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# Negating Our Social Bonds: Experiencing Shame in Body Art as a Political Act

## Introduction

In April 2018, as part of Leeds Beckett University's performance seminar series *Performance Philosophy Happy Hour*, along with body artist Martin O'Brien, I was invited to talk about performance practice and the relationship this has to our sense of selves. In the question and answer session that followed our presentations, both O'Brien and I were asked about our experiences of shame concerning our different performance practices. O'Brien responded by noting that shame was something he did not feel in his works because they are the very places where he can own the shame that he might experience in the world outside of them. The position taken by O'Brien in his response is one that echoes contemporary queer narratives, where shame experienced by marginalised subjects is something embraced by the artist as a strategy in performance making, with the purpose of critiquing normative ideologies around identities. O'Brien's answer was very different from my own, for, while there was a sense that shame was welcomed as a strategy in his work, in my articulation of *Spitting Distance*,<sup>1</sup> the work under investigation in this article, it was the pain and shock of experiencing shame in and through performance that was discussed.

This is not to suggest that unlike queer practices, the experiencing of shame does not challenge normative articulations of identity, for as this article sets out to explore, experiencing shame in performance is also to experience the contradictions of self. In light of my embodied reflections of shame, and the differences that this experience has

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Flisher, *Spitting Distance* (2010–2018). This work was performed in Leeds, London and Plymouth over eight years in multiple Higher Education Institutions and Performance Festivals.

compared with the ways shame is used in queer practice, the task of this article is to set out the stakes of shame in a context outside of queer. It explores, through an analysis of *Spitting Distance*, why it is important that the experiencing of acute shame in artistic practice is marked differently from embracing a chronic intergenerational shame. It continues to ask, why might articulating the effects of acute shame on the subject in performance, with specific reference to the content of the work itself, afford a social critique of normativity? Where might these two modes of performance practising blur?

### **Experiencing Shame in *Spitting Distance***

While shame is the primary focus here, *Spitting Distance* did not explicitly use this as a strategy for performance making. As a Practice Research project, the work was designed to explore potential ways in which male artists can challenge the representation of masculinity without first re-inscribing traits of normativity. As Amelia Jones's argues, the challenge to hegemonic articulations of masculinity through the performance of its characteristics, behaviours and traits can be aligned with male body art as far back as the 1970s. In her writing, she argues that artists akin to Robert Morris, Chris Burden and Vito Acconci, offer a deconstruction of normative masculinity, a definition of masculinity that adheres to the modernist conception of being secure, coherent, and powerful. Such a deconstruction occurs through the exposure of the gap between masculine identity and the body. Jones attributes the term *phallic dis/play* to this strategy, which denotes the playing of the phallus as a way of exploiting masculine authority and/or the 'display of the penis to its potentially deconstructive ends'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Dis / Playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform', *Art History* 17, no. 4 (1994): 547.

Using the term phallic dis/play to read Robert Morris's self-constructed image on a Castelli/Sonnabend Gallery poster from 1974, Jones describes how Morris destabilises normative representations of masculine ideology through his performance of hypermasculinity.<sup>3</sup> Photographed with a GI Helmet, dark sunglasses, bare oily pecs and bulging arms Morris seems to perform, and to some extent literalise, the phallic/penis conflation. The control and power associated with the phallus, and in turn this image, disappears as a result of him adopting excessive attributes of different types of masculinities. Not just presented as a symbol of power, as associated with the military, or working-class tough guy, Jones also attributes Morris's image to sadomasochistic garb, which she argues signals 'the dangerous marginality of gay male subjectivity'.<sup>4</sup> Through Jones's reading of phallic dis/play, Morris can be seen to perform the symbolic castration of the male body from masculine ideology, for he reveals his body as presenting more than the symbolic traits of masculinity.

Despite its potential for destabilising normative articulations of gendered identity, there are two problems that can be associated with phallic dis/play. The first is that, although these works demonstrate the failure of straight white masculinity in the West to convey coherence, they do so only because they first perform images of masculine strength, power, control and autonomy. In the words of Amelia Jones, '[a]s he [the artist] parodies it, so he wields it'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, an excess of masculinity can only occur because of its encounter with symbolic law and such a 'discursive impasse' can at

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 555.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 556.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 563.

best be defined as kind of subversive, kind of hegemonic.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, for works to challenge hegemonic articulations of masculinity, they would need to do so without reinscribing the very traits, behaviours and characteristics valorised by patriarchy. The second problem with these works is that the performance of phallic dis/play affords a general ahistorical linguistic split. What is meant by this is that, the signifiers of the male body in these contexts directly link with the cultural, and generic, concepts of Western masculinity, and therefore suggest a stability in ‘maleness’.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, such a position also ignores the existence of multiple normative masculinities, ones that exist across different cultures, geographies and periods.

The result of not attending to the problems outlined above is that the performance of normative masculinity veils the link between the artist’s male body and the nuances of their masculine identity. As a way of offering an alternative challenge to Jones’s concept of phallic dis/play, *Spitting Distance* was created to destabilise normativity through my own experiences of masculinity. Methodologically speaking, the title of the work gives way to some of the strategies that were developed through the making process. The use of *Spitting* derives from a childhood memory that I have of my father spitting onto my bloody knee and rubbing it to make the pain go away. Not only do I find the image of my father using his bodily fluid as a form of care-taking evocative, in the years that have passed since that moment, I have also, become fixated on the memory of his spit mixing with my blood. The ambiguity associated with the

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<sup>6</sup> Cüneyt Çakırlar, ‘Masculinity, Scatology, Mooning and the Queer/Able Art of Gilbert & George: On the Visual Discourse of Male Ejaculation and Anal Penetration’, *Paragraph* 34, no. 1 (2011): 91.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line*, (Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1996), 42.

(almost literal) bleeding of our bodies was an important aspect in achieving the aims of the performance for it attended to what Julia Kristeva refers to as the abject.

In her first chapter of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva dedicates the concept of the abject to outlining how the body and its materiality can be identified as both I and not-I. Defined as the very thing that has been ejected from our sense of self, but not abolished altogether, the abject sits at the margins of our identities and refuses to be assimilated by the subject. In its refusal to be part of, and not part of our selves, in its ambiguity, the abject causes us to be repulsed, anxious, embarrassed and in some cases ashamed. The role that the abject plays is to be the primer to the subject's culture, it is a reminder to not go any further, and thus it is a safeguard to our understanding of self.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, though, the disgust associated with abjection is not just associated with the body, it is also metaphorical. The emphasis that is placed on our materiality by Kristeva is meant to convey 'the conflict between our organic bodies, which operate according to the laws of nature, and our desired cultural projections of the body'.<sup>9</sup> What this means in relation to *Spitting Distance* is that while all bodies leak, including male ones, the abject quality of bodily fluids is displaced onto the bodies of others. Those subjects that are seen culturally as abjected bodies are seen to matter less than normative ones, because normative bodies have materialised over time as stable.<sup>10</sup> Thus, by locating my own masculine identity and my body alongside my viscera, and the viscera of others, in *Spitting Distance*, I aimed to metaphorically and literally associate

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, *An Essay on Abjection an Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez. (Chichester, Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 57.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, (Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 7.

myself with ambiguity and in-betweenness. The purpose of achieving this is to reach the point where meaning collapses, where binary oppositions of subject/object blur.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, while the use of *Distance* in the title suggests a stepping back from the abject, and might therefore be used to protect oneself from the anxiety of ambiguity, it was instead meant to encourage a movement closer to it. To distance refers to the dislocation of the act of spitting from the context or the original story, and there are two interrelated aims for employing such a strategy. The first is to remove the context of the memory so that the action of spitting onto my body cannot be justified. In doing so, *Spitting Distance* would emphasise the ways in which the everyday lives of men make uncomfortable references to embodiment and corporeality. By removing the context and emphasising the abject associated with the materiality of my body, I hypothesised that the challenge to normativity would emerge by foregrounding the fluidity of my identities, rather than just the fluidity of representational masculinity.

What was not taken into consideration through the process was the impact performing *Spitting Distance* would have on myself. Over the eight years that this work has been performed, there has been a range of emotional responses that have derived directly from it; these have included feelings of confidence, control, embarrassment and anxiety. The version under investigation in this article, however, was the only iteration that caused me to experience significant and prolonged episodes of shame. None of the subsequent performances were quite so debilitating as the one that was curated as part of the first ]Tempting Failure[ festival in 2011. For it was this performance that eventually rendered me unable to fully engage with the documentation of *Spitting Distance*, or write about it in a meaningful way. Given that Practice Research is about

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<sup>11</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 7.

‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating’<sup>12</sup> the inability to write up any of this immediately could have been problematic. However, in hindsight I argue that the experience of shame provided me with an extended incubation period, which was fundamental to this project.

*The concrete floor is cold underfoot as I walk naked through the informal boundary constructed by the audience, some sitting, some standing, some drinking, which separates their space from mine. Once in position (next to a folded three-piece suit, tie, white shirt, neatly topped off with a pair of shoes, some safety pins and bandages), I massage my tongue against the side of my cheek, across the roof of my mouth, and across my gums with the purpose of generating spittle. At the same time, I pull at my penis, I pull it further and further away from my body, so that the flaccid appendage can be tightly wrapped with the bandages, and then pinned, to loosely resemble an erection. As an echo to this image, I tense my body as hard as I can, for as long as I can. I pull my head back and project my spittle into the air so that it directly lands onto my body. When my position becomes impossible to hold, I relax, still massaging the inside of my mouth so that when the time is right, I can make an offer to the audience, by dribbling into my cupped hands. I offer them the same fleshy receptacle, and once everyone has spat, I cleanse myself with our contents.*

*While I push at the margins of the space to collect spit, the following action calls for a total transgression of that boundary. By way of an invitation to care for my body, as my father did, the audience is invited to cross from their space to mine so they can "spit and make their mark". Most do just that, some spit onto me, others spit onto their hands and then gently rub my body, while a few, maybe one, choose my shoe to unload their gifts. My task is to wait until no one else enters the space, at which point I will unravel my penis and get changed into the suit next to me, this is when I would leave. The score is disrupted though. One person enters the space and dribbles along the length of my bandaged penis, the audience giggle. Another walks confidently through the boundary, stops directly in front of me, snorts and projects sputum onto my chest. A third runs through the audience and sprays whiskey in my face. I shudder as the audience laugh harder. I get changed as quickly as I can and exit the space.*

[Figure 1 near here]

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<sup>12</sup> Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 32–33.



[Figure 2 near here]

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Even though, in the moment of performance, those participants affected me in such a way that I concluded the work early, the emotional impact of *Spitting Distance* was not immediate. When I did start to experience the overwhelming bodily and emotional impact of the work, the pull of the stomach that shame usually evokes through humiliation was not experienced straightaway. Before anxiety and worry set in, I became angry, firstly at those people who I felt took advantage of my invite to spit onto my body, and then at myself for not maintaining the rules that had been set out in the score. It was only as the days progressed after *Spitting Distance* that embarrassment, shame and worry became more prominent features in my emotional landscape, which occurred through the watching and re-watching of the documentation. Soon, I quickly developed an obsession with the small and possibly insignificant details that had been missed in the live moment, and as odd laughs from the audience became more apparent to me, the work itself became even more challenging to watch.

At the pinnacle of my struggle with this work, I felt an intense discomfort with how my body was presented in *Spitting Distance* and how my identity might be interpreted. These feelings were not just brought to my attention through the participant's actions, but also by those individuals who did not attend or even know about the performance. I felt mortified and humiliated when I considered the potential reactions of my partner and my brothers, and I worried about what my parents would say to their friends and colleagues if they accidentally came across the documentation.

Sometimes these emotions were justified through the conversations that I had with some individuals. When attending a conference where I presented a paper based on *Spitting Distance*, a researcher claimed “that no man should ever allow himself to be spat on in that way”.<sup>13</sup> On another occasion, when some of the documentation of the performance had been posted online, a colleague of mine suggested that I may want to request it to be taken down in case some of my students saw it.

What became clear as a result of performing at ]Tempting Failure[ is that shame is not a singular emotional response, it encompasses a large family of emotions ‘that includes many cognates and variants, mostly embarrassment, humiliation and [...] feelings of failure and inadequacy’.<sup>14</sup> Luna Dolezal and Barry Lyons extend on this list by noting that shame variants offer negative self-conscious experiences ‘such as [...] chagrin, mortification, feelings of defectiveness or low self-worth’.<sup>15</sup> Although missing from this list, guilt also plays a vital role in the experiencing of shame, for it reminds us that social boundaries have been crossed. Having said this, it is also worth pointing out that these two emotions, although in common parlance are often conflated, have very different impacts on our understanding of self.

Shame and guilt, according to sociologist Anthony Giddens, is to experience two separate but interrelated concepts about the construction of self. Guilt is anxiety produced through fear of transgression, where the thoughts and activities of the subject

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<sup>13</sup> For clarity, it is important to note that the person in question specifically used the term ‘man’ in this context. It was unclear as to whether or not they were using the term to refer generically to a human being or more specifically to a male, both of which carry normative connotations. I interpreted it as the latter, given the framing of my research.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Scheff, ‘Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory’, *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 1 (2000): 96.

<sup>15</sup> Luna Dolezal and Barry Lyons, ‘Health-Related Shame: An Affective Determinant of Health?’, *Medical Humanities* 43, no. 4 (2017): 258.

do not match normative expectations.<sup>16</sup> In this context, one is guilty when they have done something that might socially be deemed unlawful or morally ambiguous. Shame, conversely, bears directly on self-identity because it is an anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative, by which the individual sustains a coherent biography.<sup>17</sup> This occurs, more often than not, when one is seen and judged by others, and, is judged as having a weakness in character, or when one sees oneself as flawed. Shame is distinguished from guilt by a focus on the person rather than the act.<sup>18</sup> When considering my experiences in *Spitting Distance* this unpacking of shame from guilt is pertinent. As is discussed later in this article, my anxiety was less about having transgressed normative expectations of masculinity by allowing others to spit at me, than it was about not achieving the ideals set out for me by those individuals closest to me.

Phenomenologist, Jean-Paul Sartre emphasised the impact shame has on self with his famous example in *Being and Nothingness*. In Sartre's account of peering through a keyhole, he is engrossed in his action with no pre-reflections regarding what he is doing. While on his own, there are no feelings of wrongdoing, it is only when he hears footsteps coming down the corridor, and realises that he has been seen, that he experiences himself as a shameful Object.<sup>19</sup> The encounter with the objectifying gaze of another subject is crucial because it is there that we gain awareness of ourselves. However, and as Dolezal states, 'the look for Sartre is not merely about being within the other's perceptual field; it is not a neutral seeing, but rather, it is a value-laden looking

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Stanford University Press, 1991), 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Luna Dolezal, 'Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre's Account of Shame', *Human Studies* 40, no. 3 (2017): 421-22.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 283.

which has the power to objectify and causes the subject to turn attention to himself or herself in a self-reflective manner'.<sup>20</sup> Ervin Goffman echoes this position by noting that shame arises from the 'individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself not possessing [*sic*']'.<sup>21</sup> Shame then has a social power to it, even though it is a subjective emotion; through self-evaluation, shame can teach us how we have transgressed socially accepted norms.<sup>22</sup>

### **Chronic Shame as a Queer Aesthetic**

The experience of shame in *Spitting Distance* was, albeit relatively short-lived, acute and only operated at a personal level, which is significantly different from the chronic shame that groups of individuals might share intergenerationally or intercorporeally. In these contexts, a salient aspect of one's identity, such as gender, disability, race, sexuality or ethnicity, is stigmatised and associated with a marginalised group or community.<sup>23</sup> If shame is one way of understanding self, then pride is the other side of the same coin, and this comes from a mastery of self where the subject's biography fits within socially defined and accepted expectations.<sup>24</sup> If these types of identity are taken as something that are considered to be positive, productive and coherent, then those individuals who do not meet the criteria for performing normative examples of self might be seen to have failed owing to their identities as being unintelligible,

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<sup>20</sup> Dolezal, *Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging*, 426.

<sup>21</sup> Ervin Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (New Jersey, Penguin Books, Limited, 1990), 18.

<sup>22</sup> Dolezal, *Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging*, 428.

<sup>23</sup> Dolezal, *Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging*, 423–24.

<sup>24</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 66.

nonsensical, and anti-productive in relation to dominant discourses.<sup>25</sup>

However, Sally R. Munt, in her book *Queer Attachments* notes that shame is something that is not necessarily negative, she identifies that, for example, within some BDSM practices shaming can form part of an erotic relationship.<sup>26</sup> Shame can also be more than this, Munt continues to note that, shame can have political potential as it can provoke a demarcation of hegemonic ideals, which affords an inscription of ‘social intelligibility’.<sup>27</sup> At its most powerful though shame is also a change agent for the self,<sup>28</sup> and therefore, ‘shame has a contradictory latency: on the one hand it can reinforce shrinking conformity, and on the other hand it can proudly bring into being new and expansive grammars’.<sup>29</sup>

So, while pride dictates a specific dominant way of understanding the world, chronic shame has been used extensively by queer artists as a way of challenging the pressures of conforming to normative expectations around identity. More often than not, these artists are also marginalised subjects, who embrace the shame placed upon them by dominant discourse, and in doing so, offer an alternative way of living one’s life outside of the nuclear family, binary sexual relationships, and racial norms, although this is not a definitive list. Thus, the use of shame in queer performances is a deliberate strategy and one that offers a very particular aesthetic, for it affords a critical distance for the viewer of the work, which in turn foregrounds the messiness and ambiguities of identity in social life.

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011), 83.

<sup>26</sup> Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (London and New York, Routledge, 2007) 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Thus queer, in its use here, refers to a series of practices and discourse that resist heteronormativity and conformity.<sup>30</sup> Queer is about accepting and valuing those lives, and subsequently practices and beliefs, that are deemed abject to mainstream culture. It is about forming, reforming and deforming new shapes of identity that are liberated, compassionate and importantly multiple.<sup>31</sup> The aim though is not just in the acceptance and valuing of abjected identities, queer also aims to undo mainstream representations and expectations around identity formation. With this in mind, Judith Halberstam defines queer in her book *The Queer Art of Failure* as being about revolt, change, cooperation and transformation.<sup>32</sup> This is significant because she also notes that heteronormative culture privileges the passing down of knowledge and rites of passage. The problem with this mode of knowledge generation is that it relies on a history, tradition and memory crafted by dominant voices of which the receivers of this information are required not to challenge.<sup>33</sup>

The point of queer is to be anti-oedipal, to find purpose in the failure to achieve the cultural ideals associated with self as an identity. It is about getting lost, forgetting what we know, and stumbling over the ambiguities located between seemingly fixed modes of categorisation.<sup>34</sup> Instead of denying or repressing shame, queer practices enact a process of making creative use of that emotion as a way of accepting one's differences from the dominant majority.<sup>35</sup> By embracing shame, a dignity emerges that

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret Morrison, "'Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid': The 'Dignity of Queer Shame'." *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 48, no. 1 (2015): 22.

<sup>31</sup> Brendan Healy, 'Seven Reasons Why I Believe We (Still) Need a Queer Theatre', *Canadian Theatre Review* 165, no. Winter (2016): 86.

<sup>32</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 79.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 124–25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Morrison, *Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid*, 18.

demonstrates courage in the risk of performing the very shame that is placed upon a marginalised identity by the dominant voice.<sup>36</sup> In addition to this, the sharing of one's traumatic or shamed lived experiences creates an intercorporeal or intersubjective exchange.<sup>37</sup> In both of these instances, the performer is not merely expressing their symptoms but is instead connecting a shared history that exists between generations and felt by people.<sup>38</sup> Shame undoes mainstream identity representations by consciously bringing itself to the core of cultural transformation, and thus, portraying marginalised identities as social agents. In doing so, exclusionary patriarchal institutions can be reconsidered, while the creation of new circuits of desire, and bonds of solidarity that exceed inflexible family dynamics and nationalist identities, can be established.<sup>39</sup>

The use of chronic shame to challenge dominant discourses around illness and disability is arguably a defining feature of Martin O'Brien's practice. As someone who lives with cystic fibrosis, O'Brien's culturally constructed 'sick body' works against normative articulations of masculinity because it is viewed as weak, vulnerable and lacking. These stereotypes are challenged through his embracement of the tropes of his disease by 'carrying out actions adapted from medical procedures [...]'.<sup>40</sup> In one section of his performance *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*,<sup>41</sup> O'Brien coughs up the thick mucus that largely defines cystic fibrosis. He then mixes this with a combination

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Blackman, 'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities', *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2011): 94.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>39</sup> Irune del Río Gabiola, 'Notes on Shame and Failure: Portrait/S of Queer Puerto', *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 16 (2012): 36–40.

<sup>40</sup> Jareh Das, 'On Curating Pain: The Sick Body in Martin O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh! Bite Me I'm Yours*', *LEONARDO* 49, no. 3 (2016): 266.

<sup>41</sup> O'Brien, Martin. 'Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours.' 2015.

of water and soap, and blows mucus bubbles out into the audience. In *Flesh-Eaters: Notes Toward a Zombie Methodology*, O'Brien recounts how spectators dashed to avoid the bubbles or stood and allowed them to burst on contact with their bodies.<sup>42</sup> In another section of the work, O'Brien invites the individuals to enter the performance space and bite his body as hard as they wish. This action is later returned to, when he enters the spectators' space and attempts to bite individuals, which is met in a similar manner to his mucus bubbles.

By embracing the materiality of his body in his work, and not rejecting it, O'Brien's spectators are afforded the opportunity to attend to their relationship with the artist, and their bodies. In these moments, rather than assume binary oppositions of healthy/ill, the spectators come to recognise that their own bodies are also capable of sufferance.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting on the act of biting in O'Brien's performance, Jareh Das, extends on this empathetic connection by noting that when the 'sick body' has clamped down on the cheek of another subject, that individual becomes gazed at by the remaining subjects in the room. In this moment, there is a coming together of minds, in which, albeit on a superficial level, 'people share a similar visual experience of one aspect of the world [...],<sup>44</sup> that being the experience of otherness due to contamination.

There is a sense that O'Brien's work offers an intercorporeal exchange, a feeling between people, or a shared connection, but his practice also affords perspectives outside of normative discourse. By including regimes of hardship that have been appropriated or modified from medical techniques in his work, O'Brien is able to

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<sup>42</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Flesh-Eaters: Notes toward a Zombie Methodology', *LEONARDO* 49, no. 3 (2016): 264.

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien, *Flesh Eaters*, 265.

<sup>44</sup> Das, *On Curating Pain*, 267.



foreground the sensuous materiality of his body.<sup>45</sup> On one level, this resists the stereotypes of illness by attributing the experience of pain with the potential of it being positive and pleasurable.<sup>46</sup> However, this also works on another level. With reference to my own engagement with *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* in 2016 at Live Art Bistro, Leeds, another spectator spoke to me about the eroticism she felt as O'Brien sunk his teeth into her skin. What is highlighted here, is the erotic potential of contamination outside of heteronormative discourse. It highlights the frightening pleasures that we can experience, which evades oedipal logic.

The embracement of chronic shame is not the only strategy employed within O'Brien's practice, his use of humour is also an important aspect. Many queer practices that look to challenge dominant discourse in this way more often than not, although not exclusively, are facilitated through camp, parody, explicitness, non-linearity, irony, exaggeration and surrealism.<sup>47</sup> Ken Plummer also argues that in addition to the comical and paradoxical, queer can sometimes be defined through the carnivalesque.<sup>48</sup> The surreal and parodic are key aspects of O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*. Performing as a zombie he references, albeit metaphorically, how being in the world with a chronic illness has a relationship with death that is keenly felt as a way of life.<sup>49</sup> While the connections between the image of the zombie and disability are meant to be

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<sup>45</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Performing Chronic: Chronic Illness and Endurance Art', *Performance Research* 19, no. 4 (2014): 59.

<sup>46</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Treating the Body', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012): 151.

<sup>47</sup> Healy, *Seven Reasons Why*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> Ken Plummer, 'Critical Humanism and Queer Theory: Living with the Tensions' in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005), 366.

<sup>49</sup> O'Brien, *Flesh Eaters*, 264.

taken seriously, the location of this against the image of mucus bubbles, or even the live soundtrack that seems to reference the tropes of zombie films, is not.

As spectators we know this, for as O'Brien stumbles around his set looking for another cheek to feed on, as the mucus bubbles threaten to release their contaminate on those below, some of us scream and shriek, while others laugh, and sometimes this feels like delight. Drawing on Cüneyt Çakırlar's analysis of Gilbert and George's *Eight Shits*<sup>50</sup> the shame associated with illness in O'Brien's work is thrown back to the spectator, yet, on the back drop of the ridiculousness of the event, it ricochets around the subject and turns into joy. The purpose being that, while all bodies are abject, not all abject bodies have to be abhorrent. The use of wit, humour, and shock then are important to queer practices because through the tension held between 'happy and unhappy' an affective relation is created where information is felt rather than understood.<sup>51</sup>

### **Shame as the Need for Social Connection in *Spitting Distance***

When comparing *Spitting Distance*, to Martin O'Brien's work there are clearly some points of commonality in the destabilisation of normative masculine traits through the embracement of the material body. If, as argued above, what causes anxiety in the abject is in-between states, then bodily fluids and waste are abject because they transcend the boundaries of inside/outside and make explicit the permeable body.<sup>52</sup> Such a position is foregrounded in both O'Brien's performances and *Spitting Distance* where that which is inside, that which is more often hidden, is made to appear on the surfaces of our skin, the site where interpretations of identities are primarily made. This

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<sup>50</sup> Çakırlar, *Masculinity, Scatology, Mooning*, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Blackman, *Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities*, 189.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

has a considerable impact on the signification of male identity when considering that, and as I have previously noted, normative masculinity is more often than not presented as an identity that is hard and coherent. To locate one's inside onto our outside is a reminder that all bodies are abject and have a fluid material existence, regardless of the identity that you prescribe to.

While clearly there are similarities in these works, there are also significant differences. One key difference is that in O'Brien's practice there is a correlation between intercorporeal chronic shame and the abject materiality of the body. While there was an important autobiographical relationship to the material body in *Spitting Distance*, the link to shame was not considered, and at the time of making I assumed that just engaging with the abject was enough for a destabilisation to occur. However, Fintan Walsh, in *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* argues that the use of the abject can also be an attempt at mastering the 'Other'<sup>53</sup> when used by male subjects. Instead of the body being seen as leaky, penetrable and therefore fragmented, the hypermasculine body can demonstrate the assumption that normative masculinities can withstand the abject, to not be affected by it, and to retain a coherent identity.<sup>54</sup>

So, unlike O'Brien's work then, *Spitting Distance* did not make use of the parodying of my shame alongside the presentation of the materiality of my body, but that is not to suggest that the experiencing of shame, in and through performance, does not have a destabilising effect upon dominant discourses surrounding identity. Whereas O'Brien might be seen to use an aesthetic of shame to challenge representations of the sick body, the experiencing of shame in performance can provide moments of insight

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<sup>53</sup> Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Hampshire and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 164.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

for the subject.<sup>55</sup> It is in the self-reflexivity of the person where a destabilisation of normativity is possible, but not guaranteed, where the experiencing of shame can reveal the fragmentation of the subject and their need to retain the social bonds that help form their subjectivity.

The fragmentation of my identity in *Spitting Distance* occurred as a result of the gaps that became apparent between interpretation and intention. That is, my interpretation of other people's intention in the performance, and, how I interpreted the ways in which those closest to me would understand my intentions and actions in the practice. It became clear very quickly after the performance, that my constant questioning as to why participants had engaged with my body in specific ways could never be answered, not just because there was no easy way of gaining that information, but also because language itself cannot fix meaning. What's more, communication exceeds the linguistic, for 'bodies produce language, just as language helps the body to produce the field of cultural intelligibility in which bodies make their appearance'.<sup>56</sup> There will always be an excess of meaning that exists outside of any linguistic interpretation, and it is for this reason also that I would not be able to fully understand what my family, friends and colleagues would think of me as a result of that performance and the participant actions.

How those participants engaged with my body in *Spitting Distance*, and the subsequent emotional affect that derived from this, occurred because the participants, and those absent friends and family, helped to disrupt my logic of self. This is, of course, not a new concept, Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted that the other is the first cultural object in the world that we engage with; it is the other that allows us to

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<sup>55</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas, *Male Matters*, 29.

understand ourselves in the world that we operate within.<sup>57</sup> Thus, what seems significant about *Spitting Distance* was that it performatively produced an intersubjective space between self and other, a gap that Amelia Jones recognises in 1960s and 1970s body art where she notes that the ‘enactment of the artistic body [...] enables the circulation of desires among subjects of making and viewing’.<sup>58</sup> This intersubjectivity entails the acknowledgement that one is never fully performing one’s self and that one always needs the other to form one’s subjectivity.<sup>59</sup>

I do not want to suggest that before *Spitting Distance* I was not intersubjective, what I want to highlight is how that performance made me uncomfortably aware of my intersubjectivity. In performing *Spitting Distance*, a gap was prised open between what I thought I knew, and what I didn’t know about myself. That is, what you know and others know, but that which does not meet. This ‘unknowability’ became disconcerting because in addition to not being able to control the signification of my own identity, as a result of it being prised open, “I” had come to see myself as being soft and penetrable.<sup>60</sup> In Hélène Cixous’s terms, I had begun to feel like an undifferentiated boundary between self and other,<sup>61</sup> which acted as a constant reminder of my fragmentation and permeability.

These are significant experiences, for as Calvin Thomas notes, normative masculinity is afforded by the characteristics and behavioural traits of strength,

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<sup>57</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Classics Series. Routledge, 2002), 405.

<sup>58</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 51.

<sup>59</sup> Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 172.

<sup>60</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Extreme Fidelity*, ed. S. Sellers, (Taylor & Francis, 2003), 134.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

authority and control, in comparison to femininity, which is linked to passivity, weakness, and incoherence.<sup>62</sup> To achieve coherence, phallogocentrism is employed, with the purpose of closing down meaning in order to reject anything that is ambiguous or sits at the margins.<sup>63</sup> The production of language used by patriarchal structures in the creation of masculinity then is about constructing coherent boundaries for meaning to be controlled.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, to experience "I" as fragmented and permeable offers a counterpoint to hegemonic Western ideals around male identity. Not only am I recognising the fluidity and instability of my identity, but also that others have the ability to penetrate and affect my understanding of self.

To leave this analysis at the point where performance performatively produces the experience of fragmentation, prematurely concludes the destabilising potential to normativity that shame possesses. For while the recognition of one's subjectivity, and in turn fragmentation, has the potential to cause shame, it does so because it foregrounds the ways in which the social bonds that glue and holds societies together are threatened by the subject.<sup>65</sup> In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that shame is essential to us, not only because it teaches us to adhere to social codes and conventions, but also because it is an ontological structure for self. He argues that: 'Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have "fallen" into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am'.<sup>66</sup> Without those social bonds, the

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas, *Male Matters*, 12.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin Thomas, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory*, (New York and Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 12.

<sup>65</sup> Scheff, *Shame and the Social Bond*, 98.

<sup>66</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 254.

implication is that we can become alienated from the society that we are trying to be part of, and also lose our understanding of self. It is the roles that we play, of which we are obligated to undertake in some instances, that help us understand who “I” is.

Shame then helps to form our understanding of self because it causes fear of contempt, of abandonment, and of being ostracised,<sup>67</sup> and as Lewis argues, a fear of ‘being adrift from understanding and being understood by the other’.<sup>68</sup> This is an important point to make, for if we find our understanding of self through the exploration of a moral identity, in relation to our memberships to particular communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, and the city, then without those moral particularities we have the potential to lose our way and ourselves.<sup>69</sup> Shame derives from the need to ‘repair’ an interpersonal connection, the break of communication, from the people that form an important part of the communities that we operate it. In this respect, that emotion emerges when someone close to an individual, learns something abhorrent about them, which in turn forces a connection to be broken between the two subjects.<sup>70</sup>

Arguably, the shame that I experienced as a result of *Spitting Distance* was due to the potential risk of becoming disconnected from the different communities that I align myself with, as a result of something that I assumed others would find abhorrent about me. In turn, this moment of self-reflexivity brought into question my understanding of who “I” am. Although, to state that there is a singularity of shame

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<sup>67</sup> Luna Dolezal, ‘The Phenomenology of Shame in the Clinical Encounter’, *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 18, no. 4 (2015): 573.

<sup>68</sup> Scheff, *Shame and the Social Bond*, 95.

<sup>69</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 256.

<sup>70</sup> Morrison, *Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid*, 19.

associated with this work is incorrect, for, in hindsight, my shame emerged from the contradictions and inconsistencies of different shames that were experienced. For the purpose of this article though, I would like to foreground just two types of shame that became apparent to me through the performance. The first was a shame associated with my family, whereas the second was a professional or artistic shame. It was in the ways in which these different shames interacted that fundamentally challenged my understanding of self.

Familial shame became apparent to me as a result of how I did not meet the normative expectations that I have associated with my parents, and other family members. At the same time, there was the shame felt as a result of feeling ashamed about *Spitting Distance* with specific reference to the concepts that I was exploring. In short, considering the purpose of that performance was to challenge the security of my masculinity, there seemed something hypercritical about the fear I experienced of those closest to me engaging with the documentation. Not only did these conflicting experiences force the recognition of incoherence in the self, but they also foregrounded the incompatibility of selves in the subject. Furthermore, because of this incompatibility, there was always the potential threat that each bond would negate the other and restrict my access to both communities.

The fear of abandonment derived from the ambiguity of two spaces, the potential for my family failing to recognise me, or who they thought was me, as a result of the work that I presented. While at the same time, I also feared that the community of artists that the work was made for would come to recognise me as representing the very thing that I was attempting to challenge as a result of the familial shame that I was experiencing. Not only did *Spitting Distance* highlight the potential risk for me to be ejected from both communities, but it also helped position me, albeit temporarily, as a



deject, ‘the one by whom the abject exists’ as a result of deliberately separating and straying away from strict definitions of self.<sup>71</sup>

While the fear of abandonment and the experience of straying away from one’s self can be associated with shame because they act as a reminder of where our place is in society, which in turn, like the abject, acts as a primer to our sense of self, shame is not strictly a negative emotion, as was noted earlier. Sally Munt argues, ‘shame [...] can also stimulate an energy that has a restorative, creative force, it can mobilise the self and communities into acts of defiant presence, in cycles of disattachment and reconnection’.<sup>72</sup> Drawing on the story of the original fall in Genesis, Munt reminds us that in Judea-Christian narratives the first shame occurs in the garden of Eden when Eve eats the forbidden apple and is then banished from paradise along with her partner. ‘The end of shame brings knowledge, once their eyes are opened Adam and Eve can fully see themselves and each other, their selves are formed through recognition and accountability [...]’<sup>73</sup> In this regard, Eve is not a villain in this story, she is a hero for her disobedience ‘inaugurates a new era of sexual love without guilt, forcing religion to relinquish its power’.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly one can make the link between the image of god in these narratives and hegemony, both of which dictate particular ways of being and living. Furthermore, queer practices, and the artists that embrace shame can be seen to be as heroic as Eve in the way that they disobey, and challenge what is expected of them. What is different about *Spitting Distance* though from queer practice is that to experience shame in performance is to experience the powerful moment of choice. Unlike Eve and Adam, who cannot find their way back to paradise after their fall, or the queer artists who have

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<sup>71</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Munt, *Queer Attachments*, 198.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

embraced this and move forward, the fall in the moment of performance reveals to the artist the plethora of options and identities that are open to them. They can choose to move forward and make this shame a productive element of their lives, as queer arguably does, or they can climb back up and reinstate themselves within a normative and privileged paradise.

There is also a third option, one that sits between reinforcing and embracing shame and this is the role of the deject, to spend time in the original fall constantly demarcating themselves in light of the shame that has been bestowed upon them. Being neither subject, nor object, the deject casts of the question “*who* am I” and instead substitutes it with “*where* am I”.<sup>75</sup> Such a challenge to the self occurs in this way because of the bleeding of the personal into the social. The image of the social-self might be articulated as the linguistic constructs that shape our idealised versions of self. My social-self then is the self that performs the appropriate characteristics, behaviours and traits that allow me to be socially defined in particular ways. This concerns aspects of our identity such as gender, but the social-self is also about adhering to the politeness of society in more ways than this. It is also about the roles and responsibilities that are given to us as a result of what we do and who we are, for example, the social-self as a teacher, artist, son, brother and partner. Simon Jones might articulate this part of our identity as the citizen, which he says refers to the linguistic definitions associated with of our identities that protect the person from embarrassment and allows them to ease into society.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Kristeva, *Powers*, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Simon Jones, ‘Not Citizens, but Persons: The Ethics in Action of Performance’s Intimate Work’, in *Intimacy across Visceral and Digital Performance*, eds. M. Chatzichristodoulou and R. Zerihan, (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 33.

The images of myself, which I had come to recognise others had constructed with me and for me, were examples of my social-self, and in looking back and seeing the contradictions associated with these selves, I was rendered as person. Persons are constructed from elements of self that are not adequately expressed by way of the social.<sup>77</sup> It is a self that, although exposed because it exceeds linguistic definition, is also full of desire, and open up to interpretation from those people around you. It exposes the subject to a variety of personal histories that might not be exact, but which comes from a reciprocal engagement with those others that come in direct contact with you. Jones uses these two modes of being to emphasise the ways in which some performances ‘open up an altogether *writing* of history’,<sup>78</sup> by creating tensions between the seemingly objective histories that are automatically reproduced by individuals and the particularities of personal histories – this tension creates a ‘growing self-awareness of each one’s and others agencies in the telling of histories’.<sup>79</sup>

I argue though that the tensions that emerge between social-self and persons can also cause shame in the subject, because: those tensions can reveal an inconsistency with one's autobiographical narrative; they work towards challenging the social bonds that help form our understanding of self; furthermore, the contradictions that cause tension to become present reveal the subject as being ambiguous. There is not a clean break though between the social and the person, for they exist and bleed together. Thus, the foregrounding of the person in relation to the social-self when attended to in performance and in front of others, has the effect of affording moments of self-reflexivity, where we look back on ourselves and see the possibilities of what we could be. Importantly then, shame manifests because the person reminds us that there is no

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 30.

“I” outside of the shame that I am feeling, it is a reminder that “I” am always already abject.

The parodying of the masculine social-self, by male artists in the 1970s, while arguably did offer a challenge to normative concepts of male gendered identities, also reinstated modernist concepts of masculinity because the personal is restricted in the presentation of the work. Given my experiences in *Spitting Distance*, and the concepts of queer explored in this article, it would seem then that shame is fundamental to challenging normative masculinity because it foregrounds the in-betweenness of the personal and the ability for ambiguity to bleed with the social-self. This effectively weakens the bonds to established social groups and locates the self as neither here nor there. However, I argue that for cis-gendered, white (male) artists, shame needs to be carefully considered when used in performance practices. As with the embracement of the abject, to simply take shame and parody it might be read as securing the coherence of normative male identities rather than challenging them. Such a position emerges because there is a risk that what is implied is the lightening of shame and its limited impact on the male subject; in short, these performances could suggest that cis-gendered male bodies can joke about shame precisely because they have nothing to be shameful about.

To actively experience shames in performance then, might offer a more ethical approach to challenging one’s own privilege, because the self is experienced by the subject as abject. Usefully, this creates a direct correlation between the purpose of the performance, that is to challenge normative articulations of identity through the materiality of the body, and the actual destabilisation of the artist’s sense of self – to the point of abhorrence. In weakening the bonds to their privileged identity, two interrelated events occur. The first is that, albeit temporarily, the subject experiences ‘a

fall from paradise' (their privilege), the second is that potential new bonds of solidarity become open to us. Importantly though what is challenging about this in-between space is the choices that are made available to the subject. Through experiencing shame, we are reminded that we can choose whether to embrace or reject the privilege associated with conforming to citizenship. Arguably, this is a more dynamic position to find one's self in than simply to perform Western hegemonic ideals around masculinity with the hope of deconstructing them.

There are clearly similarities between queer practices and *Spitting Distance* as both challenge the fixity of normative representations of identity, and both emphasise the fluidity and instability of our sense of self. What makes the experiencing of shame in performance different from queer shame is that marginalised artists who employ a shame-aesthetic already have the shame projected onto them in the form of hegemonic ideologies. At the heart of *Spitting Distance*, was the foregrounding of my shame as a cis-gendered male artist through the materiality of my body. In doing so, I expose myself to myself, my person bleeds into the social-self weakening my bonds to normativity. To momentarily experience shame though is not quite good enough, there needs to be a prolonged period where one is offered a chance for self-reflexivity. If the shame experience is too quick, it becomes too easy to mend those broken attachments and regain my position. It is important then that I spend an extended period of time not knowing who "I" am, in order to become more knowledgeable about what persons could constitute my selves.