

Antoine Alario

Force of Queer Performances: From Violence to Care

Abstract – This article investigates the power of queer performances through an analysis of *Bixarada*, a work by racialized queer artists. This power emerges from a dialectic of violence and care: the performance enacts the racist and transphobic violences endured by the artists, yet simultaneously produces political care, forging a new community. The article then considers how this dialectic informs queer performance more broadly, showing that they all confront the questions of violence and the necessity of care that shape queer existence. This dialectic is particularly pronounced in *Bixarada* due to its intersectional dimension: racialized trans artists experience both violences and the need for performative healing more intensely. Intersectional performances thus reveal this dialectic as a core force of queer performativity.

Keywords : queer performance; violence; care; intersection

Résumé – Cet article explore le pouvoir des performances queer par une analyse de *Bixarada*, une œuvre d'artistes queer racisé-es. Ce pouvoir émerge d'une dialectique entre violence et soin : la performance révèle les violences racistes et transphobes subies par les artistes, tout en prodiguant un soin politique, produisant une communauté nouvelle. L'article interroge la manière dont cette dialectique traverse les performances queer de manière plus générale, montrant qu'elles sont toutes confrontées à la violence et à la nécessité du soin qui caractérisent les existences queer. Cette dialectique est particulièrement prononcée dans *Bixarada* du fait de son caractère intersectionnel : les artistes trans racisé-es expérimentent plus intensément les violences et le besoin d'un soin performatif. Les performances intersectionnelles révèlent cette dialectique comme une force profonde de la performativité queer.

Mots-clés : performance queer ; violence ; soin ; intersection

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Force of Queer Performances: From Violence to Care

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Introduction

It is Friday, October 15, 2024, in the evening. The audience has gathered for the Festival of Trans Arts and Creations (FACT) in Lyon. The festivities begin in the large dance hall: the audience sits in a circle along the walls, leaving a vast empty space in the middle. Powerful speakers begin blasting a deafening hard-techno beat just as five trans, Portuguese, and racialized artists emerge on stage, screaming and dancing frenetically. Bruta, the director and creator of the show, stands completely naked, wearing only a disheveled wig attached to her pubic hair, while the others appear in scant outfits that leave most of their bodies exposed, including their buttocks and legs. Thus begins a performance of *Bixarada* that lasts one hour and thirty minutes. “Bicho” in Portuguese refers to indigenous people compared to wild animals, and “Bicha” refers to the effeminate man, which can be translated as “faggot”, or “queer” by extension, in English, “folle” or “pédé” in French. *Bixarada* is about wild queers.

This performance immediately strikes with the violence by which it impresses on the audience. One may define violence as the effect of a form of power that seeks to normalize subjects, often producing affects of discomfort and diminishing their integrity, while also being capable of serving as a means of resistance to that very power¹. Here violence is produced by different powers of the performance. The sonic violence of the speakers is followed by the violence of the screams, then the visual violence of exposed bodies that dominate the audience, forcing them to move and placing them in discomfort throughout the performance.

But what is strange about this performance is that the violence in question gradually transforms into its exact opposite, namely a movement of care and benevolence. This is just as striking as the violence in the way the bodies interact on stage, embracing, kissing, supporting each other, to the point that the audience ultimately enjoys the experience. Care can be defined as a force that, through its effects, increases the integrity of the subject who receives it. It is less about thinking of care as a specific ethical stance than as a vital necessity to confront the violences one experiences². This paradox between violence and care, far from diminishing the impact of the performance, makes it particularly striking and effective.

Yet, how can the same queer performance be both violent and benevolent? What are the aesthetic and political stakes of the tension between violence and care in queer performance? In this work I aim to interrogate the power of queer performances. To do so, I draw on a Foucauldian conception of power and resistance as contingent, disseminated, and plural strategies to be encoded³. I conceptualize the dialectic of violence and care as one such strategy of resistance in two stages: first, by analyzing how violence and care operate as two forces animating *Bixarada*; second, by considering whether this dialectic may also characterize other queer performances.

¹ This is what Foucault analyzes as the power of disciplines, which “make” individuals by imposing norms upon their bodies (*Surveiller et punir*, Paris, Gallimard, III). Fanon also gives attention to the way violence builds bodies and subjects, but to define decolonization as resistance to the original colonial violence: a violent process that produces new human beings by forcing itself upon the colonizers (*Les Damnés de la terre*, Paris, La Découverte, p. 39-41).

² In this sense, I am not referring to care as defined by Gilligan as a feminist ethics different from a masculine ethics of justice (*In a Different Voice*, 1982, Chapter 6), but rather as conceived by Audre Lorde as an act of political warfare (*A Burst of Light*, 1988, Epilogue). I will elaborate on this point later.

³ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1. La Volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 125-127.

Bixarada: From Violence to Care

Violence in Bixarada

This violence is experienced firsthand by every member of the audience. The first blasts from the speakers do not feel good but harmful, much like the bodies that burst onto the stage, saturating the visual and auditory space. It is through this physical violence, first inflicted on the audience's bodies via their senses (hearing and sight), that the performance is born and unfolds before our eyes. Our hearing is assaulted at several moments, which are nonetheless beautiful and powerful: when the artists gather at the center of the room to scream together into a microphone, or when one artist sings with a head voice on a small platform at the back of the hall. Next, the eyes are attacked when a blinding spotlight reveals Bruta crawling in front of it, in backlight, chained and then freeing herself as she dances. Our bodies are overall violated, often forced to move to make way for an artist who almost stumbles. This violence can, of course, be received with pleasure or discomfort depending on the type of audience, but it remains the primary effect of the performance, which in this sense aligns with many contemporary performances exploring the effects of visual and auditory saturation⁴ and the quest for confrontation with the audience⁵.

During an interview I had with Bruta, she explained that this violence is not incidental but deliberate and calculated: the show is traversed by anger directed at the audience, mostly white and bourgeois, interrogating their voyeuristic position. Yet it is Bruta who has gathered the audience to witness her work, only to reproach them for it. Why bother? Bruta tells me that violence is a tool to “reveal” an intimate reality to the audience and that the performance responds to the need to revisit personal experiences. In this sense, artistic violence reveals the violences experienced by trans and racialized artists—namely transphobic and colonial violence—since it is a means to actualize them. The transphobic violences revealed concern cisgender norms⁶: a woman is defined both as having a vagina (biological criterion) and being hairless (aesthetic criterion). Yet the women on stage have penises and body hair. From the perspective of cisnormativity, these are “ugly” bodies, which take pleasure in exhibiting this ugliness, amplifying it. They do not hide their penises but fully expose them⁷; they do not shave their hair but let them unregulated and prominent instead. What seems violent to us are bodies deemed “ugly” by our norms, *i. e.* queer bodies—the Bicha.

These transphobic violences are inseparable from colonial violences, which also impose norms: a colonized body is perceived, described, and thought of as “wild” by colonial Europe⁸. This savagery is also what is exaggerated and displayed on stage. Bruta wears a mouth opener giving her a frightening appearance and rustic clothing reminiscent of colonial racist caricatures. The body movements—agitated, screaming, caught in frenzied dances—are those imposed by colonial gazes on colonized bodies, the Bicho. “Here the creatures are constructed by the colonial, aesthetic, medical, and cis gaze—the dominant European discourse on countries and societies considered exotic,” reads the festival's website presenting the performance⁹. Once again, it is about exposing and amplifying the colonial violence experienced by racialized bodies: while appearing violent and dangerous, they merely reproduce the norms that European cis people, produced to exclude trans and racialized bodies from propriety and beauty.

In this sense, *Bixarada* illustrates the queer performativity process analyzed by Butler, constituting the core of queer politics in the last chapter of *Bodies That Matter*: repeating norms and then theatrically hyperbolizing them to subvert them¹⁰. Violence gives queer performance the means to exaggerate norms and

⁴ The collective Dumb Type, for example, has constantly tried to provoke such effects in its installations, notably through the use of digital tools.

⁵ In the 1960s, the Living Theatre already experimented with this confrontational relation by trying to disturb the audience's immobile stance.

⁶ One can also talk about cisnormativity: the normative system produced by and for cis identities, which defines gender identities according to supposedly natural biological criteria. See also cisgenderism (Erica Lennon, Brian J. Mistler, « Cisgenderism ». *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1/1-2, 2014, p. 63-64).

⁷ This is also a central issue for many trans people. In her performance *Manifiesto Transpofágico*, Renata Carvalho notably questions the importance given to genitalia when presenting trans bodies.

⁸ This is what Lévi-Strauss shows in Chapter 3 of *Race et histoire*: the term “savage” was used by colonial empires to demean any foreign culture by casting it as natural. Fanon explains that the fear of Black people is based on their association with biology and violent life impulses (Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Chapter 6).

⁹ My translation. The presentation in French on the FACT website: <https://factfestival.fr/productions/bixarada-2024>.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 232. Butler explains how the repetition of norms by subjects—the very condition of norms' power—can also become a site of subversion:

turn them around. For Bruta, the goal is to free oneself from them through repetition and also to redistribute this violence, an expression Bruta borrows from the Brazilian trans artist Jota Mombaça in a 2019 text¹¹. Mombaça explains that exposing the norm redistributes its violence so it is not only suffered by a few bodies. If violence is socially distributed unevenly, so that marginalized bodies suffer more violence but have less right to express it, the queer project consists of redistributing this violence. Exposing transphobic and colonial norms allows cis and white audiences—usually spared this violence—to experience it while allowing the performers’ bodies to externalize it, all through repeating these violences on stage. In this sense, Bourcier demonstrates that when women perform violence, they overturn the monopoly claimed by dominant masculinity, turning that violence back against it, opening *Queer Zones* with an analysis of Despentes’s *Baise-moi*¹².

By stating this, I position myself between Edelman¹³ and Muñoz¹⁴ in their opposition regarding the idea of a “queer future”. Edelman argues that queer opposes any notion of the future, which serves solely to reproduce heteronormative society through the figure of the Child. That is why queer is antisocial: it opposes, through transgression, any project of a future society¹⁵. Muñoz critiques this antisocial perspective: the queer endeavor is to build political utopias, spaces that, in the present, invite us to imagine another present and future, other social relations, notably through performance¹⁶. My argument presupposes the utopian project of a critical redistribution of social relations, following Muñoz’s perspective, but it involves redistributing a harmful violence that opposes social relations, which aligns with Edelman’s antisocial perspective.

This is the ambiguous position in which *Bixarada* stands: allowing the rise of a new social order through the distribution of what destroys and blocks social relations—violence. Since this redistribution creates a new equality between audience and artist in facing the experience of violence, it seems that its aim is something other than the mere repetition of violence. Bruta emphasizes the idea that violence is simply a tool for her, but to serve what? Mombaça had already said that the redistribution of violence is not a declaration of war, nor merely an act of confrontation, but an act of “self-care”¹⁷.

Care in Bixarada

As mentioned before, the performance strikes as much by its violence as by the benevolence surrounding the audience. This benevolence manifests itself in two main ways.

First, in the relationships among the artists. For instance, there is a beautiful moment when an artist, seemingly under the influence of substances, stumbles, cannot walk, falls onto the audience, and is then rescued by Bruta, who, in English, tells her not to pay attention to us, that we are just transphobes, and that everything will be fine. More generally, at numerous moments, the artists embrace each other, make love, hug, kiss, and show affection in multiple ways. The stage becomes a space of trans solidarity, complicity, and harmony among the artists in their various performances, whether erotic or not. Sexuality, when it occurs, is no longer a means of dominating another, in line with patriarchal mechanisms, but a way to develop friendships through shared pleasure. One scene in particular illustrates this: an artist, dressed only in threads highlighting her body, begins by dancing in front of Bruta, who repeats cries of pleasure into the microphone, then ends by miming a sexual act for several minutes, squatting, twerking, holding her hair, taking different positions. It is a scene of striking self-eroticism, with the artist enjoying her own performance. At the moment she lets out a long orgasmic cry, a jet of water sprays from the ceiling, drenching her. She is then joined by the other artists, who drink from the jet and caress each other under the water in a scene of sensual orgy. The relationships among the artists are consistently care-based, constituted through multiple gestures of erotic and friendly affection, manifesting their mutual attachment.

Benevolence also reveals itself in the relationships between the artists and the audience. While initial interactions are violently provocative, the audience is invited to share the affection the artists have for each

“This kind of citation will emerge as theatrical to the extent that it mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses.”

¹¹ Full text available online, in English: [Towards a Gender Disobedient and Anti-Colonial Redistribution of Violence – Queer Nihilist and Insurrectionalist Zine and PDF distro](#)

¹² Sam Bourcier, *Queer Zones. La trilogie*, Clermont-Ferrand, Editions Amsterdam, 2018, p. 25-31.

¹³ Lee Edelman, *No Future : Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.

¹⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia : The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, New York University Press, 2009.

¹⁵ Lee Edelman, *op. cit.*, p. 1-32.

¹⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *op. cit.*, p. 97-115.

¹⁷ Mombaça, *op. cit.*, scene 6.4.

other, to feel sympathy for these bodies marked by violence, and even sexual desire. Thus, the artists' outfits accentuate their breasts, buttocks, and hips, and their movements make them increasingly seductive as the performances progress. While this eroticization risks fostering racist fetishism¹⁸, it is mitigated through the humanization of the bodies. Erotic desire felt by the audience forces reflection on objectification, in light of bodies that gradually reveal themselves as sincere, beautiful, and dignified. In this way, sexualization fosters sympathy for the bodies, defusing the fetishistic effects it might provoke. Moreover, erotic scenes constitute only a small part of the performances, so the subjects are not reducible to objects of sexual desire.

Bruta emphasizes the importance of the show's duration, which gradually builds a new relationship between the artists and the audience. The audience, initially shocked and assaulted by these bodies, gradually becomes attracted to them, ready to feel empathy, benevolence, and attraction. The violence redistributed among the audience allows to share the violence experienced by the artists, calling for care and producing new affective bonds. The aim of this redistribution of violence is nothing less than the creation of a new community, united through the shared experience of endured violence. The goal is not to erase differences in a universalist perspective, but to connect individuals through their egalitarian expression. The audience, which initially embodied the colonial and cisnormative gaze, becomes an ally willing to be traversed by systemic violence, whether experienced directly or not, in order to form society among equalized individuals.

What does the performance do to the violence it addresses? It reverses it. Recall: the violence stemmed from bodies being judged according to norms, deemed ugly and savage. Yet the performance gradually reveals bodies that, far from being ugly, assert themselves as beautiful and seductive; far from being savage, as full of benevolence and love, for themselves and for the audience. This reversal of norms aligns with the goal Butler assigned to queer performativity, but working with the violence endured by bodies more specifically takes the form of care.

Neither Butler nor Bruta fully interrogate this dimension. For Bruta, the issue is not so much care as creating a space for reflecting on relationships to racialized trans bodies, and a desire to externalize violence. But what is the point of externalizing violence if it is not addressed? By performing ugliness and savagery, are the bodies not healed from the violence imposed by norms, especially as the audience's gaze on them changes? As I mentioned, Mombaça emphasizes this dimension, asserting that the redistribution of violence is a form of care for one's own body, healing the wounds left by norms. Self-care is freeing oneself from the violence produced by colonial and cisgender norms, thereby enabling reconstruction in a different way. This aligns with Merlin-Kajman's interpretation of "cathartic reception" as the conversion of witnessed and endured violence into a non-violent force, in contrast to traumatic reception, which simply repeats violence¹⁹. The perspective of political care also resolves the ethical dilemmas posed by the mere reproduction of violence, with negativity as the sole political force of resistance. It allows us to think of the productive power of queer arts, irreducible to a negative or nihilistic force. This perspective departs from Halberstam's who, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, proposes understanding queer art solely through the negation of social relations, the failure to conform to heteronormative society, following Edelman's lineage²⁰.

The care enabled by *Bixarada* can be linked to the concept of "self-care" in Audre Lorde's *A Burst of Light*. Caring for oneself when afflicted with cancer, or when subjected to racist, transphobic, queerphobic, and sexist violence, is not an act of "self-indulgence", a contingent luxury. According to her famous formula in the epilogue, self-care is a vital necessity, an "act of self-preservation" and "political warfare"²¹. Since care becomes necessary for survival, one must confront the political structures that make this care both necessary and impossible. It is not care understood as personal healing facilitated by a specialist, needed to recover from individual trauma; it is political care, understood as collective healing, enabled through the redistribution of structural violence, and a vital necessity for marginalized bodies to heal from the social norms that exclude and wound them. Care can be understood both as work—a task carried out with attentiveness—and as dream,

¹⁸ As Fanon shows in Chapter 6 of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, it is the fantasy of Black sexual violence that underlies white phobia. Also, Joseph A. Massad claims in the introduction of *Desiring Arabs* that sex has always been an important feature of Orientalist fantasy (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁹ H el ene Merlin-Kajman, *L'Animal ensorcel e : traumatismes, litt erature, transitionnalit e*, Paris, Ithaque, 2016, « La catharsis ».

²⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011. Even though he will criticize Edelman's project as too binary (p. 120), Halberstam proposes to think, starting from Edelman, "a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess", grounded in the queer art of failure (p. 110).

²¹ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*, New York, Ixia Press, 2017, Epilogue : "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

a creative space in which a better future may be imagined²². Care is a form of utopian labor, vital for those who confront systemic violence.

Performance becomes a therapeutic-political instrument: the expressed violences are redistributed and reversed, giving the means to free oneself and heal. The power of *Bixarada* lies in this dialectic between violence and care, whereby violence is collectively reversed and healed. But is it specific to *Bixarada*, or can it help understand other forms of queer performance?

The Violence-Care Dialectic: The Power of Intersectional Performances

The Violence-Care Dialectic in Queer Performances

The violence-care dialectic could not define all queer performances. Beyond the fact that doing so would risk essentializing queer performances (even though queerness opposes any fixed or universal definition²³), those that are now part of popular culture, among which drag performances, do not seem to involve violence.

Drag culture emerged by embracing the camp aesthetic, defined by Sontag as a way of living in love with artifice and frivolity²⁴. It is this aesthetic that Newton identifies and analyzes in her ethnography on drag culture, *Mother Camp*, characterizing it through three aspects: incongruity, exaggeration, and laughter²⁵. These elements, prominently visible in the international show *Drag Race*, do not involve violence—or at least not in a form as intense and critical as in *Bixarada*. A drag performance most often consists of lip-syncing; it is designed to make the audience dance, entertain them, make them laugh, elicit desire, shouts of joy, and applause. Drag most often oscillates between inspiring contemplative admiration and satirical laughter²⁶. While “queer laughter” always carries political stakes²⁷, this political queer art is entirely different from that described in the first section. My aim is not to essentialize drag aesthetics but to distinguish them from the one analyzed in *Bixarada*. Although this performance is clearly not, strictly speaking, drag, it is nevertheless a trans and queer performance, and can thus be compared with other queer performances.

Drawing on Newton’s analyses to think about drag, Butler’s description of queer performativity—which allowed to understand *Bixarada*—also applies to drag. The drag queen repeats norms of femininity, such as applying makeup or wearing a wig, but displaces and exaggerates them on stage, turning femininity into spectacle, thereby resignifying feminine norms²⁸. From drag performance to *Bixarada*, we confront two types of queer performances distinguished by opposite uses of hyperbolic theatricality: in drag, theatrical exaggeration produces a comic effect, transmitting laughter and well-being to the audience, whereas in *Bixarada*, it produces a tragic effect, conveying violence and discomfort to the audience. Violence is therefore not inherent to all queer performances; it is even absent from those most visible and popular today—those featured on Pride floats or as mascots of commercial LGBTQ+ parties and queer festivals.

Yet, Lemoine’s article demonstrates this: queer laughter turns experienced violence on its head, allowing one to detach from it—for example, laughing at a violent situation one has personally endured. In other words, it performs the same function as the redistribution of violence in *Bixarada*: it is the effect of liberation produced by stage power. Queer shows parodying the coming-out process transform this often tragic and difficult moment into something humorous and light—such as when African American comedian Wanda Sykes announces to her parents that she is Black in her 2009 show *I’m a Be Me*²⁹. Even if violence is not explicitly shown on stage or redistributed to the audience as in *Bixarada*, it remains a fundamental experience for marginalized subjects³⁰. Most drag performances, even the most sanitized, remain marked by the violence the artist has experienced, showing a body that had to endure gender norms before breaking free from them and

²² In French, *soin* and *songe* might both come from the Latin *somniare*.

²³ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1997, p. 66. In this pioneering book, Halperin argues that queerness should be understood as a non-substantial position of resistance to norms.

²⁴ Susan Sontag, *Notes on « Camp »*, London, Penguin Books, 2018, p. 1.

²⁵ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 106.

²⁶ Johanna Fleisher, in her study of New York drag in the 1990s (*The Drag Queens of New York*, 1996), shows how drag identity is constructed in tension between glamour and clowning, aesthetic recognition and subversive humor.

²⁷ Xavier Lemoine, « Naissance des comiques gays et lesbiens américains : le rire queer comme performance esthétique-politique », *Miranda* 19, 2019.

²⁸ I draw both on their theory of queer performativity, already described, and on their famous analysis of the drag queen as revealing the performativity of gender, which concludes *Gender Trouble* (New York, Routledge, 2006, p.187).

²⁹ Xavier Lemoine, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ Erribon shows clearly in the first part of his *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Fayard, 1999) that LGBT+ identity is formed through the violence of insults, assaults, and norms.

displaying actions that construct an identity fighting to continue existing. Even if the audience cannot directly access this violence, it remains implicitly present in the performers' queerness. Violence is thus a core subject of drag performances, which aim to heal through laughter.

In contrast to drag performances, there exist extreme queer performances that explicitly display violence. During some queer techno nights, sets are interspersed with performances in which individuals—who are not necessarily professional artists—practice BDSM on stage. Under the direction of a dominatrix, bodies are whipped, tied, targeted with darts, or laid naked on the floor while drops of hot wax are poured on them. Such performances test the limits of bodies—both performers' and audiences'—to endure the violence potentially present in alternative sexual practices.

These performances can be paralleled with extreme body art, in which the body is altered, abused, burned, or cut. Californian queer performer Ron Athey, in *Self-Obliteration#1, Ecstatic*, a 10-minute solo performance created in 2009, frenetically places a blonde wig on his head, then removes it to reveal a bloodied skull pierced with needles. Lemoine notes that, for Athey, blood is a means to fluidify gender by making his body susceptible to change³¹. Similarly, French queer artist Mona LaDoll, in her performances, inserts needles into various parts of her body and ingests flammable materials; in *Cabaret Genève* (2024), she staples papers onto herself containing messages from the audience after reading them aloud³². While this type of art intersects with our analysis of violence in *Bixarada*, the care dimension is less explicitly addressed. Both Athey and Mona first display their bodies covered in blood; the effect on the audience is one of horror, and the movement by which *Bixarada* gradually produced a caring relationship with the audience is no longer as active. Nevertheless, even if the care dimension is less explicitly articulated, political care remains the horizon of violent performances, uniting the audience around a collectively renewed relationship with violence and sexuality. Through blood, Athey and Mona seek to create something beyond violence, using violence to produce a space of reunification.

This journey through various queer performances, from the least violent to the most extreme, reveals a persistent presence of violence and care as a political horizon. The difference with *Bixarada* lies in the explicitness of violence as an object and care as a goal. This performance transforms the relationship between performers and audience by showing—so as to problematize—the violence of norms and the possible care in response. Drag performances rarely go as far in explicating violence, nor do extreme performances fully articulate care. *Bixarada* reveals forces that silently animate other queer performances, forces that appear with full dialectical power in what is contradictory and challenging: hurting in order to heal. Consequently, it seems like this dialectic emerges with particular intensity in performances by queer and racialized artists. A striking example is *Diaspora*, the show by Soa de Muse (season 1 of *Drag Race France*), which brings together multiple racialized drag artists. While the show begins with conventional lipsynch performances, everything collapses when Soa de Muse, at several moments directing her anger at the audience, finally explodes, forbidding the audience to laugh, insulting them, and gravely asserting truths about the rise of racism and fascism, before moving into the crowd. Under a red light, accompanied by the dark electro music of Teto Preto, *Gasolina*, she performs jerky movements with a white light bar, threatening the audience. This sudden eruption of violence radically disrupts the drag aesthetic, which usually aims to entertain without harming the audience. The show then seeks to rebuild a connection with the audience, healing the expressed violence through multiple scenes of sisterhood, following a dynamic similar to that observed in *Bixarada*.

It is important to clarify that my approach is not essentialist at any point: I do not wish to claim that violence and care define queer performances, but that they render queer performances powerful and effective, doubling their effects and bringing artists and audiences together around a shared tragic experience and the necessity of confronting it. This thesis advances a political and aesthetic analysis of strategies of resistance enacted through queer performances, rather than an ontological claim about their nature.

Intersectional performances reveal the violence-care dialectic

The most salient specificity of *Bixarada*, also shared by *Diaspora*, is that it is performed by racialized trans people, who make this intersectional identity the primary material of the show. What if it were precisely the intersectional dimension of these performances that enables them to reveal the dialectic they convey?

³¹ Xavier Lemoine, « Métamorphoses du genre : le sang et la technologie dans les spectacles de Ron Athey et Kate Bornstein ». *La fabrique du genre*, dir. Claude Le Fustec et Sophie Marret, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008.

³² It is this kind of queer art that Halberstam has in mind when defining darkness as the fundamental dimension of queer aesthetics (*op.cit.*, p. 96).

To explore this hypothesis, it is necessary to clarify the key notion of intersectionality. Coined by Crenshaw in her analysis of how the legal system addresses violence against Black women, the concept describes the way multiple social identities (gender and race) intersect to produce forms of disadvantage — and, in some contexts, privilege — that cannot be fully understood when each identity is considered in isolation³³. She justifies, in the first section on structural intersectionality, that Black women do not experience racism and sexism in the same way as Black men or White women. Faced with the same patriarchal violence—being beaten by a husband—a migrant woman must contend with problems very different from those of a white citizen: choosing between her domestic safety and her administrative security, risking expulsion from the country if she leaves her marriage, especially if she does not belong to a wealthy class³⁴. Intersectionality qualitatively alters the experience of violence, potentially making it more intense and unmanageable. In this extent, the racialized trans women of *Bixarada* experience sexist, racist, and transphobic violence at a degree of intensity unknown to those who do not share their identity, which makes them capable of making the mechanisms of such violence visible.

Furthermore, Bruta analyzes how her political identity intensifies her relationship with performance. According to her, the daily life of a trans person is experienced as a performance: one must consider the gaze of others, style hair and clothing accordingly, to ensure proper passing³⁵. To that extent, Bourcier suggested that cross-dressing be understood not merely as a trans practice but as a “performance” proper, insofar as it calls into question the very notion of gender³⁶. Similarly, racialized people know they are observed and judged by white gazes that racialize them, constantly called upon to perform for them. Bruta observes that in festive contexts, it is often racialized people who animate “white parties” as they often come from more festive cultures. Consider ball culture, now popular and present in queer festivals: white audiences gather to enjoy the voguing of racialized queer artists³⁷. This aligns with Fanon’s analysis of the central role of dance in colonized cultures, which serves as a way to release stored colonial violence³⁸. Bruta concludes that the intersection of trans and racial identities constitutes a hotspot for an intensified relationship to performance, characterized by constant attention to the gaze of others—this is precisely performance as a theatrical act: acting for the gaze of others³⁹. Hence, performance becomes, in the face of an intensified experience of violence, the necessary instrument for self-care. The dialectic of violence and care is most clearly manifested in intersectional performances, where racialized trans people encounter violence with such intensity that it demands attention, and where performance functions as a vital practice, providing an indispensable means of healing.

To better grasp the power intersectionality confers on queer performance, let us return to the moment of rupture analyzed in *Diaspora*. This corresponds to what Muñoz terms “disidentification”, a strategy through which minority subjects create a space that departs from the majoritarian fictions of identity⁴⁰. In chapter 4 of his work on performances by racialized queer people, he analyzes the “terrorist drag” of Black artist Vaginal Davis⁴¹. Davis parodies subcultures from which she is excluded, such as the Black Power movement, largely queerphobic, and commercial drag art reduced to entertainment. Instead, according to Muñoz, Davis proposes “a queerer drag” that enables imagining ways to subvert norms by creating discomfort in the audience’s desires. In a performance in Manhattan, she embodied Clarence, a white heterosexual militiaman whose white supremacism was so “hot” that he underwent gender and race reassignment to embody it⁴². Her drag, both funny and violent, allows disidentification from commercial drag as well as dangerous identities, revealing and interrogating violence at its root. The predominantly white audience is led to question its relationship to whiteness, whose hegemony is complicit in heteronormativity. In a similar movement, Soa de Muse uses her performance to disidentify from *Drag Race*, with which she is closely associated, by provoking the audience

³³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, « Mapping the Margins : Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color », *Stanford Law Review* 6/43, 1991, p. 1241-1245.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1249.

³⁵ Passing refers, for trans people, to the ability to be perceived as a cis person.

³⁶ Sam Bourcier, *Queer Zones*, *op.cit.* p. 142-145.

³⁷ The popular festival “Intérieur queer” held every year in Lyon in July includes among its events a large evening ball organized by the House of Revlon.

³⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, *op. cit.* p. 57-58.

³⁹ I do not distinguish performance from theatricality in this article, but I understand performance as a theatrical act—that is, actions carried out on a stage in front of an audience.

⁴⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications : Queers of color and the performance of politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 4-8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93-115.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

in its voyeuristic stance. Disidentification as a tool of intersectional performances involves both forces seen in *Bixarada* and *Diaspora*: producing violence by placing the audience in discomfort, in order to transform and heal them from the norms that constrain them.

The show by non-binary, racialized artist Millepertuis, titled *Soin*, allows to take this idea further. Here, violence is expressed not through bodily action but through words: Millepertuis recounts sexual violence endured, those suffered in hospitals, and those they wish to inflict on their body under dysphoria. The first two lines read: “I want to tear off my skin / I want to cut off my breasts”⁴³. However, this violence is counterbalanced by non-violent bodily gestures, by acts of care performed on their own body, through harmonious and gentle dances, and a calm voice. The performance ultimately becomes a space of political care, inviting the audience to practice breathing exercises under the artist’s guidance. It constitutes an alternative care space, critical of healthcare institutions that are often queerphobic, sexist, and racist. At the end of the show, Millepertuis lists the items in their medicine kit, revealing queer and racialized care instruments: queer when relating to gendered products—testosterone and injection afternoons; racialized when of non-Western origin—Tiger Balm, incense, traditional medicines⁴⁴. Even though the violence here occurs only through words, it remains the explicit object the performance seeks to reveal and heal. The intersection of trans and racial identities thus provides a privileged site for studying the power of queer performances.

Conclusion: Intersectional Performances Reveal Queer Performativity

Intersectional performances reveal the dialectic analyzed in *Bixarada*, as both the intensified experience of violence and the recourse to performance as a way of life stem from the same intersection. My analysis has focused on a specific intersection between trans and racial identities, but similar investigations could be pursued with regard to other intersections. Intersectionality has thus been mobilized as a tool to better understand the power of trans and racialized artists to perform the violences they experience, and, by extension, the power of their performances themselves. Violence and care endow many queer performances with strength, enabling them to be simultaneously aggressive and critical—by addressing minority experiences and placing them at the center of their purpose (violence as object)—and constructive—by producing new critical communities and by healing individuals through collective ways of facing the world (care as objective). Here lies a core power of queer performances, which, like any strategy of power, is neither given nor necessary, but always contingent and to be achieved.

Just as Butler argued that drag performances reveal gender performativity⁴⁵, I contend that intersectional performances reveal queer performativity. They make visible a political force inherent in queer practices: the repetition of experienced violence in order to exaggerate it, thereby enabling liberation and healing. This points to a central dimension of queer performativity as revealed through intersectional performances: not only does queer performativity rely on performances that repeat and hyperbolize, but it is also particularly effective when enacted by those whose experiences of violence are more intense and whose relationship to performance is more deeply rooted as a vital practice of self-care, allowing for an expanded capacity for action. While queer performativity can exist independently of intersectional performances, the latter constitute privileged instances through which its political potential is made visible and unfolded. This argument does not aim to essentialize individuals on the basis of their experiences; rather, it seeks to observe how social experiences are both differently constituted and productive of subjectivities and practices.

This idea aligns with the feminist concept of “epistemic privilege,” as developed by Harding, which holds that social positions shape the quality of knowledge produced: minority groups, who are most subjected to normative violence, possess the privilege of gaining a deeper understanding of normative mechanisms, thereby achieving greater objectivity in their analyses⁴⁶. Here, the focus is not on truth-claims but on the performance of care. It may be argued that intersectionality confers a “performative privilege,” enabling the redistribution of normative violence in order to overcome it.

Queer critiques of commercial drag—from *Drag Race* to comedic cabarets designed for heterosexual audiences—derive from this idea: the depoliticization of drag, which accompanies its institutional normalization, often stems from a lack of intersectionality (the majority of drag performers remain white,

⁴³ My translation. Original text : “*J’ai envie de m’arracher la peau / J’ai envie de me couper les seins*”.

⁴⁴ A text co-written in French with Millepertuis and Flora Lecomte, analyzing this performance, is currently being published as a chapter in the forthcoming book *Herbier queer*.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁴⁶ Sandra Harding, « Rethinking standpoint epistemology : what is strong objectivity ? », *The Centennial Review* 36/3, 1992, p. 437–70.

cisgender, able-bodied, thin, and affluent), obscuring the systemic violences it could reveal and the necessity of performance in response. Only when violence is experienced as an intensely unlivable condition, and performance as a necessary mode of political care in response (as has been the case since the beginnings of ball culture), does queer performance appear at its highest level of political potential, fulfilling its most necessary functions and pursuing its loftiest goals.

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