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Performing Solidarity: Affirmation, Difference and Debility in Project O's SWAGGA

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Introduction

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines solidarity as: 'Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group.'¹ This definition provides a useful starting point to consider how solidarity can offer one means to think about feminist performance. It is especially useful for collaborations between women who occupy different subject positions in society, according to, for example, class, race, age, ability and body size. In particular, the evocation of individuals who find agreement *in action* because of a common interest provides a productive framework for my analysis of Project O's SWAGGA (2014-15), a collaboration between differently positioned women who, through affirming their differences, also produced commonality and mutual support.

SWAGGA was the result of a collaboration between Project O, a company created by black women dancers Jamila Johnson-Small and Alexandrina Hemsley, and self-identified middle-aged fat white queer activists Kay Hyatt and Charlotte Cooper. It was performed as a dance piece in a variety of iterations across England. The performance had a defiant punk quality, an aspect that was enhanced by the addition of queer punk band Trash Kit live in the later staging of the work at East London's Yard Theatre in 2015. This punk sensibility underlined the raucous affirmation of the subjectivities at play within the work whilst simultaneously offering instances of exhaustion and vulnerability. This juxtaposition of

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3 edition, ed. by Angus Stevenson, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010).

affirmed defiance with fragility made *SWAGGA* a productive example of feminist performance which complicates affirmative representational strategies of both difference and commonality. This contradictory effect, I will argue, was enabled by the specific type of solidarity at the heart of *SWAGGA*'s process, the ways the women involved in the process worked with their differences, and how this materially translated onto the stage.

After looking at *SWAGGA* in detail as well as how Johnson-Small, Hemsley, Hyatt and Cooper discussed the work with me, I consider solidarity as a means to analyse the making and reception of the performance. This helps me examine how *SWAGGA* might sidestep a possible binary opposition Sarah Gorman detects between certain contemporary feminist performance productions. Gorman's 2013 article, 'Feminist Disavowal or Return to Immanence?', seeks to move beyond radically negative and deconstructive approaches to feminist performance, to consider if there is value in reclaiming more affirmative work. She defines radical negativity in performance as work which purposefully presents the body as incomplete or disappearing, for example in the work of Ana Mendieta or Mary Kelly. Recognising the value of radically negative approaches and how they help destabilise the circulation of phallogentric representations of female corporeality, she nonetheless argues: 'to celebrate incoherence when coherence is such a key requisite for success in Western liberal humanist society represents something of an own-goal for feminism and runs the risk of being counter-productive.'²

I am sympathetic to Gorman's claims regarding the potential impasse of uniquely favouring radically negative approaches to feminist performance. However, I want to reflect, through *SWAGGA*, if this can be done without falling back on a – specifically liberal –

² Sarah Gorman, 'Feminist Disavowal or Return to Immanence? The Problem of Poststructuralism and the Naked Female Form in Nic Green's *Trilogy* and Ursula Martinez' *My Stories, Your Emails*', *Feminist Review*, 105 (2013), 48-64 (p. 57).

humanist framework. The risk of falling back on a liberal humanist framework for feminist politics is that this framework has often lacked attentiveness to material factors which entrench domination, often returning to abstracted conceptions of equality based on the promotion of individual rights at the expense of deeper structural change. Thus, I want to instead consider how models of complex and difficult solidarities offered by black feminist Audre Lorde as well as in Paul Gilroy's work on *Rock Against Racism (RAR)* can provide another means to value affirmative strategies grounded in a recognition of differences between women, something liberal approaches to feminist politics can elide. I then consider the role of vulnerability in the performance, using Jasbir K. Puar's concept of debility, in order to consider if the attention given to pain and difficulty in the dance can conversely speak to an implicit commonality between the women. This commonality is not rooted in a universalising conception of the liberal subject but rather through Puar's lens of debility, a mode of 'deconstructing the presumed, taken-for-granted capacities-enabled status of abled bodies.'³ Figured in *SWAGGA* through highlighting physical exhaustion, the debility evoked through demonstrating the effort of dancing has the potential to draw attention to the instability of bodily capacity shared across subject positions. In order to set all this up, I first offer a summary of *SWAGGA* and its creative process.

SWAGGA

The first time I saw *SWAGGA* was as a scratch performance in June 2014 at the interdisciplinary arts venue Rich Mix, a venue committed to programming work reflecting the cultural diversity of its East London location. It was part of a double bill with *Benz*

³ Jasbir K. Puar, 'Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility and Capacity' in *Women & Performance*, 19.2 (2009), 161-171. (p. 166.)

Punany, a performance lecture devised by Hemsley and Johnson-Small, which functioned as a retrospective on the duo's work. This lecture looked back on their previous collaborations, most prominently *O*, a performance about 'being black, mixed and female that addresses awkward and uncomfortable everyday experiences.'⁴ The double billing of the performance lecture and *SWAGGA* under Project *O*'s umbrella made the performances speak directly to one another. This relationship between the performances was further emphasised by the use of wigs in both, worn by Hemsley and Johnson-Small in *Benz Punany* in reference to representations of black womanhood, while in *SWAGGA* they adorned Cooper's breasts to highlight her size. Although the wigs had different styles, their recurrence as a significant prop became a visible way of linking the separate political concerns of both pieces. This version of *SWAGGA* also most prominently integrated elements of Black American culture, such as Coolio's *Gangsta's Paradise* which was sung by Cooper, Hyatt, Johnson-Small and Hemsley together on stage. In the subsequent live version of *SWAGGA* at the Yard in London in June 2015 however, many of these elements disappeared, as the performance gained another element, the onstage presence of post-punk women's band *Trash Kit* playing most of the score.

Punk was a stronger feature overall in this latter version, starting with live music, before Cooper and Hyatt entered the stage loudly shouting at the audience. Cooper, looking directly into the eyes of the spectators, declared she was going to fuck all the women present. Meanwhile, Hyatt, whose onstage persona had been softer at Rich Mix, became more aggressive, strutting up and down the stage swearing. This sequence drew loud laughs from many spectators but also discomfort amongst certain audience members. This unease

⁴ Project *O*, 'Projects: *O*', *A Contemporary Struggle* website, <<https://www.acontemporarystruggle.com/o>> [accessed 09 April 2017].

is expressed, for example, in *Guardian* critic Luke Jennings's review of the show, describing how Hyatt directly accused him of flinching. He admits to this, writing: 'Having your space invaded by a hefty, pugnacious performer can have that effect'.⁵ Jennings pejorative vocabulary to describe the masculine-presenting Hyatt is quite revealing of the type of social attitudes towards fat butch women the show was partially addressing, yet his expressed uneasiness might also attest to the explosive intensity of both performers' entrance. Setting the tone for a defiant experience, the piece then shifted between movement sequences and spoken and sung intervals. Trash Kit continued playing intermittently, the melodic energy adding to the turbulent atmosphere on the stage. The speeches, mostly delivered as direct address to spectators by both performers throughout, were witty and unapologetic. Hyatt informed us that she created not only this dance, but also our bodies, bones, hair as well as the Yard Theatre, the stars and the universe, becoming an assured god-like figure. Cooper informed spectators about how she accounts for her weekly wages and how much she will enjoy counting the physical cash she earns as a counsellor. She then proceeded to list each family member she believes is appalled by her. The dance duets between Cooper and Hyatt alternated between tenderness and aggression, switching between wrestling, playful teasing and gentler scenes of seduction, as Cooper danced topless in front of Hyatt with two black wigs on her breasts. The movement register was precise but expressly not virtuosic, inspired in parts by Cooper and Hyatt's own punk dancing styles, as well as slightly reminiscent of Project O's own movement quality. These shifts between raucousness and gentleness are one aspect of the show which sometimes gave it an affirmative quality, underpinned by the militant undertones added by the live punk music on stage.

⁵ Luke Jennings, 'SWAGGA review: a butch bonanza' in the *Guardian*, 21 June 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/21/swagga-review-yard-theatre-london-charlotte-cooper-kay-hyatt>>, [accessed 03. 11. 2017].

Another prominent feature was the explicit foregrounding of the exhaustion felt by the dancers, one scene specifically demonstrating the increase of their heavy breathing as they wrestled. The refusal of virtuosity was also highlighted in a scene in which both dancers questioned why the audience came to watch ‘two fatties dance’, implying a spectatorial desire for either voyeurism or, as Cooper herself puts it, ‘inspiration porn.’⁶ The final scene was possibly the most tender, as Cooper and Hyatt started singing *a cappella*, gently repeating ‘all the ladies’ love is on me, my god I am magnificent’. As the lights faded, other voices joined in. The members of Trash Kit sung from their position at the side of the stage while Hemsley and Johnson-Small joined in from the back of the Yard’s small auditorium, filling the space with the delicate sound of their combined voices as Cooper and Hyatt disappeared into the darkness of the slowly blacked out stage. This collective singing at the end served as a reminder that although the bodies on stage have been Cooper’s and Hyatt’s, *SWAGGA* is the result of a collaboration with Project O and, in this version, Trash Kit. Yet twinned with the refusal of virtuosity and the commitment to showing difficulty throughout the show, the singing also seemed to express an instant of quiet care, offering a counterpoint to the fragility and rage shown on stage and gesturing toward a broader, shared vulnerability.

In November 2015, I met up with Johnson-Small, Hemsley, Cooper, and Hyatt to discuss the process of making *SWAGGA*. I asked them how they had come to work together and Hemsley and Johnson-Small remembered reading a blog post Cooper wrote about *O*.

⁶ Charlotte Cooper wrote about the process of developing *SWAGGA* in an *Open Democracy* article explicitly framing it as a refusal ‘to be positioned as brave, majestic, unexpectedly beautiful, or reduced to what disabled performer and activist Stella Young has called “inspiration porn”’. Charlotte Cooper, ‘I am a fat dancer, but I am not your inspiration porn’, *Open Democracy*, 11 February 2015, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/charlotte-cooper/i-am-fat-dancer-but-i-am-not-your-inspiration-porn>> [accessed 11 April 2017].

The duo noticed Cooper's post because it appeared to be the only critique that had considered all the themes of *O*, including racialisation and dancing – rather than other reviewers' descriptions of it as a piece focused on gender and sexualisation. Cooper's review sparked an interest in adapting *O* with Cooper and Hyatt, as Project O were already considering reworking the show with bodies other than their own. I subsequently asked Cooper and Hyatt if the question of Othered racialised bodies in *O* was something which had spoken to them as fat activists, influencing their desire to work together on *SWAGGA*.

Cooper answered:

For me, working on *SWAGGA* was also an encounter in thinking about my whiteness and working with black and brown people and about how that might be [...]. But then a big thing in *SWAGGA* for me was about me being old. Old and fat. And there was class stuff in there certainly and something in there about disability too and things that are easily categorisable in terms of identity. And I don't think it is a piece about identity [...]. But yeah it's kinda there and not there at the same time.⁷

When I asked if they understood the performance to be a type of feminist practice, Hemsley declared that maybe the politics were not located in representation but had manifested through how they had collaborated.⁸ Indeed, the collaboration between the different women was not foregrounded through straightforward representation, showing the choreographers on stage for example, although Hemsley and Johnson-Small's presence was felt throughout, mainly through the use of voice. Rather, it was the transmission of props

⁷ Unpublished interview with the author, 18 November 2015, London.

⁸ Mader McGuinness, interview.

such as the wigs and the movement between Project O's earlier work and *SWAGGA* that inflected the collaborative aspect of the piece.

Hemsley explained that for the first rehearsal Hyatt and Cooper were asked to try and do Project O's earlier work, *O*, from memory. As Hyatt expressed anxiety at having potentially ruined the piece, Johnson-Small answered that:

[...] watching you do it was so revealing for us. [...] It's very difficult to speak about dancing and for someone to tell you about your dancing, but if you get someone to do it you get so much and the whole process really has been about us, how (sic) we are and what we're giving to you and seeing how that comes out.⁹

Through watching how Cooper and Hyatt reinterpreted their own dance about being black women dancers, Project O were able to understand how what they were trying to articulate could be reworked through different bodies, and how differing experiences might speak to each other. Rather than attempting to start with a separate conception of what 'fat dance' should look like, Hemsley and Johnson-Small used what they knew, letting other bodies dance *O* to consider what this told them about their own work and their new collaborators. Through centring the performers' bodies, they created a methodology in which a performance about being black women dancers could serve as a starting point to develop work which was partially about being fat and queer. This attentiveness to working with difference is one reason why solidarity might function as a lens to analyse *SWAGGA*.

Affirming difference

⁹ Mader McGuinness, interview.

The question of centring the body as a strategy for feminist representation which departs from radical negativity is something Gorman picks up in her argument. Gorman contrasts radical negative work with two separate performances by artists Ursula Martinez and Nic Green, *My Stories, Your Emails* (2010) and *Trilogy* (2010). What specifically prompts Gorman's argument is the use of female nudity in both works, which refocuses these artists' work on the body. She writes that:

to identify with the female body does not mean identifying with it as the site of the wound, or as the womb; to identify with the body means to be at peace with one's imperfections and to internalise a sense of control over how one wishes to be perceived.¹⁰

Gorman's argument about how affirmed corporeality helps reposition women's artistic work as central is useful, whether that affirmation is achieved through nudity or otherwise. Her assessment of affirmative strategies as a means to 'move away from an identification with the body as a site of lack' is one I am especially drawn to.¹¹ Gorman draws on Rosi Braidotti in order to critique radical negativity, quoting Braidotti's argument that deconstruction can only proceed from the subject position of someone who has gained the right to speak as a full subject in the first place, which women have not.¹² This leads Gorman to seek out the potential humanist value in the celebratory aspects of the works, wondering if her enthusiasm for Martinez and Green's performances has made her, 'if not a card-carrying humanist, then one who is nostalgic for the sense of agency instilled by the illusion of the humanist subject.'¹³ Despite coming from a slightly different perspective to Gorman's, I

¹⁰ Gorman, 'Feminist Disavowal or Return to Immanence?', p. 62.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 57.

¹² Ibid. p. 57. Quoting Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia Press, 1994), p. 107.

¹³ Ibid. p. 62.

agree that the attachment to certain forms of radical negativity in feminist performance can risk reinforcing marginal subjects as essentially incomplete while conversely continuing to privilege the white, male and able-bodied subject as universal. This also has further implications for women who carry additional markers of difference related to race, age, gender deviance, or size.

However, despite her expressed ambivalence towards the liberal-humanist project, it is the fact that Gorman offers up liberal humanism as the only alternative position to radical negativity which troubles me here. To seek coherence and agency, indeed to inhabit one's body comfortably and present it to the world does not necessarily mean returning to a liberal humanist project or turning to liberal feminism. While I cannot offer a comprehensive critique of liberal feminism here, Jill Dolan's succinct description of it in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* is helpful. She writes: 'Liberal feminism takes its cues from liberal humanism. Rather than proposing radical structural change, it suggests that working within existing social and political organisations will eventually secure women social, political, and economic parity with men.'¹⁴ While Dolan concedes that this strategy has had some successes, she also notes that it still rests on the triumph of a few, overwhelmingly white, privileged women, over deeper structural change. This triumph of mainly white privileged women can also have the unfortunate effect of homogenising womanhood, with a certain type of successful woman, *through a certain type of liberal success*, coming to stand in as the model for emancipated womanhood as a whole, thus modelling itself on the androcentric universalist humanism feminism originally challenged. The question then is how to frame affirmative representation without returning to liberal strategies for making

¹⁴ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2nd ed., 2012), p. 3.

or reading feminist work, as this runs the risk of erasing the important differences between women, differences which are central to *SWAGGA*.

The use of affirmation as not only a feminist but also an antiracist strategy is explicitly discussed in the way Project O describe their practice. They declare:

The work intends to expose some of the structural workings of racism and misogyny and their impact on bodies, sparking debate and pushing for conversations about how to live with agency – and a sense of a future – amongst these painful and uncomfortable histories.¹⁵

This echoes how Gorman discusses the politics of Green and Martinez's performances, stating: '[...] both Martinez and Green are performing a belief in the possibility of female agency, in the possibility of attaining the illusion of unity and self-governing subject-hood.'¹⁶ Agency underpins both Gorman's reading of Green and Martinez and Project O's own declarations on what they are trying to achieve in their work. The question of control over one's body image and agency was also an integral part of *SWAGGA*. Insofar as Cooper does indicate that the piece was about 'identity [...] and not at the same time', the scene in which the audience gets accused of wanting to 'see two fatties dance' did draw attention to the bodies spectators were watching, as the performers embraced their corporeality. Drawing attention to Cooper and Hyatt's bodies thus strikes me as crucial to *SWAGGA*'s political stance. As noted by Cooper, who is also a fat-studies scholar, and human geographer Bethan Evans, fat bodies are pathologised as obese in social discourses and are overwhelmingly figured as abject. Cooper and Evans remark that 'cultural and moral ideologies inform medical, popular and policy language with the "sins" of "gluttony" and "sloth", evoked to

¹⁵ Project O, 'About', *A Contemporary Struggle* website, <<https://www.acontemporarystruggle.com/about>> [accessed 12 April 2017].

¹⁶ Gorman, 'Feminist Disavowal or Return to Immanence?' p. 62.

frame fat people as immoral at worst and unknowledgeable victims at best.¹⁷ In this regard, taking the centre stage and singing 'I am magnificent', or assigning oneself god-like powers, as Hyatt did when explaining how she made the universe, are important humanising strategies which counter conceptions of fat people as incapable. Moreover, the bold accusation of spectatorial voyeurism explicitly addressed the fact that the audience were watching fat, atypical dancers, and served as a means for Cooper, Hyatt and Project O to question, and change, how fat bodies are perceived.

Yet there was also an ambivalence present in *SWAGGA*. Although Cooper and Hyatt inhabited their bodies defiantly, some scenes played with negative associations and stereotypes assigned to the types of bodies they have, for example when Cooper highlighted her love of counting cash. Cooper's shameless description of the pleasure she draws from counting cash drew on stereotypes of fat people as greedy – be it for money or food. Neither Cooper nor Hyatt ever fully undressed, although Cooper did perform topless, yet their corporeality and the way the performance was constructed around this corporeality was crucial to the piece. Furthermore, the highlighting of voyeurism coupled with hints towards negative representations of fat bodies is in line with Project O's own ambivalent declarations surrounding agency in their practice. They describe their work as seeking to make sense of the future, yet point to how painful histories inevitably shape how this future can be grasped. In their work as a duo this has taken the shape of referring to practices of blackface and the objectification of black women, through inviting spectators to paint Johnson-Small and Hemsley's bodies with black paint, or replicating hypersexualised dance routines from music videos. In *SWAGGA*, spectators were made to face and question

¹⁷ Charlotte Cooper and Bethan Evans, 'Reframing Fatness: Critiquing "Obesity"' in A. Whitehead and A. Woods, eds, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 225-241 (p. 225).

social attitudes to fat and queer women through confronting their prejudices about the conflation between fatness and greediness or drawing attention to the disgust Cooper provokes amongst her own family members.

Thus the register of the performance moved between engaging with harmful representations of fatness and queerness and declarations of self-love and collective love. This was present in the tender scenes between Hyatt and Cooper and the singing at the end of the show, as Hemsley and Johnson-Small joined in, quietly declaring that they too are magnificent. The fact that the choreographers participated in affirming their worth reminded me of why this collaboration was important. Despite inhabiting different bodies, black and young, older and fat, the collective singing exemplified how this affirmation of worth was vital for all the participants in a world in which each of them suffers specific oppressions. Audre Lorde, Black American lesbian feminist, draws attention to how the recognition of differences between women is key to an effective feminist practice which need not result in a rejection of collectivity. She writes: 'Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.'¹⁸ Arguing for a refiguring of feminist community which creates connection exactly through the recognition of difference in women's experiences across different races, classes, ages and sexualities, she further states that 'community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist.'¹⁹ Lorde's arguments show that affirmation of difference – indeed polarity – between women ultimately strengthens feminist solidarities. Her articulations of the productivity of difference, and her rejection of a feminist practice which seeks to homogenise women's

¹⁸ Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', *Sister Outsider* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 111.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 112.

experience in the name of unity offers a more adequate lens to consider *SWAGGA* than the universalising framework of liberal humanism.

This attention to specificity in collectivity is one of the reasons solidarity presents the most suitable word to describe both the process and the performance of *SWAGGA*, with individuals showing their agreement in action and feeling, here manifested through dance and singing. The militant associations of the word solidarity also suit the punk element added with the inclusion of Trash Kit, punk being a style of music historically associated with particular liberation movements, prominently antiracism but also, with Riot Grrrl, certain feminisms. The inclusion of the band reminded me of Paul Gilroy's assessments of aspects of the cultural expressions of the 1970s anti-racist movement in RAR, a music festival which prominently featured punk bands. Analysing RAR's accompanying zine, *Temporary Hoarding*, he notes its heterogeneity, especially the fold-out poster consisting of collages in which 'Trotsky, Mao, Lenin, The Clash, Bob Marley, Bernadette McAliskey, Polly Styrene, Big Youth, Angela Davis, Arthur Scargill, Muddy Waters and other famous faces were grouped around the slogan "We shall be Free" and the RAR logo.'²⁰ He argues that this visual strategy in what was a main organ of anti-racist propagandising pointed to other struggles alongside icons of black culture, gesturing towards the broader structural context which enabled not only racism but other forms of oppression. This did not distract from RAR's anti-racist concerns, but, according to Gilroy, 'allowed disparate and apparently contradictory expressions of the national crisis to be seen as a complex, interrelated whole, a coherent structure of which racism was a primary characteristic, exemplifying and symbolising the unacceptable nature of the entire authoritarian capitalist edifice.'²¹ Whilst Gilroy's work is

²⁰ Paul Gilroy, *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 127.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 123.

concerned with finding effective models and representations of antiracist practice underpinned by musical expression, his analysis chimes with Lorde's assertions about the importance of difference for feminist community. Indeed both writers underline how linking different oppressions without homogenising them provides effective ways of creating solidarities, while also enabling collective struggle, underpinned in *SWAGGA* by the inclusion of irreverent live punk music.

Tending to pain

The way differences were deployed in *SWAGGA*, a collaboration between very differently positioned women which showed how these differences brought them together, is perhaps the main aspect of the work which led me to analyse it in terms of solidarity. Yet there might be an additional way solidarity emerges in the work, linked to the movement quality in the performance as well as the performers' age and Cooper's assertion that disability also shaped the work.

As previously discussed, the dancing was purposefully not virtuosic, and in one scene, specific attention was drawn to the exhaustion felt by Cooper and Hyatt through emphasising their heavy breathing after they had wrestled. Cooper discusses this as she reflects on choreographies for fat dance, writing: 'Pay attention to the parts of the body where there is pain. Show what pain looks like. Tend to the pain, tend to others' pain.'²² Here pain stops being an obstacle, becoming instead a component of fat dance, based on difficulty, as well as the promise of care. This attention to pain and exhaustion in performance is not in itself an innovation, but I am intrigued by how they figured in

²² Charlotte Cooper, 'What Could Fat Activist Choreography Look Like' in *Obesity Timebomb* (28. 07. 2014), <<http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/what-could-fat-activist-choreography.html>> [accessed 25 October 2016.]

SWAGGA in relationship to Cooper's assertions about the dance's focus on disability and age as well as not being about identity at all. This aspect of SWAGGA can be read through Puar's deployment of the concept of debility, an intervention in discourses surrounding disability and questions of identity more broadly. She elaborates on disability activism's reminder that humans are only able-bodied until they are disabled; she alternatively notes the temporalities of prognosis, mortality and fluctuating instances of sickness and health across human life in order to develop her concept of debility. She argues that the impetus behind considering debility as a framework invites 'a deconstruction of what ability and capacity mean, effective or otherwise', and proposes 'to push for a broader politics of debility that destabilises the seamless production of abled-bodies in relation to disability.'²³

Debility is not, as sociologist Kay Inckle has argued, meant to supersede the able/disabled binary in order to develop a universalist understanding of vulnerability which would run the risk of additionally erasing the crucial work done by disability scholars. Rather, Puar's goal is to complicate this binary. She contends that 'the three vectors, capacity, debility, and disability, exist in a mutually reinforcing constellation, are often overlapping or coexistent, and that debilitation is a necessary component that both exposes and sutures the non-disabled/disabled binary.'²⁴ Thus, she argues for both 'an intersectional critique that destabilizes the white, Euro-American, economically privileged subjects that are most likely to be interpellated as "a person with disabilities"' whilst also 'building off of solidly argued critiques of identity to highlight constantly shifting assemblages of power'.²⁵ In order to do so, she deconstructs the strict separation between able and disabled bodies,

²³ Puar, 'Prognosis Time' p. 166.

²⁴ Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. xv. For Inckle's critique see Kay Inckle, 'debilitating times: compulsory ablebodiedness and white privilege in theory and practice', *Feminist Review*, 111.1 (2015), 42-58 (p. 52).

²⁵ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, p. 20.

as well as the implicit linear temporality which underpins this separation. Her articulation of debility is therefore situated in relationality, calling attention to each body's different capacities at *different times* across life, arguing that the relative fluidity between health and sickness has the capacity to shift our understanding away from identity categories as entities towards identity understood as partially dependent on encounters with others.²⁶

Puar's framework might thus offer an additional means to consider performances resulting from collaborations across differently oppressed subject positions, such as *SWAGGA*, helping to account for the shifting contextual and relational nature of performance events.

Puar's focus on fluctuating bodily capacities is especially useful here as a means to consider both Cooper's assertions about fat dance and *SWAGGA*. In foregrounding pain, and hopefully the care that will follow, as central to the dance practice she developed with Project O, Cooper offers something that expands beyond body size. When exhaustion, pain and care become aesthetic attributes, asking viewers to focus on these attributes draws attention to the potential debility felt in the spectators' own bodies. Purposefully embracing what is socially understood as bodily failure also moves away from the pathologisation of obesity, becoming a vector which highlights debility as a quotidian condition rather than uniquely an attribute of fatness or age. This shifts the understanding of *SWAGGA* as a piece strictly *about* fatness, queerness or feminist interracial collaboration to work which is also about encountering others in a different way. This is echoed by Johnson-Small's comments about how making work is a response to being in the world with other people, which then becomes 'an invitation somehow for a different kind of being.'²⁷ Foregrounding the vulnerability of bodies is one way to evoke 'a different kind of being'. Returning to Puar,

²⁶ Puar, 'Prognosis Time', p. 168.

²⁷ Mader McGuinness, interview.

showing debility in performance might then contribute an understanding of categories such as race, gender, and sexuality as partly dependent on encounters.²⁸ In this account, categories of difference become partly contingent on the proximity of other bodies, creating a solidarity constituted through a recognition of both shared and separate vulnerabilities which emerge in specific encounters throughout time. *SWAGGA*, in this sense, provided a performative example of such an encounter, staging solidarity through debility, thus underlining the potential of collective care across specific subject positions, manifested most prominently in the final group singing.

The defiant quality of much of the work, and how spectators' attention was drawn to the collaborative aspect of the piece through props and singing, as well as the creators' discussion of their collective process, offered a snapshot of how to approach a type of feminist commonality which did not subsume difference, or claim that the specific positions of the collaborating women were directly comparable. Yet it is the conscious performing of physical vulnerability which also created a connection, a connection which linked this vulnerability with the care which will succeed it. Both the affirmative representation of difference in relation and the attention to debility were key to *SWAGGA*'s forcefulness. This is how I experienced the solidarity in the work: both as an attempt to work together from a place of difference, as well as a reminder that the varying capacities of women's bodies are not as distant as their own uniqueness first makes them appear.

²⁸ Puar, 'Prognosis Time' p. 168.

