

Post-Political Feminism on Stage?

Central to the early feminist/women's project, was the process of imagining community—an alternative ground that organized a shared set of values and experiences. This community took on various forms and labels. For example, the “grassroots community” denoted women who worked together as women, spent their leisure time within specifically women's pursuits, and imagined themselves part of an alternative lifestyle. The lesbian feminist notion of community included separatist communes, which functioned apart from the dominant society on its most radical fringe and separatist cultural events, for those who lived and worked within the patriarchy, on its more assimilated border. The stage grounded, in formal representation, the shared vocabulary of gesture, costume, language, and rules of the game that communities practiced in social organization. Feminist/women's performance relied on an “open” and necessary channel between community issues, practices, and signifying conventions to the stage, in order to mark productions as feminist.

Essentially, the sense of a women's community grew up in the 1970s, along with the student movement, ethnic political movements, and the lesbian and gay movement. Community was a utopic image resident in most of these movements, in consonance with support systems, in its kinder forms and terrorist practices in its harshest. At this time, what seems most crucial to me about this practice, was the relationship between the notion of community and collective organization. Socialist ideas and practices were in the eye of the feminist gaze. What we have forgotten, or abandoned in the United States, is the necessary relationship these 1970s political movements forged between gender, sexual practice and material conditions. Patriarchal institutions were both sexist and capitalist. Most women's/feminist performance groups were collectives—they shared labor, money, living conditions, and personal, emotional space. They endeavored not to organize along what were considered the patriarchal, hierarchical lines of playwright, director, and actor. Likewise, this cultural practice was nested among women's/feminist collective bookstores, collective writing, collective food co-ops, and communal living quarters. Music festivals and theater festivals strove to operate collectively, from decisions about performance, to ticket prices, to child care concerns, to food and sleeping provisions.

With the 1980s, the era of Ronald Reagan and the politics of affluence, came new forms of feminist performance and cultural production which, unconsciously not only adapted to the threatening, cruel space of such politics, but actually also emulated it. The sense of community gave way to the idea of subculture. The exchange of terms moved the social organization of women away from a sense of an alternative lifestyle to one that was “sub” – defined by its status within dominant social, national, and economic practices. Feminist, as well as lesbian and gay movements managed the creation of a gender or sexual citizenship, which no longer tested the practices, increasingly global, of capitalism, or of nationalism, but sought to work within them. By the 1990s, any connection of gender or sexual politics to the collective practices or the anti-capitalist critique of the 1970s has been totally severed. What remains is a poststructuralist critique and postmodern performance. Key to both, is the rise of a neo-individualism. Collective, coalitional strategies have been overwritten by a fascination with the internal dynamics of a newly-constructed sense of the individual. This neo-individual stems, in part, from an urban sense, derived from notions such as Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur* and from the internalization of the social through Lacan. Heterogeneity resides within the individual, rather than collective. Coalition-building is replaced by the internal process of slippage among the various political positions this individual now consumes. Any external social dynamics, or representation of the material dwell in a new, positive role for commodity fetishism. This neo individualism and commodity fetishism are suited to the form of postmodern performance. The one-woman show accommodates the internalization of social processes. For example, sexual difference plays within the transsexual performer, who is both male and female, rather than between members of the two sexes. Along ethnic lines, Anna Deveare Smith’s one-woman representation of different ethnic communities situates collective struggles within the one performer. Fragmented language and isolated props stage the power of commodities. The political effect of postpolitics has driven some performers and playwrights, who were initially involved in postmodern experimentation back to realism – dialogue – to script the agon of differences among people and to stage the material.

What I have presented thus far, is a general overview of the situation, but let me now proceed to specifics. The traditions of the 1970s may be represented by work at the WOW Cafe in New York Holly Hughes, now a performance artist of some note, describes sense of the alternative, collective space of performance:

One day I was walking down East 11th Street and bumped into WOW... and started volunteering there. I had gone to WOW for a few events before that. They were having double XX-rated Christmas parties at Club 57... It was *for* women. People would come in there and strip off their clothes and put on lingerie. It had lot of drag theatre flavor and permission. And everybody became a performer ... [with] “Paid the Rent in my Maidenform Bra” parties.

WOW’s permission to performance, distributed across the stage, parties, and strip tease acts, begged the notion of community in its shared camp

sensibility in regard to gender and sexuality. The traditional roles in theater of playwright, director, and actor were interchangeable. Nobody owned the space or the performance, but performance drifted among the women as a possibility, both in its traditional sense and out onto the streets. No one auditioned, no requirement or talent circumscribed the access to performance – one only had to volunteer. The individual was merely a “flasher” within the collective – making an appearance within the communal atmosphere as a performance. Yet while the space was “free” in the sense of access to performance, the collective circulation of performance actually paid the rent. The traditional divide between performance and audience fell away, as the women paid to maintain the space by coming to rent parties to appear in their Maidenform bras and watch the others make their appearance in them. The collective circulation of performance among women thus established the parameters of both performance and material conditions.

Situated in the lower East Side of Manhattan, the WOW Cafe drew a local crowd. By virtue of its location, and its poor fourth-floor walk-up appurtenances, WOW drew a regular crowd from a particular mix of ethnic and class affiliations. The style of wearing used clothing, working in low-paying, unrewarding jobs, such as waitressing and needing a social space to escape from small, confining apartments saturated the elements of WOW performances. As an alternative, women-only space, WOW offered a place to perform, away from the violence of the streets and of sexist social practices. Community, then, described the WOW Cafe because of how it operated itself, but also how it was nested within a particular wage and living ghetto within New York, Community, then, was partially constructed by ghettoization.

The ghetto was poor – either as a result of sexism in the workplace, or of the decision not to work within the successful capitalist patriarchy. WOW performances staged class oppression as poverty. Split Britches, a WOW group, staged the poverty of rural women, in its first performance and urban women thereafter. The name Split Britches, after all, was taken from the pants women wore, who worked in the fields and couldn't stop to urinate. Behind the drive for collective community, the signs of socialism and even the communist party haunted the feminist project. Ti-Grace Atkinson clarifies, in her resounding manifesto “Lesbianism and Feminism,” produced in 1973, that:

The strategic importance of lesbianism to feminism can probably best be understood by analogy....The Party was 'political' in the sense of directly and publicly attacking class structure. It was 'militant' socialism... Lesbianism is to feminism what the Communist Party was to the trade union movement.

The Combahee River Collective added race to the mixture, basing their identity in class politics and radical materialist critique, while amplifying its application.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed people necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy... We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is also not a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee

our liberation....As Black feminists and lesbians we know we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

WOW's sense of performance, agitating for change, directly addressing class and ethnic privilege, often lesbian at its most outsider status, and operating in an alternative organizational and material mode, best illustrates this 1970s heritage that combined socialist and feminist strategies of collectivity and critique.

The 1980s brought new strategies: the notion of subculture, commodity fetishism as an alternative practice, and neo-individualism. Below, I want to briefly summarize these critical moves and their consonant performance practices. Dick Hebdige's influential book, *Subculture: The meaning of Style* appeared in 1970. Opening the 1980s, the book set the terms for much of the ensuing over-writing. Subculture, as Hebdige has defined it, tips the balance between cohesive and disjunctive forces in favor of the latter:

"If we emphasize integration and coherence at the expense of dissonance and discontinuity, we are in danger of denying the very manner in which the subcultural form is made to crystallize, objectify and communicate group experience."

The ambivalence, then, between employing either "community", or "subculture" is one of privileging one of these forces over the other. "Community" emphasizes cohesion, whereas "subculture" charts the formation of a group as a process of discontinuity with the dominant. Hebdige links subculture with style, finally grounding its operation as a manipulation of commodities. Commodity fetishism takes a new, positive role in leftist thinking, as the postmodern sense of *bricolage* signals the alternative composition of commodities:

commodities can be symbolically 'repossessed' in everyday life, and endowed with oppositional meanings ... The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them... The objections are lodged... at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of sign-community, the community of myth-consumers...

Through a borrowing of Derridean deconstructive practices that critiqued "presence" and thus identity politics, the feminist critique moved against 1970s community politics. Iris Marion Young's influential article, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference" exemplifies the typical charge. Asserting that community "privileges unity over difference" as her starting point, Young finds, in community, an ideal that "totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations." Young chooses to deconstruct community as an "ideal", in the worst sense of the word, by insisting that the kind of "I" and "you" that resounded through its practices connoted inter-subjectivity – a model of presence. Young contradicts that base by proposing that subjects cannot totally comprehend themselves, therefore cannot be "wholly present to one another". Young's ideal, in contrast to such a community, would be "an unoppressive city" that would remain "open" to "unassimilated otherness".

In Diana Fuss's introduction to the influential anthology *inside/out*, she levels the charge that community is too stable a notion: "most of us are both inside and outside at the same time" she notes, affording us only partial and temporary membership in the community, or more likely, sub-culture. Fuss continues:

"Any misplaced nostalgia for or romanticization of the outside as a privileged site of radicality immediately gives us away, for in order to idealize the outside we must already be, to some degree, comfortably entrenched on the inside."

As both inside and out of sexual difference and gender, the male to female transsexual has recently emerged as the front-wave of gender and sexual politics. Kate Bornstein, in her performance, *Hidden: A Gender* plays both genders, in life as well as onstage. She narrates her sex-change operation, detailing the literal deconstruction of the penis in the form of a cooking lesson. She offers transsexual, transgender politics as the distanced perspective, feminism, still lingering within gender-identification as women, cannot. Sandy Stone, also male to female, performs a vampire, in the dim light of a computer screen that flashes images of the interface with humans to the new, emerging cyberspace and with hormonal interventions into the body itself. The screen illuminates transgendered people injecting estrogen into bodies that bear the secondary sexual characteristics of both sexes. The first-world privilege of such a setting is uncontested. The access to medical technologies and cyberspace are givens in the affluent politics. The transgendered body illustrates a new kind of sexual and gendered citizen in consonance with market forces and national status. "Women" and feminist politics are relegated to essentialist practices. Old politics unformed by such slippage. The individual is here writ large-illustrating differences within rather than without.

In this tradition, the one-woman shows of Anna Deveare Smith bring the practice into ethnic politics. Smith goes to areas such as Los Angeles, to interview members of ethnic communities who have experienced inter-ethnic violence, as in the Rodney King uprisings in 1992. She shapes the interviews and then plays all of the characters herself. Alone on stage, she plays the Korean American debates with the African Americans. Her works are celebrated as dramatic insights into the urban situations. The time is right for these conflicts to be acted out within the new, efficacious image of the individual.

In contradiction to these practices, Cherrie Moraga, the Chicana lesbian poet/performance writer, has moved her work away from postmodern strategies back into a kind of realist dialogue. Moraga stages the experiences of Chicano farmworkers. Her works recall the annexation of the Southwest territories in 1848 and the continuing force those national borders levy on the Mexican/Chicano peoples. She imagines a dissolution of the United States through the activist movements of indigenous people, which would redistribute the land. National borders are at issue in her political organization. No sub-culture could accept those legislated privileges. Moraga also invokes the most recent ferocious expansionist move

into Mexico through NAFTA. At the time of this writing, NAFTA has incurred an indigenous, terrorist movement against it, which is struggling to reclaim the lands of the Indians. Once more, in our hemisphere, the struggle between capitalist expansion and terrorism is playing out.

Moraga's stage version of these conditions is a play entitled *Heroes and Saints*. While the play is traditional in its realist form, the lead character, Cherezita, is only a head—the result of pre-natal chemical contamination in the fields. The character is derived from a central issue of the Chicano activist community in its struggle against the chemical spraying of hand-picked crops that causes multiple birth defects among the Chicano workers. Though only a head, Cherezita is nonetheless sexual in a scene that breaks multiple moral codes at once, she gives "head" (oral sex) to the local priest. She is also in support of her gay brother who must travel between the Chicano farm community and the San Francisco urban, gay one-split between his two different orders of political identity. At the end of the play, Cherezita's now-dead head is carried through the fields like the statue of a saint by militant, organized farmworkers. In its spectacle and through its elevation by the activist movement, it represents the drive to reclaim the land by the people who work it, the right to a whole, sexually active female body, and the right to community by the gay brother. Moraga's fullsome sense of community rests firmly on the stage peopled by its citizens, in the dialogical practice of characterization.

The coalitions that once stretched among these different political positions have been largely undermined by post-politics. Now, in California the new, fierce Republican move against affirmative action has reserved the gains of the 1970s, denying special consideration to women and ethnic minorities in the workplace and finally even in the university. We are now back in 1968. People are scrambling to organize, but how? How to press for the rights of women and ethnic minorities without identity politics? How does internal slippage within the individual inform coalitional politics? Can we somehow resurrect the confluence of feminism and socialism, after the "fall of the wall"? Is the stage of the future the one-woman show?

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