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CABARET THOUGHTS ON *WOW AND NOW* Katie Brewer Ball

*WOW AND NOW: A Celebration of
Feminist and Queer Performance*

Curated by Nao Bustamante,
Karen Finley, and José Esteban
Muñoz

Saturday, 10 November 2007
Joe's Pub, New York City

WOW AND NOW was a night of salacious and serious cabaret. In addition to providing Performance Studies International (PSi 13) conference attendees with a glimpse of queer and feminist artists today, *WOW AND NOW* offered a space for the audience to consider and envision the vital intersections of feminism, queer politics, and contemporary performance practices. Watching the show, I was reminded of the now ten-year-old edited volume *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed.¹ This collection of essays insists that the conversations between feminism and queer theory need to be reengaged since such dialogues remain quite relevant to coalitional politics today. Queer and feminist politics are very much interrelated as queer was itself born out of feminist and sex-based thought experiments. The multiple manifestations of feminism and queer theory build on each other and yet originate from distinct historical moments, circumstances, and desires. Schor and Weed articulate the distinctions between these fields of practice and politics in an effort to complicate feminism and queer theory as uneasy, yet productive, bedfellows. It is their hope that, through this focus on *meeting* and *meeting again*, one might be able to more clearly map the paths in which feminist and queer trajectories coalesce and aid each other in maintaining a critical self-awareness of coercive formations and sedimentations.² So it was that *WOW AND*

Now, this meeting of feminist and queer performance in 2007 Manhattan, not only served up a jovial political, gender-excessive, and erotic tempest, but also provided a refreshing revisit of Schor and Weed's 1997 collection of pointed essays on the crucial need to continue a dialogue between feminism and queer theory.³

I begin this review in the clandestine stage that is the public restroom. Cocurator and host Nao Bustamante emerged midway through the night in her pearl kimono cape clutching a sizable toilet-paper holder seemingly ripped right off the wall of the theater bathroom stall. As Bustamante went into her humble apology and explanation about how the toilet-paper holder had fallen off as she was "going number one," she insisted that it could not have been her brute force that caused its descent. She was only merely pulling "normally" on the toilet paper. Then, after taking a moment to reflect, she announced, "Well, it's hard to know what normal is because I'm always by myself." Her comment, in its lyrical and humorous excess, points to the very antinormative drive that has been crucial to queer efforts and the decentering project of feminism, particularly women-of-color feminism. Both political and coalitional markers "queer" and "feminism" fail to know what is fully normal, and although feminist projects have been more (often problematically) attuned to strategic essentialism to

gain rights and recognition across gender and race differentials, each continues to embrace the inability to attain normalcy and critique the uninterrogated search for equivalency.⁴ Bustamante explains that she will give the toilet-paper holder to the staff so her cop performers of the night do not suffer at her paper-hungry hand, saying, "I just don't want to fuck up anymore." However, what we seem to hear is both that the fuckup is perfect for tonight and that this antinormative, yet inevitably, binary-bathroom-based stance that *WOW AND NOW*'s artists contend with and embrace is predicated on a certain reflexivity and self-care for one another. Although Bustamante's remark at first comes across as part of her quick-witted glamour aesthetic, what is conveyed is a collegial queerness, a care for the other performers, for the performance space, and a desire to do right by the collective body. On this very stage is the meeting of various self-critical and contending fields and politics.

In Judith Butler's essay "Against Proper Objects," from the aforementioned edited collection, she tells us that "[t]here can be no viable feminism that fails to account for its complicity in forms of oppression, whether they be colonial, class-based, racist, or homophobic. And there can be no viable lesbian and gay studies paradigm that does not examine its own complicitous investments in misogyny and other forms of oppression."⁵ Self-critique

need be a vital part of any movement resistant to oppression, and furthermore one needs to remain attentive to potential political oversights and complicity in systems of oppressions. Bustamante and her cohorts challenge the boundaries and the dialogue among the fields of feminism, queer theory, performance, and critical race theory, to name a few. Through her performance of bathroom failure and a queer and feminist ethic of care, she shows us that self-awareness need always be present in order to interrogate what has become normal or usual to us, even if it is as mundane as how hard we pull the toilet paper. Bustamante shows us that, even in the public restroom, the ur-site of gender's division and undoing, we need to remain attuned to the interweaving of these differently focused, but not discrete, fields and that, most importantly, these fields and their followers continue to connect up and push one another toward greater critical awareness.

Bringing together a variety of artists, the curatorial trinity of Bustamante, Finley, and Muñoz created a spectacle presented in the improvisational terrain between the feisty hosts and the top-drawer lineup of performance artists. Carmelita Tropicana christened the stage, shouting out to her "academic peeps" with a sing-along to "Chongalicious" in her queering of U.S. youth culture and language based on the user-generated online video rendition of a teenage Miami "Fergalicious."

Tropicana, performing as "Evel-Knievel-meets-yeast-infection," proclaimed with "Cartesian certitude" that she was both *WOW AND NOW*, which is to say her work is reminiscent of the feminist performance heyday of Wow Café in addition to being her visible contribution to the queer and feminist culture that continues to perform glittering excess on the downtown stages of New York. Following Tropicana, video/performance artist, and recently named Guggenheim Fellow, Kalup Linzy graced the stage in a black leotard and long black weave, pulled tightly to the side. He performed pieces from "SweetBerry Sonnet" singing about an unrequited love who told him, "You're needy, and oh boy, you're shady, but most of all you're stingy with your asshole," climaxing in "Why did my asshole fuck it up for my soul?" Linzy's performance was a throwback to queen culture with the elegance and voice of Nina Simone but with little regard for gender realness.

Next up, New York's favorite lesbian noise musician, Jibz Cameron, performed a bout of frantic failure as Dynasty Handbag. Wearing white high-rise jean shorts and a tight black body suit, Dynasty Handbag brought the creative process onstage in all its nervous hilarity and hipster unsexy-yet-successful attempts at alluring those offstage into her uneven world. She amorphously mouthed words out of sync to a prerecorded voice-over of her wailing "I don't want the

experience, I just want the memories.” Finally, Dynasty Handbag became overwhelmed by the pressure of the audience, scholar, and artist waiting in the wings. As she crawled across the stage to exit the eyes of critique, she bemoaned “I’m dying and art is dying with me!” The Amy Sedaris inspired bodily animations tapped into the attempts of the academic and artist to find that very elusive “art” that Dynasty Handbag charges herself, in whiny dramatic splendor, with needing to help survive in a world of cookie-cutter aesthetics and boredom. Moving back and forth in twitchy confusion across the stage, her work mirrored the

“numerous contestations” that feminist and queer manifestations find themselves in: trying to create meaning and strategy whilst leaving projects open to critique, self-examination, failure.⁶

Lastly, Los Angeles-based performance group My Barbarian, fresh off their performance of *The White Widow* at the Whitney Museum, performed part of their piece “Non-Western: A Western.” Malik Gaines and Alexandro Segade, in matching Vaquero neon pants, formed a pterodactyl to fight Jade Gordon’s feather-adorned Animal Queen in their comment on border-crossing and neocolonial contacts in the Southern California landscape.



Figure 1. My Barbarian, “Non-Western: A Western” video, 2007. Photo used with permission of My Barbarian.



Figure 2. Dynasty Handbag, Joe's Pub, 10 November 2007. Photo used with permission of the author.

And, if race had yet to be articulated as an intrinsic part of contemporary queer performance art, My Barbarian in their “dark camp” rendition of California Westerns conveyed that queer and feminist concepts are ineluctably tied to questions of racialization.⁷ The *WOW AND NOW* artists’ focus on the intersecting projects working against raced, gendered, and colonial-based oppressions coincide with Roderick Ferguson’s understanding of Queer of Color critique and postnationalist American studies wherein “the negation of normativity and nationalism is the condition for critical knowledge.”⁸ The negations of

coercive identity formations performed by *WOW AND NOW* artists provide openings of critique and potential through the scene of performance and beyond. Caught amongst histories of feminist and queer multiplicities and the meetings between the two, Carmelita Tropicana, Kalup Linzy, Dynasty Handbag, and My Barbarian perform in excess of the easily categorized “feminist” or “queer” and bring to light the necessity for a debate that concerns the relationship of such categories to contemporary performance practices and the understanding of identity and community formations exemplified therein.

Lois Weaver, artist and lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, concluded the night with her “reverse striptease” and performance as Tammy WhyNot, country-western singer turned lesbian performance artist. Ms. WhyNot demanded that the knowledgeable audience help her to understand lesbian performance things like “Proust, oyster cultivation, animal husbandry, globalization, and more sexual practices.” She needed to know these things because, as she had just learned at the PSi conference, identity politics are a thing of the past. Thusly Weaver felt compelled to rethink what a lesbian performance artist is *supposed* to know, do, and perform. Her quip about a *passé* identity politics, gesturing toward a potentially antiquated lesbian feminist need for identity markers, brings to the forefront of

her performance questions regarding the proper subject at the center of feminism and queer theory. Her body, standing on the stage of academic artistry at the international performance conference, begs the question, what do we do at the crossroads of these radical projects that focus on gender and sex, and how do we allow such changes to enliven and reinvigorate the purview of feminism and queer thought? Furthermore, how do we negotiate the “subjectlessness” of queer theory with the typically female-centered feminism? At this moment, one begins to see that the meeting of feminism and queer theory could produce a series of critically fertile conversations, critically fertile spaces on the stage, through the bodies of the performers as they meet to shake each other up. This interaction in the bodies of feminist and queer actors, the very nature of the meeting, is where two bodies look to each other to remain critical and generative. This meeting reminds us of the uninterrogated assumptions brought up by the performers around how much toilet paper is normal or what is, after all, in the cannon of the lesbian thespian. Such interactive work loosens the ties between sex and gender, allowing for the two to meet in creative and unpredictable ways. As interrelated traditions, discourses, and performance strategies, the robust spectrum of queer feminist practices keeps these various traditions in the spotlight to be continuously

interrogated, staged, and examined. *WOW AND NOW*, instead of feeling like a meeting of the womyn-born-womyn feminist artist with the new subjectless queer on the block, was a playful and serious reminder that these two bodies of thought and action have much exciting and stimulating work to be done together as artist collaborations, word associations, and creative engagements on and off the stage.

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NOTES

1. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds., *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1997).
2. I am using the term *coercive formation* here in reference to Rey Chow's understanding of coercive mimeticism as the ways in which citizens of color and foreign nationals are required to perform their ethnicity, to fit the stereotype, in coercive ways that they themselves are often unaware of. Slightly distinct from *coercive mimeticism*, coercive formation in my usage has more to do with the ways in which feminism or queer theory might themselves become stagnant fields of politics and practice if there is not pressure for them to consistently remain self-critical and aware of holes in the logics of inclusion or antinormativity (Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2002]).
3. According to Weed,

[T]he unmodified feminism of the title would seem to be more properly paired with something like “queer politics” (“feminist

politics meet queer politics”), just as “queer theory” would seem to be better matched with its counterpart, “feminist theory” (“feminist theory meets queer theory”). And yet, the solution is not to find a more proper couple, for if “feminism” and “queer theory” are an awkward pair, “feminist theory” and “queer theory” are no less so. . . . Given the difficulty of finding a matched pair, the skewed coupling of the title remains unabashedly awry, suggesting, perhaps, a meeting that is not as straightforward as many academicians and bookstores might think. (Introduction to *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, viii).

4. *Strategic essentialism* is a term coined by Gayatri Spivak that is used to describe the ways in which essentialist thinking can be inhabited in order to gain recognition of a certain group, such as Third World women, by the state, even though in reality there may be vast differences among the individuals that make up this group (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald M. MacLean [New York: Routledge, 1996]).
5. Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1997), 2.
6. Weed, introduction, x.
7. *Dark camp* is an expression used by My Barbarian members Malik Gaines and Alex Segade in “Séance in the Dark Theater: Further Notes on the Death of Camp,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 1, no. 3 (2006), www.joaap.org.
8. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 141.