

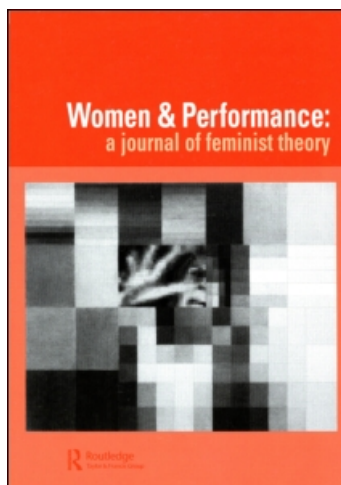
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Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts

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Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts

J O S É E S T E B A N M U Ñ O Z

Queer Evidence

The picture on the cover of this special issue of *Women & Performance* is taken from an untitled series of photographs by conceptual artist Tony Just. The larger project that this elegant image is culled from centers on a complex understanding and enactment of performance. Tony Just visited a run-down public men's room, a tea room where public sex flourishes. He scrubbed and sanitized the space, laboring to make it look pristinely, shimmeringly clean. The result is a photograph that indexes not only the haunted space and spectral bodies of those anonymous sex acts, and Just's performance after them, but also his act of documentation. This extended performance is, in multiple ways, an exemplary "queer act." It accesses a hidden queer history of public sex outside the dominant public sphere's visible historical narratives. It taps into the lifeworld of tea room sex, a space that is usually only shadowed in semi-publicness, and makes this space legible outside

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of its insular sphere. But it does this through negation, through a process of erasure that redoubles and marks the systematic erasure of minoritarian histories. While seriously engaged in establishing an archive of queerness, it simultaneously disrupts the very notion of officially subsidized and substantiated institutions. Showing this ethereal image to my friends and colleagues registered yet another reason why the act and its visual trace are queer. While a few people recognized the image as that of a toilet bowl, many saw it as a breast, some only as a nipple, others as an anus, and still others as a belly button. It is not an image that is epistemologically framed and grounded, but, instead, is performatively polyvalent. The fundamental indeterminacy of the image made me feel that its ephemerality and its sense of possibility were profoundly queer.¹

Central to performance scholarship is a queer impulse that intends to discuss an object whose ontology, in its inability to “count” as a proper “proof,” is profoundly queer. The notion of queer acts that this opening essay hopes to offer is immediately linked to a belief in the performative as an intellectual and discursive occasion for a queer worldmaking project. Thus, I want to propose queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality. Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. Tony Just’s images are emblematic of the kind of invisible evidence which I will proceed to unpack as “ephemera.” Queer acts, like queer performances, and various performances of queerness, stand as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities.

In the spirit of queer acts, I am less interested in telling readers what the performatively polyvalent writings that follow *say*, and more invested in gesturing to the work that these writings *do*. Therefore, this essay will focus more on situating this volume within a larger institutional frame—elaborating the ideological grain that these writings work *against*—than on introducing or “setting up” the work that follows. I want to explain some of the ways in which critical writing and scholarship that address and enact queer phenomena, ontologies, politics, or styles are attacked by homophobic and conservative forces. These resistances, attacks, and contestations of queer and other modalities of minoritarian work often follow predictable patterns of assault.

With increasing frequency, queer and race scholarship, like feminist inquiry before it, are dismissed as merely passing intellectual fancies, modes of inquiry that are too much in the “now,” lacking historical grounding and conceptual staying power. Because the archives of queerness are makeshift and randomly organized, due to the restraints historically shackled upon minoritarian cultural workers, the right is able to question the evidentiary authority of queer inquiry. All of this amounts to a general critique of queer scholarship’s claim to “rigor.”

A question: Who owns rigor? I suggest that rigor is owned, made, and deployed through institutional ideology. This essay will attempt to interrupt the regime of rigor to make this dominant institutional ideology visible. In what follows I will also consider the ways in which the writings that are collected in this volume resists the protocols of rigor as it has been traditionally manufactured. This is not to say that the work contained in this volume does not perform at high levels of precision and critical cogency. Instead, this volume documents, accounts for, and finally performs what we are calling queer acts. *Queer acts, I will suggest, contest and rewrite the protocols of critical writing.* Thus the threads of commonality connecting these essays are not only their focus on queer phenomena, but their own status of queer acts.

Rigor-mortis

During this national and institutional moment of backlash, certain modalities of self enactment—both political and professional—have fallen under attack by institutionally sanctioned arbiters of “good writing,” “good scholars,” and “good work.” Work and thinking that does not employ and subscribe to traditionalist scholarly archives and methodologies are increasingly viewed as being utterly without merit. Work that attempts to index the anecdotal, the performative, or what I am calling the ephemeral as proof is often undermined by the academy’s officiating structures. This is true despite the fact that, on the level of publishing and not much else, alterity is currently in vogue. This trend doesn’t really translate into validation of non-traditional critical work in other aspects of the institutional matrix—fellowships, tenure, promotion, funding, etc. (I can not begin to count the times I have been advised—or I have advised—friends, colleagues, and students to make their projects look “straighter”: conservative in thematics and rigorous in methodology. Rarely do I suggest that someone “queer up” their application for a fellowship or play up the heuristic or performative dimensions of a book proposal. Academically

and institutionally the communities of scholars that I live in are often in the position of ideologically and theoretically dressing down.)

When we emphasize the experimental, heuristic, and performative aspects of our work, we sometimes deploy the anecdotal in the hope of conveying a point that is not backed up by routinized understandings of proper evidence. We do so knowing that we are leaving ourselves open to charges of being ahistorical or flimsy. This critique is elaborated in Heather DuBrow's introduction to a recent *PMLA* issue about the status of evidence, in which she examines the "power" of "proof" as opposed to the power of a certain kind of performance which "silences" demands for real evidence. In fact, she goes so far as to suggest that "often performance functions as an *alternative* to the presentation of evidence" (emphasis added; 1996, 17). Discussing the different connotations of "solid" as a style of scholarship in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain, she concludes that, "Those who write and praise criticism that courts the label solid pride themselves that such works, unlike concoctions from French ovens, will not collapse for years after it is prepared and cannot, under any circumstances, be described as light or flaky" (17).

DuBrow's essay is an ambitious attempt to bridge a gap between different generational investments in evidence. The binary that she establishes between "solid" older scholars and less than solid yet "powerful" younger scholars is one that she does not worry or challenge. In an essay that intends evenly to map out both sides of the debate, she betrays her mistrust of performance and anything that we might understand as un-solid or ephemeral. At the center of DuBrow's essay is a belief that I want to mark as complicit with a dominant institutional logic: an imperative to maintain the stability of evidence *despite* the acknowledgment that evidence is always already contingent under the pressure of post-structuralist and post-axiological inquiry. DuBrow insists on the need for a rigorous deployment of evidentiary procedure grounded in "material reality." For DuBrow, if our work wants to avoid the fate of being light and flaky, it must follow rigorous patterns in its presentation and deployment. This dominant impulse in the profession marks the ways some of us claim alterity in our political scholarship as improper and inappropriate writing, practice, and theory-making.²

In the same issue of *PMLA*, DuBrow participates in a roundtable on "evidence." A statement by Sue Houchins in this discussion sheds valuable light on some of the intrinsic problems of evidence for the minoritarian subject who must choose from different categories of identity and evidence:

At the point at which issues of race, particularly blackness, and issues of queerness meet, in fact, those kinds of experimental stories are called into question. For example, if a Caribbean woman reveals herself as a lesbian, others look for ways in which she is foreign to the Caribbean because one can't be African or African American—within the Caribbean hemisphere, at least—and lesbian at the same time. A question in the discussion of some of the Michelle Cliff's work is how autobiographical it can be—what is its evidence. If something is evidence of her queerness, it's evidence she's not black. If it's evidence of her blackness, clearly she's not queer....It's interesting to ask what her homosexuality does to invalidate her evidence. ("The Status of Evidence: A Roundtable" 1996, 27)

Houchins usefully points to the ways in which evidence fails to account for the points of interaction within different minoritarian identity practices.

The late Marlon Riggs accessed an archive that was ephemeral as opposed to traditionally evidentiary to resist the trap that Houchins describes. Self is not argued and asserted in Riggs's work by the mandate to provide evidence, but it is instead fleshed out in the groundbreaking *Tongues Untied*, and in his tour de force finale *Black Is, Black Ain't*, through a powerful and calculated set of deployments of ephemeral witnessing to black queer identity. Both videos weave together disparate fabrics that would, if considered as emanating from discrete archives, clash. The videos continue Riggs's snap! diva virtuosity made manifest in different performances, the poetry and music of other queer black men, and stories—remembrances of growing up queer in heterosexual black America and black in the lily-white Castro. Riggs's collage effect challenges the protocols of evidence and in doing so makes possible the enactment of a black and queer lifeworld that can not be upheld by a foundation as unsympathetic as a rigorously enforced archive. His work stands in direct defiance to calls for a return to real evidence. The presentation of this sort of anecdotal and ephemeral evidence grants entrance and access to those who have been locked out of official histories and, for that matter, "material reality." Evidence's limit becomes clearly visible when we attempt to describe and imagine contemporary identities that do not fit into a single pre-established archive of evidence. Many of the articles contained in this volume are by scholars who insist, in the first moment of their critical project, on *not* dislodging queerness from race and ethnicity.

Ephemera and Feeling

The notion of ephemera *as* evidence that I suggest in the title of this piece is nothing like a smooth linkage. I want to take some time to reflect on what I'm calling "ephemera" as modality of anti-rigor and anti-evidence that, far from filtering materiality out of cultural studies, reformulates and expands our understandings of materiality. Ephemera, as I am using it here, is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things. It is important to note that ephemera is a mode of proofing and producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers.

Raymond Williams's influential and oft-cited notion of "structures of feeling" helps further our understanding of the material dimensions of ephemera ([1977] 1989, 128–135). Williams explains the ways in which art conveys, translates, and engenders structures of feelings—tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being "solid." For Williams, a structure of feeling is a *process* of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art. A closer consideration of William's thesis helps explain the ways ephemera does not "forget" materiality, but rather refashions it:

The hypothesis has a special relevance to art and literature, where true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced, with or without tension, as it also evidently includes elements of social and material (physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements. (133)

Williams's formula is calibrated to maintain the ephemeral aspects of culture's particularities, its "specific dealings, specific rhythms" (ephemera is always about specificity and resisting dominant systems of aesthetic and institutional classification), without abstracting them outside of social experience and a larger notion of sociality. Ephemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, is firmly anchored *within* the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential

politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived. Queerness, too, can be understood as a structure of feeling. Since queerness has not been let to stand, unassailed, in the mass public sphere, it has often existed and circulated as a shared structure of feeling that encompasses same-sex desire and other minoritarian sexualities but also holds other dissident affective relationships to different aspects of the sex/gender system.

My definition of ephemera is influenced by Paul Gilroy's reading of vintage soul, R & B, and funk album covers as part of the exchange of ephemera that connects and makes concert a community like the Black Atlantic (1993). In this volume, Michael Moon's powerful essay on Joseph Cornell's boxes shows us a cultural worker whose relation to ephemeral objects in part constitutes his queerness. I also mean to include the residue of different live performances in the public sphere, performances with powerful worldmaking capabilities. A writerly relation to ephemera inhabits this collection; many contributors explore modes of anecdotal/performative writing practices that index different experiences and memories of self. For example, Robert Reid-Pharr's "Dinge" takes the theory project to critical registers that shed all abstracting mechanisms around sex, sexuality, and theory's own abstracted "I." Reid-Pharr makes palpable the material dimensions of sex, race, and power through his considered performative writing strategy.

Surpassing Epistemology: Doing and Deciphering

In this essay I have tried to indicate the forces that stand in the minoritarian subject's path when she or he attempts to enact counter-publics through alternative modes of culture-making and intellectual work, to explicate the ideological underpinnings of discourses like rigor and evidence, and to *understand* their roles in maintaining certain protocols and conventions. This is *not* to suggest that the minoritarian subject has some primary or *a priori* relation to ephemera, memory, performativity, or the anecdotal; instead, I have tried to call attention to the efficacy and, indeed, necessity of such strategies of self-enactment for the minoritarian subject. Those who deploy rigor and certify evidence have stakes in the maintenance of critical and academic protocols that are most certainly not about rigor for rigor's sake. These notes are meant to open up a space for the writing that follows—writing that re-makes rigor and questions what an archive is. I'm reminded of the call for "decipherment" as opposed to interpretation (the "play" of "meanings")

and significations a text produces) offered by Sylvia Wynters, the Caribbean novelist and critic. She writes:

Rather than seeking to “rhetorically demystify,” a deciphering turn seeks to decipher what a process of rhetorical mystification *does*. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*, it also seeks to evaluate the “illocutionary force” and procedures with which they do what they do. (266–267).

The writing that composes this volume is much more calibrated to meditate on what a queer act does, performatively and, in turn, socially, than what it might *mean*. Performance studies, as a modality of inquiry, can surpass the play of interpretation and the limits of epistemology and open new ground by focusing on what acts and objects do in a social matrix rather than what they might possibly mean. It is in this spirit, the spirit of *doing* queerness, of what Parker rightfully calls *praxis*, and, perhaps, *making* queer worlds, that these queer acts of thinking, scholarship, writing, and performance are offered.

This essay is intended to do the double work of being a self-contained contribution to this collection as well as serve as an introduction to the other writings here. Thus far I have tried to resist the introduction-writing protocol of summarizing essays. While I have already gestured to several pieces because they were particularly relevant to my argument, it is clear that all of this work contests the regime of rigor. Indeed, there is something about “introducing” them that profoundly goes against the ethos of a queer act. Instead of the usual round of glosses, I will briefly touch on some of the writings that I have yet to evoke in an effort to display this issue’s diversity of approaches, styles, and identifications.

We see the way in which the kernel of queerness is present in acts we don’t normally see as queer, for example, in the wedding that Elizabeth Freeman expertly reads in her textual analysis of *The Member of the Wedding*. The nuanced queerness of “lesbian acts,” mass-produced for straight male consumption in “all-girl action,” is ironized in June Reich’s essay, which playfully assumes the position of the phallic spectator, displacing and replacing the “only dick.” Andrew Parker’s compelling meditation on the relation between performance, praxis, and Marxism unpacks another long-overlooked trace of the queer. Parker’s hypothesis that the relation between praxis and performativity might actually be “constitutive” of praxis is more than suggestive, it is also an act that unravels a certain queerness within a concep-

tual and institutional terrain that has *not* been generative of queer possibility.

Judith Halberstam's work reminds us that even a queer archive can stand to be pushed beyond its parameters. Halberstam repositions the routinely excluded and often abjected stone butch in the archive of a lesbian history that has cast her as a bad object. Her work also traces ephemeral strands of stone butchness in a way that challenges all narratives, histories and theories of lesbianism, butch/femme and, ultimately, gender.

Many of the writings between these pages render institutional landscapes where queer acts transpire and often unexpectedly flourish. This would include the Girl Scout Camp that Katie Kent writes, remembers, and re-enacts, with all its limits and possibilities subtly drawn. Other sites are more imaginable as breeding grounds for queer acts, like the Chelsea clone gay male bar Splash! that John McGrath describes. McGrath's article traces not only the more apparently queer act of soapy men dancing for other men in public showers, but, more poignantly, the almost coterminous queer acts of surveillance, identification, and disidentification. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Pandas in Trees" wonderfully depicts the queer spaces of treetops, sandboxes, and a "dusty yard"; locations that are temporal spaces where queerness often rules and where the very queer performance of childhood is housed.

Stacy Wolf's important work on the star iconography and history of Mary Martin also reminds us of the way in which bodies, in this case a star body, injected with star power, is a queer site in its own right. Richard Fung's thoughtful appraisal of Shani Mootoo's thematics of finding a displaced body and home call attention to the fact that finding a space for the enactment of a queer self can, in itself, be a queer act. The video performances render such a search visible. Cynthia Fuch's notion of performative queerness in the performances of "The Artist Formerly Known As..." is situated at one of those dense transfer points where the act successfully negotiates when epistemology falters. What Fuchs identifies as the ambiguity of the once-Prince, "the unexplored spaces between expressions, the possibilities of movement, the non-names not imagined," resonates within the key words of this article as the ephemerality of ♀ .

While much of queer theory is fixated on pastiche and parody, a deadly impulse towards stale seriousness has kept the production of theory that *performs* parody from being imaginable. Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh, in a ludic theory-making intervention that adds both wit and wisdom to this project, make sure not to rest on the epistemological trap door of identity and, instead, talk about femme in a vernac-

ular equally lurid and laughing: "Fem(me) is the performativity, the insecurity, the mockery, the derision of foreplay—the bet, the dare, the bringing to attention of the suitor, the one who would provide (her) pleasure." In an alternate universe, a different place and time (maybe a Paris in the seventies that actually possessed a sense of humor), this essay would be called "The Laugh of the Femme."

Latina studies's foundational thinker Gloria Anzaldúa is given the critical attention she richly deserves and is often denied by Marcus Embry, who considers the ways in which she functions within a matrix of sexuality, gender, *Latinidad* and nation. The negotiation of these identificatory coordinates is navigated by "queer performance, a performativity that retains the specificity of Anzaldúa's many identities." Alberto Sandoval and Nancy Sternbach offer a cogent consideration of the work of Marga Gomez, a major player in the world of Latina performance, who rehearses and produces a self at a somewhat similar crossroads of identity. Both these articles, especially taken together, make an important contribution to Latina studies, surpassing reductive essentialist vs. anti-essentialist polemics and instantiating the utility of performativity for any theorizations of *Latinidad*.

Barbara Browning's essay attends to the importance, power, and necessity of ephemeral materials for AIDS pedagogy in the Brazilian candomblé community. This generative text also acts queerness through a meticulous and marvelously crafted prose that is calibrated in the interstices among ethnography, cultural studies, and performance studies.

Finally, queer acts brings to mind an important moment in a text that is arguably one of queer theory's most relevant precursors. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault writes, "sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them" (1978, 43). The work collected here aims to displace the tyranny of identity, and instead to think about acts. Foucault, like Just's cover image, desires and dreams about a moment when reified identities, the universe of over-determined presence, could be dissolved for a new and yet prior notion of acts. Foucault's investigations into a time and place before the regime of identity is propelled by a longing for a utopia figured in the past that critiques the present. His project stresses the centrality of acts over the dead end that is epistemology. Reconsidered decades later, we return to the slogan "acts, not identities," and with that said, I would add, "queer acts."

Notes

A version of this paper was presented at the 1995 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Chicago on a panel organized by Sasha Torres for the division on popular culture; I want to thank Sasha for the opportunity to present my work. I am especially grateful to three members of that audience—Elizabeth Freeman, Celeste Fraser Delgado, and Jon McKenzie—for their support and generous feedback. My co-editor Amanda Barrett did more than simply edit these pages; it will suffice to say that this writing would not be possible without her intelligence, skill, and patience. Thanks also to our managing editor, June Reich, who did much more than simply manage—she was instrumental in making this volume.

1. For more on Just's work, see my forthcoming "Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories" (1996).
2. For an example of the kind of attacks on queer work that I am glossing here, see Donald Morton's most recent assault on queer theory, scholarship, thinking, and lifeworlds, "Birth of the Cyberqueer" (1995).

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