

PERFORMANCE AS ITS OWN COUNTRY

An interview by Alvis Choi with Camille Turner

This interview took place on March 16, 2016 at Crossroads, York University, Toronto. The interview was conducted as part of a research for my Master's studies at the Faculty of Environmental Studies. My final portfolio, supervised by Dr. Jin Haritaworn, is titled Fantasies of Time and Space: Queer of Colour Performance as Transformative Strategy. I interviewed Camille Turner (and Tom Cho) for the key component of my portfolio, "Out of Time, Out of Place: The Queer Landscape of Fantastical Performance." Among many other things, we discussed the transformative nature of queer of colour performance, as well as its time-and-space-transcending ability. I am immensely grateful for Camille for agreeing to being interviewed and for the knowledge that she and I have co-produced during this two-way process. It is my hope that this work will bring insight and affirmation to those who perform, those who don't and those who aspire to.

Alvis Choi: Performance has offered me ways to cope with situations but also to transform myself in some way. As a queer person of colour, I am curious to find out how queer of colour performance can be used as pedagogy for different marginalized communities that might or might not identify as queer. In addition to performance as an artistic expression and instead of looking at performance only from the perspective of the audience, I am also interested in knowing what happens within the performer.

Camille Turner: Yes, yes. I think this is fantastic. I've always thought that [performance] is an incredible tool for self-making.

AC: Yeah. And I think people don't talk about it enough.

CT: No they don't. I always thought it would be so cool to use it as a tool in leadership. A friend of mine who is a ceramicist uses clay as a transformative tool, and he uses it in leadership training [at the Banff Centre]. I always thought performance is so perfect. I know how it's helped me, so I think it would be so great.

AC: I am doing this interview for research purposes, but I am also just extremely interested in your work and very excited about this opportunity of talking to you about it. To start, I want to ask you about your most well-known work as Miss Canadiana. Was that your first performance?

CT: It wasn't really my first performance, but it was my first kind of major piece and it's kind of how I became known. I have done performance before that. But this one somehow really caught the imagination of the people that saw it.

AC: Can you tell us about the conception of the piece?

CT: Yeah. It was a strange, strange piece - it was almost like, I didn't make it. It made me, you know? Somehow it just came to me, descended itself to me. It used me as a vehicle for bringing something important into the world that had to be there, you know? It came to me in a moment of, to me, crisis. I was walking through this really white town [in North Bay] and people were staring at me. I felt very much like an outsider, someone who didn't belong. And it wasn't like that was an unusual situation for me. I find myself in this kind of situation a lot, but at that moment, it was just like, this moment of the irony of this multi-culti-nation. *[Giggles]* It just made me smile, like all of a sudden, this image of myself as [a hometown queen], or the embodiment of that dream just came into my head, and it just delighted me, you know? *[Laughs]*

AC: When you were creating it, was it a pleasant process?

CT: It was a weird process! I was like “What is this?” because it just wouldn't leave me. It was an idea that came to me, and it was, you know, this funny delightful thing that came into my head at that moment that made me feel all of a sudden not, um, self-conscious anymore - it was just kind of like funny. It was like having a joke - “Ooho, those people over there,” you know, looking at them and suddenly seeing them naked. That's how it felt. So I just thought, okay, that's that, get on with the rest of my life. But no, that image and that idea just grabbed a hold of me and would not let me go. And so, it took years before I actually performed as Miss Canadiana and I think the reason why is because I just kept thinking that it was silly. Like: “Why are you still thinking about it?” But it just wouldn't let me go, so I thought, “Okay. Alright, alright. I'll just do it.” I remember the first time [when I performed Miss Canadiana] – I didn't even have a proper gown or anything. I just had a red skirt and a red top and I went and got myself a ribbon, and some stick-on leathers. I just kind of made this homemade sash. I didn't even have a tiara. I had one of those funny little Canada hats with the maple leaves on it. I think it was 2001, Ottawa, Canada Day. [There was] this huge crowd at Parliament Hill, and I was walking there with this outfit on. And I was thinking, “Oh my god, everyone is just gonna think I'm a crazy woman.” I could hear just whispers - people were like “Oh! There's Miss Canada.” [*Laughs*] And I felt really kind of self-conscious at first, and then I realized they couldn't even see me. Like, they are not seeing me, they're seeing somebody else. They're seeing *her*. That's when I realized the power of this thing. ‘Cos I could just sit back and relax, do whatever [*laughs*] in my mind, you know what I mean? And, *she's* performing. They're seeing her. And they're interacting with her and, you know, there's something really empowering about that. [*Giggles*]

AC: And so, when you first did it, were you part of some arts festival?

CT: No.

AC: You just...?

CT: Ya, exactly.

AC: You just walked down the street?

CT: Ya, I just walked down on the street! *[Laughs]*

AC: And did you have some friends helping you?

CT: Ya, I had some friends shooting it. I had one friend sort of walking in front of me, making way. *[Laughs]* My entourage. And then I had another friend behind shooting what was going on.

AC: You were talking about that image you had before you started doing it, that image being stuck in your head, and you are embodying this person when you perform Miss Canadiana. When you were embodying this person, how did you see the world differently?

CT: Oh.

AC: Or, if you can compare before and after.

CT: Totally different than me. That was the thing. She just had this, um, she just loved everybody and just was all happy happy joy joy, and saw the world as this beautiful place. She wasn't jaded, like me. *[Laughs]* She would just really embrace everybody. And she's just this being of love and people really feel that. And that's the thing that I find so interesting - there's a genuineness that happens when she encounters people. There's just this real feeling of barriers being melted and it's a real experience you know? A lot of times when I'm interviewed by the press, I noticed reporters are always fascinated by the fakeness of it all. But, it's not fake.

Nothing fake about it. It's a real moment that happens. I'm not impersonating someone. This persona exists. And it's created by the people that she encounters. It's the encounter that creates the persona. So, I see it as something real, not something fake.

AC: What do you think it is that made this persona so happy and joyful?

CT: That's a very good question - what is it that makes her so happy and so joyful. I feel like I haven't really come to the bottom of this so it's really hard to answer that question. I feel like, you know, we all have different kinds of things that we could choose to focus on any one of these things. Sometimes it's hard for me to harness my inner joy but it's like, she is my inner joy. She *is* that side of myself. It's like taking all those feelings, those pure feelings and putting them in one package so in a way, it's a choice when you focus on one particular thing. Um... yeah, I feel like maybe she didn't have the same experiences growing up as a little Black girl. *[Laughs]* All-white school and, you know, she didn't have those experiences. She's drawing on something completely different here and so that's why she's able to be this happy happy joy joy kind of a person. *[Laughs]* So it's kind of transcending my own experience. *[Laughs]*

AC: I'm relating what you're saying to my own experiences as a performer, similar experiences that I've had. When I was doing [this sci-fi performance](#) about people transitioning into a transparent species, I would be on the subway and my head would loop: "Haha, these people are all gonna transition."

CT: *[Laughs]* It's great. Isn't it? *[Claps]*

AC: It was like "I don't even care if you are white or not" because I was living in the fantasy of everyone being transparent. I wonder if you had any similar moment like this when creating your work.

CT: That is true. I feel like [performance] is this kind of transformative device, you know, at least I think I see it as a transformative device. It's a way of transforming the world, for me, but also for other people. And I don't control their experience. They have their own experience. They sort of come to what I'm putting out with whatever they bring to it, whatever they see is what they want to see. I guess I'm kind of a mirror. But I'm offering this opportunity to transcend. And a lot of people take it and it's wonderful. It's like for one moment we can revel in something completely different here. And I think Miss Canadiana is really kind of a strange piece because it's a lot of things that I don't know still, because I'm only on one side of it, you know? And I would *love* to know what people are experiencing. But I have the feeling, too, it's kind of, um, it kind of really demands that people interrogate their own response to this image. So they have to grapple with that. I don't. I don't grapple with that at all. What I'm experiencing is something completely different.

AC: You performed it once at TAFFI, the Toronto Alternative Arts Fair International. There is a video of it online and at the end of the video, the audience were told that you were just performing and they were surprised.

CT: Yes. It was an art festival. I find people are very different when they don't know I'm performing, when it's not an art event, when it's just the public - on the street sort of thing. Art really frames it in a different way. And so, I love non-art opportunities - to just *be*. At a performance in Germany, a friend of mine who spoke German overheard people being excited about having met Miss Canadiana. For them, this was not an art project - they didn't know it's an art project. They're just like excited 'cos they met some celebrity - Miss Canadiana. And I just, I love that, just those kind of moments that cross into real life - they *are* real life. I just really love that spillage.

AC: How did your projects, including Miss Canadiana and other ones such as the [Afronautic Research Lab](#) and [The Final Frontier](#), if at all, change how you view the world, or how you live, after each performance? How did they impact you internally? For example, as a prompt, with

Miss Canadiana, did it make you a more joyful person?

CT: Well that's a very interesting question. I think what I learnt from all of this is that, um, we're always choosing. An identity is something that you choose - you can put on, you can take off, you can transform. It's nothing fixed. And that's what I learnt. It's really interesting. We're more powerful than we think. I don't always remember that though.

AC: And when you do these performances, do they remind you of that?

CT: Yeah, absolutely. Even in Lethbridge, you know, in the [Final Frontier video](#), you see people saying silly things, but they really want to, genuinely want to do the right thing. They want to figure it out and be on the right side of whatever it is that's happening. So there's this will that people have, I think, to transform themselves, or to... yeah, to find something. They're willing to work. I feel like these performances are work. They are not easily consumed though they can be. As I'm saying that I'm thinking about some crazy things that had happened. I just remember going to Sault Ste Marie. I remember performing as Miss Canadiana, someone says, *[impersonating the audience member's voice]* "And where are you from, dear?" *[Laughs]* I thought, "What?" So I just kind of pointed to my outfit. And she goes, "Oh yeah, well as soon as I said it, I wish that I could take it back." *[Laughs]* There's that. There were these kind of moments, these awkward, weird moments that happened as well. And I remember at the McMichael Gallery Miss Canadiana was hosting this tea [event] and this woman said exactly the same thing: "What's this about? Multiculturalism?" So I said, "So, if I was a white woman, would you be asking me this question?" I threw it back at her. There's these opportunities to speak back that I don't necessarily, you know, always have. And I feel like it's not usually spoken, though the symbol is so potent that it really speaks volumes right there. You don't need words, you know? But sometimes when the words come, it's really interesting. 'Cos then people really see themselves you know? Since I've done these kind of embodied performances, I've also done performances that I write for other people to do, like the [sound walks](#) for instance. And it kind of allows me to transcend my own self and my own body and allows other people into the

performance in a different way. And there's more a sense that they're in the center of the performance and that's really interesting and potent to me too. I really wanna explore that more.

AC: What is it in performance that you think makes those dynamics of systemic oppression more visible?

CT: I feel like performance is so visceral and visual that it can communicate beyond words. I feel like sometimes words really get in the way. Words are not my natural habitat. I feel like that's why performance works so well for me. Because you can express multiple things at once, you can express contradictions. You can express things in a single gesture, single moment that would be difficult to try to capture in words. And so I feel like it's a very very rich way to express things but also to understand things, to learn things, to open up spaces, to open up discussion. Yeah, I find performance an incredible tool and country. *[Laughs]*

AC: What do you mean by “performance as a country”? *[Laughter]*

CT: Well it's kind of like its own country.

AC: Can you tell me more?

CT: Yeah... It's like taking something with you... maybe like visiting a country? Maybe it's like a suitcase or something. *[Laughs]* Maybe it's more. It can be portable but it doesn't necessarily translate the same way wherever it goes. Whoever encounters it is gonna bring their own thing to it too, right? And so, it's kind of a place people participate in together. Maybe it's a sandbox, I don't know. I'm trying to come up with that analogy to really capture what it is that I feel. But I feel like it is a place though - there's some sort of place in it. And it is a place that can move, but it does change depending on who's in it. Yeah, that's what I think.

AC: It is a place you said. How would you describe the temporality of it? Is it a different

dimension? Is it a simultaneously existing place?

CT: Sometimes other places far away, in a completely different world. When people come into the Afronautic Research Lab for instance, they are entering a completely different time, and place. Something that might look familiar in some ways - there are elements that are familiar, but you almost can't recognize it because it's transformed. It's something different. It's, um, it's a journey, right? People are travelling to a completely different dimension. I don't know, for me, this is so much about time travel. And I love the way performance allows you to do that - to bring people with me, you know? And people are so willing to go there. I love that.

AC: How would you describe this time travel? What do they do when they participate in this journey?

CT: I think it's, um, sort of switching off the regular ways of thinking and it allows other things to emerge. I'm sure not everybody's like that, not everybody can do that. But I feel like if people are willing, they can really experience something completely different than they normally experience in regular life and I think that's the potency of performance.

AC: What about for you? Does time travel - specifically traveling to the past through being a futuristic persona - make a difference in how you see these different issues?

CT: It does. But I feel I'm always thinking like that anyway. *[Laughs]* It's the way I think right? Or else I couldn't create these things.

AC: Tell us more?

CT: I think it's really important to transcend the now, because it really gives you a perspective on what's going on. If you can stand over there and look at this room, you see more of the room and you see the context. Whereas if you're inside of it all the time, you're not really gonna get to see

how it sort of fits into something bigger, you know? So I use the past *and* the future as ways of looking at the present, you know? I've always been really interested in history and I've always been really interested in the future. But I really think that these are ways of understanding now. Now makes no sense unless you understand what happened in order to make this moment. And now can make a lot of sense if you understand what the possibilities are. So the future is really important as a way of making now a potent moment, like a moment that has agency and importance, right? So, I think both are very important and I think in that kind of non-linear way. So, performance just seems perfect - it's my natural environment.

AC: In Miss Canadiana, you perform a persona that is, as you describe, happy and joyful. How do you think this “optimistic” persona affects the audience’s reception?

CT: What I found so interesting was I tried doing a performance where I wrote about this enslaved woman named Peggy Pompadour. I wrote the script and I performed it. But it was so weird. It was flat. It just really didn't work.

AC: You mean as part of a walking tour?

CT: No. I performed it live, for a class actually, here at York, on a stage. And it just was flat. It didn't work at all. It just didn't work. I think the reason why - and I wrote about it in [my paper](#) for this journal - was it released this angry Black woman scenario and that's what people were responding to, and it's just like the switch went off.

AC: 'Cos you were “just you”?

CT: I was channeling Peggy Pompadour and trying to imagine what it would have been like for her [as an enslaved woman in Toronto’s past], you know?

AC: So first person narrative.

CT: Yeah. Didn't work. Did not work. But when I told the same story as Miss Canadiana, people were just like [*mimicking admiring sound*]. They were just all over it. They loved it. They wanted more. They wanted to please Miss Canadiana, you know? And it was so interesting to me. It's like "Whoa, that was fascinating." But the angry black woman? Honestly it's just this trope that totally turns people off. So it's like, what do you do when there's this righteous anger, when you really need to represent evil in some way? How do you deal with that? Does Miss Canadiana go far enough? How can I explore these histories? How are people taking these up? I'm always grappling with the history piece and I'm still grappling with that now.

AC: How does queerness play a role in your work?

CT: I guess it depends on how you define queer?

AC: You can define it in your way.

CT: Okay. So for me, it's about questioning. It's about questioning what seems to be on the surface, to be one kind of streamlined homogenous place and really interrogating that and rupturing it, and creating like a whole other world, or revealing a whole other world. Because it's not like it's not there. It's just that it's not seen. So I guess ripping back the veil. I think this kind of work is so much about space so it's really, to me, queering a space is transforming the space.

AC: What role does fantasy play in your work and also in everyday life because of your experience as a performer?

CT: Well... oh, fantasy is so interesting. For instance, when I did *Hush Harbour* it was the first time I worked with sound as a pure kind of medium. And it really made me aware of sound in a different way. We're always surrounded by sound. It's just this thing we're bathed in all the time but it's kind of like a fish doesn't know it's in water. We don't really take in sound as our

environment. Fish don't know they're in water, unless they've been taken out of water. It's when you come up against the boundaries and borders that you realize what you're in. And so, for me, working with sound has been this huge revelation. I feel like I'm constantly aware of it now. And also I started doing these performances where I lead sound walks, and I basically invite other people to come into the experience of just listening. So that's what we do - we just walk in familiar places and listen. I've done some here where I see people - and I just love it - people just like sitting there and listening to the grasses, [giggles] or just taking in just the things that are around us all the time but all of a sudden being aware of them. So I feel like this has really awoken something in me - just to be more aware of the world that I'm in.

AC: And how does that relate to fantasy?

CT: Well that's the thing. I feel like you don't have to go that far to look for fantasy. It's all around us all of the time. I have this little box - I put prompts in it, sound prompts, and I love just taking cards out randomly and asking people to perform whatever is on the card. One is "Listen for traces from the past," another says "Listen for evidence of alien life" [giggles] - things like that. So just kind of... when you sort of attune yourself to a frequency then you catch whatever that is on that frequency. And so I feel like that's what this practice enables me to do - to attune myself, and also to bring other people into that experience, and so, yeah, fantasy is never something far. It's something that's always here.

AC: And sound for you is like a tool or a conduit to fantasy?

CT: It's a conduit. Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. It's a conduit. That's a good way to think of it.

AC: Who would you have been if you had never performed?

CT: Oh my god.

AC: Or the other way round, how are all of these performance projects shaping who you are?

CT: Wow. It's weird to think about myself as never having performed. I just can't even imagine who I would be. But like honestly, I think we're always performing. We're always performing a version of ourselves. And it's not always the same person that we are performing, you know? We are performing different versions of ourselves for different audiences. *[Laughs]* And so, I think of performance in that way. It's just being aware that I'm performing and being aware that I have a choice. That, to me, is what I've learnt.

AC: When you're not performing, do you feel that sometimes you are taking on those personas too? Do you feel conscious about them?

CT: Yes. I was always really shy. I never liked to speak in public, didn't speak in public, was afraid to speak in public. And I realized early on that Miss Canadiana wasn't afraid and so I remember going to do talks and I could just appear as Miss Canadiana. No problem! I remember the first time I did it without the outfit. And it was really amazing to me.

AC: Do you remember where it was?

CT: Yeah. It was in Lethbridge, actually. Yeah, that same time I was invited to speak at the university. And I remember the guy who came to pick me up said he was a little disappointed 'cos he expected that *she* was going to be there. *[Laughs]* And it wasn't her. It was me! But for me I was very consciously choosing to be myself and to realize that if she can do it then I can do it too. And it was an incredible moment for me, like when I just really *just* let myself realize that. "Yeah she's a separate person but I *am* her." Like "I am her vehicle so I can do this." And I did! And so I feel like that was a really triumphant moment, you know?

AC: And then, was that recurring? Do you just keep taking on the persona when you feel shy?

CT: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Definitely.

AC: That was my last question. Thank you *so* much. Oh my god.

CT: You are welcome! Wow!

AC: That was rich.

CT: Wow! For me too! Oh my gosh. Whoa. Your questions really helped me 'cos sometimes, you know you get stuck in your head?

[Laughter]