

# INJURIOUS ACTS: A STRUGGLE WITH SISSY IN PERFORMANCE

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## Abstract

This article investigates injury through an exploration of four dance-theatre pieces – a trilogy of works: *Sissy!* (2009), *The Sissy's Progress* (2015) and *Shoot the Sissy* (2016), plus a closing performance, *Death and the Sissy* (2017). The author, who is also the creator and main performer of the above-mentioned performances, takes a queer approach to injury and uses his personal, lived experience as a queer subject – a self-defined and self-declared Sissy – as a point of departure. Instances of injury on stage are the focus of the analysis, which asks whether it is possible or, indeed, desirable to move on and away from this condition.

## Keywords

Injury; sissy; queer; body; vulnerability; harm; violence; death; dance-theatre; performance; homophobia; subjectivity; horizontal bonds; political alliance; gender

Winning does not tempt that man.  
This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,  
by constantly greater beings.

(Rilke in Bly, 1980, p. 113)

Rather than a final word on injury, this article is processual, interrogative and exploratory. In looking at harm, I examine the damage done to the physical body. I extend my gaze beyond the realm of the body by considering injury as an ontological condition. In other words, I look at it as a form of oppression. This article – like my most of my work – stems from the personal. In that sense, my lived experience of this condition will guide the discussion. I explore the injury done to *my* body and how the threat or realisation of injury has rendered *my* life as a visibly queer subject less “livable” than those of others – to borrow a term from Judith Butler (2004).

In taking a queer approach to the subject, my aim is to reach beyond the negative frameworks of vulnerability. I therefore ponder if there may be potential to yield productive results from injury. In doing so, I am careful not to romanticise its harmful effects on the lives of queer

subjects, who, like myself, have been kept “in their place” for fear of loss, disenfranchisement and death. My body of work, created under the guise of Sissy,<sup>1</sup> serves as my source material. This includes *Where Four Roads Meet: Death and the Sissy* (2017)<sup>2</sup> as well as the trilogy leading up to it.

### **Violent violet**

It was the 17th of July 2017. I remember it well because of the repetition of sevens, my favourite number. The time also stuck in my head. It was 5pm – or 17.00 hours. 17 hours on the 17th of the 7th of 17. I was on my way home from a department store where I had purchased a pair of violet high-heeled shoes. Stiletto heels, as a matter of fact. Sharp as knives. *Violet*.

I eventually found a seat on the train when, from the corner of my eye, I saw a young man walking in my direction. It was then that I committed the fateful error of looking up. I met his gaze, and this triggered the attack. “What are you looking at?” he started to shout, his face a few inches from mine. He waved a plastic bottle in a threatening manner and threw homophobic insults at me; words I would not care to repeat. A young woman walked onto the train a few stops later. Her name was Ellie. She, a random stranger, intervened. She stopped what was swiftly escalating into a violent, physical attack. The reason I know this was about to turn into a physical assault is simple: I have been in this situation before. *Violet* shoes. *Violent* utterances. None of the people on that train carriage were brave enough to help me before Ellie appeared. They were passive bystanders to this act of abuse. Was Ellie an angel?

The summer of 2017 was also the period of development of *Death and the Sissy*, a dance-theatre performance piece created as a send-off for Sissy. By that point, I had had enough of staring into violence, dispossession, fear and vulnerability. I had dedicated the best part of ten years to these themes. I had produced three performance pieces in response to it. The purpose of *Death and the Sissy* was to take stock, to move on, to find new ideas, to venture into pastures new. This performance, a one-off event, was conceived to mark the end of Sissy. As such, it looked at death, legacy, archive. It explored what needs to be left behind in order to move forwards.

My desire to kill Sissy came about for a plethora of reasons. I could no longer stare into the abyss of violence. The burden of carrying this cross had become too heavy. I couldn’t bear the brunt of an identity constructed on precarity any longer. Furthermore, the injuries sustained as a result of my extensive investigation of violence had left marks on my body. Whereas the scars were only visible on my physical body, they could clearly be felt on my mind, too. It was time to move on.

This is what finally sparked the idea of an ending: the realisation that the physical and mental baggage accumulated throughout the years of researching Sissy had become too cumbersome. The props, costumes, dresses, high-heeled shoes, makeup, perfumes, notes, memories

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1 Sissy is a term I have harnessed, through the strategy of “reverse discourse” (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 101) to describe my own position in the queer, gender, political spectrum. Through the guise of Sissy, I have investigated, among other things, effeminacy, gender dynamics, gender politics and social violence.

2 From here on, I refer to *Where Four Roads Meet: Death and the Sissy* simply as *Death and the Sissy*.

were taking too much space in my wardrobe and in my head. I wanted to rid myself of them and their associated weight. I wanted them gone from my life, from my house. I needed the space they had been occupying in my wardrobe and on my mind for something fresh to come in.

I began to ask myself if a life outside violence was even possible. I was so done with the whole Sissy project that I even wanted to burn the costumes I had accumulated over the years. I was fed up even with the word "sissy", hence my choice of the title *Where Four Roads Meet*, to which I only later added *Death and the Sissy*.<sup>3</sup>

### **Injurious acts**

*Death and the Sissy* became a dance-theatre performance on the subject of death. It is the fourth and concluding piece to what I now see as a trilogy of Sissy performances. It is the *dénouement* of the whole Sissy project; the final act, the finale, the swan song. In investigating death, I created the conditions to delve into my personal relationship with injury, sustained both on- and off-stage. In each of these performance pieces, at least one instance of injury occurred live on stage. This is significant given the fact that they were all excuses to investigate this very thing they occasioned: injury. In studio and on stage, I have been both victim and perpetrator of injury at separate times. I have even been both target and culprit, subject and object, simultaneously. I have therefore *caused* injury on another body, *caused* it on my own body, *suffered* injury done by others and *escaped* the threat of injury. Having experienced its multiple facets has afforded me a depth of knowledge.

### **Prologue**

Leading up to my urge to organise a sending-off ceremonial-performance for Sissy, there had been a trilogy of works: *Sissy!* (2009), *The Sissy's Progress* (2015) and *Shoot the Sissy* (2016). Each of these three pieces represents an artistic rumination on my precarious condition as a queer subject in the world. The trilogy accounts for nearly a decade of my creative life, stemming from one single incident: a violent homophobic attack I suffered in 2005 on the street where I live. In hindsight, I see that the whole Sissy oeuvre has been my response to Butler's claim that, as a queer subject, I had a responsibility to respond to injury as it has touched me on such a personal level.

Social minorities, Butler (2004, p. 20) suggests, are communally "subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not to its realization". As a visibly effeminate queer male, my daily lived experience of violence has allowed me allegiance to this community of speakers. The possibility (or realisation) of violence has afforded me the creation of what Sally Munt (2007) has termed "horizontal

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3 In the end, I opted for the title *Where Four Roads Meet: Death and the Sissy* for this performance. Since then, however, I have come to refer to it simply as *Death and the Sissy* as this expresses the ideas and sentiment of the piece more adequately.

bonds” with other queer subjects.<sup>4</sup> These “horizontal bonds” are firmly rooted in a desire to gain rights of protection. The desire to gain such rights, in turn, is “constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed” (Butler, 2004, p. 20).

In determining queer bodies as both assertive *and* exposed, a dynamic paradox is revealed. The queer social body is recast as simultaneously vulnerable and protected, weak and strong. In other words, it is allowed to exist outside and beyond discourses of victimhood. That is, it is a body empowered by its recognition, acceptance and pride in difference. The potent duality of this social body – assertive and exposed – has been central in the dramaturgy of my work, especially when grappling with the issue at hand: injury.

In trying to make sense of my precarious condition as a queer subject, particularly the vulnerability of my body, I have given primacy to an exploration of the body itself. At times, this has been done by simply putting my body in front of an audience.

### **Act I: *Sissy!***

At what is possibly the emotional climax of *Sissy!*, I stand up on a table. I go on to throw myself off the table. My dance-partner, Biño Sautitzvy, catches me before I hit the ground. I get up on the table again, throw myself off it once more and Biño catches me again. This cycle repeats at the same time that it increases in speed and in intensity. By the end of it, the movement becomes frantic and violent.

Needless to say, we both knew exactly what we were doing. We are both trained dancers. The rigorous process of repetition in rehearsal, however, lulled us into a false sense of security resulting in an accident onstage. The falling sequence was a difficult set of steps to execute. It was exhausting. That was its point. There was always a nagging sense of fear in the background that something might go wrong despite our meticulous rehearsals. One day, during a live performance, something did indeed go wrong. Towards the end of that movement, fatigued and full of adrenaline, I hit my knobbly knee against Biño’s brow. It’s the sound I remember most – of bone crashing against bone. As I would soon find out, you get so much blood when you cut the brow. His blood trickled down his face and down his chest.

We managed to finish the performance before rushing to hospital, blood still running down my dance partner’s face. Biño got some stitches and a scar to show for it. So in *looking* at injury, I ended up *causing* injury. Most people in the audience that evening thought this violent collision of body parts was in fact a planned part of the performance. It wasn’t. I myself only realised the gravity of what had just happened when the usher bolted up in her seat, standing up

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4 For Munt (2007, p. 04), “horizontal bonds” are productive in the way they “can be transmitted into collective desires to claim a political presence and a legitimate self, that new sense of identity can forge ahead and gain rights of protection”.

immediately clutching a first-aid kit in her hands with firm intent. In *Sissy!*, through a sharp collision of body parts, I caused injury to another body.

### **Act II: *The Sissy's Progress***

*The Sissy's Progress* was the second in the trilogy. It was the most direct artistic response to the homophobic attack I have referred to above. All three sissy performances have been, in their own way, responses to that same incident. *The Sissy's Progress*, however, confronts the attack head on by actually visiting the site where it took place. It does so with a booming brass band in tow.<sup>5</sup>

The performance starts in the theatre before moving onto the streets. There is a series of collisions taking place here too: between the different languages, codes and aesthetics belonging, on the one hand, to more traditional theatre and, on the other hand, to the genre of walking performances. One could argue that there is an incongruity between the physical space of the theatre in its cosy comfort and the physical space of the street: a discombobulating dissonance. There is, one could even argue, an invasion or a disturbance of the public space created by the performance. The two worlds collide against each other; violently sometimes.

In taking to the streets, *The Sissy's Progress* did precisely what I wanted it to do. It framed the daily violence suffered by queer subjects; a violence that often remains invisible to those who are not its main targets. In that sense, there was an imperative for the performance to take place on the streets, where injury happens. I invariably had looks, abuse and even projectiles thrown at me when taking this performance outdoors. I performed the piece at Toynbee Studios in London three times. At all three performances, there was a man who would throw a can of energy drink from his bedroom window. At the end of one of these performances, an audience member presented me with one of these cans, telling me that it had been thrown in my direction. It was bent completely out of shape, showing the sheer force with which it had hit the ground. Luckily, it didn't hit me.

I kept this can with my costumes and props for a long time before eventually deciding to throw it out in the bin. In getting rid of it, I wondered why I had kept it for so long. Was it a trophy, a medal rewarding me for having survived? Was it a reminder of the existential threat inherent in the queer condition? Here too I discovered that looking at injury is injurious. The can of energy drink exposed me to the possibility of injury. It represented, materially, the threat of violence.

### **Act III: *Shoot the Sissy***

The final piece in the Sissy trilogy, *Shoot the Sissy*, is structured around a series of shootings as I invite a member of the audience to throw things at my body. I was inspired to take action following the Orlando shootings. "What can I, as a queer subject who has been touched by violence, do about the violence that touches others? If one of us is touched, we are all touched": this was my mantra.

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5 For a more detailed account of *The Sissy's Progress*, see Messias (2016) and Messias (2018).

There are quite literal collisions at play here. My body is pelted with flour, juggling balls, glitter eggs, water balloons and tomatoes, among other things. I felt discomfort in placing myself in the position of the target just as I felt discomfort in placing members of the audience in the position of the aggressor, even if that position was represented rather than real. No actual injury, however, was ever caused by this exchange between performer (me) and audience.

For the final shooting, we only hear a bang. I wanted to create a staged or theatricalised version of a gunshot. So we hear the bang and I go on to empty the contents of a red body spray can on my chest. The problem here is that I had never rehearsed with the actual spray prior to the opening night. So, when doing it for real, I held the can too close to my body for too long. I ended up in hospital and had to perform the following evenings with a huge bandage over a burn. I still have the scar to show for it. *Looking* at injury caused *me* an injury. In the days that followed, I remember waking up in the middle of the night with something oozing out of my chest. It was as if my heart was melting out of my body. *I* did that to myself. This was a self-inflicted wound. In this instance, I was both target and perpetrator, subject and object of injury in the same act.

### **Epilogue: *Death and the Sissy***

As well as a dance-theatre performance, *Death and the Sissy* was also an excuse to reflect on injury: the injury sustained as a result of the three preceding performances, often during the very act of performance. Death, present in name in the title of this piece, remained at the forefront of my mind throughout its development. Is death the ultimate end result of injury or can it be avoided?

The idea of creating a ceremonial funeral for Sissy emerged out of my desire to move away from violence, loss and injury, themes that had been so present in the Sissy trilogy. *Death and the Sissy*, in other words, was a self-reflective exercise on injury. By staging death, I was reflecting on Sissy's legacy, on what is left behind. At the same time, I was publicly exposing the marks that had been left – physically – on my body as a result of my experience with injury. Ultimately, I had had enough of violence, in both body and mind, and I was ready to put it to rest.

Contrary to my expectations, killing Sissy turned out to be more difficult than imagined. In other words, detaching from Sissy has become a multi-layered, lengthy process rather than a one-off event with a clean ending. The impulse to kill Sissy originated from an attempt to redefine my own subjectivity – away from violence, injury and loss. In redefining my own subjectivity, I was after a new name. Sissy did not fit me anymore. But before effectively killing Sissy, I had to pause in order to ask myself if I even had the right to do so in the first place. Rose Braidotti (1991, p. 122) has argued that "in order to announce the death of a subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one". "One cannot destruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted,"<sup>6</sup> she concludes (ibid.).

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6 "One cannot diffuse a sexuality which has historically been defined as dark and mysterious" (Braidotti, 1991, p. 122).

In joining Braidotti, I am mindful not to overlook the fact that my relationship to my bio-cultural body as a man – albeit an effeminate one – differs in its socio-symbolic meaning to hers as a woman. I take my condition as a queer subject, in other words, my precarity, as a sign of alliance to her cause. My attempt, therefore, is to develop new ways of thinking about masculinity rather than colonising women’s speech and representation. Rather than appropriating the experience of women with their bodies, I am invested in exploring the misalignment of my own effeminate body<sup>7</sup> and, through that exploration, weaken and destabilise the notion of masculinity as a monolith. It is my intention to allow my sissy, effeminate body to remain forever mismatched, ill-fitting and blurred. My intention is to assert my right to wear the things that have been denied me (makeup, high-heeled shoes, dresses, etc.) outside the frameworks of precarity, vulnerability and the constant threat of violence. My desire is also to live in the body I choose to live, i.e. an effeminate one, outside the discourses that require it to be corrected. In other words, what I deny is the imperative that either my body or my gender needs to be corrected in order to make them match and that the refusal to comply will leave me with a battered body. That is precisely the point of Sissy. The question then becomes: Is it necessary to kill Sissy? Is an existence outside vulnerability, fear and loss possible?

### **The get out: Dismantling the show**

In all works of art, performance included, there is a gap between the initial intention for the work and what eventually emerges from the creative process. With *Death and the Sissy*, it has been no different. My original concept was to tell this story – of injury – which is not only my story but also the story of others around me. Fundamentally, I wanted to stage death as a public demonstration of grief, to ask the question of whose lives are grievable and whose lives are not. Or, as Athena Athanasiou (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 135) put it, to “imagine and recognize a viable life and a mournable death”. Instead of finding a neat ending, I was left with a series of new questions.

It was now the 18th of July 2017, the day after the verbal attack on the tube. In need of some respite from it all, I took myself to my favourite gallery in London, Tate Britain. As well as respite, I also needed inspiration. Perhaps I wanted to lick my wounds or maybe I just needed to take my mind off the event of the previous day: the violet shoes, the violent act. This act of injury served as an eye-opener. It made me realise, with a heavy heart, that my work as a Sissy was not yet done. If it had been completed, then what job did violence have in turning up in my life like this again?

At the Tate, Derek Jarman’s last film, *Blue*, was being screened in a dark room. This felt

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7 When talking about the misalignment of my effeminate body, I mean the misalignment between sex and gender, between my male body and my effeminate representation of gender. I am careful to use the term “effeminate”, rather than “feminine”, in order to stress the mismatch. Effeminacy, as I understand it, is an *approximation* of femininity, a state that embraces failure by saying: “I can neither do masculinity nor femininity right. My gender expression is inadequate and I wish it to remain thus.”

serendipitous somehow. With violet so firmly on my mind, another colour would be intriguing. *Blue* is a film about loss. It is Jarman's attempt to face his own mortality, to take stock, to expose the pain, hurt and exclusion he suffered. The soundtrack, superimposed to a monochrome screen, deals with the director's terminal illness as well as the mental, physical and emotional strains caused by it. I was myself facing the end of Sissy, organising a performance-funeral. The parallels were plain to see.<sup>8</sup> Jarman's work is concerned with the struggles of homosexual identity. He speaks from the position of the queer subject: disenfranchised, dispossessed, deprived, dominated. In resisting oppression, I realised I needed to mourn. "What we call resistance," says Butler (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 111), "is actually this sustained duality of being exposed to injury and, at the same time, refusing and resisting." The dynamic tension between corporeal vulnerability and resistance remains unresolved. "The problem," Butler points out (ibid., p. 115), "arises only when the discourse of victimization precludes the possibility of effective political organizing and resistance to the cause of injury." Mourning, for me, represented an acceptance of this paradox: being exposed to injury and, at the same time, refusing and resisting. My task, it seemed, was to remain on the path that led me to the possibility of "effective political organizing", to use the words of Butler, to carve an existence outside "the discourses of victimization".

Jarman often makes use of religious imagery in his films, something that preempted what I was about to encounter next.

In the neighbouring gallery, I came across a large-scale marble sculpture by Jacob Epstein. *Jacob and the Angel* is an interpretation of the story from Genesis:

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip (Genesis 32:22–32).<sup>9</sup>

Epstein uses the story from the Genesis as an allegory. Jacob, his namesake, represents the artist. The angel, on the other hand, is a metaphor for the artist's materials: Jacob grapples with the

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8 The parallels I refer to here are of an existential and artistic nature for myself and for Sissy. Unlike Jarman, the nature of my investigation of loss is not centred around the damaging effects of HIV/AIDS. In reaffirming "horizontal bonds" with Jarman, my attempt is to reposition myself in the minority community of artists/subjects who have lived under the duress of fear and oppression.

9 New International Version.

angel, the artist grapples with his materials. The sculpture forced me to consider my own work: was violence my material? The identity of Jacob's assailant is ambiguous. Whereas some suggest he is an angel, others believe him to be a man. In assuming Epstein's position, could Sissy be the angel (or the man) I had been grappling with? "Man", of course, can stand here for masculinity, hegemony, maleness, power. The assailant refuses to be named.

Does *Death and the Sissy* signal the break of dawn? Would I need to be renamed before I am let go? The new name marks the end of the fight. Sissy, I realise, my name of a decade now, is still present in the title of the funeral piece. I am clearly reluctant – or perhaps not ready – to let it go. If *Death and the Sissy* marks the break of day, should it not thereby signal a break in consciousness? That clearly had not happened. What do I need to become aware of before I am ready to move on?

My engaging with Epstein seemed to suggest to my mind that the light of dawn is in the renaming. This is about subjectivity, identity politics, self-determination. I created Sissy. I chose the name. Sissy is me. In choosing to move on, I feel I have earned the right to a new name, to a new game, to a new show. Like Jacob, I am also left with an injury. Whereas Jacob is left limping because of his hip, I bear a scar on my chest. It is indelibly there for all to see.

In remembering Braidotti's words, I feel strength in my knowledge that I have indeed gained the right to speak as a Sissy. My extensive research and my lived experience as one have given me this right. In announcing the death of this subject, I performatively declare closure. This is the final curtain on injury. I am mindful, at the same time, that not all my collisions with the subject have been negative. I have four dance-theatre pieces, extensive accompanying tours, a series of writings and insightful knowledge on the subject to account for. I also have all those dresses, shoes, makeup, perfumes and memories, of course. One day, when I am ready, they will all go.

Returning to Butler (2004, p. xii), "to be injured," she has claimed, "means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from [...] unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways." In this self-searching process of examining injury, I have tried to remain attentive to the ways in which I have myself been the agent (as well as the target) of injury. "We are at once acted upon and acting, and our 'responsibility' lies in the juncture between the two. What can I do with the conditions that form me? What do they constrain me to do? What can I do to transform them?" (ibid., p. 16).

Performance work has been my tool of transformation. Through performance, I have explored ways to ameliorate the conditions that have made me who I am. Having been subjected to the violence of others has allowed me to establish bonds with other corporeally vulnerable subjects. "Only once we have suffered that violence," Butler (ibid.) reminds us, "are we compelled, ethically, to ask how we will respond to violent injury [...] will we be furthering or impeding violence by virtue of the response we make?" Having caused and suffered harm at my own hands, I have asked myself if my duty is indeed to stop. But how?

I have no definite answer to this question. What I do have is more questions instead. My trilogy of sissy performances represent my struggle in trying to resolve the conundrum. The performative funeral, as a finale, is a reflection on this struggle. It is also a truce, a ceasefire, a way to say I have had enough, that I can no longer fight, that the struggle was real and that it was taking a toll on my body. I am partially responsible for some of the injuries I have sustained in the process. I am also aware that I have injured Biño. Like Sisyphus, I feel my task is never-ending. Perhaps a new name is not necessary after all:

What we choose to fight is so tiny!  
 What fights with us is so great!  
 If only we would let ourselves be dominated  
 as things do by some immense storm,  
 we would become strong too, and not need names.  
 (Rilke in Bly, 1980, p. 112)

## Conclusion

To conclude, I am conscious of what lies ahead. The work lies in resistance, in remaining engaged. The Sissy oeuvre has been an exercise in engaging with questions such as whose lives matter and whose do not matter as lives. *Death and the Sissy* has been my way to “give bodily presence to demand ‘never again’” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 143). The question I am left grappling with is whether injury itself becomes essential to identity under certain political frameworks. “There is a difference,” advises Butler (ibid., p. 87), “between calling for recognition of oppression in order to overcome oppression and calling for a recognition of identity that now becomes defined by its injury.” The sense here is that of feeling trapped in the cage of injury, of having no escape, no choice, no life outside its frameworks. The problem with being defined by injury, Butler concludes, “is that it inscribes injury into identity and makes that into a presupposition of political self-representation” (ibid.). The task, for me, then becomes to find ways to exist *outside and beyond* such conditions. That way, injury could potentially be recast as a force to be overcome.

Is the solution therefore to try to place political focus less on the identity and more on the struggles and conditions of social oppression to be overcome? It has to do, I feel, with claiming rights of bodily integrity, keeping in mind that my body is not only mine but also a broader social body, connected with other living beings.

As I finish writing this article, I put my violet shoes on. They are *violet*, my favourite colour, so how can I resist them? I pile on the makeup and exaggerate the gesture as I go out the door. Sissy is still alive. Together, we fight.

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