

**The Queer Archive as Promiscuous Ethics of Care
(Re-)activating transcestor kinship structures in Travis Alabanza's
Burgerz and *Tranz Talkz*
Elisabeth Massana**

Trans artist Travis Alabanza created their play *Burgerz* (2018) around the time of the public consultation for the reform of the Gender Recognition Act, a Parliamentary Act in the United Kingdom to make provision for gender recognition (2018; from here on GRA).^[note]¹ The youngest recipient of the artist in residency programme at Tate Galleries, Alabanza is becoming a leading voice in queer British theatre with plays such as *Overflow* (Bush Theatre, 2020), a response to the policing of public female bathrooms and the safety of trans women, or *Sound of the Underground* (Royal Court Theatre, 2023), a celebration of drag exploring the consequences of the shutdown of queer venues. Throughout their solo play *Burgerz*, they relive a transphobic attack suffered in April 2016. As they walked over Waterloo Bridge in London, at 2 p.m. in broad daylight, someone threw a burger at them and shouted a transphobic slur without anyone coming to their help. As they say at the beginning of the show, 'I think over one hundred people saw and I know no one did anything' (Alabanza 2018a: 7). During the creation of the play, and with the aim of building a sound archive of trans lives, they simultaneously held *Tranz Talkz*, a series of public conversations with trans and gender non-conforming people throughout different theatre venues in the UK. Looking at *Burgerz* and the recorded material from *Tranz Talkz*, this article argues that Alabanza's entangled art project creates a queer archive that 'preserve[s] and produce[s] not just knowledge but feeling' (Cvetkovich 2003: 241). The approach to Alabanza's project through Ann Cvetkovitch's lens reveals how the trans archive generates a practice of undoing epistemic violence, in the sense of countering transphobia, and constitutes, borrowing The Care Collective's terminology, a 'promiscuous ethics of care', understood as activating alternative forms of caring kinship structures beyond the nuclear family (Chatzidakis et al. 2020: 23).

In *Burgerz*, Alabanza recalls their experience while cooking a burger with the help of a cisgender white man from the audience with whom they engage in a partially non-scripted dialogue. In their conversation the artist evokes the colonial legacies and violence of the gender binary itself. They address the audience's complicity in transphobic acts and invites them to acknowledge not only the violence of the act of throwing a burger, but also 'the violence [of passive bystanders] in the surrounding moments after that attack' (Alabanza 2017). The play concludes with Alabanza inviting a cisgender white woman – who stands for the people who witnessed the attack and did nothing – to read a pledge to protect trans people. Drawing on the central element of their show – the burger – the public talks that constitute *Tranz Talkz* were held around tables where participants ate burgers and chips while discussing and sharing the implications of being a gender non-conforming person in contemporary Britain. The recorded conversations are part of the personal records of the Hackney Showroom, and will be archived in the Bishopsgate Institute's Special Collections and Archives. The future addition of the recorded material from *Tranz Talkz* will significantly add to the available trans archives, by collecting the immaterial experiences recorded in conversations that took place in a context of heightened tensions and increased violence towards trans and gender non-conforming folk.

Tranz Talkz and *Burgerz* are performed in the context of clashes between trans activists and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (Chamberlain 2017: 174). As Alabanza stated, '[t]he news is filled everyday with debates about whether or not trans people are a danger to society – but no one is talking about the dangers we face from the rest of society' (Alabanza 2018a). Indeed, one of the consequences of the GRA public consultation was the circulation of a fraught public debate – what Shon Faye has referred to as the 'transgender issue' (2021) – which put trans lives under scrutiny. This spread a series of preconceptions about transness where trans people, and in particular trans women, are accused of being a menace towards cisgender women by occupying women-only spaces, while also enforcing and performing a stereotypical version of femininity which ultimately contributes towards the gender oppression cisgender women endure. As will be shown, Alabanza's project contests this at multiple levels by giving voice to the trans participants in

Tranz Talkz and by activating a pre-colonial history of trans identities in *Burgerz*. To unpack that, I first look at how Alabanza's evocation of pre-colonial gender non-conforming identities functions as 'transcestors' (Heyam 2022: 224) – a portmanteau of trans and ancestors (Gale Hall 2023: 150). Their approach contributes towards archiving and historicizing trans lives away from the Western medical discourses as well as the current rhetoric that present transness as 'new'. I then further explore how Alabanza's archiving of trans lives in the dinner conversations activates a form of care.

Colonial legacies and genealogies of gender dissidence

Dressed in blue overalls and working boots, Alabanza enters the stage, which resembles a warehouse with a giant box at the centre. As they unbox the set, which is dominated by a kitchen island, they recall their accident, how that prompted an obsession with burgers, and their relationship with gender. Shortly, they reveal that they need to make a burger and that they need help from an audience member, ultimately choosing a white cisgender man to help them. The white cisgender man is given a binder with part of the scripted dialogue he is asked to perform. As they start to make the burger with the spectator, Alabanza says:

Two thousand years ago there were Gods that looked like me. And maybe you. Worshipped in their plurality. Existing. Not cast aside. Castrated. Cast away. But seen in their plurality as a strength, not a hindrance. (2018a: 26)

The gods they refer to are historical gender non-conforming identities, who, from a Western perspective, we would identify with non-binary gender expression, such as the Hijra (Hindu society), the Bakla (the Philippines), the Kathoey (Thailand), Two Spirit (Indigenous North American Communities), Quariwarmi (Perú) or the Femminiello (Naples, Italy). While the 'transgender issue' narrative identified by Faye and sustained by Western clinical discourses presents trans identities as 'new', Alabanza's evocation of these transcestral figures restitutes their aborted realities and allows them to intervene in the

current gender binary discourse, as well as in the Western rhetoric of the trans as 'new'. The historical figures never appear on stage – the only physical presence is that of Alabanza and the two spectators asked for help. Instead, they are referred to by Alabanza in the stories about gender they share during the burger-making process. As will be shown, invoking these figures through mythical storytelling, Alabanza offers the audience a pre-colonial genealogy of gender expression while simultaneously underscoring how gender identity and gender expression are shaped by colonial histories and legacies. In short, Alabanza (re-)activates a genealogy of gender dissidence.

Following visual culture theorist Ariella Azoulay, activation denotes a sense of unlearning imperial histories, forms of imperial violence and epistemologies (2019: 10). Following that, Alabanza's mythical storytelling during the play counters the hegemonic imperialist chronology, which, based on the enforcement of the gender binary, understands non-binary and trans identities as something new. I use both *trans* and *non-binary* not as synonyms or as interchangeable terms with the same histories, but rather in a capacious way – following Alabanza (2022) and trans historian Kit Heyam (2022). Heyam's understanding of trans history-making as 'a difficult and messy business' (7) helps us understand what Alabanza is doing in the play with the non-binary categories they are referring to. Alabanza's invocation of the figures of different colonial histories is an attempt to create a sense of community with the past, which Heyam identifies as a profoundly important element of trans history-making (8), and which allows them to 'unlearn with companions' (Azoulay 2019: 16). As Susan Stryker says, '[t]here is rhetorical power in saying trans has a history, and given the fascination with trans-identified people moving successfully into mainstream media production, it's crucial that we assert that history' (Stryker cited in Lehner 2021: 41).^[note]² Thus, Alabanza's incorporation of these figures simultaneously highlights the Eurocentric lens through which gender is examined and establishes a genealogy of multiple gender non-conforming identities.

The genealogy activated via Alabanza's lines in the performance is part of their wider queer project of archiving trans lives. In this case, they render visible the history of gender non-conformity and enunciate who their 'transcestors' are. After recalling a series of violent encounters and instances of

harassment suffered in public space, Alabanza tells the following dream and starts off with the transcestral figure of the Bakla, who, in pre-Spanish Philippine society, were well-respected spiritual community leaders. The dream indicates that current discrimination against Bakla may be attributed to a patriarchal and heteronormative Western colonial heritage:

And I'm floating next to my ancestors in the Philippines. The Baklas. And we are both floating in a time before we were punished. Floating in and out of genders, the Bakla turns to me and speaks in their own tongue. 'We have been creating these words long before they were shouted at us.' (2018a: 48–9)

Shortly afterwards, their dream places them on the finger of a Femminiello, an ancestral figure who embodies a highly esteemed third gender role in traditional Neapolitan culture. Alabanza, surprised, wonders how they can hold them with just one finger. To that, the Femminiello answers: 'Darling, we have held so much more for centuries. We were not always treated like dirt, we were once seen as blessed' (49). The dream continues with the appearance of a Hijra, a third gender figure officially recognized in ancient Hinduism. The Hijra, named Jaan, lovingly tucks Alabanza into bed, bringing them the comfort and security they lack as a trans person in public space. The dream finishes with these words, which are worth quoting at length:

'Isolation is the best tactic of oppression. But I need you to open your eyes, your ears, your heart, and remember that we have been here too. You are not new, you are not the only one, the streets will make you feel like there is no one else, but remind yourself of the lands before they were walked on.' Jaan blew out the candle, as the Femminiello closed the curtains, and the group of Baklas gently pushed me back down to the ground. I opened my eyes to hear you say faggot, and remembered that there was more than this moment. (51)

With this dream, Alabanza aims to unfold potential histories in the current moment, to carve a space of security and care, not only for themselves but for other trans and gender non-conforming people. Concurrently, the space of care also emerges with the tracing and retracing of trans histories, exemplified by the figures of the Bakla, the Femminiello and the Hijra, making evident that gender non-conforming identities predate the very same discourse that upholds and sustains the gender binary. Simultaneously, they recognize the difficulty of so doing by referring to this 'you say faggot', which brings the dream back to the transphobic incident that prompted the show, and to the multiple people behind that 'you' who have attacked trans people in public space. Holding these two realities together, the space of safety to counter the violence depends on the unlearning of a colonial history of gender binaries, which the Hijra voices by recalling 'When they first came over here, said "male or female" and we said "no". They called us a criminal tribe' (50). The heteronormative Western colonial heritage hence appears as a violent one, imposed on a transcestral tradition.

Alabanza's (re-)activation of this pre-colonial genealogy, while risking the homogenizing of different colonial histories by equating all these different figures without providing specific characteristics, functions as a community-making strategy for the present and the future to come. It offers trans spectators an entry to a historical community while countering the narrative of trans lives as new. Alabanza's pre-colonial narrative is therefore not focused on historical fact, nor on offering a detailed image of each of these figures' characteristics; rather, with their retelling and evocation through the performance they participate from a tradition of transcestor veneration and trans coalescence that can be traced back to trans activist Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* (1996) – one of the first publications on transgender history – and that formulates an invitation to connect with other trans identities across time and space.

Communal care in queer archival and conversational practices

Together with creating the performance, Alabanza conducted *Tranz Talkz*, a series of gatherings around the UK where they had dinner with trans and gender non-conforming people.[{note}]³ Gathering a group of trans, queer

people and potential allies around the table, Alabanza continued to resignify the burger – from food, to the weapon of a transphobic attack, to the centre of a healing cooking process in the play, to food again – by sharing it amidst conversations about the hardships of being visibly trans in public.

Before the conversations start, Alabanza introduces the members of their production team present, with the aim of creating a safe space for the participants. They introduce *Burgerz'* artistic director, Sam Curtis-Lindsay, photographer Holly Revel and sound designer Xana, all of whom are members of the LGBTQI+ community – and they remind the participants that they have autonomy in relation to what is being recorded; any intervention they do not want to be archived can be flagged to the sound designer so it can be edited out, voices can also be distorted to prevent their recognition.

Throughout the dinners Alabanza encourages the participants to not only be conscious about their voices, but also about whose voices have been archived and whose voices have not. The event starts with a round of names and pronouns, where participants are invited to share any other information related to their gender variance experience or their reasons to participate in the event, followed by the whole group responding to the person by repeating their name and thus acknowledging their presence. For the duration of the dinner, Alabanza asks questions and invites the participants to record their answers in writing or by drawing if they feel more comfortable with this medium. They also inform the participants that they are free to leave at any given moment, as this is a form of taking a stand, to move around the space, to remain silent and only listen, or to be vocal. Looking back on these series of talks, Alabanza testifies:

I sat around a table with strangers, bonded by our transness, eating burgers and chips and asking them questions about their life. Every single person said they were anxious outside. Most said they edit themselves before they leave the door. Almost all said they were harassed. (2018a:n.p.)

Despite the allusion to transness as bonding in this passage, it is important to note that participants took part in the event freely. Even if the call for the event was issued for LGBTQI+ folk, and especially gender non-conforming people,

this was not a requirement to be present. Thus, at the beginning of the dinners Alabanza asked participants to avoid assuming anything about anyone present, and instead let them tell the room if they wanted to. The different experiences the participants shared served to illuminate how a single experience of transness could not be universalized, and how important the conversations were in offering a multiplicity of examples of living as trans. These helped shed light on aspects of the participants' identity or experiences that also played into the creation of a potential community that the sole shared experience of being trans could not necessarily guarantee. Examples included the difficulties of existing in public space as both trans and racialized (Alabanza 2018b: 24'42"), or a testimony admitting that their experience as a trans woman had been almost entirely positive and they wanted to educate themselves on the experiences of those suffering from abuse in public space (Hackney Showroom 2018d). Comments by participants in smaller areas such as Coventry remarked how their experiences – marked by a sense of isolation – differed greatly from those of trans people in bigger urban areas with a more visible queer community, such as London (Hackney Showroom 2018b). This suggests that while a sense of community could be attained within each individual dinner gathering, it is difficult to assess if a general sense of community among all participants in the different venues was or could be achieved.

Together with the imperialist trope of 'the new' discussed in the previous section, the 'transgender issue' narrative mobilizes a fraught debate that fails to account for, firstly, the systemic and ongoing violence endured by trans people, and in particular trans women and other gender non-conforming femme presenting people, and, secondly, how forms of gender that deviate from the strict gender binary are not recognized by the state either politically or through the institutionalized form of the clinic. In the words of Marxist gender theorists Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, '[t]he chaos of gender nonconformity is reconceived and swept under the organising logic of a racialised, normatively teleological binary transition' (2021: 23). This view excludes and obscures the experiences of those who escape from or do not fit in the parameters of this normative experience and simultaneously normalizes what constitutes violence against trans people. On that note, an interesting point Alabanza makes is that the available statistics about trans experience in public space – they refer in

particular to the statistics from Stonewall – only focus on incidents, but do not take into consideration the distinct forms of aggression and discrimination that happen before these incidents take place.

With this in mind, Alabanza invites the participants to talk first about how they feel when they go outside. In that regard, the dinner discussions point to the conundrum of feeling both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. On the one hand, a gender non-conforming person's increased visibility also means an increased vulnerability to violence. On the other hand, to avoid discrimination or violent confrontations, trans people remain invisible in regard to their gender expression, which results in frequent misgendering. The hyper-visibility they describe leads to most participants affirming that in order to not experience harassment they edit themselves before going outside, to present themselves as more normative, or more in accordance to the gender they were assigned at birth, or the gender people assume from their expression. This editing can take the form of choosing different clothes to the ones they would wear to be less visible, modifying the way they walk or arching their backs to take less space. In the Coventry gathering, a participant describing themselves as an intruder, in the sense that they do not identify as trans, raises the question of whether trans people edit themselves to satisfy others, and/or to what extent that satisfaction leads to feeling less harassed. Alabanza replies that, for them, the distinction between what is a choice for themselves and what is a strategy so they will not get hurt is not clear (Alabanza 2018c: 59'30"). One particularly jarring example is that of a transmasculine person who explains they edit their voice to sound more masculine even if the recurring practice results in physical pain, because it makes them feel less dysphoric (26'05"). Conspicuously, experiences of pain 'shatter language and communication' and reveal 'a connection between the over-representation of pain and its unrepresentability' (Ahmed 2004: 22). Despite this difficulty to fully represent pain, Sara Ahmed claims that 'pain involves the attribution of meaning through experience, as well as associations between different kinds of negative or aversive feelings' (23). In connection to that, participants in the dinner discussions express that being outside makes them feel lonely, anxious, nervous, overwhelmed and/or vulnerable, a series of feelings that contribute to a feeling of pain, and to an overall experience of terror.

Throughout the dinners, the space of the dinner table shared by the participants becomes a counter-public for political discussion facilitated by Alabanza, in which questions of care, empathy and mutual recognition become fundamental. With that, the participants ultimately move care not only from the private sphere to the public realm, but also from the individualistic neoliberal understanding of care as being part of the 'self-care industry' to an understanding of care as communal. In that sense, care is not considered as something we are supposed to buy for ourselves on a personal basis' (Chatzidakis et al. 2020: 3). I understand care here, following Kristof van Baarle, Felipe Cervera and Helena Grehan, as a 'hands-on concept' and a relational form of repair that creates 'spaces and ways of belonging ... and a sense of connectedness so that we can survive the upheaval' (2023: 1). Therefore, care is not only talked about, but also practised throughout the dinner conversations. In the *Tranz Talkz* participants can contribute to the discussions with their ideas and experiences, but they are also invited to observe, sit at the table and just be present as a form of participation. They can sit at the table, and write or draw on the paper tablecloths, or sit at the table and talk. Silence and the so-called 'awkwardness' that results from it in public discussions are welcomed and encouraged whenever they are necessary for the self-preservation and well-being of the participants. In that sense, *Tranz Talkz* understands and makes visible multiple ways of being active in a conversation; ways that go beyond the simple exchange of words. It encourages a conversational practice of recognizing the Other and the multiple forms their agency can take, which are fundamental aspects of a queer feminist approach to public discussion and, in addition, place care at the centre. In that sense, the approach to public political discussions in *Tranz Talkz* is based on a 'feminist ethics of care' (Dowling 2021: 25) centred on responsibility for and towards the Other, mutual recognition and reciprocity.

As part of the same project, the Hackney Showroom recorded a series of short testimonial videos – vox pops – where some of the participants in the dinner conversations were asked about their experiences, as well as what message or advice they would give to trans people in the future. Upon being asked this last question, one of the participants answered:

In thirty years time a lot of the advice that I have for trans and non-binary people is probably going to be obsolete. I can't tell you what websites you will be able to buy cross-sex hormones from, which community centres will be open, or which spaces we are still going to have ... hopefully, there will be a greater degree of acceptance and decent medical care, access to medication or to the pharmacological intervention so that you can be how you want to be. (Hackney Showroom 2018c)

One of the aspects this testimonial touches upon, and which is central in discourses around trans lives and care, is the availability, or lack thereof, of accessibility to hormone replacement therapy (HRT). As stated by Nathaniel Dickson,

[s]ince gender does clearly require work, transgender people need access to the means to produce ours. But the tools available are often both inadequate and out of reach ... If you want access to hormones, you must submit to diagnosis ... this means sticking with an existing framework for understanding gender. (2021: 205)

Against the prevailing hegemonic narrative of the teleological binary transition that requires the validation of the clinic, Alabanza's project opens a space of communal care that creates a glitch in the structures dispossessing trans and gender non-conforming people; it acknowledges multiple experiences in processes of transition while creating an archive that will function as a repository of transcestors for future generations of trans people.

Next to challenging traditional formats of polarizing, public (political) debates, the dinner discussions in *Tranz Talkz* aim at archiving diverse trans lives. Introducing the dinner discussion held in London, Alabanza stated:

I realized there was no archive, no conversation about us existing in public space. Often [the] conversation about queerness and transness is focused on our body, is focused on our before and after, but [it is] not

really about existing. So, I wanted to create these dinner conversations ... to archive us. (2018b: 2'11")

The archive that Alabanza constitutes captures something both material – trans embodiment – and ephemeral – trans experience. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, lived experiences are hard to archive, ‘and the cultural traces that they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation’ (2003: 9). Yet, the trans archive has a profoundly affective power, due to the sound recordings of the conversations. These sound recordings are an important tool to archive ‘forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities’ (9). This resonates with trans studies scholar Jian Neo Chen, who states that trans culture created by trans people ‘provides a vibrant counter-archive at a moment when the state, society, and national body continue their attack on trans people, especially trans youth, trans women and trans BIPOC’ (cited in Lehner 2021: 43–4). Taking all of this into consideration, what Alabanza is doing can be linked to what gender studies scholars Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison describe as ‘tranifest’. In their words,

[t]ranifesting enacts a resistance to the political and epistemic operations that would encapsulate, and capitalize for others, the fruits of our labor. It is a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing. (2014: 223)

Following poet Jay Bernard, Alabanza’s queer archive might be considered as ‘an act of love’, not in the sense of desire and attraction, but in the sense of ‘care and curation’ (Massana and Alsina 2020: 231). This transforms *Tranz Talkz* into a manifestation of Alabanza’s ‘promiscuous ethics of care’ (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). The notion of promiscuous care is developed by The Care Collective as an alternative form of caring kinship structures beyond the nuclear family. Their proposal is based on the idea of ‘families of choice’ developed by LGBTQI+ communities to refer to relationships outside the biological nuclear family, as well as the alternative infrastructures of care that

queer people created to counter ‘the failures of both neoliberalism and hetero-patriarchal kinship in providing adequate infrastructures of care [during] the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and ’90s’ (36). Taking AIDS activist theory as a starting point, in particular Douglas Crimp’s essay ‘How to have promiscuity in an epidemic’ (1987), The Care Collective suggests an understanding of promiscuity beyond the heteronormative paradigm that blamed the AIDS epidemic on the sexual promiscuity of gay men, and instead looks at promiscuity as a way to redefine intimacy, care and interdependence (Chatzidakis et al. 2020: 41). To this end, an ethics of promiscuous care prompts us to extend our care-giving beyond the nuclear family: it recognizes that we all have the capacity to care and that care can be carried out by people with different kinship connections to us (42).

Aesthetics of care in participatory theatre

Alabanza’s ‘promiscuous ethics of care’ in *Tranz Talkz* extends in the ‘aesthetics of care’ in the performance of *Burgerz* (Thompson 2020a: 225; 2020b: 36). Theatre scholar James Thompson derives his aesthetics of care from the feminist ethics of care – most notably explored by Joan C. Tronto (1993) since the early 1990s and more recently updated through a new materialist lens by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017)⁴ – and defines it as an aesthetic practice that puts care at the centre, where ‘the intimate and interpersonal, rather than be ignored, are acknowledged as an important source of our politics’ (2020b: 39). This aesthetics of care ‘seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realised in human relations fostered in art projects’ (43). Both *Tranz Talkz* and *Burgerz* are participatory performances that represent ‘reciprocal acts of caring’ that ‘have a sensory, crafted quality that could be called an aesthetic’ (Thompson 2020a: 215). Following Thompson, these participatory performances activate new ways of thinking about the intimate and the interpersonal, about ‘the practice and the political ambition of that practice’ of care (2020b: 38). It is no coincidence that Alabanza turns to performance as a medium to practise this promiscuous ethics and aesthetics of care. Amanda Stuart Fisher and James Thompson claim that care is intrinsically bound to performance: a performance ‘can only be experienced as

a live, embodied encounter' and hence has a tangible sensory quality; and its 'repeated or "restored" practices and behaviours' are 'always situational and relational', with 'value attached to it' (Fisher and Thompson 2020: 4).

Alabanza's promiscuous ethics of care is manifest in the dinner talks when they explain how the dinner talk will function, and when they publicly recognize that what they all are about to do is quite scary, and that they are scared (2018c: 5'45"). Alabanza acknowledges the same vulnerability in the performance of *Burgerz*, in which they also express their fear when they say 'This feels scary, you... I think I want your help. Can you take my hand? Commitment is scary, right? How do you feel?' (Alabanza 2018a: 19). This is not the only example; quite at the beginning of the show, Alabanza says:

Maybe it is about knowing when you need help. Recognising when you could continue to struggle on your own, but would breathe lighter with someone else. It feels weird because I do not know you, but I do not think this is a prerequisite for help. (17)

Similarly, later in the play Alabanza admits 'I'm so confused. I need you, but I can't tell what that looks like' (47), once again leaning into and revealing their vulnerable position, which following Thompson is a key element of an aesthetics of care.

Alabanza's promiscuous ethics of care also appears in how they interact with the audience during the performance of *Burgerz*. The cisgender white male is never purposely made to be uncomfortable while they are on stage – despite the fact that it is not possible to predict their potential discomfort. Alabanza welcomes the first participant to the stage, and as indicated in the stage direction 'brings out a stool and a cushion from a box at the back' (19). Right after that, Alabanza says 'Would you like a drink? I can get you white wine, red wine, rosé wine, G&T, vodka, Coke (diet as well), water, sparkling or still, Heineken, Carlsberg or... and orange Capri Sun' (19–20). Together with these acts, throughout the whole performance there are recurrent moments where Alabanza checks in with the participant to ensure their well-being while on stage, so that care not only takes the form of reproductive labour. Reflecting upon his own participation in the play, David, an audience member that joins

Alabanza in one of the performances at the Hackney Showroom said: 'Travis is a really honest and powerful performer. I was invited on stage and it felt like a conversation, as much as it felt like a performance, which is really rare, but incredible to see' (Hackney Showroom 2018a).

Alabanza invites the spectators to practise a 'promiscuous ethics of care' too. Two good examples of that are when they ask the cisgender man to get them a glass of water, and therefore invite the spectator to care for them too (41); or when, at the end of the play, they gesture to a cisgender white woman in the audience and ask her to read the following passage, which is worth quoting here at length:

I vow to protect you, more than others have before. I vow to protect you, as in the plural, as in more than just you. I vow to realise that in my safety, in my comfort, in my silence, comes your danger, hurt, and entrapment. I vow to know that I cannot possibly be free, whilst you, the plural, are still hurt. I vow to know that I cannot remain silent when others are hurting, to recognise that silence is part of the hurting. I cannot, on my own, make them stop. Make them turn away. Make them look less. But I know that I can wake up. I know that I can do better. I vow to make sure that every day I go outside I realise that I am not alone, that I am together, with you, the plural, and me, the plural – that there cannot be singular anymore. That we have tried singular, and we continue to fail. My freedom is not just tied to yours, but is not freedom without yours. (59–60)

While in the first example, the cisgender male spectator is invited to take care of Alabanza, in the second one, the cisgender woman is encouraged to perform care for everyone, but, most importantly, for all those trans and gender non-conforming people who are at constant risk of experiencing violence and harassment in public spaces. She is, in short, invited to embrace promiscuity, as are all other members of the audience that she represents in that very moment.

Halfway through her pledge to protect trans lives, which in all the performances I saw was read with a mixture of nerves – understandable, as

public participation can cause discomfort – and emotion, Alabanza hands her the burger they have just cooked, and asks her to throw it at them. In none of the three performances I had access to did the woman throw it, despite this being scripted in the published play text. In the performance at the London Southbank, the woman refused by saying

I don't know how to do this, you really want me to? ... I will do it only if I feel in some way it may help you. I really don't want to unless you need me to, for some reason. (personal notes)

Similarly, in an archived performance at the Hackney Showroom the woman said 'I don't want to throw the burger at you, but if you feel like it... [laughs nervously] It is you, it is what you want', followed by 'no, of course I don't want to throw a burger at you' (personal notes), when prompted again by Alabanza. Certainly, some might refuse for their fear to fully participate in a live performance and some as a way to perform their progressive politics and be able to support their role as allies in this very act of refusal. But if we allow ourselves to be hopeful, the refusal to throw the burger is also an answer to Alabanza's veiled question: 'Would you ever partake in an active form of transphobia?' In this refusal we can also perceive an act of care.

Silence as a space to breathe

The multiple ways Alabanza cares for the participants in *Tranz Talkz* can be seen when they stop the discussion to publicly recognize those who are observing but have not felt ready to engage in the discussion, or when they encourage the participants to stop apologizing for their existence or victim-blaming themselves for the ways in which they responded to violence. Similarly, they introduce other forms of participation that take into consideration the fears some dinner guests might have of speaking in public. A recurrent form of care is also observed in the multiple instances when they insist on welcoming silence as part of the process, as a valid response to the questions being asked and ultimately as a form of self-care. One particular instance worth highlighting is when they remark that

this space doesn't need to include our traumatic stories in order to be a space, but if you want to comment on some of these experiences this is your space. I feel awkward asking that, because I don't want to capitalize on trauma, but this archive is about public space. And the silence will be just as powerful. (Alabanza 2018c: 1h04'17'')

In this instance, Alabanza is reclaiming the use of silence – traditionally associated within feminism in general, and black feminism in particular, to a form of oppression and violence – as a form of resistance. In *Tranz Talkz* silence becomes a space to breathe. Borrowing the words of Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe, we can say that in the course of the dinner conversation '[s]tanding in silence allows for that breath, for that reflection that can create a space of great healing' (2013: 2). With that, Alabanza interrupts the dynamic that privileges voice over silence and introduces the use of silence as a resisting force, as well as a fundamental strategy for self-care. This notwithstanding, during the conversations traumatic experiences are recorded, fulfilling what Cvetkovich deems one of the central tasks of queer archives, which is to 'enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness' (2003: 241). Despite the necessary acknowledgement of pain and trauma, the *Burgerz* spectators' experience of the performance as a comfortable conversation recorded earlier, where their well-being is ensured, mirrors the care practices Alabanza performs during *Tranz Talkz* and frames the overall project within Thompson's care aesthetics, where both the process – the dinner conversations – and the outcome – the play – centre the necessary infrastructures for supporting (trans) individuals.

Departing from the object of previous scholarship on the intersections of ethics and audience participation resulting from the 'participatory turn' (Bishop 2012; Harvie 2013), while discussing the participatory nature of the performances, this article has placed its focus on (re-)activating genealogies of gender dissidence as an example of care-full queer archiving practices. Alabanza's art project, encompassing their performance of *Burgerz* and the celebration of *Tranz Talkz* alongside members of the trans and gender non-

conforming communities throughout the UK, is part of a wider project aimed at archiving and cherishing trans life. I approach this act of queer archiving – not only of mythical stories and genealogies of gender dissidences, but also of the experiences, silences, affects and fears surrounding them – as part of Alabanza's promiscuous ethics and aesthetics of care. This queer, performative archive of communal care counters neoliberal understandings of care based on the premise of individualism and (re-)activates pre-colonial gender non-conforming identities throughout the play. In turn, these transcestral, potential histories counter hegemonic narratives of teleological binary transitions that present transness as something 'new'. Moreover, recording *Tranz Talkz* for a future archive transforms the participants into transcestors for future trans communities in the same way that, during *Burgerz*, the pre-colonial figures evoked by the playwright function as transcestors for them. The fact that these were performed and held at the time of the public consultation for the GRA – and against the backlash that resulted from it – further reinforces the political and activist natures of Alabanza's work.

Notes

1 This article forms part of the I+D+i project 'Gender, Affect and Care in Twenty-First Century British Theatre' (PID2021-126448NA-I00) funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The article is also the result of research carried out within the GRC Creació i pensament de les dones (2021 SGR 01097), financed by the Catalan Ministry of Research and Universities, Generalitat de Catalunya.

2 In light of what is discussed in this section, it is important to note that the overarching reach of *trans* as an umbrella term to define experiences of gender non-conformity has been criticized by gender non-conforming activists from former colonized territories as a Eurocentric term that homogenizes experiences of gender dissidence and erases non-Eurocentric experiences. In relation to this see Emezi (2018) and Whitehead (2018).

3 *Tranz Talkz* took place in the following venues: Coventry, Belgrade Theatre, 20 September 2018; London, Hackney Showroom, 4 October 2018; Manchester, Royal Exchange, 13 November 2018; Oxford, North Wall at the Jericho Tower, 20 November 2018; Cambridge, Cambridge Junction, 21 November 2018. These were sound recorded in order to be archived at the LGBTQI+ Archive at the Bishopsgate Institute. The audio recordings formed part of the 'BURGERZ' exhibition that ran from 23 October to 3 November 2018 at the Hackney Showroom. I had access to the archived conversations, as well as short testimonial videos of several participants thanks to the generosity of Sam Curtis-Lindsay and Nina Lyndon, co-directors of the Hackney Showroom.

4 For a more comprehensive discussion on the intersections between care and performance see *Performance Research* special issue 'On Care' (2023) edited by Kristof van Baarle, Felipe Cervera and Helena Grehan.

References

Ahmed, Sara (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York: Routledge.

Alabanza, Travis (2017) 'Who is allowed to be a victim?', October, Birmingham: TEDxBRUM,
www.ted.com/talks/travis_alabanza_who_is_allowed_to_be_a_victim, accessed 4 July 2024.

Alabanza, Travis (2018a) *Burgerz*, London: Oberon Books.

Alabanza, Travis (2018b) *Tranz Talkz London*, London: Hackney Showroom Personal Archive, unpublished audio file.

Alabanza, Travis (2018c) *Tranz Talkz Coventry*, London: Hackney Showroom Personal Archive, unpublished audio file.

Alabanza, Travis (2022) *None of the Above: Reflections on life beyond the binary*, London: Canongate.

Azoulay, Ariella (2019) *Potential History: Unlearning imperialism*, London: Verso.

Bishop, Claire (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*, London: Verso.

Chamberlain, Prudence (2017) *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective temporality*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chatzidakis, Andreas et al. (2020) *The Care Manifesto: The politics of interdependence*, London: Verso Books.

Crimp, Douglas (1987) 'How to have promiscuity in an epidemic', *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* 43, pp. 237–71.

Cvetkovich, Ann (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, sexuality and lesbian public cultures*, Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.

Dickson, Nathaniel (2021) 'Seizing the means: Towards a trans epistemology', in Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (eds) *Transgender Marxism*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 204–18.

Dowling, Emma (2021) *The Care Crisis: What caused it and how can we end it?*, London: Verso Books.

Emezi, Akwaeke (2018) 'Transition: My surgeries were a bridge across realities, a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature', *The Cut*, <https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/writer-and-artist-akwaeke-emezi-gender-transition-and-ogbanje.html>, accessed 8 June 2022.

Faye, Shon (2021) *The Transgender Issue: An argument for justice*, London: Allen Lane.

Feinberg, Leslie (1996) *Transgender Warriors: Making history from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Gale Hall, Audrey (2023) 'The Leper as transcestor: Queens in exile', in Sravana Borkataky-Varma, Christian A. Eberhart and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (eds) *Religious Responses to Pandemics and Crisis*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, pp. 144-156.

Gleeson, Jules Joanne and O'Rourke, Elle, eds (2021) *Transgender Marxism*, London: Pluto Press.

Green, Kai M. and Ellison, Treva (2014) "'Tranifest'" in Postposttranssexual: Key concepts for a twenty-first-century Transgender Studies', *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1(2): 222–4.

Hackney Showroom (2018a) *Audience Reactions Vox Pops*, Hackney Showroom Personal Archive, London, unpublished video.

Hackney Showroom (2018b) *Tranz Talkz Vox Pops Coventry*, Hackney Showroom Personal Archive, London, unpublished video.

Hackney Showroom (2018c) *Tranz Talkz Vox Pops London*, Hackney Showroom Personal Archive, London, unpublished video.

Hackney Showroom (2018d) *Tranz Talkz Vox Pops Manchester*, Hackney Showroom Personal Archive, London, unpublished video.

Harvie, Jen (2013) *Fair Play: Art, performance and neoliberalism*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Heyam, Kit (2022) *Before We Were Trans: A new history of gender*, London: Basic Books.

Lehner, Ace (2021) 'Critical questions and embodied reflections: Trans visual culture today – A roundtable', *Art Journal* 80(4): 38–52.

Malhotra, Sheena and Carrillo Rowe, Aimee, eds (2013) *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the edges of sound*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Massana, Elisabeth and Alsina, Cristina (2020) 'Poems as livable worlds: A conversation with Afshan D'souza-Lodhi and Jay Bernard', *Lectora* 26: 223–46.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*, London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Stuart Fisher, Amanda and Thompson, James, eds (2020) *Performing Care: New perspectives on socially engaged performance*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thompson, James (2020a) 'Performing the "aesthetics of care"', in Amanda Fisher and James Thompson (eds) *Performing Care: New perspectives on socially engaged performance*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 215–29.

Thompson, James (2020b) 'Towards an aesthetics of care', in Amanda Fisher and James Thompson (eds) *Performing Care: New perspectives on socially engaged performance*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 36–48.

Tronto, Joan C. (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*, London: Routledge.

van Baarle, Kristof, Cervera, Felipe and Grehan, Helena (2023) 'Stranger than kindness', *Performance Research* 27 (6–7): 1–4.

Whitehead, Joshua (2018) 'Why I'm withdrawing from my Lambda Literary Award nomination', Tiahouse: The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative

Writing, <https://www.tiahouse.ca/joshua-whitehead-why-im-withdrawing-from-my-lambda-literary-award-nomination/>, accessed 8 June 2022.