CONTEMPORANEITY, COMMUNITY, FEMINISM, TIME AND ANDREA FRASER’S ‘MEN ON THE LINE’

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For her performance *Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism KPFK, 1972* (2012), Andrea Fraser transcribed and memorised a 1972 radio broadcast, in which four men earnestly discussed their commitment to the feminist movement. Sitting alone on a stage, she then re-vocalises their decades-old words, verbatim – channelling the multiple male subjects through her isolated female body. In order to carry out their discussion on her own she has to enact the dynamics of the group, interrupting herself, sitting back and listening to herself, agreeing and disagreeing with herself – and ending up in a brotherly group hug amongst herself. There are no props or costumes, but through Fraser’s performance a conversation that happened in Los Angeles in the early 1970s leaves its historical confines and infiltrates the present – where it feels awkwardly outmoded, while also bringing occasional reminders of unrealised radical potential that was left in the past.

At the time of the original radio broadcast, each of these men – Everett Frost, Bob Kruger, Jeremy Shapiro and Lee Christie – self-identified as feminist. De-embodied and re-embodied in the twenty-first century, their conversation is at times quaint, patronising, confused, embarrassing and infuriating – but it also moves us with moments of surprising tenderness and confessional honesty, as well as flashes of a collective longing for a world that never came. The audience laughs when, through Fraser, one of the men proudly congratulates himself for being ‘fully cured’ of his former sexism; and when another reveals that although he understands the necessity for women’s groups, he can’t help but feel that when they meet they’re all talking about him, and it ‘scares’ him because he can’t be there to defend himself. While their narrowness and arrogance make us cringe and retreat, when these voices from the past occasionally articulate concerns that still have relevance and urgency, distinctions between ‘now’ and ‘then’ – between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – start to break down.
In an interview about the work, Fraser has recalled that when she was transcribing and memorising the audio recording of the forty-year-old conversation, it was important to her that she maintained ‘all the “uh-s” and the “um-s” and the “you know-s”, and where words are repeated or sentences are unfinished and so on,’ even though this made the process more challenging. This attention to every minute kink in the original spoken language gives the piece a dimension of intimate naturalism; it would make for an extremely lifelike rendition of the 1972 group discussion – if not for the obvious lack of naturalism in the fact that all the lines are delivered by one woman, who appears as herself in the present. So while there is a laborious faithfulness to the historical material, the work is clearly not a citation of a period piece. It recasts things at a distance, allowing different bodies, and different times, to open up through each other.

I saw Men on the Line in Amsterdam in December 2014, as part of the Performance Days presented by the feminist curatorial collective If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution. Fraser has staged the piece several times since it was commissioned as part of the Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980 festival in 2012 – but for this particular iteration she did something she had not done before. Coming out of the lonely group hug that marks the end of the 1972 conversation, she(they) then invited responses from their(her) audience. A roving microphone was passed around and audience members tentatively formulated some comments and questions, but Fraser expertly deferred them all, saying, ‘I’d like to hear your thoughts on that,’ observing quietly, and becoming ‘an audience to her audience,’ as she later put it.

During this unscripted, open-ended, add-on ‘question time’, it was not at all clear whether or when the performance had actually ended, and whether or how much the performer was still performing. Were we to ask Andrea Fraser about what she had just done, or were we still in 1972 with Mr Frost, Mr Kruger, Mr Shapiro and Mr Christie? Rather than breaking down the fourth wall, this ambiguous invitation to engage with the figure(s) on stage made the time of the performance, and the time that it channelled, hover above the room – suspended, but not sealed off. We found ourselves with the historical past as well as its future, as the time after the performance also became time during the performance.

Playfully embracing the possibilities of this temporal entanglement, one woman in the audience took the microphone and addressed the men as if she was in the past with them. She singled one of them out (I forget which), and asked him to imagine, for a moment, that there might come a time in the distant future when there would be a third wave of feminism. The man (Andrea Fraser) did not respond, but this amusing provocation called on all of us to imagine our present from the point of view of 1972. The perspective suddenly flipped from backwards to forwards, which meant that the clarity and simplification that hindsight offers were no longer available to us.

It can be extremely humbling to try to think of ourselves as the future, from a position in the past; to try to imagine what feminism today would look like to people in the midst of earlier struggles, when their actions were not yet historicised, their oversights not so easily identified, their hopes not yet crushed.

Given that feminist struggle is ongoing, what sort of relationships to its pasts should we be fostering in the early twenty-first century? And what sort of feminist contemporaneity would allow us to maintain conversations across and between times, without constructing normative linear narratives? From our present position it is easy to see that the version of feminism proposed by the so-called ‘second wave’ – at least in the USA in the early 1970s, which is the context that is staged in Men on the Line – was riddled with blind spots and shortcomings. ‘Women’s lib’ too often meant liberation for cis, white, middle-class women and cis, white, middle-class women only (tellingly, the 1972 conversation between these feminist men lacks any proper consideration of issues around class, race or gender binarism). But while important work has clearly been done to get beyond this exclusionary short-sightedness and draw out more sophisticated and intersectional feminist critiques and practices, we also need to avoid treating time simply as a neat series of acquisitions and accumulations that lead into an advancing present.

Standard timelines of feminist history usually start with Mary Wollstonecraft or the suffragettes, and lead through various achievements and developments, up to the present day. But timelines require us to pretend that time actually moves forward in a single straight line from a beginning to an end, and we soon encounter problems. For instance, starting the narrative around the nineteenth century with a ‘first wave’ is extremely limiting – because solidarity and resistance against patriarchal oppression existed long before the word ‘feminism’ was coined, and, more crucially, because in order to radicalise
our approach to time we need to give up on the idea of fixed origins all together. Likewise, if we posit the idea of third wave feminism as simply our correc-
tional improvement upon earlier failures and inadequacies, we fall back on the
same patriarchal logics of linearity and dichotomy.

In trying to conceive of feminist history without relying on or deferring to the
conventions of chronology and periodization, we might be tempted to give
up on the wave metaphor altogether. But while the separation of feminism’s
‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ waves can perpetuate notions of compartmentalisa-
tion and homogeneous progress, the image of the wave also holds possibilities
for thinking about time differently. Waves might seem to follow one another
in sequence, but the same force that propels them forward also drags them
back. They move in multiple directions at once, pulled by currents and undercur-
rents, as well as the gravitational tidal cycle that is always out of synch with the
mechanical clock time of our 24-hour day.

If we stand at the shore and try to count the waves ... one, two, three ...
we soon lose track because it’s impossible to pinpoint clear beginnings or
endings. Waves are also abrasive; by turning stone into sand they undermine
our notions of permanence and solidity, inviting us to rethink time as
a multi-directional and unpredictable force of change.

In her work on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman revives feminism’s
wave metaphor by honing in on the undertow as a movement that pulls back,
beneath the surface. Focusing on examples of feminist reenactments and
embraces of the ‘outmoded’ in contemporary art practices, she proposes the
notion of temporal drag, where ‘cross-dressing’ involves crossing temporal
boundaries. Dragging always has something to do with displacement and relo-
cation: when I drag on a cigarette or drag a file to my trash, I make something
disappear – but when I drag an object through space it is usually with some
weariness or reluctance, some likelihood of leaving residue behind. When time
drags on it moves tediously, as if weighed down, resisting the pull. More than a
lazy embrace of anachronism for its own sake, or a safe tribute to a former radi-
calism that is now locked away in an absent past, Freeman’s notion of temporal
drag involves asking what time has dragged along, what it leaves in its wake,
and where it has resisted, or been neglected by, the onward march of history.

43 E. Freeman, Deep Lez: Temporal drag and the specters of feminism.
In Time binds: Queer temporalities, queer histories
The gender-transitive performativity in Fraser’s *Men on the Line* also involves a dragging back in time, so that boundaries between the past and present times become porous and unstable. A conversation from 1972 is carried over into our time, word for word, without updates or added commentary. But far from simple repetition or clean continuity, we find that the present can force a rethinking of our inherited stories about the past — and encounters with the past can pose disconcerting questions to the present. The temporal drag at work here offers, in Freeman’s words, ‘a *productive* obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backward, and a necessary pressure on the present tense.’

Watching Fraser drag this group of men across time and into one body, I was reminded of the late-nineteenth century poet and playwright Michael Field. He was two women, Katharine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper — aunt and niece, co-authors, and cross-generational lovers for four decades. Behind the socially approved singular male pseudonym, Cooper and Bradley published around forty works of poetry and verse drama. In an article about the queer temporalities of Michael Field’s life and work, Kate Thomas observes that they often looked back to earlier times while dreaming of a future time, when they would receive the literary immortality they thought they deserved. For Thomas, this sense that Michael Field always wrote for a different era, shows ‘that they feel historical and that this feeling derives from their embrace of a specifically broken, interrupted teleology.’ Michael Field, Thomas writes, ‘theorized a queer futurity: they lived their afterlives as simultaneous to their lives; they saw themselves as coming after themselves.’

Like Michael Field, Fraser’s *Men on the Line* poses certain challenges to normative language, which often asks us to distinguish between past, present and future tenses, as well as between male/female and singular/plural pronouns. Fraser has made several works where she teeters between monologue and dialogue while performing an entire cast as one body. In *Men on the Line* she remains seated in the same place throughout, but moves masterfully through subtle shifts in her body, depending on who is talking. By pluralising and decentralising her ‘self’ in this way, she reminds us that every one of us is already many. Bodies and selves are not unitary or bounded

44 Ibid. p. 64.

entities; they’re disjointed, interpenetrative and always capable of becoming other. And the more we allow for this plurality, the better placed we are to apprehend and enact the multiplicity of our contemporaneity.

The contemporaneity I want to propose here is one that eschews notions of ‘nowness’ based on novelty for its own sake, and combative advancement into the future. It is a contemporaneity that allows instead for unexpected affinities and solidarities to be forged across perceived chronological, generational and historical boundaries – and for unrealised futures to be excavated from other times. In this mode of being together in time (being ‘con-temporary’), possibilities exist not just in the future that we invent or wait for, but in the past that history has already trampled over, left out, moved on from. Power tends to rely on and perpetuate understandings of time where the more recent is more developed and more equipped, by virtue of having inherited the achievements of its selective pasts. But feminism can help to destabilise this by reminding us that time is not an unbroken string of victories. Feminism teaches us to be sensitive to what is not there, and concern ourselves with the losses and suppressions that our reality is founded on.

When the author Jeanette Winterson was asked in an interview about how Harold Bloom’s notion of the ‘anxiety of influence’ applies in her work, she dismissed the idea as ‘a boy thing.’ Male writers might feel the Oedipal urge to kill their fathers, Winterson commented, but the competitive rush to negate the past seems less relevant for women writers. Rather than feel anxious, Winterson said she feels ‘shored up and supported’ by those who have influenced her work. Pointing out that, historically, there were far fewer ‘private ancestors’ for women writers, she remarked:

It’s getting a lot better now, but it’s still new for us, women haven’t even had the vote for a hundred years, we are finding our power, our creativity, we can’t go back a long way and say “there’s a woman doing what I want to do” – so there is a difference; far from wanting to kill anybody off – Jesus, you want to keep everybody as close to you as you can because you need them all!

You need them all. This is a relationship to the relevant past that courts pan-temporal community, based on care for marginalised voices that have come

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before us. Winterson points out that the pool of women writers from which one can draw influence is relatively small, but this is not just a statistical matter. By keeping our ‘private ancestors’ close rather than going on a macho killing spree in an attempt to redefine the world from scratch, we already pose an affront to the patriarchal (and interrelated capitalist and colonialist) logics of competitive advancement based on division and conquest. The idea of contemporaneity then becomes less about finding what’s ‘cutting edge’, less about distinguishing the most recent time from other times – and more about rethinking time itself, in order to find its alternate paces, rhythms and paths.

Contemporary art in recent decades has shown increasing interest in archives and historical relics. In contrast to modernist dreams of the tabula rasa, and the avant-gardist drive to negate everything that came before, this mining of the past can allow for a sense of temporal multiplicity that doesn’t perpetuate notions of unified linear progress. But in order to really radicalise our understanding of time, engagements with history as artistic material need to go beyond uncritical acceptance and mimicry of former positions, or lazy, nostalgic heroisation of past figures. We need to avoid treating all times as a soup of neutralised equivalence – and we need to be especially cautious of gestures that take on the imagery or language of a radical past from a safe distance, without actually having to act out any of the politics that are signalled.

The re-enactment in Fraser’s Men on the Line is both incomplete and in excess, reminding us that every body is already a plurality, and every self a cast of characters; just as every time is a gathering, and a fracturing, of many times. Because time is not a condition that our bodies merely inhabit; it’s something that we generate, and continually rework. Faced with the political past’s cringe-worthy limitations as well as its downtrodden possibilities, we are reminded here that things could have turned out differently – and, by extension, that they still could.