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The Politics of Queer Be-longing and Acts of Hope in Peter McMaster's Solo Performance *A Sea of Troubles* and Split Britches' "Zoomie" *Last Gasp (WFH)*

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Abstract: This article investigates two case studies of queer performers who counteract discomfort and terror with their acts of hope: Peter McMaster's *A Sea of Troubles* (2019) and Split Britches' Covidian performance *Last Gasp (WFH)* (2020). In the performers' work, the politics of queer be-longing is tied to the performance of acts of hope which can function as a means to defy a society/a space that is limiting, hostile, or causing anxiety. This article conceptualizes the performance of acts of hope as ways to create forms of be-longing that position the queer individual firmly in – and, sometimes, "slightly above" (Dolan 5) – the (uncomfortable) present. Be-longing in this context is hyphenated to put an emphasis on the gap between the queer body and the surrounding space and to argue that that body can never merely be. Hope, therefore, is both a bodily and mental positioning that either looks to what is to come and draws its shape from that or, in looking back, reparatively constructs its space via retrospection to an elsewhere. In the two performances analysed, this positioning to be-long in the present constitutes itself via an engagement with one's (male) theatrical ancestors (McMaster) and a retrotopian looking back on their career (Split Britches) to find words for the present.

Keywords: queer performance, queerness, be-longing, hope, body and space, heteronormativity, masculinity, ageing, Peter McMaster, *A Sea of Troubles*, Split Britches, *Last Gasp (WFH)*

Introduction, or: Grasping for an Elsewhere

"What can hope mean, in a world of terror?" Jill Dolan asks in the introduction to her *Utopia in Performance* (3). While Dolan's "terror" refers specifically to 9/11, ter-

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ror can take on a multitude of meanings. At a time when homo-, queer-, and transphobia are ubiquitous, and discourses on identity politics are either dismissed or taken for granted, theatre and performance practices can be one of the most effective grounds to make the private public, and by that political, especially for marginalized Others such as queer people. This contribution investigates two case studies of queer performers who counteract discomfort and terror with their utopian performatives and acts of hope: Peter McMaster's *A Sea of Troubles*, staged pre-COVID in 2019, and Split Britches' – that is, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver's – Covidian performance *Last Gasp (WFH)* (2020). Both performances present the imperfect and improvised as a space to generate utopian performatives (in Dolan's sense) that create a poetic and aesthetic frame for a politics of queer be-longing. In the selected artists' work, this is tied to the performance of acts of hope which can function as a means to defy a society/a space that is limiting, hostile, or causing anxiety.

In order to think about and conceptualize acts of hope and forms of queer belonging, I am using the following three theoretical concepts as the basis for my discussion. First, I take Dolan's understanding of the role of utopia in performance and the function of hope as a point of departure. Dolan begins with her own positionality – growing up middle class, lesbian, and Jewish-American in Pittsburgh after the Second World War – and how her coming of age coincided with her discovery of theatre as an anchor, a place of "ephemeral maybes" (4). Quoting Marvin Carlson, she defines performance as constantly oscillating "between the fleeting present and the stillness of infinity" (5), and it is in that in-betweenness that performance can lift every spectator "slightly above the present" (5). Her *Utopia in Performance* is, on the one hand, firmly grounded in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. Yet, on the other hand, she grasps beyond the immediate atmosphere of fear and terror. She identifies performance as a space of allyship and *communitas* where, for the duration of the performance, strangers can come together and experience "fleeting intimations of a better world" as well as gain an awareness of the existence of a public "in which social discourse articulates the possible" (2).

Dolan herself draws on concepts formulated by (cultural) anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner and also echoes Erika Fischer-Lichte's insistence on the necessity of a bodily co-presence both in spatial and temporal terms in the theatre setting to evoke effects that are unique to the theatrical genre (23). But Dolan, importantly, does not shy away from emphasizing the – what some may call naive – potential of theatre to bring about "both affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love not just for a partner, as the domestic scripts of realism so often emphasize, but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of 'community,' or for an even more intangible idea of 'humankind'" (3). She regards theatre and performance as "practices of social life," and, sticking to the particularities

of performance, I would suggest speaking of *scripts* of social life. In a variety of performances, including the ones that this article looks at, these scripts mimetically engage with their audiences' perhaps yet unexpressed desires.

The second concept that has influenced my thinking is Zygmunt Bauman's retrotopia that is located in between utopia, hope, and regret. Bauman states acutely that "nostalgia is but one member of the rather extended family of affectionate relationships with an 'elsewhere'" (7). When governments and politicians in power make decisions that only highlight their powerlessness, and the present does not seem to be a space containing guidance or answers, Bauman concludes that this warrants a turn to "retrotopias" which designate "visions located in the [. . .] undead past, instead of being tied to a [. . .] so inexistent future." More precisely, "it is the genuine or putative aspects of the past, believed to be successfully tested and unduly abandoned or recklessly allowed to erode, that serve as main orientation/reference points in drawing the roadmap to Retrotopia" (12).

These turns to the past can never be returns to the past as such. Instead, they are returns to pasts as we see them now or as they appear now from a distance; they can be returns to selections and samples. Most importantly, the concept of retrotopia entails a rather productively pragmatic approach to the past and a revision of past scripts (both the actual and the metaphorical theatre scripts), suggesting that any political project had the potential to be a work in progress. Such an approach is characterized by self-reflection and scrutiny and, to draw a connection to a key thinker from queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a reparative position. I argue that retrotopias, or the unlocking of retrotopias, for instance, via the reassessment of political projects, injustices, or hegemonic structures that have caused harm in the past, exemplify what a reparative position can bring forth. The phrase "reparative position" is fitting in two regards: a position, as Sedgwick points out, borrowing from the psychologist Melanie Klein, that is flexible and potentially useful, as well as something that a person can try on and test. To take that position to be a reparative rather than a paranoid one is to embark on a laborious but ultimately more open-minded journey to alternative modes of living. Such an alternative mode can be a retrotopia in Bauman's sense, a vision which creates space for hope.

Thirdly, my argument is informed by Sara Ahmed's book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, in particular the chapter "Queer Feeling." There, she assesses the pervasive nature of xenophobic and homophobic scripts and narratives in the public sphere and how they shape bodies and lives, targeting precisely the structures that make necessary the formation of hopeful communities and arguing for a revisiting of and a reparative position towards the past(s). Heteronormativity, Ahmed argues, "affects the surfaces of bodies, which surface through impressions made by others" (145). It also, as Ahmed further develops,

> functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies. (148)

Using the image of the chair, Ahmed elaborates on how heterosexual individuals are so used to fitting well into public spaces, on seeing themselves represented in the media, in legal privileges (marriage, child adoption, etc.), and in public displays of heterosexual affection[1] that they do not notice these structures as structures of comfort. The "chairs" on which they sit have acquired their shapes "by the repetition of some bodies inhabiting it" (148). Those very "chairs," however, are not made for queer individuals – their lives do not fit that mould and they are therefore exposed to constant navigations, emotional labour, and, depending on the political context, threats to their lives. What Ahmed also elaborates on is the hope that when queer subjects get closer to the spaces defined by heteronormativity – spaces of discomfort for them as those who are Othered –, this proximity creates a potential for a reworking of heteronormativity. Crucially, for Ahmed, this is a potential and not a political imperative. She differentiates between those who can afford to rework the heteronormative and those who cannot. She counts herself, for instance, as a member of the first group, as somebody who is, economically speaking, in a relatively privileged position, somebody who passes as white and has a support network. For others, such as a working-class lesbian Black mother, rallying for marriage equality might not be the first priority as she needs to take care of more imminent responsibilities. The artists that this article looks at, Split Britches and McMaster, work from a privileged position and decidedly take up the task to dismantle heteronormative and hegemonic structures.

I consider these three pathways of thought as interconnected with regard to their emphasis on performance and community giving shape to "ephemeral maybes" in the sense of Dolan, the conviction that one can take a reparative position that provides visions of an "elsewhere" (Bauman), and the potential emerging out of the encounter of Othered bodies with normative ones (Ahmed). Continuing those threads, this article conceptualizes the performance of acts of hope as ways to create forms of be-longing that position the queer individual firmly in – and, sometimes, "slightly above" (Dolan 5) – the present and thus make them present, despite being placed in an environment that offers primarily discomfort. Be-longing in this context

1 To be able to hold, for instance, your partner's hand in public can thus become a bold act – both in terms of the queering of public, predominantly heterosexual spaces but also for the queer individual for being allowed to *be*. The protagonist of Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Mr Loverman* (2013) describes this feeling when holding the hand of his partner of sixty years briefly for the first time in the London neighbourhood of Soho as a moment of incredulous joy.

is hyphenated to put an emphasis on the gap between the queer body and the surrounding space and to argue that that body can never merely be. For this reason, the queer existence is characterised by a longing – to be. Hope, therefore, is both a bodily and mental positioning that either looks to what is to come and draws its shape from that or, in looking back, reparatively constructs its space via retrospection to an elsewhere. In this sense, through this positioning, the anxiety of influence (Bloom) and of authorship (Gilbert and Gubar 45–92) – both of which are products of hegemonic and heteronormative structures – can be overcome and reworked. But it first needs to be exposed, addressed, and courageously confronted. This can be a laborious act which can also bring disappointment for the (Othered) queer individual.

On this score, the article continues a discourse started in queer studies by José Esteban Muñoz, who argued that queerness is a future-oriented, profoundly utopian mode of being and doing in the world. Countering Lee Edelman's trope of "reproductive futurism" as endowing life with a purpose,[2] Muñoz understands futurity with regard to queerness as the state of being "not yet here" (*Cruising* 1). At the same time, and this is where I see both my case studies as enacting this concept, Muñoz investigates a varied selection of queer utopianism in art, poetry, and performance located in the post-Stonewall past in order to distil from it a utopian potential that can be "used to imagine a future" (1). When the present is, for instance, a place where homo-, queer-, and transphobia still exist, the future can indeed take on the shape of a projection canvas to play out the potentialities of a more inclusive society in the present.

In the two performances analysed in this article, this positioning to be-long in the present happens in two ways and is simultaneously constituted by the body as a site of hope. First, it happens via a deliberately fluid and whimsical, simultaneous looking back and forward towards the future, for instance, when McMaster uses his new role as a father to overcome the anxiety of influence of seemingly more masculine (theatrical) ancestors. The play's title *A Sea of Troubles* is, as the performer acknowledges, "just a quote from somewhere else; a phrase wearing the status of a name."[3] This "somewhere else" is Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy – a rhetorical reference to an indeterminate state between life and death. Water, as that which gives life and makes up sixty per cent of the human body, characterizes the whole structure of McMaster's play. Water is connected to familiarity, but can also be terrifying. Second, in Split Britches' *Last Gasp* the positionings of the performers

2 Edelman argues that in the case of queer individuals, a reproductive conceptualization of futurity brings about a feeling of exclusion as it precisely reproduces what queer people cannot do (at least not "naturally") (3–5).

3 All subsequent references to the script of *A Sea of Troubles* are based on the unpublished manuscript, which was sent to the author by McMaster for research purposes.

resemble a retrotopian looking back, both on their private lives and on their careers, which is sometimes tinged with regret and incredulity. The word *gasp* in the title evokes the functioning of lungs and breathing, as Weaver and, in particular, Shaw reflect on a re-emerging kind of discomfort with their ageing bodies and the language used by younger queer women. In both shows, reflecting on and using the body to create a distance from an already existing language is what constitutes hope: it is the performers' own words that are there to stay.

Peter McMaster's *A Sea of Troubles*: Longing Dressed up as Waiting

McMaster is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Bowling, West Dumbartonshire, Scotland, and his performances explore the intersection of masculinities, ecological sympathy, and collaboration.[4] He has repeatedly worked with Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment, most recently in *Elephant*, which was streamed online during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. His *A Sea of Troubles* was first performed at the NOW Festival at Yard Theatre in Hackney, London, which ran from 16 January until 16 February 2019 and focused on "innovating and risky work" that did not rely on the use of technology (Williams). *A Sea of Troubles* was staged in the festival's fifth week, from 12 to 16 February, in a double bill with Etchells and Forced Entertainment's *To Move in Time*. Both performances were concerned with the passing of time and an examination of how the body is both an archive as well as fleeting and ever-changing. The solo piece *A Sea of Troubles* deconstructs linearity, language, memory, and gender. It is an encounter between the performer and the audience, which creates high levels of intimacy in its stripped down and seemingly improvised form, as it is reminiscent of confessional theatre. The confusion, which the performer enacts, of having been thrown into the current state of the world is provoked by silences and occasional awkwardness, which McMaster counters by feeling the space and moving through it – or at least trying to. He does so by reaching out into the air with his hands and taking careful steps into all directions of the stage. He repeatedly reflects on "the desire to believe in something, dressed up as waiting" and thus suggests a mode of be-longing that is never fixed but constantly renegotiated.

The performance, in its entirety set on a bare stage, begins with the performer, dressed in a simple T-shirt and comfortable pants, addressing the audience directly. To me, the performer's introductory scene translated into a seemingly reconstruct-

4 See also McMaster, "About."

ive, archaeological act of (verbal) digging through theatrical history for traces of male presence – a kind of digging that unearths a limited, dense, and ultimately meaningless collection of name drops: "There is something about Hamlet in this place. An attempt at referencing a bigger theatrical canon, but it's not working. There are too many men. This is a ruin wearing a coat of a performance." When the imagined bodies start moving, "there is something gentle happening, a thing moment, it's nice; a circular shape falling down in slow motion; all the bodies are going into a pile here. There is that jittery motioning here too; but it's just their heads, as if they are tracking the ghosts of the space." The performer seems to look into an archive of performance – this can only contain ghosts as in "the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away," as Rebecca Schneider puts it (100). In *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Schneider begins the chapter "In the Meantime: Performance Remains" by dismantling the dichotomy between text as that which remains and performance as that which disappears, a distinction "so beloved of twentieth- and twenty-first-century performance studies" (87), from within one of the most canonical texts of theatre history, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c 1600).

In act two, scene three, Hamlet has the players stage *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play which is centred on a death similar to that of his father. Shortly before the performance, Hamlet is anxious about whether the words will "set down" as he intends them to and what will happen to them "in the meantime." As this is a reference in a play to both the script and the performance of another play, it becomes clear that both (the script and the performance) cannot be governed (Schneider 87). The notion of "the meantime" tries to grasp the temporal and spatial connection (or lack thereof) between written and performed text. As Schneider points out, "meantime" can describe both something that is between times and simultaneous: the phrase "in the meantime" refers to the passing of time, but "the meantime" is what takes place (somewhere else) as the foregrounded scene unfolds.

In that sense, when McMaster recognizes "something about Hamlet in this place. An attempt at referencing a bigger theatrical canon," he also acknowledges the temporal and spatial mismatch between old scripts and their contemporary echoes. With the next sentence "but it's not working. There are too many men," he achieves two things: first, he rejects the binary of live performance vs record/archive and hauls those past male bodies (seemingly only present in their quantity and not so much as individuals) into the living present. As spectral remains, these bodies function as a means of re-appearance of the past; for the present individual they offer an invitation for "reparticipation" (Schneider 101). The phrase "a sea of troubles" evokes in the performer an anxiety of influence: in his speech "To be, or not to be," Hamlet asks "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by

opposing end them?" (3.1.1–5). McMaster states, almost dismissively, that this is a quote from "somewhere else." And yet, this "somewhere" also evokes the fear and anxiety of failure, of not being able to live up to the craft and achievements of his predecessors (Bloom), or not finding points of connection due to a lack of models.[5]

Even more dauntingly, T.S. Eliot declares in his 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that a poet must "develop or procure" (55) a consciousness of the past, maintaining that it is any poet's or artist's task to develop a relationship with the dead. But to the gay artist, it may be less comfortable to develop such a stance, as looking at the past and the dead only reinforces his out-of-placeness and his lack of comfort with the scripts they provide. McMaster uses the phrase "a sea of troubles" as a reminder that this is precisely what he wants to be up in arms against. In its evocation of silent, hostile, and unwelcoming bodies, McMaster's performance is also an evocation of the pain queer bodies, in particular, have had to endure. As such, the performance ties in with what Fintan Walsh has recently identified as the possession of contemporary queer theatre and performance by the past as a way both to confront difficulties and to bury the ghosts. McMaster describes this confrontation as both an ontological and as an epistemological crisis: "I can feel its presence, but it's a hard one to let in, to see, to really get my body into. It's a slippery one to try and describe, but it's on the tip of my tongue, it sits heavy on my chest. [. . .] And it makes me feel I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

The presence of past ghosts is described in spatial terms (their spectral presence is *felt*, it *sits* on his chest), as another body that the performer cannot get hold of. As if wrestling, he seems to be tackled by the other body which takes away his breath ("it sits heavy on my chest"). Because McMaster enacts maleness differently, turning to traces of male presence in the theatrical canon does not offer the performer any hope: "Like I don't have the right tools to make it happen. Like a builder doing water colours with a sledgehammer, or an actor wearing the wrong costume." To recall Ahmed's words, the performer finds himself surrounded by "surfaces of social space [which] are already impressed upon by the shape" (*Cultural* 148) of these spectral male bodies. In this moment of uncertainty and anxiety – the meantime between "possibly errant acts and possibly errant words" (Schneider 88) that Hamlet, too, was worried about – McMaster starts moving, though not dancing,[6] to

5 See Gilbert and Gubar and their concept of the "anxiety of authorship" (45–92).

6 The distinction – moving, not dancing – is significant. While not all forms of dancing are scripted, of course, the performer here emphatically and cautiously tests how his body and body parts fit and extend into the surrounding space. While there is a certain rhythmicality to his movements reminiscent of dance, it often mixes with mime or gesticulation. For that reason, this specific kind of "moving" about in the performance space invites a comparison to Ahmed's description of Othered bodies struggling to find comfort in the public spaces around them.

Kate Bush's song "Moving." This song, from the 1978 album *The Kick Inside*, acknowledges the work of Bush's mime teacher who evoked in her a new understanding of (bodily) movement. Linked to my previous discussion of the desire of Othered bodies to find their place in a hostile space, the song's lines "Moving stranger does it really matter? / As long as you're not afraid to feel" can be read as a powerful call to action and an encouragement to keep going.

Figure 1: Scene from *A Sea of Troubles*. Photo: Maurizio Martorana

At the performance I attended in February 2019, McMaster's moving routine was followed by several lengthy moments of silence, creating a contrast. When the blasting music stopped, McMaster turned his gaze to some of the audience members, looked them directly in the eyes, and asked: "Excuse me? Sorry did someone say something? This, this, what is this, what is this . . .? [*Pointing to himself*] This is me, it's me, this is me and . . . ." This moment is, crucially, only uncomfortable for the audience but not for the performer who visibly starts taking comfort in feeling the space around him. As specified in the stage directions, he engages in a "*tiny listening game*" and performs a "*falling down choreography*," trying to find words to describe what it feels like to be in this space: "Maybe it's a bit like a bullet wearing a body. Or like expectation wearing the atmosphere in a room. [. . .] It's like I am trying to unlock a door with a banana."

As a recording of his baby son's crying starts to play, McMaster again evokes the image of (historical) men, standing in a "swarming maul." They seem to ooze anonymous collective strength; as they have their arms around each other, there does not seem to be a way for him to squeeze into the group. After a while, he notices they keep repeating the phrase "Why. Is. It. So. Difficult. To. Talk. About. The. Past?" But since they are caught in a loop of reiteration, they no longer seem intimidating. As McMaster realizes that they are not a "they" but a "we," he finds himself and the others wrapped around each other. At first, the past Hamlets seem unavailable, strong, and hard to decipher. Yet they are ghosts of the past, frozen and paralyzed in their pastness. As such, they do not need to be read as "predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural) logic of the archive" (Schneider 97). The archive they are a part of is not any more intimidating than the one to which "new Hamlets" can contribute.

As a gay man and a father who will raise an adopted son with his partner, McMaster's family is already, by definition, interrupting "one ideal image of the family, based on the heterosexual union, procreation and the biological tie" which invites reflection "on the exposure of the failure of the ideal as part of the work that queer families are doing" (Ahmed, *Cultural* 153).[7] McMaster realizes he is here: wearing an old and crumpled T-shirt, sweaty, moving (not dancing), finding comfort in a place that, historically speaking, did not provide any for a gay male body such as his. This resistance to be oppressed by past bodies and, concomitantly, the insistence to keep moving, exemplifies "queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality" (Muñoz, "Ephemera" 6). As early as 1996, Muñoz observes:

> 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. ("Ephemera" 6)

It needs to be acknowledged that despite the decades that have passed since the publication of this essay, queerness is still characterized by this friction with permanence, an against-ness, an absence from overt forms of presentation. McMaster's performance expresses an act of hope, creating forms of be-longing that may resonate with Othered bodies in particular, which are often invisible. He knows that people are good at fooling themselves: to be is "longing dressed up as waiting," "It's

7 Notably, Hamlet himself does not fit the model of the heteropatriarchal order, as he does not procreate and does not start a family.

darkness dressed up as the night . . . and the sea dressed up as trouble." But trouble seems fine; it is not troubles like in the original. Trouble is a force which propels queer life.

Split Britches' *Last Gasp (WFH)*: "I Wish I Was There When They Started Using Words"

My second case study is also interested in expressions of queerness that take a reparative position towards the past to express forms of queer be-longing in the present. *Last Gasp* is the most recent work of the US American performance troupe Split Britches (see also "About"). It was filmed in a mostly empty house in London in the summer of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, using the recording feature on Zoom. "WFH" is an acronym for "working from home," something that for many people became the state of the art during the pandemic. The recording premiered in November of that year on the streaming platform Stellar. The show uses the pandemic as a frame to theorize community and queer be-longing. In a "series of verbal and physical essays," it invites viewers to consider the personal, the (im)permanent, and how to care for one another. In terms of form, the "Zoomie" adapts to the aesthetics of videos on YouTube or TikTok, with both performers talking to the camera directly, or, especially in Weaver's case, dancing and moving in front of a static camera. The duo's personal experiences – for instance, on coming to terms with butch lesbian identity, the forty years of their artistic career, and the ups and downs of the two performers' long-term relationship – function as nodes for the viewers to reflect on their own states of being.[8]

Last Gasp resembles a (autobiographical) retrospective, positioning the two, now ageing, performers in the not always comfortable rubble of their pasts. In their performance, word blankets, music, and words of advice provide a sense of safety. Word blankets are their respective monologues which contain sometimes seemingly associative passages that want to provide solace – especially at a point in time (the pandemic) where many people are anxious about the future. Yet in each of their parts, passages of pain, regret, and anger pierce through those blankets, reminding viewers of the constant labour that had to go into their creation (see also Liedke). In Shaw's case, her part is a confrontation with the finitude of her life on stage, even as her initial statement "I know I have only one more show left in

8 For a comprehensive introduction to Split Britches' expansive work over the past forty years, see Case.

me"[9] comes with a bit of a cocky attitude. She thinks back to her first jobs, her parents' Protestantism, her life at home, and the music she grew up with. But despite being white, a Christian, and from Boston, she recalls that "when I was growing up, whenever I saw the policeman, even though I knew that he wouldn't pick me up because I was white, I did think he's gonna arrest me for being queer. And even though I came from a working-class family of seven kids, I always felt it was something called luck, now I know that some call it privilege." She does not feel that present-day America is a comfortable place as

> there's lots of different ways to get shot. Going to the mall, going to the movies, going to the church, or shot by the police, or a partner, or sitting in your own backyard watching a football game, or jogging. But words are what I'm afraid of now. So, this is a wordproof vest. I will be able to say just about anything that I want, and you can shoot me, but it won't matter.

This harks back to both Dolan's and Ahmed's assessments of times of political terror. Shaw also explicitly refers to the context of US American politics and the racist treatment of Black people by the police ("shot by the police"), which during the COVID-19 pandemic gained global attention with the #BlackLivesMatter Movement after the brutal murder of George Floyd by a white policeman in Minneapolis in May 2020. To Shaw, contemporary America seems to be made up of piles of racist and homophobic wreckage and, as if to get a better overview and consider forms of action, Shaw starts rummaging through those "piles of words" that she has assembled. On the one hand, there are the words that she began her career with when she was traveling with a drag group called Hot Peaches. Shaw yells all the words at the audience that had ever been yelled at her on the street: "Like thug, faggot, tranny, lezzy, pussy, cunt, man-hater. I yelled all that into a mirror, and I turned that into a monologue, which I did in the show that night." These words are her bullets.

On the other hand, there are words that have been there for a while but do not seem to fit anymore, like a scratchy coat, as in the following scene:

> I feel wrong about using the word *woman* these days. It's funny, I don't feel wrong using the word *man*. No, it's not really funny. Lucky for me, I haven't been shot already.
> Like this one time I was listening at a Long Table to some queer artist talking about their work. I started feeling sorry for some of the younger ones, 'cause they seem so confined by theory-speak.
> So I came to the table. I said, right now I feel lucky that I started to write in the 70s, when there weren't so many words for what I was doing. I felt like I was free to make it up all alone. I

9 All subsequent quotations from the show refer to a transcript from a recording of *Last Gasp*, which was kindly made available to the author by Lois Weaver. Thanks to Evgeniia Maksimenko for providing the transcript.

> mean, I had a few people who accused me that I walk like a man. But still, during what we called gay liberation, I was able to make shows without worrying too much about getting it wrong. I was able to explore out loud. And, boy, was I loud.
> I was traveling with a drag group Hot Peaches [. . .] mostly drag queens and gay men, we desperately needed lesbian material. And even though I had never written or performed anything, that became my job. [. . .] But a young woman at the Long Table took offense and told me to go away. She actually said that. "You should go away," she said. "You sound like some old conservative white man." Did I? Did I sound like that? What did I mean when I said that I was lucky? That I had a chance to get it wrong? [. . .]
> I was just exploring out loud. "Go away, old lady," she said, "if you cannot keep up." That was funny. Well, maybe not. You know, maybe she was right. Or maybe she was just righteous. What a relief it would be if I could just wander off. Stop worrying about who decided what notes sound good together, or what looks right to the eyes, or what feels good to the hands, or feels solid when you walk on it.

Two issues stand out in this scene. First, Shaw's looking back to the beginnings of her career as a queer performer in the 1970s can be conceptualized as a retrotopia in Bauman's sense. She experienced the discourses around being gay as what Bauman calls a practice "believed to be successfully tested and unduly abandoned or recklessly allowed to erode" (12). In Shaw's point of view, it presents a freedom of expression, an atmosphere in which she was "able to explore out loud" something she perceives as luck. In particular, she thinks back to that time as one "when there weren't so many words for what [she] was doing" and when she was free "to make it up all along." On the one hand, this may be a reference to terms such as *cis*, *trans*, or *non-binary*, terms that have existed for a while within present-day queer discourses and communities and may be perceived as just another set of "labels" by some older queers. On the other hand, her concern with language and how it is always already limiting is a more general concern of Shaw's that she comes back to in several iterations in *Last Gasp*. She nostalgically seems to wish for a time when a person could have started from scratch to talk about the world and their identity.

The second issue captured in the young woman's reaction in the scene above is reminiscent of debates surrounding the term *cancel culture*. Finding offense in Shaw's relations and perhaps especially the remark that she felt she could make shows in the 1970s "without worrying too much about getting it wrong," the "young woman" verbally and violently excludes Shaw from the Long Table, and she does so explicitly on the grounds of her age. This confrontation exemplifies a generational gap within the queer community that makes Shaw hesitate and reflect on her assessment of the past, but not quite: "You know, maybe she was right. Or maybe she was just righteous."

As Linda Hess discusses in her book *Queer Aging in North American Fiction*, when ageing is approached as a factual problem or even looming catastrophe (both

in the general public as well as academic discussions), ageing queers find themselves even more "at odds with the parameters that constitute the heteronormative blueprint of the life course" (8; see also Jerónimo). Even within queer studies and queer theory, the focus has predominantly been on how heteronormative temporalities and futurities can be challenged, for instance, through the trope of the child (Halberstam, *Queer Time*; Edelman). Edelman in particular is associated with "queer negativity," a position that encourages queers to abandon the drive towards equality and instead embrace their status as disruptors of the heteronormative order. Cynthia Port has summarized the parallels between old age and queers:

> No longer employed, not reproducing, perhaps technologically illiterate, and frequently without disposable income, the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future. (3)

According to Jack Halberstam, old people signify "non-futurity" because of their frail and potentially sick bodies and unfamiliarity with, for instance, new forms of communication; they can thus also be read in parallel to the foreclosed lifespan of gay males during the AIDS epidemic ("Anti-Social").

Linn Sandberg, however, notes a discursive change in this regard in the broader cultural context, pointing to a "positive-ageing assemblage," which stands for a "more cheerful approach to ageing" and which goes hand in hand with a view of later life as a "time for self-fulfillment and the pursuit of one's interests after retirement" (20).[10] Crucially, however, Sandberg critiques and even attacks this seemingly embracing turn as a fraud as it displays nothing less than a "heteronormative mode of belonging that essentially postulates what is a desirable and good (later) life" (20). In all its positivity, this turn disregards other intersecting positionalities. For instance, it tries to subsume ageing queers into the same societal group as ageing heterosexuals. However, it is not as easy for a queer person to grow old with their partner as it is for a heterosexual person: for example, older queer couples still face obstacles and prejudices in many places in the world in the context of healthcare; older queer couples are more often without children, so when facing illness, the care work falls to the other partner; and also, many queers do not have the luxury to get very old, for instance, because of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses and mental health problems caused by experiences of queerphobia. As Sedgwick has put it in 1993 – and her words still resonate with the queer community today –, "anyone with a reason" is "attuned to the profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling

10 Sandberg is also referring to Gilleard and Higgs.

queer energies and lives. I look at my adult friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work, and I feel that the survival of each one is a miracle" (1).

What complicates matters, however, is what is expressed in the quoted scene from *Last Gasp*: it is not only from within heteronormativity that older queers are nudged to "adjust" and, if these adjustments do not happen, are relegated to the sidelines. In this scene, it is a younger queer woman who accuses Shaw of being "out of joint" with the present-day queer community. Shaw's reaction – puzzlement and fury – is also one of speechlessness. It resonates well with a recent post on X (formerly Twitter) by queer scholar Stephen Guy-Bray, who, using the hashtag #QueerRage, writes: "I should probably ignore this, but I'm just so angry. I'm a gay man in my sixties. This wretched little bigot has no idea of what I've been through, what we all went through, & what it took to get through. I worked for my happiness. What a piece of shit he is." This strongly worded post is a response to a provocative and homophobic tweet where a user accused gay people aged over fifty of not being happy. There is, of course, a huge difference between the homophobic bigotry of straight people and rejection coming from within the queer community. The former – and this post from X may well be taken as an example for a typically hateful expression to cause pain to gays – is uninformed and considers the rights of LGBTQ* people to be an "ideology." This is an example of everyday terror that a gay person can encounter when they walk down a street or browse the Internet. The latter is much more complex, as it reveals lines of conflict from within the queer community, from within the (allegedly) same cause. In her recollections, Shaw captures a profound rupture along generational lines, creating a dissensus between younger and older queers. But, at the same time, she also emphasizes that dialogue and exchange can take place across this generational rupture.

For Shaw, in addition to her age and queerness, it is her failing health that creates her sense of out-of-placeness. After a stroke in 2011, she has been struggling with her hearing,[11] her balance, and, as she puts it in a deadpan way, her sense of humour. Such a depiction of ageing as not positive is still relatively rare. Shaw's performance creates forms of be-longing for ageing queers. It turns to the words and music of her past and takes them up again as bullets against Donald Trump's homophobic America which provides her with a sense of reassurance and hope.

11 In *Last Gasp*, as she can no longer memorize text, Shaw wears headphones, over which Weaver reads her lines.

Interspersed with Shaw's parts, Weaver's scenes resemble her Public Address Systems more closely.[12] She presents "micro dance essays": to irregular music, she moves, in a seemingly unrehearsed manner resembling contemporary dance performances, through the room. When she starts speaking, directly looking at the audience, she sometimes still keeps moving (one of) her arms or legs. The mismatch between her movements and what she says causes defamiliarization on part of the spectator. Weaver starts with an anecdote from her childhood when a storm interrupted her and her mother's dinner. Her other micro dance essays are titled "How to Set a Table in an Emergency," "How to Survive a Loss," "How to Have More Charisma," "How to Know when Someone is Finished," "How to Pretend to Die on Stage," and "How to Have the Last Word." The titles have been edited to appear written on the screen at the beginning of each scene. These essays both upend the "how to" mania so characteristic especially for the first months of the COVID-19-induced lockdown (concerning suggestions on how to, for instance, acquire a new skill during the pandemic, how to make the best out of being at home) and offer survival strategies for a world collapsing. Weaver's bits are practical and poetic and, on a more personal level, also shed light on what it means to be with a person like Shaw: Weaver confronts Shaw about cheating on her and about winning a prize that she would have deserved. It becomes apparent how jealousy and competition play dominant roles in their lives.

Ultimately, next to the "bullet" words and the "ill-fitting" words, there are also Split Britches' words expressed through movement and song. At the end of the play, both performers wander through the house in London in which the Zoomie was filmed, and their bodies are edited in a way so as to appear translucent at times. They are both there and not there, still alive, but at the same time already their own memory of themselves. Their wanderings and their displays of small acts of intimacy, such as taking off one another's glasses before lying down, are bold and intimate, and the scene is accompanied by Shaw singing "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," a song most famously performed by Roberta Flack in the 1970s. The choice of this number is a reference to the decade when the troupe started performing. The lyrics also resemble a declaration of love between Shaw and Weaver and the reassuring looking back to the "firsts" (first encounter, first kiss, first sex) which endowed the lovers with the conviction that "our joy would fill the earth."

12 The term *Public Address Systems* refers to different formats that Weaver has devised that aim to facilitate open discussion with and for the public. Examples are the "Long Table," "porch sitting," or the "care café." They all aim at creating hospitable spaces for everyone and non-hierarchical forums for participation. While the facilitator may, for instance, suggest a broad topic for discussion or a simple task like cutting out cookies for everyone to partake in, the idea is that strangers can gather and talk with one another.

Figure 2: Screenshot from *Last Gasp*.

In *Last Gasp*, Shaw in particular acknowledges the pain of being gay and not always being comfortable with the gender assigned at birth. By quoting the slurs she used in one of her first performances with Hot Peaches and reflecting on the difficulties of finding the right words to express the pain of being the target of hate speech, even now, Shaw also hauls the ghosts from the past into the present. Like McMaster, however, she does not succumb to anxiety but with her testimonies expresses queer joy[13] – the joy to exist despite and because of history and finding and expressing joy as an act of resistance. As mentioned above, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed very carefully refrains from encouraging queer bodies to resist the heteronormative order or even from suggesting that resistance is a duty. Instead, she emphasizes that not everybody is in the privileged position (that is, of personal and economic safety) to engage in acts of resistance. In *Living a Feminist Life*, however, Ahmed does offer the concept of the "feminist killjoy" who speaks uncomfortable truths on a daily basis and takes joy in disrupting the comfort of the dominant patriarchal culture. In composing their word blankets, moving, and singing, Split Britches, too, give their audience a glimpse into their joy of be-longing.

13 The conceptualization of "queer joy" is part of an ongoing project of mine. One of the few engagements with this concept, up to this point, comes from the field of urban studies in an examination of the Los Angeles Pride parade as "queer spatial joy" (Turesky and Crisman 262–276).

The Last Word

McMaster's *A Sea of Troubles* and Split Britches' *Last Gasp* both deconstruct the idea of coherence in performance narratives, proposing instead a turn towards an urgently needed queering of heteronormative scripts and existing structures of power. For the performers of both plays, queer be-longing requires additional labour: it relies on the personal, which is in itself fragile, and it repeatedly rubs against a space and narratives that are hostile and haunted. Yet they imagine their own elsewheres. Both performances are truly weird and non-normative: they feature a performer embodying the sounds of whales in a Kate Bush song and two performers presenting micro dances, using their bodies in idiosyncratic ways to expand into the space around them. They also both end with the recitation of a poem and a love song, respectively. Both performances, too, dismantle notions of linear time: McMaster cheekily joins his formerly intimidating male ancestors only to leave them behind as he prepares for fatherhood. In *Last Gasp*, Shaw says, "Sometimes, when I think about time, I set the year ahead of me in a circle like a record. I'm always standing in January, on the edge of the record, on top of a pile of records from the years before." A position slightly above the present, it seems, can provide a view of what will remain. In the two performances, this positioning unfolds via verbal and physical movements. Furthermore, be-longing is expressed through acts of hope. The rubbing against dominant narratives and creating despite exclusion and hatred constitutes queer be-longing, which is a being against normative orders and is characterized by a longing to bridge the gap between oneself and the others, inviting reflections on what a community without such cracks could look like.

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Bionote

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