her younger brother under a banner saying “God’s Gift,” and calls out to see if her brother is in the audience. She plays a short clip of a daytime soap opera as a backdrop to her confession that that’s why she’s queer, because she learned to speak English from afternoon soap operas. She dances with the audience, talks to them, shows them photos, and asks them questions, and, when the show is over we, as spectators, hardly know it is over. It is more like her time ran out and she just decided to leave with no curtain call and no finale. Later, as we exit through the lobby she is there, ready to engage with the audience. “I have hope,” Latif said to me in the lobby after her show, and after engaging with the diverse audience she had summoned and shared space with so that she, herself, did not feel so alone, “I have a lot of hope.”

Forward Dawning Durationality

Looking back on the performed (and performative) pasts of both Latif and Dobkin allows us to imagine a future rather than foreclose a future because unfixed utopia is a temporally imminent potentiality composed of memory, affect, and hope. “If,” Georgis asks, “aesthetic production does the work of recollecting the residue of lost memory, might a queer aesthetic be understood as the reenactment of impossible desires and the impossible knowledge of relationality itself?” (14). Might the impossible work of relationality, represented in Latif’s work,

be the very utopia she strives to arrive at? For Muñoz the sea of possibility (after Bloch) is what he defines as “a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense” (*Cruising Utopia* 9). If anything can act as a means of transportation to the horizon of utopia, surely it is a magic carpet with its lithe transtemporal potential and its ubiquitous familiarity.

Returning to the foundational argument of this chapter, which asserts, in short, that each of the performances discussed here has already started and each is still going on, Latif’s magic carpet demonstrates the queer potential of performative ongoingness, which, in life and performance is a process of, as Schneider has said, “witnessing the passing time of doubling, redoubling, tripling, re-tripling, cross-, multi-, and hyper-citational events” (*Performing Remains* 25), in order to scramble toward a utopia made from an ongoing, and in-process archive.

Each of the artists discussed in this chapter scrambles toward an individual utopic scene. The grand vision of history and generations presented in Dobkin’s penultimate scene in *The Magic Hour* goes back through time and space, through centuries, through the universe, seeking the place where “grace and magic meet,” and ends with her asking the audience to imagine something (a utopia of their own, maybe?) when she asks: “What do you see? What does it look like? What can it be? Is there music? Is there dancing? Is there company? Can I join you?” and finally, “Are we there yet?” (*The Magic Hour* 197). Again, there’s that question, are we there yet? Has it started, this performance? Has it ended? Where is the horizon for experience as creative force, as performative? Where can it, will it, take us? Where will it take the performer? *The Magic Hour* ends, or seems to end as we exit the space somewhat elated, somewhat transported, somewhat triumphant and return to the lobby. Latif, too, returns to the lobby with us, and ushers us back into her ongoing performance between (and always of) life and art.

Cougar for a Year

The artists in this chapter strive to bring attention to acts of survival. McLeod, introduced at the beginning, takes her performance to the street, shattering the fourth wall, confounding audience expectations, and making herself ultimately vulnerable as she, dressed to kill, baits a sexualized and misogynistic gaze. As a queer femme, McLeod is playing with the question of when and how femininity starts. On the cusp of middle age she asks: “Is femininity over now? What exactly is the evaluation criteria for appropriate femininity?” (Personal interview). *Cougar for a Year* seeks to investigate a rubric of success and failure in the pursuit of femininity by testing the boundary between trying and succeeding, and between trying and trying too hard to go on being feminine.

When McLeod decided to actively perform the cougar stereotype—a derogatory term for an aging sexualized woman who is imagined to be on the prowl for an inappropriately younger man—she chose the animal print “as the cougar’s uniform for its visibility, clarity, and literalization” (“Reflections on Performing Cougar”). RM Vaughan suggests that “prints that refer to animal hides have been sexually encoded as ‘wild’ [and] become quick-jot references for a more base, appetite-driven form of sexual satisfaction” (42). From the outset of the project, McLeod realized that she needed to set some rules for herself because “animal print was trending fashion-wise at that time so the ladies on the Metro were also doing my project, evidently, because everyone had a leopard print blouse” (Personal interview). The weave of life and performance is, in this work, a tight one. Indeed, given the full-time, all-the-time duration of this work, the artist is the only witness to the full extent of its durationality—every other spectator encounters only a fragment of it.

McLeod decided that she had to wear a minimum of sixty percent visible animal print at all times in order to confirm clarity within the quotidian familiarity of her ornamental signifiers for a stark visibility in the arena (daily life) within which she was performing. Performing for a

largely unsuspecting audience, McLeod blurs the boundaries of performance and performativity, so that in the end *everyone is a spectator* and *everyone is in the show*. Doing a performance 24/7 means that the artist becomes that performance; it *is* her and it constructs her, and having constructed her it becomes her performance. Witnessing this performance means both contributing to its *mise-en-scène* and responding to its effects. This is how performativity works: through response, iteration, effect, and affect it, like durational performance, challenges the mastery of its reception by producing readings, misreadings, responses, and adjustments that themselves produce effects and phenomena.

I am suggesting here that all of the artists in this chapter (Dobkin, Latif, and McLeod) are engaged in long durational projects that weave in and out of what we might call life and performance. Each abandons the safety net of traditional performance by setting up the conditions for real transformation inside and outside of the performance space. McLeod demonstrates the out-of-control nature of herself and her performance by wearing the symbols of sexual uncontrollability. Animal prints suggest that—wild, unbridled, out of control. What is playful and vulnerable, what is wild and magic, what is performed and lived are scrambled together in this ongoing act of going on. In addition, McLeod's live performance was extended by a website (<https://cougarthis.com>) where the artist was diligent in her daily documentation and her organized archiving of the project. Even as *Cougar for a Year* went on through rain, sleet, snow, or sun on the streets of Montreal, it went on in cyberspace, contextualized and distributed by the artist herself.

The magic of queer feminist performance lies, as I said above, in its ability to find new representations in a scramble of theatrical acts and the compulsion to repeat. McLeod's ongoing femme identity is itself a practice, one that creates recognition and then misinterpretation by

turns. Femme performance offers a supplementary and subculturally charged set of standards and, like all camp reappropriation, finds “success in certain passionate failures” (Sontag 291). The misogynistic readings and gazes that follow McLeod’s daily performance as the cougar are suddenly (and magically) vanquished under a queer gaze that “understand[s] Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (Sontag 284). If, as Sontag asserts, “[t]he essence of camp is its love of the unnatural” (275), then its legibility lies in understanding the ideological construction of “natural,” especially in relation to gender performativity. When McLeod enters queer space, the quotes that frame her performance are suddenly visible and suddenly fabulous. In this scene she is seen, and this legibility comes from being on the same side, the trouble side, of the gender matrix. The magic McLeod encounters in a queer space with this project is a serendipitous engagement with the powers of transformation that teeter on the tipping point between performance and performativity. McLeod’s demonstrative camp effort is not legible in the heteronormative place of policed femininity. It’s not legible there because it’s queer, it’s for us, and that is a magical feeling—McLeod’s utopia.

Cougarliscious Point Final

At the end of McLeod’s year-long *Cougar* project, she staged a finale at Montreal’s feminist art gallery, La Centrale, in an event entitled *Cougarliscious Point Final*. She brought every single piece of animal print clothing she had acquired and worn over the duration of the project to the gallery to display and disseminate over the course of the evening. She arrived in animal print and had the spectators themselves remove her final cougar costume in a reperformance of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*. Ono’s famous and oft-cited work was also, in its original iteration in 1964, an act that challenged the boundary between life and art, and, in its dissolution of the barrier between audience and performer, left the artist utterly vulnerable and out of control. Ono’s performance emerged as an

act of rage and protest that staged her Asian otherness in a war-ready United States on the cusp of its preparation to enter into the battle raging in Vietnam. In addition, *Cut Piece* makes the audience responsible for Ono's safety and survival, and makes apparent her stoic fragility as a pacifist, a woman, and a work of art. McLeod's rendition brings an entirely different reading to the performance with her whiteness, her queerness, her age (Ono was thirty-one, McLeod was forty-one), and her venue (a feminist gallery that attracts like-minded feminist publics).

Cougarliscious Point Final is composed of many elements that speak to the traversals of queer time by first drawing on and restaging an iconic feminist performance and then documenting and disseminating the clothes and artifacts of her performance in a forward dawning act that ensures that her performance will continue to go on in multiple ways, on multiple platforms, and with multiple collaborators. After the cutting of the final cougar costume from McLeod, she stages an exchange with her audience where they may take any items they like from her cougar wardrobe as long as they agree to pose for a photo that the artist will eventually use in her deck of cougar playing cards.



Figure 3.5: The Queen of Clubs from the Cougar Cards, photo by Nikol Mikus and styled by Alyson Wishnousky, 2013.

After McLeod was publicly stripped of her cougar costume, she retired to the public washroom of the gallery to change into a non-animal print dress for the first time in a year. When she emerged from the washroom, she was surprised, even dismayed, to be confronted, in a room full of feminist-identified people, by an ongoing commentary on what she was wearing. “I didn’t expect that,” she said to me in an interview. “I naively thought that the comments would end once the performance was over” (Personal interview). It reminded her of how women are “always [considered to be] public property” (Personal interview) when her invitation to look at and comment on her appearance would not (could not) end with her performance. Womanliness is always a gender code that is policed (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 28). *Cougar for a Year* provides a new way of understanding the policing of the categories and contours of femininity in a durational frame where the expectations are forever slipping away in a long durational chase after and away from them. As a performance that is premised on aging and enacted within the durational frame of aging itself, McLeod’s project can only ever end in the dramaturgical event we call death.

Jess Dobkin’s *The Magic Hour*, Shaista Latif’s *The Archivist*, and Dayna McLeod’s *Cougar for a Year* each tackles a temporal condition and time-based question, which is embedded in the very title of their performances. The “hour” in Dobkin’s *The Magic Hour* frames the performance time and signals a recurring point of reference; the magic hour is recurring, and it doesn’t happen just once. A “magic hour” is a turn of phrase that speaks to “going on” and to potentiality. As a temporal frame, it resonates with Dobkin’s personal history as a sex abuse survivor because the time of trauma is always potentially imminent. Meanwhile, Shaista Latif’s *The Archivist* centralizes the role of collecting, controlling, and determining the value of past events for future consideration and present relevance. The artist here is a keeper of

gates, of dreams, of memories, and of racial profiles that determine the folders into which her archive might be stored. Latif as the archivist is counting on going on into a future and also performing in a present wherein her archive will make an impression and she will feel less alone. McLeod's act of *going on* for an entire year, aging and staging as she goes, is invested in the scope of knowledge that can only be accessed through a durational intervention into ongoing past/present/next ways of seeing and doing femininity. Aging here, and always, is a durational performance itself.

Each of the artists in this chapter is deeply invested in queering the stable subject and her archive, scrambling performance and performativity, and investigating the out-of-control-ness of performance practices that play with being who they are, always, even in performance. They strive for new potentialities, queer magical encounters, and forever scramble their own relationships to performance, performativity, going on, surviving, and travelling ever onward toward new potentialities and new and queer utopias. In the next chapter we turn to a new mode of ongoingness and survival—one that is centred in its transitional resonance with forever and always becoming.

Chapter Four

Queer Resonance and Transtemporal Collaboration

In her essay “Plays,” written in 1934 as part of *Lectures in America*, Gertrude Stein ruminates on the nature of theatre and its dissonant relationship with the emotions of the spectator, which are always, she says, ahead or behind the action on stage. In the theatre, she suggests, the “emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together” (245). Stein encourages the reader to “think about theatre from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action” (251), and argues that from this standpoint we might approach the “inevitable problem of anybody living in the composition of the present time” (251). This chapter studies the creation and production of *trace*, a multi-channel composition/immersive performance/interactive installation created by Tristan Whiston and me, to delve into the question of being and living in the “composition of the present time” and the possibility of “living as we are living as we have it and now do live in it” (Stein 251). Being and doing in the composition of the present¹ means embracing a state of always becoming.² This proposition is central to the theoretical and artistic foundations of *trace*.

In this chapter I will take the reader through the performance process and performative genealogy that led to the creation of *trace*. I will then turn my attention to the complex matter of identification across time and gender, and how and why linearity fails in the face of queer-trans identification. Beginning with the idea that the queer performance scramble engages with a literal disarrangement of elements of transmission, I will show how sound can be used to extend queerness. I will parse the nature of vocality and sound (transmission; absorption; resonance; grain) to consider the voice as an expressive vehicle for embodied experience and as a synonym

for self. I will delve into temporal theory (queer; sonic; material) to show how collaborations can be formed across bodies and time. I will take the reader through the elements of *trace* and show how the audience contributes to and continues the work both during and after production. And finally, I will look into the crucial role of the sonic metaphor of the Althusserian hail through an investigation of the way queerness creates static that interferes in the construction of a stable and knowable subjectivity.

The development of *trace* began in 2012. At that time I had recently completed a Master of Arts in Drama and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. I was steeped in the voices of the queer Modernists such as Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and Djuna Barnes. I was looking for myself, as one does, in the voices of the past. *trace* bears the visible and auditory traces of these influences (see Fig. 4.1). *trace* is an experimental performance wherein the crisis of self (interior and exterior) is thrown into tension with questions of temporality, harmony, and fragmentation. The work was created between 2012 and 2015 and during that time it was workshopped in Toronto, and then later presented in Regina, Whitehorse, Dawson City, Yellowknife, and Montreal. This chapter (and the performance upon which it is based) seeks to excavate the experience of one transgender voice as a metaphor for the idea that stasis is counter to life and that we are all always becoming.

Tristan Whiston was gendered female at birth. For many years he was seen and heard as a woman. Now, after transitioning, he is seen and heard as a man. Only a few tangible traces of his past remain: photographs, a birth certificate, an “F” on his driver’s licence, and numerous archival recordings of his singing voice. The audio component of *trace*, which is its central component, consists of a series of original compositions made exclusively from recordings of

Whiston's singing and speaking voice at different stages of his transition. In *trace*, Whiston attempts to literally harmonize with himself.



Figure 4.1: Poster image for *trace*, photo by David Hawe, 2014.

As a youth, Whiston was a soprano singer and a member of his church choir. As an adult, he recounts a time in the mid-1990s when hearing an English boychoir on the radio caused a deeply affective recollection of his childhood singing voice and his desire to *be* a boy (Bateman 13). In 1995 he created The Boychoir of Lesbos along with a group of his colleagues, including Alex Bulmer, Sarah Stanley, and me. The Boychoir of Lesbos was an all-female choir that performed in the costume and vocal range of an English boychoir. Although the choir was a camp re-uptake of the liturgical original, it took itself extremely seriously both musically and aesthetically (see Fig. 4.2). Neatly groomed and sporting the classic English boy's school uniform, including shirt, tie, jacket (with school crest), shorts, knee socks, and polished black oxfords, the choir would arrive at a performance venue as a group and maintain their boy personas throughout the event at which they performed. The choir members had two distinct costumes, which helped to maintain the collective performance persona of boychoir-on-tour. One costume was the touring costume, described above, and the second was the performance costume consisting of robes, and cassocks, and accessorized by outsized prop hymnals to hold the sheet music. These outsized hymnals were meant to function as theatrical tricks of scale—the idea being that the larger the books, the smaller the human carrying them would seem to be, thus adding to the impression that these adult women were little boys.

The choir was a massive hit on the queer performance scene. For over ten years The Boychoir played cabarets, fundraisers, and band venues to enthusiastic reception. A typical set would start with a traditional hymn and segue into a series of popular tunes sung in the style of boychoir (i.e., church) music and arranged in four-part harmony. The Boychoir opened for Whiston an experimental and temporary way of enacting his trans-masculine identity. He says of the choir experience that

for [other boychoir members it was] more a game...playing with the character, and varying degrees of in between, as in, I am doing this character and it has nothing else to do with my life. For me it was a very safe way to open up the whole exploration of gender and of transitioning, tasting what that would be like, did I really want that? (qtd. in Bateman 15)



Figure 4.2: Tristan Whiston as T. Bruce Whiston, Head Boy of The Boychoir of Lesbos, photo by Simone Jones, 1997.

In November 1995, at a Strange Sisters cabaret at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, The Boychoir of Lesbos had its premiere performance. Eleven years, and approximately a hundred

performances later, at a Strange Sisters cabaret at Buddies, but in the context of the Hysteria Festival in 2005, The Boychoir of Lesbos staged a farewell performance for Whiston, who was then known as T. Bruce Whiston, Head Boy of The Boychoir of Lesbos. During this performance, his departure was narrated and enacted as a transition into puberty. Whiston had begun to take testosterone earlier in 2005 and could no longer sing in the register of the choir. He said his farewell, picked up a little prop suitcase, and left The Boychoir as the remaining “boys” sang him off the stage, and into the beginning of his gender transition. The end of The Boychoir was, for Whiston, though unbeknownst to him at the time, the beginning of a new performance experiment, the one that is the subject of this chapter, *trace*, which employs as the foundation of its creation the archival recordings of Whiston’s voice before, during, and after his transition.

Identity, David Valentine writes, is “two-faced” (103). It is a cultural process; it is about how we construct and express our senses of self (Halperin 6). It is a being and a doing, and in Whiston’s case, where performance is transformative, it is being as doing. In order to really do his own being, Whiston had to change his performance; in order to perform his identity, he had to change his body; in order to be himself, he had to change his voice. Being and becoming are sites of performance and performativity. Whiston’s transition, as described as being through and within his own performative actions and self-stagings, reiterates the state of queer as a state of always becoming. In this chapter, the queer performance scramble engages with a literal disarrangement of the elements of transmission: elements that are transitional in the present tense; that are vibrating in a state of disarrangement, not stabilizing there. A state of constant becoming “highlights and takes seriously the temporal foundations of matter and culture” (Grosz 3). The scramble is in motion and the fragments of a being, as represented by a voice, are spliced, sampled, repeated, and rearranged to create a new “composition of the present time.”

Elizabeth Grosz, after Nietzsche and Deleuze, asserts that becoming is an active force that “rejects the notion of time as passivity, a mode of passing, a neutral immersion of things in a temporal medium” (4). Becoming in this chapter, and in *trace*, is an open active force of time.

trace is the product of a queer feminist creation practice (one that is collaborative and process-based), and being centred in a practice-based research methodology, it began with a question. How do we reconcile all we have been with who we are now and who we have yet to become? How do we show the show of our past, which is always with and around us, that tugs on our subjectivity and inflects our identity, without getting caught in the prickly demands of a chrononormative narrative, with its insistent life markers signifying beginning, middle, and end?

How do we queer a queer life story?

If stasis is counter to life, counter to the process of living itself, how does change manage the pull of the past on one’s always-in-motion present state of being? In short, how do we tell a story when the story keeps on going, keeps on looping back, and keeps on rewriting itself with the powerful reconstructive pull of memory? Marcel Proust struggled with this, writing himself to his own death, lying on top of his own ongoing history, unintegrated marginalia staining his fingers. Ink stains and pages (pages upon pages) are the traces of his efforts to show, at once, a life.

I invoke Proust’s life work, *In Search of Lost Time*, the longest novel ever written, as a counterpoint to the sonic transtemporal experiment of *trace*. The Modernist genius that was Proust struggled in isolation with the ghosts of his own past and his own unfulfilled fantasies of self. Proust’s gigantic novel reconstructs a life through a narrative of grand, meandering proportions. *trace*, created in studio and in collaboration, on the other hand, seeks to construct a representation of becoming by speaking through a set of modalities to immerse the audience in the oceanic multiplicity of an identity in progress. The queer performance scramble shows and

has shown how linearity fails in the face of complex queer representations and how linear narrative has failed queers both historically and presently. Trying on, but not clinging to, the historical experiments of our predecessors is part of the process that keeps the scramble nimble, transtemporal, and engaged with what was, as well as what is and what may be. The content of *trace*, founded on Whiston's story of vocal and gender transition, a story we contrived to tell together, begins with a bodily experience; it begins with the sound of a voice; it begins with the changes that this voice undergoes; and it begins before that too, with the impulse to change a voice in order to find harmony with oneself. Ultimately, this performance abandons chronological narrative in the service of affective and relational representations in the form of a solo concert/performance in multiple voices. In analyzing the creation process of *trace*, and in the writing of this chapter, I am interested in ways that vocal performance can scramble chrononormativity; I am grappling with the composite body that is ever and always in motion as represented by the voices that emerge from its corpus. This work addresses how sound (sound that emerges from the live meat of the body in particular) can be used as a means to extend queerness: not to "queer," but instead to acknowledge the ways that queerness resonates outward and beyond queer bodies. This work seeks to investigate the way resonance lands in the listener, shapes identity, travels, and changes. Exploiting musicality, vocality, and sonic technologies both old and new, this work seeks to elucidate the frames of knowledge and representation that surround the transtemporal queer body and address the literal voices from elsewhere that are neither past nor entirely present. *trace* and the critical inquiry that emerges from it examine the potential for measuring the body in, through, over, and across time in performance, as well as for measuring time's effects on performing bodies.

In order to solve the problem “of anybody living in the composition of the present time” (Stein 251), Gertrude Stein turned to the landscape, and the landscape landed her in the medium of performance. She felt that “if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of a person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance” (263). The play as a landscape solved two problems at once: the problem of writing a landscape, and the problem of time in performance. Theatre must, in her formulation, be composed spatially, and the temporality of performance must be the absolute present; “it is there” (263). The landscape permits a spectator to “make acquaintance with it” (263), even though they are not familiar with it nor it familiar with them. In her search for temporal ease, Stein arrived at the landscape, which “has its formation and as after all a play has to have a formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing” (264). The play, according to Stein, is in conflict with narrative because it cannot sustain a temporal synchronicity with its audience. In its abandonment of narrative linearity, its relational representation, and its invocation of multiple simultaneous times (suggesting an absolute and composite present), *trace* demonstrates its sympathy with Stein’s formulation in a number of important ways.

trace is a sonic landscape that can be entered. The score is staged in a techno-theatrical environment of video projection, interactive recording stations, and multi-channel compositions visually framed as a day on the beach. Picture a shoreline, like the final beach scene of Visconti’s film version of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, waiting to be occupied. Three blue-and-white-striped beach changing huts (a heavy-handed but aesthetically pleasing metaphor) edge the space, and ten plinths with speakers on top of them dot the scene. The speakers sit at a range of heights atop their plinths approximating the level of a human ear for average sized

humans (see Fig. 4.3). Most of the plinths are below or at eye level, and movement in and around them creates a parallax view, one that changes with one's position inside the set. In addition to the huts, plinths, and speakers, there are four projectors. Three are low to the ground ready to enliven the set, the audience, the changing huts, and Whiston himself with their watery projections (see Fig. 4.4). The fourth projector is hung up high to fill out the top of the space so that all four together eventually, over the course of the performance, flood the scene with moving images of water.

The huts are all lit from within. One of the huts is command central, the homunculus den, whence the show will be operated by Whiston himself. Inside his hut Whiston can feed tracks to the ten speakers. Depending on the length of the tracks and the number of preset cues, Whiston is sometimes able to leave his hut to interact with his own voices, talk to audience members, cue the projectors, and perform live in concert with his multiple recorded voices. A series of cables, like rhizomatic tendrils, emerge from behind Whiston's station and spread across the floor in neat well-taped routes to the various speakers with which they correspond. Whiston works with a library of .WAV files channelled through a custom software program created for our specific requirements by Daffyd Hughes. This custom software can be likened to ten little cyber music players on a desktop that each correspond to one of the ten speakers in the space. Each of these cyber music players is processed through a data organization tool called a MOTU,³ which acts as the liaison between the players and the speakers. Whiston loads tracks onto the MOTU, assigning as many or as few of speakers as he needs, and the MOTU holds and transmits that information to the speakers so that Whiston can load a new track while another track is playing. Most of the time ten different parts are loaded onto ten different speakers to create ten-part compositions wherein each of the speakers plays a different part of that composition.



Figure 4.3: Trans Whiston on the set of *trace* in rehearsal in Regina with speakers on plinths, photo by Moynan King, 2015.



Figure 4.4: Trans Whiston as projections surface, photo by Moynan King, 2015.

The result of this multi-track, multi-speaker environment is the creation of a landscape that includes both Whiston and the audience. The performance exists in relation to the audience and to Whiston simultaneously. The ineluctable quality of sound means that the audience is automatically immersed. However, with sound, reception is everything. Before a sound is complete, it must be consumed by the listener through the ear or through the vibrations it produces in the body. Bodies absorb (consume) sound. Therefore, their very presence transforms the quality of the sound and the limits of sound's reach. Situating the audience within the sonic landscape means integrating them into the sonic landscape in a very literal way. The scrambled temporality of Whiston's various and combined voices mingles uniquely in each body, and is apprehended, absorbed, and interpreted according to its immediate resonance for each of them.

Queer Resonance

Voice is a symbol of "the embodied experience of the speaking subject," which, according to Susan Stryker, renders it a valuable means by which to subtend an analysis of transgendered phenomena (qtd. in Anastasia 262). Voice, "used metaphorically," Andrew Anastasia writes in the inaugural issue of *Transgendered Studies Quarterly*, "signifies multiple meanings at once: a sound that represents a person, the agency by which an opinion is expressed, and the expressed will of a People" (262). A voice then can be a singular expression or a collective agreement. It can say, signify, and express by speaking from, speaking of, or speaking for. It can also sound without speech, and in so doing identify, deceive, delight, confuse, disturb, and transport well beyond the limits of language because the voice, Anastasia says, "can pierce us in unexpected ways, turning us toward (or away from) another in an acoustic and affective register" (262). The transgender voice can be a powerful means of scrambling normative assumptions about sex and gender because its "unpredictable reception is part of the voice's

value” (262). A source of dissonance, both literally and figuratively, queer voices emphasize the clashing tensions that so easily trouble normative gender performativity. Internal technologies (that produce the voice) and external technologies (that record, manipulate, and play sound) are apprehended together not to discipline Whiston’s voice but to scramble it, and thereby to recalibrate the time of the sound and the temporal trajectory of the life and body from which the voice emerges. Sound travels and comes into being through time. Time is fundamental to the experience of perceiving sound. Time (speed of vibration) is the essence of pitch. Music is composed of and with time (time signatures; keeping time). Organizing sound is a way of organizing time. Queer resonance (both interior and exterior) creates a sonic counter-cartography (a counter score, perhaps?) of the multiply constituted subject-in-process.

Sound, in *trace*, is used as a means of organizing time in a way that can be traced in queer and newly resonant ways. Tracing a line (as linear) excludes the folds of experience that surround the life that moves the line in a seemingly forward direction. By tracing time in ways that engage the in-between space of transition across gender, voice invokes a “palimpsest of times in which the past, the present, and the future intermingle” (Case 13). Such traces are like the grooves in a phonographic record, invisibly jagged, scrambling the notion of linearity by resonating around and out to extend and progress simultaneously. reese simpkins observes that “as trans* bodies materialize, they create unique temporal embodiments that challenge universal frameworks of chronological time, highlight the nonlinear resonation of matter and enmesh past-present-future in open-ended becomings” (124). Gender transition is a marked version of the change (non-stasis) essential to living a life, and the voice is an apt metaphor for understanding the resonance of a state of always becoming: a state of harmony that is out of sync and that inhabits the discontinuities of the queer experience.

Resonance, as we know, defines a phenomenon related to systems of vibrations wherein a force causes oscillation or vibration in another system or object. In vocal terms, resonance emerges from bodies, and more specifically from bodily spaces where resonators produce vibrational chambers. Resonance has multiple and generative denotations for this project. To resonate is to have a significant impact or value; to have or be filled with a specific feature; or to trigger a memory or experience similar to the one that causes the resonance. That which resonates with the queer experience bears features of its own queerness and has a significant impact on the queer experience.

The soundscape of *trace* was an experiment in queer resonance that studied and exploited the manipulation of resonators to produce the foundational material of the show. The documentation and manipulation of the resonators and their vocal production took place across time and in different ways: first with the testosterone that Whiston started taking in 2005, which gradually lengthened and thickened his vocal chords over the period of his transition, and then with the sound recording and cutting technologies that allowed for the documentation of Whiston's transformation and for the extraction of sonic units of varying lengths and pitches. The result, in *trace*, is a representation rather than a story of transition—a representation that queers resonance by scrambling the linearity, continuity, and normativity of Whiston's vocal experience.

A voice is different from any other musical instrument or sound-emitting device in important ways. The voice is synonymous with self and can act as a critical key to identification. Roland Barthes's rumination on the "grain of the voice" borrows from Julia Kristeva's concepts of "phenotext" and "genotext" to develop "phenosong" and "genosong" where the former is a mode of effective communication and the latter points to ephemeral non-signifying structures in order to articulate the distinction between voice and language (Barthes 505). Genosong is that

element of voice that extends beyond its linguistic potential; it can be noticed in the breath of a whisper, or in a sigh. The grain is found in the genosong, and denotes the aspect of vocalization wherein the presence of the body is perceived. The small fragments of sound that are mixed to create the cohesive compositions in *trace* reveal the somatic coherence of genosong. Whether we sampled from Whiston's pre-transition soprano singing voice, his mid-transition "ums" and "ahs," or his post-transition speaking voice, we were able to create a harmonic effect. Indeed, this was one of the greatest discoveries of our practice-based research process; the discovery that we were able to create harmonic effects within our sound compositions with relative ease no matter when the recordings were made nor from which stage in Whiston's transition they were extracted.

Expanding on the metaphorical potential of resonance for the always-becoming state of queer-trans being, our creation process began with a survey of the raw data of Whiston's transtemporal vocal recordings. First, we organized and categorized the data. Speaking voices and subject matter were extracted and filed together. Then, songs, song phrases, and musically similar data were organized accordingly. As the organization and assembly process progressed, we gained a familiarity with the material and began to recognize patterns and tendencies in the sounds. The recordings, inflected by changing affective states throughout the recording stage (Whiston's transition), started to reveal new and unexpected material. Where we had begun by searching the material for musical and narrative cohesion—working only with the songs and phrases—we became, over time, more and more engaged with the unexpected, the non-narrative, and the extra-musical noises that emerged, often involuntarily, from Whiston's breath, pauses, chance sighs, and "ums" or "ahs." Noises, says Douglas Kahn, are "simply the sounds music [can] not use" (68). By integrating non-verbal and extra-musical vocal emissions into our

compositions, we discovered that bodily noises bear traces of the body from which they are emitted, and when integrated into a composition, they become sounds that music can indeed use.

The final soundtrack (insomuch as it can ever be final) consists of ten separate tracks. Each track is channelled through its own cable and played on its own speaker. Ten speakers are spread throughout the performance space. Sometimes a single track will have long spaces of silence on it because it is only a single part of a larger composition. Imagine that the speakers are members of a choir, each has its part to sing, but all are contributing to the larger whole. The tracks, as I have said, are created from raw data that is entirely composed of Whiston's voice. Some of the sounds are musical, some are verbal, and some are noise; that is to say, they are extra-musical and extra-linguistic sounds, like "ums" and "ahs," sounds one makes in the interstices of speech, when one is gathering a thought or preparing to speak, or trying to find the words to say what one wants to say. This raw material is cut and collaged. It is extracted in fragments (some whole phrases or songs and some nano-fragments of a word, a note, or an "um") and rearranged (or newly arranged) along with other sounds or phrases. This non-linear compilation of past voices serves to create a unique composite, one that is *exactly* and *not at all* a representation of the person from whom the voices emerge. I say *exactly*, because the pitch of the material is never manipulated, only the order and the length are altered. Each fragment is exactly (even if just for a millisecond) how Whiston sounded at some time. And I say *not at all* a representation of the voice because these fragments, taken from their original context and scrambled together, create a new composition, a thing all its own. Kahn suggests that the "way to make noise significant [is] to make it music, but by doing so the significance of the sounds [is] rendered insignificant" (70). The making musical of Whiston's vocal noises challenges Kahn's assertion through the queer resonance of the compositions that render them not insignificant but

resonant (having significant effects) in/through/with/beyond the queer subject to demonstrate, as they do, surprising and transtemporal harmonic ease in the genosong of a single corpus across time, mood, and gender.

In *Queer Voices*, Freya Jarmen-Ivens considers the singing voice as a mechanism for “linking two bodies together” (2). Vocal production comes from inside the body and, in order to be heard, it must enter another body. As the voice leaves the singer, it “takes a part of the body with it—the sound of its own production; and as it enters [the listener], it tickles [their] tympanum and disrupts the tiny hairs in [their] ears” (2). When the vocal production emanating from one body travels toward other bodies, sound becomes waves that exist between bodies in a third space. Jarmen-Ivens suggests that “it is this central feature of the voice—its operation in a kind of ‘third space’ between the voicer and the listener—and the importance of identification both with and against the voice on the part of the listener that make it a particularly intense site for the emergence of queer” (3). Further, might we be able to think of the voice as not only produced by the body but for its potential to produce the body? As Jarmen-Ivens writes, “The body-voice relationship is a looped one, a matrix in which body and voice produce each other” (8). This loop is central to the always in process state of queer becoming. “Becoming,” T. Garner suggests,

is a highly productive concept in transgender studies and in theoretical perspectives on the body in general because of its capacity to provide a way of reconsidering the nature of the body and body modification. An engagement with the notion of becoming brings into focus the borders between and within bodies. (30)

The voice, emerging as it does, with its unique grain and its powerful range, seems an apt metaphor (and site) for such an engagement. The third space (between voicer and voiced) is

where the scramble can happen; where the elements of the voice can become disarranged and rearranged; where the looped collaboration between bodies in process become and continue to become by looping and feeding back.

“Nobody can be anywhere without leaving something behind” (Tristan Whiston)

Whiston’s assertion that we always leave traces of ourselves wherever we have been inherently suggests its correlative: everywhere we have been leaves traces on us as well. This living exchange, this ongoing process of collection and deposit is a phenomenological issue; it is about how bodies, objects, intentions, and spaces “point to each other” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 5). Sara Ahmed’s formulation of queer phenomenology shows how “bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into space,” and how “social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit space with others” (5). Phenomenology seeks to understand the way that the world is perceived through the senses; how the world is experienced in a conscious state; how the mind perceives through its relations with the world what is out there; how the world is integrated even as it is out there; and how the world is both out there and of us simultaneously. Sound, given its somatic, sensory, intercorporeal, affective, and ineluctable character, is a particularly dense site for phenomenological analysis.

In Ahmed’s terms the “intercorporeal aspects of bodily dwelling” (*Queer Phenomenology* 5) speak to the traces of being and doing that culminate and continue in ongoing queer subject formation. Ahmed offers a “model of how bodies become orientated by how they take up time and space” (5) in a phenomenological way. A consideration of the voice’s potential to extend the occupation of bodies in time and space opens new means for analyzing time and space, and time as space, or space as time, through which sound travels. Perhaps if we consider Moya Lloyd’s “subject-in-process” (1), we can begin to formulate a trans-queer experience that emerges from

the voice and resonates with the idea of voice as a free-floating occupant of time and space, absorbing and perceiving while depositing and transforming as it goes. Lloyd's suggestion that "all subjects are...produced across, and positioned within, several (sometimes reinforcing, sometimes conflictual) axes" (15) is highlighted in the trans experience. In *trace*, this flux is rendered audible. *trace* stages the subject "in a continual state of flux" (Lloyd 15) to embody and show how queer resonance is a living exchange with other bodies, intentionalities, and affects.

Elsbeth Probyn's image of self as a collection of acetate transparencies, "layers and layers of lines and directions that are figured together and in depth, only then to be rearranged again" (1), summons the material of trace-making and the tangible but unfixed nature of subjectivity and gender. Probyn's image of layered acetate transparencies suggests a cartographic model of understanding subject formation. In *trace*, this principle is applied as a counter-cartography to voice a layered representation that conjoins time and space by using the performance space as a way of keeping time; a way of keeping track of time; a way of tracing time onto other times and onto existing traces.

Sometimes we search a map to find out where we are going, or to find out where we have been. Sometimes we are just looking to find the "you are here" marker—to find our location, to survey our surroundings, to calculate distances to and from, to take stock, to look around. *trace* attempts to map the ethereal traces of one transgender voice to theorize the intersections of time and space in a performance that embraces the impossibility of only ever being one. In our efforts to map an immersive space that matched the essence of the work's cartography of time, we ended up with a landscape in which to play, a landscape for performer and audience to play at becoming together.

Spectator Collaboration

The pre-show of *trace* is an integral part of the show and essential to its production. The start time indicated on the promotional materials is not the time at which Whiston takes the stage and begins his performance, but rather the time at which the audience is offered the space. As people begin to arrive, intermittent sound is heard from the speakers, but it is so quiet at first that one might think that the speakers themselves produce the sound: the sound of the technology, electronic hums, perhaps, and not the voice of the performer. In fact, the phrase “Can you hear me?” from the song “I Am Sailing” by the Sutherland Brothers, as sung repeatedly by Whiston throughout his transition, is looped and repeated, in gradually increasing volume. As the phrase and the song become audible, the low-tone version emerges first. The voices, both low and high, ask a valid question in a mediated field of voice: Can you hear me?

As the audience fills the space (absorbing and contributing to the soundtrack), they are introduced one by one to the changing huts. One of the changing huts, as mentioned above, is Whiston’s control booth, command central, and the other two of the three huts that edge the space are designed specifically for the audience. Each of these huts contains a tape recorder, a mirror, some objects, and a set of instructions. Spectators are encouraged (by me) to enter the hut alone and follow the instructions. There is never sufficient time for everyone to get into one or both of the huts before Whiston’s performance begins. Spectators are encouraged (by Whiston within the performance) to continue their self-tapings during and after the performance proper.

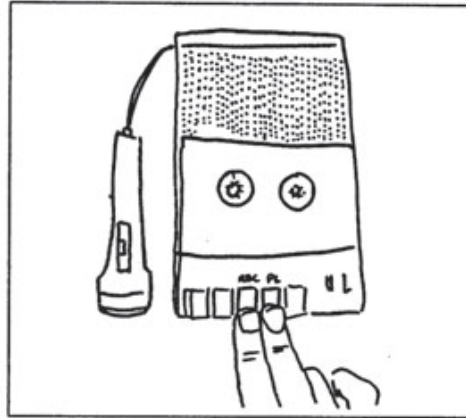
Inside the hut is a private self-recording station. The fabric coverings can be tied from inside, and the fabric is sonically porous so sounds in the hut can be heard from the rest of the performance space. The effect is like an acoustic ghost mirror where something from elsewhere shadows the main action/performance. Inside these huts the spectators experience subtle echoings of the experience Whiston had while recording his own voice. They repeat phrases and

improvise their completion. In doing so they reveal secrets and answer questions about their own ongoing becoming. The huts contain a number of objects; objects that resonate broadly with Whiston's experiences of transition and self-reflection now come to life for the spectator. Central to the hut equipment is a recorder and a microphone. The analog cassette recorder is introduced with clear written instructions inside the hut: "Take a cassette tape from the pile on the left and insert it into the recorder." The instructions are accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations (see Fig. 4.5). "To record, press 'play' and 'record' at the same time," they instruct, with a drawing of fingers simultaneously pressing play and record underneath. The analog cassette recorder was chosen as the recording medium for a couple of reasons. The analog cassette recorder is highly tactile. When you press play and record you can feel the mechanics of the equipment engage and see the tape whirling slowly by through the glass window on the recorder, and the use of archaic technology gives one the feeling (literally; somatically) of being in another time.

The material recorded inside the huts by the spectator is transferred to digital format and then used in the current show and/or in future shows. The cassettes themselves are then rewound, and recycled back into the huts, ready to be used again, once the audience voices are transferred. The same cassette tapes are used for every show. Gradually the cassette tapes have become a ghostly archive; the tapes bear traces of their own histories of recording in the form of layers of past voices; they are literally the "palimpsest of times in which the past, the present, and the future intermingle" that Sue-Ellen Case has theorized as central to queer performance temporalities (13). As the spectator leaves the hut, they leave their voice behind as trace evidence of their future past. The cassettes, like the overall score of *trace*, contain a collection of sounds, voices, and temporalities. They contain traces (embodied and performative at once) that

demonstrate the ongoing process of transmission and collection that is integral to the idea of identity-in-process.

Take a cassette tape from the supply on the left and put it in the tape recorder



Press play and record

Say the date and where you are

Say and complete the following phrases:

I wonder what it would feel like to...

O.k., by the way ...

I always wanted to ...

When I told them that ...

Don't tell anyone but ...

Who would I be if ...

How do I ...

Press stop on the recorder

Figure 4.5: Sample instructions, illustration by Ange Beever, photo by Moynan King, 2014.

The mediated voice can have an uncanny effect. Uncanny, *unheimlich*, according to Freud, is not that which seems new or alien but rather that which is familiar though somehow at odds with our expectations. The uncanny reveals repression. The disembodied voice has the uncanny effect of being simultaneously familiar and strange. Our own recorded voices when played back to us often surprise and even confound us (Do I really sound like that? Is that me?). The voice recording is a mediated reflection that stops and compiles time. It interrupts the concept of duration and linearity by putting, as H el ene Cixous would have it, “the uncanny stranger on display” (880). Heather Love suggests that “identifications across time do not serve merely to consolidate identities in the present; instead, such identifications can illuminate the uncanny life of the past inside our present” (45). The life of the past inside the present is exactly what Whiston and I are attempting to show with *trace*, and the audience in echoing Whiston’s experience in the recording booths subject themselves to the potential for similar illumination. The audience recordings and Whiston’s recordings (reflections that fill the space) act as auditory mirrors reflecting multiple identifications across time and space and gesture toward Stein’s composition (composite; multiple; scrambled) of the present time.

Inside the huts, an audience member completes a series of phrases while looking in a mirror (see Fig. 4.5). In the process of improvising the completion of sentence fragments, they are expected to reflect on themselves a number of times in each booth with different suggestions for different conditions each time. For example, in one of the booths, the audience members are asked to take off their shirts and complete the sentences topless. The intention, with such directions, is to draw attention to the spectator’s own self-constitution through the looped relationship between how one appears and how one sounds, therefore opening a door to potential reflection on how one is constituted through sound and vision. Completing a sentence while

looking at one's own naked chest in a private/public space, for example, was meant to influence the spectator's collaboration with themselves through fresh perspectives and, therefore, new feedback loops among the body, the voice, and the sentence they were asked to complete. Like every element of the work, the interactive portion evolved as we toured. Directions changed and were added, but the sentence fragments remained the same. We wanted to amass a national archive of people finishing the same sentence fragments—a national archive of repetition with difference, which is, after all, the very essence of performativity.

trace ends as it begins: by centralizing the spectator. After Whiston's performance is over, the soundtrack transitions into one composed entirely of voices from audiences present and past. No bow is taken, no applause is expected. Whiston's voice is simply replaced by other voices—those of spectator(s). Thus, the audience contributes to the show in multiple ways: their bodies consume and complete its sounds, they deposit traces of themselves on analog recordings, and ultimately they become the entirety of the show after Whiston's performance ends. The audience is never asked to leave or told that the performance is over. In fact, the show doesn't end until the audience has entirely dispersed, a process that can sometimes take a very long time because the audience recordings, filled with secrets, reflections, and confessions, are uncannily captivating.

Transformative Collaboration

Queer processes engender queer outcomes. A collaborative process invested in the ongoing nature of queer becoming must, by its very definition, elide closure and reject any trajectory of expectation that leads to completion, success, or perfection. This is not another road into Halberstam's queer art of failure.⁴ Somewhere between success and failure there is a world of experimentation and desire that is generative in and of itself; that is neither invested in arrival

or refusal but rather gets traction from different aspects of harmony that resonate with different things, places, and ideas; that spawn ideas, places, and harmonies. The lines that direct a queer creative process are generated by an investment in the unique life of the work of art itself. Queer art is desire that generates queer directions. Queer direction can be a state of unbecoming, a not-turning toward or away, a hesitation (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 32). This not-turning is a form of “composition of the present moment” (Stein), that is generated by the chance-filled state of becoming, that Grosz says, “cannot be regarded as indetermination, as the absence of cause,” because queer becoming and the open-endedness it engenders resonates with “the *excess*, the superfluity, of causes, the profusion of causes, which no longer produces singular or even complex events but generates events, which have a temporal continuity quite separate from that of their causes” (4). The queer creative process foregrounds oblique purviews that sometimes loop back on themselves to spawn more questions; questions that are sometimes the answers we need. When I am teaching devised theatre or collective creation, I tell my students to “let the work tell you what it is. If your goal is to create a memorable work of art or to achieve professional status then your work will be derivative.” In order to devise collaboratively one has to commit to a process that is unknown, a process that is generated only by its own doing (and sometimes undoing). Chance procedures, collaboration, and becoming care nothing for success and failure. This is one way that my own queer orientations influence my practice and my teaching. The process Whiston and I applied to *trace* was one that we discovered as we made it. 5

Whiston came to me with a desire to collaborate on a performance based on the recordings he had amassed across the time of his gender transition. This proposition inspired me for a number of reasons. First of all, Whiston and I had collaborated before (*The Boychoir of Lesbos*; *Heart Wrench and Hammer*; *Lord of the Flies*; *Cheap Queers*) and appreciated each

other's ideas, senses of humour, and work ethic. At our first meeting Whiston described an image he had for the project: the image of walking through a forest of his own voices where he could hear himself whispering and singing to himself quietly, like the rustle of leaves in a breeze. I then described an image I had of him as a hologram; a nearly translucent being that absorbed and reflected light and sound, and was central to something of which he was, in fact, only a small part. These images had everything to do with transformational subjectivity and the unfixed nature of queer-trans identity. We began the formulation of our research questions: How do we reconcile our past with our present? How do we remain porous and be productive at the same time? How do we show the show of queer being and becoming? How do we work with the past and potential selves that haunt us? Haunting, we decided, was nothing but traces; tracing, we decided, was a great metaphor for the accumulation and change we wanted to parse as part of our project.

A forest of voices; a hologram; a place of constant change; a reconciliation of past, present, and possibility; traces: *trace*.

From the outset I was struck by the potential of Whiston's vocal recordings to intervene in the very concept of collaborative process. Whiston, in launching this project, was delving into a multi-layered collaborative process that was transtemporal, transmedial, transgender, and transformative. The vocal traces that comprise the primary material of *trace* act as manifestations of this transtemporal embodiment. By scrambling the component parts of a trans history, this performance exceeds the limits of autobiography and the systemic narrative tropes that it relies on to represent the real harmony and chaos of a life experience. Queer in the present is not about traversals and arrivals. Transitions never end. A queer state of becoming unfolds continuously in a queer life. In *trace* temporal and gendered splits are reassembled and made cohesive by

scrambling time through sound. The fragmented recordings of Whiston's voice are disarranged and rearranged to render them out of sync and in harmony. For example, fragments sampled from an Irish love ballad, "The Water Is Wide," resulted in a haunting technological composition. The extraction of multiple non-musical "ums" and "ahs" from the later stages of his transition result in a staccato yet rich song fragment. We also used combinations of sounds extracted from songs, speech, and random vocalizations, and created one full-on choral arrangement of a complete song. This beautiful ten-part harmony sung entirely by Whiston is beyond description.

Multiple interwoven collaborative practices are everywhere apparent in this work. We collaborated with Whiston's voices, technologies of self, and technologies of production simultaneously. The entire score of *trace* is a vocal extension of a single corpus. Cyborgian systems of digital information production extend the body but do not, in some futuristic model of the complete Cartesian mind/body split, render the body obsolete. The cables and speakers that extend from the electronic equipment in Whiston's hut create a network transporting his voice to different sites and different speakers, transmitting Whiston's transphonic, transtemporal performance. Whiston's live manipulation of and harmony with the technologies that split and carry his voice is what makes this performance unique, collaborative, and open-ended.

Road Cases

In 2015 Whiston and I and our production artist, Adrien Whan, took the show on the road, travelling to some of the most remote cities in the country. It took two substantial road cases to carry Whiston's voices on what we like to call the TransManada tour. Our custom road cases were five feet long by two and a half feet wide and three feet high. They contained the following: ten plinths, fabric to cover the changing huts, ten speakers in their boxes, four DVD

players, three projectors, several tape recorders, a tiny box of raisins, a tube from the inside of a roll of toilet paper, three stools, a beach chair, the MOTU, wooden frames for the beach huts (some tucked inside the plinths), a cordless drill, a toolkit, extra screws, all the bolts for the huts, Whiston's costume (suit, shoes, and hat), the hut instructions, lights for the huts, lots of extension cords, ten rolls of white fabric tape, cabling for all the speakers, four cassette players, twenty-five cassette tapes, and a large duvet. Queer performance dramatizes inconsistency. The seemingly weightless ephemerality of Whiston's voice sits in contrast to the volume of equipment it took to stage and transmit it.

The first booking of our 2015 tour was for a performance festival called Pivot at Nakai Theatre in Whitehorse, Yukon. Whiston and I had made it our mission to prioritize smaller cities in Canada for the 2015 tour. This mission was inspired by our own upbringings: I am from East Farnham, Quebec, and Whiston is from Sudbury, Ontario. Nakai is a company I had worked with before, and Whitehorse is a remarkable place, home to many artists, dancers, musicians, and theatre artists, and the Yukon boasts the highest per capita arts funding in the country. The letter of acceptance that we received from David Skelton, Nakai's artistic director, was the foundation around which we based our subsequent touring dates and locations. Around it we arranged a presentation at Queer City Cinema in Regina, at the Shiver Festival in Dawson City, and at the Centre for Culture and Performance in Yellowknife. With four presenting hosts in place, we were able to secure Canada Council for the Arts touring funding. By September 2014 we had arranged our tour and secured all the necessary funds to take the show on the road in January and February 2015. In the first week of October 2014, I wrote to Skelton at Nakai to confirm some details and make plans for accommodations during our time in Whitehorse. I got no reply. A

week later I wrote again, and again, no reply. At the end of October, I started to get a bad feeling, so I called the theatre and got Skelton on the phone.

What happened next was one of *those* conversations: both shocking and predictable at the same time. It was the kind of conversation that queers and other others are accustomed to and yet somehow never actually expect. I was told that we had been bumped from the festival, even though we had a signed agreement from the artistic director to present our project. The programming committee had decided to present a production of a play called *My Pregnant Brother/My Playwright Sister*, a popular performance on the touring circuit that dealt with the subject of a trans man's pregnancy, his sister's play about his pregnancy, and his response to his sister's play in the form of a play. The programming committee felt that they couldn't present two trans performance works at one festival, and so ours, being the newer one with no prior press and being the less heteronormative (not about pregnancy), was cut. Forcing *trace* into an identity box and refusing to present it other than as a token does exactly what the show tries to undo.

This incident demonstrates the ongoing limitations of queer performance in Canada and the impact that these limitations can exert on the material conditions of its production. Queer performance in the mainstream is judged only for its identity category representation and the boxes it can check off in institutional attempts at diversity programming. Queer performance in Canada is not judged for its form, style, or theatrical innovation; rather, it is often reduced to an identity box. Queer artists are haunted by the spectres of their stereotypes. The performance of *trace* begins with a question: Can you hear me? In the landscape of cultural production in Canada the answer is unequivocally "no." The complex readings that *trace* ascribes to subject formation and the always-becoming state of queer are, it seems, invisible, like those jagged lines in the grooves of a record. Resonance might profitably replace *point of view* as a way of

analyzing queer performance and being. It deals in transmission and absorption rather than definition, and its very nature is ineluctable and cannot be blinkered. The blinders that render trans a single same experience across the spectrum cannot be sustained in a sonic metaphor.

The ejection of *trace* from the Pivot festival did not deter us from completing our tour as planned. We redirected our energies to a new presenter and ended up doing the show at the Old Fire Hall in Whitehorse in the week following the Pivot festival. The Old Fire Hall offered us a venue, but it didn't have the resources to offer us promotion, performance fees, per diems, or accommodations. We were left scrambling to manage these ourselves. The show was well received, including by Skelton himself who loved it and invited me for lunch the following day to talk about working on something together.

The Old Fire Hall in Whitehorse is a large, well-equipped venue. *trace* could certainly not fill the whole space, but the show was designed to be self-contained and adaptable. The speakers, huts, and cables create a unique performance space in each venue. In Dawson City we performed at the Shiver Festival, as suggested by the name the festival takes place in the middle of winter in the middle of the night—night is an ongoing event in Dawson City in early January. In Regina we performed in a converted church and had a harder time than usual getting the audience to stay with the space and away from the pews. In Montreal, our final destination, we enjoyed a run at Studio 303, an ideal performance and rehearsal studio. Each time we present the piece we learn something new. Each time we learn something new we change the piece. It, like us, is ever evolving. Every place we went, every space we occupied became *the space—the* space of the ongoing becoming of *trace*.

Judith A. Peraino points out that Louis Althusser's famous conceptualization of "how omnipresent ideology 'recruits' individuals and transforms them into subjects," used a metaphor

that was importantly, “a sonic one” (3). The hail, in Althusser’s theorization, is integral to the subject formation. However, Peraino asserts that Althusser “missed a critical moment in his story of hailing: the moment of questioning ‘Is it me?’” (3). Althusser’s theory of subject formation is additionally challenged and problematized by José Esteban Muñoz’s suggestion that “[one] possible definition of queer that we might consider is this: queers are people who have failed to turn around to the ‘Hey, you there!’ interpellating call of heteronormativity” (*Disidentifications* 32). A failure to “turn around,” when being interpellated by the sirens of heteronormativity, invokes a version of queer that is slippery, and intractable, that is forever asking “Is that really me” or “Am I perhaps someone else?” What is the call, the siren song that entices a confrontation with one’s past, present, and future becoming? Surely it is a queer sound.

To conclude, I will return now to the question that launched this project as a performance: How do we reconcile all that we have been with who we are now and who we have yet to become? How do we show the show of our past, which is always with and around us, that tugs on our subjectivity and inflects our identity? First, we must embrace a state of always becoming. We might do this by anthropomorphizing the creative process, by treating it as if it had life of its own, one that we want and must keep alive. Further, we must collaborate, with our own ever-changing identifications and desires and with our past and our present states, because in order to find harmony, one has to be simultaneously moving forward and forever resonating with and beyond our own imaginings of our own potential multiplicity.

Notes

1. This is not to say that the Steinian concept of the present is entirely synchronous with that developed in *trace*. Stein's present has no past and often no future-oriented consequences either.
2. While my use of the term "becoming" in this chapter does resonate with some of the qualities of Deleuzian becoming in so much as it is used in reference to creative potential and, as Rosi Braidotti puts it, "a multiple and constant process of transformation" (44), I am not explicitly invoking Deleuze in these pages. Queer becoming is both about passing into and on from a state in a sense that has infinite potential.
3. MOTU is a brand of audio interface hardware.
4. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Jack Halberstam theorizes failure as a productive state of transformation in queer becoming. I find his formulation elitist and resist the idea that failure is a necessary counterpoint to normative ideas of success. For most queers and other others failure is just that, failure, and rather than productive it can be deadly.
5. While I do realize that there is a body of work specifically related to practice-based methodologies, Whiston and I drew on our experience as performance makers to develop methods specific to the needs of the project.

Conclusion

Critical theory, like artistic creation, wants to tell a story of the world; it wants to make an impression on the way meaning is rehearsed and disseminated. When I embarked on this dissertation research, I simultaneously embarked on the collaborative performance project *trace*, the subject of my last chapter. These projects ran parallel to each other for some time, and I knew from the outset that *trace* was going to be included in this dissertation. I was planning to analyze *trace* from the perspective of its material conditions of production to demonstrate the very particular struggles one faces when trying to develop, produce, and disseminate marginalized queer performance (produced without institutional support) in Canada. The original title of that final chapter was to be “Road Cases” in reference to the custom-made containers used for transporting materials on tour. The chapter was going to figuratively unpack the road cases of the touring production to investigate the unique scramble involved in pulling off a tour—with an emphasis on grants, logistics, and queer networks of contacts outside of Toronto and Montreal. But, by the time I got to the actual writing, it had become abundantly clear that the reciprocal relationship between my practice and my research had generated deepening forces across both. The scramble as a hermeneutic had become a highly influential force in the creation of the project, even as the project was informing my analytic methodology. I found myself thinking obsessively about how sound can be scrambled, about how scrambling meant recoding, and about how recoding led to new and unfixed identity formations across queer subjects and performances. When I turned to the writing of my final chapter, and shifted my focus and energy from my role as creator to my role as scholar, multiple unexpected channels of inquiry appeared, and the chapter became a delightful space of cumulative learning and thinking. I came to

understand how the queer performance scramble would forever change my process as both a creator and a scholar.

Thinking within the rubric of the queer performance scramble means thinking differently about performance and time—it means thinking content, style, material conditions, identity, and socio-political concerns all together, while always keeping the art at the very centre of the investigation and always returning to it for guidance.

The scope of my dissertation is limited in the ways outlined in the introduction, but the methodology engaged here could be profitably taken up by diverse scholars now and in the future because embracing the scramble means embracing the multiplicity of its potentiality. In fact, the methodology, which foregrounds collaboration, was in fact developed collaboratively because it emerged from an analysis of the ongoing work of my peers. I like to think that the scramble might provide new opportunities for the curation of new collections of texts and essays by artists and theorists from within the community of communities that make up queer culture in Canada and abroad. Its profitable extensions might include, depending on the theorist, a trans-feminist focused reflection on the queer performance scramble, or a POC-focused application of the queer performance scramble. While trans-feminist and POC performances are included in my dissertation research, there is still a broad field of opportunity to mobilize sustained engagements with the scramble across these and other different bodies of work.

As a methodology that sprang from an inspirational keyword, theorizing the queer performance scramble allowed me to merge ideas about theatricality and performativity with observations about material opportunity and collective willfulness. The scramble, as a word, became a tool for me to frame the work without trapping it in some kind of identitarian confine, and without giving it immutable structures because the scramble—like the practices of the artists

I study—is in motion, and responsive to change. This theoretical model makes it possible for radical work of even fleeting duration to hold a significant place in the performance archive because, when understood in relation to the queer feminist performance scramble, it can assert itself as part of something vaster and more enduring. The scramble attends to the losses as well as the wins in a subcultural arts production trajectory.

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated the ways that the artists represented resist immutable temporal structures; disappearance, reappearance, and redux are integral to the temporality of their ongoing goings-on. As I said at the beginning of this dissertation, the scramble is concerned with the present; it seeks to analyze work that is happening now. And, as I discovered over the time of my research and writing, “now” is really hard to hold on to, because even as we approach it slips away. Everything is being relegated to the past every second. The scramble shows that contemporary performance (and its related analysis) is in constant dialogue with the past and with its own new and next potentialities. Therefore, this dissertation will continue to be relevant until the structural marginality that frames and repeats the concerns and conditions of queer feminist performance in Canada is resolved. And without starting a whole new dissertation, suffice it to say that this resolution does not seem to be happening any time soon.

The artists whose works occupy these pages, and I consider myself one of them, continue to go on, often against the odds, even as I write. Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue are currently engaging in the monstrous challenge of remounting *Killjoy's Kastle*, this time in Philadelphia, with a number of updated exhibits to account for the changing landscape in which it is played out. *Strange/Insatiable Sisters* and *Edgy Women/Redux* are still nowhere to be seen...for now. Alex Tigchelaar has turned her attention to a PhD at Concordia University and a

research project about sex work in Canada and the laws that surround its enactment and performance. Jess Dobkin is conjuring the archive of performance art on various stages with a bunny and a magic wand even as she perseveres in her attempts to secure a remount of *The Magic Hour*. Shaista Latif has moved to Montreal and then back to Toronto again in an ongoing effort to find both housing and performance opportunities while at the same time continuing her work as magical archivist and developing a new performance about the mandate to be happy...and Plato. Dayna McLeod is passionately embracing her process of middle-aging with new live and mediated works, including *Uterine Concert Hall* and *I Live for Menopause*. Tristan Whiston is developing new work as an advocate for artists with disabilities and continuing his community-engaged visual arts practice. He contacts me every once in a while to say, “Let’s go back to *trace* and develop it further” (and maybe time will allow that now).

I’m cooking up my next research project, which focuses on sound-based performance and sound in queer performance specifically. I am currently co-editing an issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* with Megan Johnson entitled “Sound & Performance,” which will be released in the fall of 2020, and, building on the work started in my recent book *Queer/Play* and my efforts to publish performance texts that are sometimes difficult to commit to the page, such as performance art and immersive performances, I am hoping to edit a hybrid anthology of theoretical essays and performance texts tentatively entitled *Queer Resonance: Sounding Gender & Sexuality in Contemporary Performance*. I am looking forward to reinventing myself as an artist-scholar with a PhD, developing my next performance project, and, as always, keeping my ears and eyes attuned to the goings on of queer feminist performance here and abroad.

If you embrace the scramble, you embrace the ongoing potential of performance. If you embrace the scramble, you embrace your own survival as central to the very tenets of artistic

practice. The scramble is open, energetic, and responsive to change, so even when things seem hopeless, it can show you the power of restarting, returning, and reinventing; it can show you the power of “going-on” as an active force of performance and performativity, because, as I am learning over and over again, survival is a durational performance in and of itself.

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