

Enacting Dissent: Towards a Cartography of Dissenting Performatives in the Greater Caribbean

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“I now know that if you shout and shout and shout a truth, eventually, someone hears it, and sometimes if you are really lucky, and if the words are just the right pitch, the crowd will shout along with you.” (Chin 2007, 363)

What does a performance do? What is its performative force? What is the relationship between politics and performance art? These are recurrent questions in the field of Performance Studies, and different answers have been given over the years by scholars and practitioners, ranging from positions which consider that effecting social change through artistic practices is an utter impossibility to more optimistic approaches that argue that, by critically engaging with social life, the arts can contribute to giving way to more equitable societies. The first part of this essay reviews some contemporary approaches relevant to the study of the relationship between the political and the aesthetic, which center the discussion around the ability of the arts to enact spaces of “dissensus” as a necessary step toward alternative configurations of social life. In this direction, both Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière argue for the critical role that the arts can play in generating counter-hegemonic practices and spaces that pose a challenge to neo-liberal “consensus.” Drawing from the understanding of dissensus that these two authors develop, I suggest exploring the workings of “dissent” as a performative affect that mediates the reception of decolonizing performatives across transnational stages. I contend that the affective circulation of dissent beyond the space of performance gives way to the collective creation of spaces where dissensus can emerge. My reading of dissent can thus be conceptualized as a particular manifestation of *rasanblaj*, as one of the possible “assemblies” or “regroupings” of dissenting affectivities across the Greater Caribbean to which Gina Athena Ulysse refers. In an attempt to point to the ways in which dissent can be enacted through performance, I will first provide an in-depth analysis of the work of Jamaican-American spoken-word poet and queer activist Staceyann Chin. Once the basis for the workings of dissent have been established, I will point to different ways in which dissent can be used as a heuristic tool for the analysis of other aesthetic projects that aim at producing critical accounts of material life in the Caribbean region and beyond.

Dissensual Aesthetics

In response to Frederic Jameson’s contention that aesthetic production has become an integral element in the (re)production of capitalist logics in postmodern times and has therefore lost its ability to challenge Western hegemonic ideologies (Jameson 1991), Chantal Mouffe argues in

her article “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art” (2013) that novel forms of aesthetic resistance have emerged in recent years in the cultural and artistic arenas. In her work, she identifies two main strategies that are related to the kind of relationship that those she calls “artists” establish with institutions. On the one hand, those advocating for a “withdrawal from” institutions claim that the contemporary art world is so bound up with capitalism that artists working within the system cannot but reproduce its hegemony; they therefore aim at constructing alternative social forms outside state power networks. On the other, a position she finds more productive, artists and activists work through “engagement with” institutions, as the means through which the constructedness of the real and the workings of particular hegemonies are revealed. For her,

critical artistic practices do not contribute to the counter-hegemonic struggle by deserting the institutional terrain but by engaging with it, with the aim of fostering dissent and creating a multiplicity of agonistic spaces where the dominant consensus is challenged and where new modes of identification are made available. (Mouffe 2013)

Mouffe develops her notion of “agonistic space” as an alternative to the conceptualization of public spaces in liberal democracies as those terrains where “rational consensus” is negotiated. In the agonistic approach, hegemonic projects are confronted in the public space, and it is precisely there that dissensus emerges. Of particular interest for this understanding of dissent as a performative technology that I put forward here is her contention that “critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate” (Mouffe 2007, 4). This idea is related to Jacques Rancière’s understanding of “dissensus,” rather than consensus, as the essence of democratic politics (2013, 38), and also to his consideration of art and politics as analogous practices in so far as “each defines a form of dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible” (2013, 140). In Rancière’s view,

if there is such a thing as an “aesthetic of politics,” it lies in a re-configuration of the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation. Correspondingly, if there is a politics in aesthetics, it lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience. (2013, 140)

By implying that (critical) art can contribute to social change by affecting the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2013, 141) and/or by encouraging agonistic contestation and the creation of new subjectivities (Mouffe 2013), both Mouffe and Rancière point in their theorizations to the Butlerian performative dimension of aesthetic practices. In a similar light, but referring more specifically to performance in the Latino/a Americas, Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García identify in their introduction to “Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands” (2012) the existence of a set of performative practices that engage in “de-colonizing performativity and antics,” characterized by generating “a pause in the activity of coloniality” (3). The disruption in the colonial ethos that these performances enact can therefore

also be thought of in terms of a reconfiguration in the distribution of the neo/post-colonial perceptual framework. But how exactly do artistic projects and performance pieces enact de-colonizing dissensus? To what extent and through which means can the performance of dissent on a stage affect larger public arenas?

In order to address these questions, I suggest exploring the work of selected contemporary Caribbean diasporic performers who offer hints on how their performance works can help generate dissensual spaces and politics. In this project, dissent is conceptualized as a performative affect that emerges out of the combination of the various meanings the word “dissent” conveys. On the one hand, the fact that it can be both a noun and verb with no change in pronunciation points to the performative dimension of the term, in the sense that “the expression of dissent” enacts dissent itself. Furthermore, its usage as “to *publicly* disagree with an official opinion . . . or set of beliefs” (Merrion-Webster; emphasis added) effectively captures the kind of intervention in public hegemonic discourses and spaces that this project seeks to tackle. Finally, tracing the term’s etymology, which comes from the Latin word *dissentire*—which means to “differ in sentiment”—points to the centrality of affect and emotion in the creation of collective dissensual materialities.

Along these lines, dissent is conceived as a particular type of affect that, as Sarah Ahmed (2004, 120) would put it, accumulates affective value through circulation, and it will be used here as a heuristic tool for the analysis of the type of intra-actions (Barad 2003) that the work of Jamaican-American Staceyann Chin puts into play. Dissent, I will argue, functions as a performative affect that contributes to the shaping of plural collective bodies of decolonizing dissensus. Shifting the focus from the individual performer/performance and its possible effect on audience members to the ways in which dissent is collectively created and re-created in the affective ebb-and-flow of performative intra-actions will shed light on the ways in which aesthetic practices help create the conditions for the emergence of more egalitarian partitions of the sensible.

Enacting Dissent

Staceyann Chin is a Jamaican-American spoken-word poet and novelist, who moved from Jamaica to New York City in her twenties and who started her career as a professional performer by reading her poems at open mic nights at the Nuyorican Poets Café in 1997. Over the next few years, she won several Poetry Slam contests and staged her poetry at different queer of color events. In 2000, she staged two Off-Broadway, one-woman shows, “Hands Afire” and “Unspeakable Things,” and she became a national figure in 2002 as a co-writer and performer in the Tony Award-winning show, “Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway.” Her performance practice exemplifies in manifold ways how dissent becomes performative, i.e., how it is validated and it accumulates affective value through circulation.

In her works, Chin deals with issues of social justice along gender, sexuality, and racial lines, and she articulates the centrality of a Black Queer feminist consciousness in her performances. The link between politics and aesthetics in her work is clear, as she defines herself as an activist who “care[s] about Black people, and lesbians, and girls, and children” (2007, 365). She does not consider being an activist a choice, but rather as “the only way to hold on to the better parts of my human self. It is the only way I can live and laugh without guilt” (2007, 364-65). These are some of the ideas that I suggest materialize in her aesthetic practice through the enactment of decolonizing dissent. In my view, in Chin’s work, dissent towards consensual commonsense figures prominently as a performative technology in the various material-discursive dimensions that give way to the creation of dissensual spaces in the theatrical live event and beyond.

At the performatic level, it is important to notice the different kinds of scenarios (Taylor 2003) that spoken-word poetry and slam poetry re-activate on stage. In spite of the fact that Chin’s performances take place on almost empty stages, with only the performer and a microphone as actors, these genres point to a longer history of Black and Caribbean oral poetic traditions. On the one hand, as popular verse performance, slam poetry’s origins can be traced back to the Beat movement, the Black Arts movement, and even the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, as Susan B. A. Somers-Willett has argued (2009, 39-67). In her view, it is the performance of ideas of “blackness” as a combination of racial, class, and national politics that links all these aesthetic movements to contemporary expressions of Black identity politics in slam. It is perhaps more clearly Black Arts artists’ understanding of performance as a tool for political change that firmly establishes the enactment of dissent as a central discursive framework for the staging of Chin’s work. Her aesthetic dissent is rooted, however, not in a hegemonic masculinist strand of Black Nationalist ideology but in the Womanist/Feminist tradition represented by Audre Lorde or bell hooks (“Poem for the Gay Games”), Zora Neale Hurston (“Jazz”) or Lorraine Hansberry (“In response to Danish”), as the multiple references in her poetry suggest.¹ US Black (feminist) aesthetics and politics is not the only frame of reference enacted in Chin’s performance. As a Jamaican diasporic performer, her art is also closely connected to the rich Caribbean oral poetry tradition of Louise Bennett, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean “Binta” Breeze, and Mutabaruka. The centrality of post-colonial dissenting views in the works of these authors also figures prominently in Chin’s palimpsestic scenario. Her body and accent function on stage as a repository of the de-colonizing struggles of Caribbean and Afro-Diasporic populations against colonial and neo-colonial materialities.

The importance of audience responses in the dynamics of slam poetry contests places affect at the core of the performative practice. As Somers-Willett explains, “Audiences don’t merely listen to a poem: they react to an entire performance of verse, at times performing right back through applause, spiteful hissing, or comments shouted to the poet or slam host” (2009, 17). In her view, this is precisely one of the main characteristics of slam poetry as it “aims to actively engage and entertain its audience, sometimes confrontationally, through live performance” (2009, 19). This engagement is facilitated not only through the competitive format, but also

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through content, as slam poetry is “largely dedicated to the ideals of democracy, equality, and diversity” (2009, 20). The rant tone and use of politically charged language contribute to the creation of a space where dissensual politics can emerge. It is, therefore, through the mobilization and circulation of dissent as a performative technology that the affective experience of slam poetry materializes. However, as Chin herself recognizes, creating a dissensual space in a theatrical venue is not the same as enacting social change in the larger world. Acknowledging the limitations of the slam format, Chin distances herself from what she calls the “staged revolution,” emphasizing instead the need to take the drive for social change beyond the space of the theater:

I don't want to be just a slam poet anymore
No today I want to write from a place
where I can change lives
and change peoples and change places
cross over boundaries between cultures, and sexes, and races
...
I want to write
...
poems that reveal the flaws
that make up strikingly real people
real poems
poems that are so honest
they slam. (Chin 1998)

In his analysis of this same poem, Jack Halberstam contends that, even though Chin starts the poem with an acute self-reflective critique of slamming as a genre, the last lines of the poem suggest that “the slam *is* true history, *is* revolution, and may just change the world by changing the *word*” (2005, 169; emphasis in original). In doing so, Halberstam points to the ways in which the enactment of dissent can contribute to opening up dissensual spaces in larger public arenas. I would like to suggest that, in Chin’s work, dissent acquires affective value through circulation, not only as it moves among audience members in the live performance, but also as it leaves the room in their minds or as it reaches spectators through TV shows or YouTube video clips, and even as the performance is reported in the press or in scholarly reviews. I contend that her artistic practices consciously help to create the conditions for the emergence of new partitions of the sensible and new subjectivities through the staging of dissenting politics, particularly towards the recognition of LGTBQ rights. She does so not only in the United States, where, apart from performing in theatrical venues, she regularly participates in activist events, creating spaces for the enactment of queer-of-color politics in the public arenas, but also in a transnational framework. As an openly lesbian diasporic Caribbean performer, she actively denounces the prevailing homophobia in her natal Jamaica, where, as Rosamond S. King argues, “Caribbean lesbians do not exist” (2008, 191), as they are

almost completely absent from representation in hegemonic Caribbean discourses. King denounces that, in recent years, Caribbean lesbians “have become more invisible . . . gone *more* underground because of the increasingly vocal homophobia . . . and through the growing conviction that to live *openly* as a Caribbean lesbian, one must, or should, emigrate” (2008, 192; emphasis in original). Chin’s own experience corroborates that migration is sometimes the only available resource for lesbians in Jamaica, as she makes the decision to move to New York City after escaping an attempted gang “corrective” rape while a student at the University of West Indies.

Upon her first return to Jamaica years later as a professional performer, she is anxious and does not know what to expect from the country that expelled her:

I first went home to Jamaica, as a professional performer, to read for the Calabash writers’ festival in St. Elisabeth. I had no idea what my family’s response would be. I was already on HBO’s *Def Poetry Jam*, and had appeared in many on-air performances. The island had already seen what I do. I was afraid I was going to be stoned off the stage for my overtly lesbian politics. . . . Much to my surprise, the audience applauded and was deeply moved. (2007, 364)

Even though Jamaican audiences do not always react in such a positive way and homophobia continues to play a dominant role in Jamaican politics,² the fact that her performative practice was well-known and well-received by many suggests that the affective circulation of dissent that her art sets in motion does contribute to the creation of dissensual spaces in Jamaica, spaces in which openly lesbian subjectivities can emerge. Even if this is not the reality yet, as King’s argument sustains, by contributing to the visibilization of the effects of homophobia in Jamaican society, Chin’s activism points to the role that arts can play in foregrounding new sensible materialities in which Jamaican lesbians can come into existence without having to migrate.

Towards a Cartography of Dissenting Performativity in the Greater Caribbean

As I have argued throughout, in certain Greater Caribbean performances, dissent can be understood as functioning as a performative technology that mediates the political and the aesthetic. My analysis of Chin’s work suggests that it is through the enactment of dissent in discursive-material intra-actions and its affective circulation in and beyond the space of the live performance that this work contributes to new configurations of the ways in which the possible is conceived. Even if, as Chantal Mouffe contends, critical artistic practices do not bring social change *per se* and therefore cannot replace political practices (2013), the enactment of critical dissensual performativity does help open up spaces where coalitional dissensus can emerge. It is in this sense that the conceptualization of dissent that I developed here can be read as a particular manifestation of Caribbean *rasanblaj*, as well. The gathering of dissenters in the physical or virtual encounters that critical aesthetic projects enable gives way to “acts of opposition and resistance,” (Ulysse

in Elliott) in which alternative realities can come to life.

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Notes

¹ For an in-depth analysis of the tension between masculinism and womanism/feminism strands in the Black Power movement, see for example, Joseph, Peniel E. 2006. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. New York: Routledge; Rabaka, Reiland. 2011. *Hip Hop's Inheritance: from the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books; Gore, Dayo F., Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard. 2009. *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*. New York: New York University Press; Hill Collins, Patricia. 2006. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

² As she herself admits, "Some performances are received with open palms; others, I am booed and almost thrown from the stage" (in Olson, 2007, 364).

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