

The Materiality of Queer Loss — Variations on Themes from Lost and Found by Ishmael Houston-Jones and Miguel Gutierrez

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Photo by Ian Douglas

To accept loss is to accept queerness.

This beautifully simple quote from José Muñoz gently reverberates in my ears during and after my experience of *Variations on Themes from Lost and Found: Scenes from a Life and other works by John Bernd*. Taking place at the historic St. Mark's Church as part of the 2018 American Realness Festival, *Variations on Themes* is a reconstruction, or more appropriately, a reimagination of the dances made by John Bernd, a choreographer in the downtown New York dance community who passed away in 1988, at the very young age of 35 due to AIDS complications. The piece sews and stitches together what is left of Bernd's works in the historical archive, speculatively filling in the

gaps and holes left by the loss of his life, and more importantly by the loss of queerness in heterosexual hegemony, with ephemeral traces of memories and relentless force of creativity.

Here, loss emerges not so much as a melancholic moment to look back, to mourn, even though no mourning is ever enough to compensate for the queer lives, the queer worlds that were wiped out by the AIDS crisis, and by heterosexuality at large. Rather, loss presents an opportunity to embrace another way of relating to the past, to enact a spiritual circulation of queer traces that is rendered unthinkable in the straight mapping of History — a map which reproduces and reinforces the exclusive legitimacy of material evidence and fact. If our queer predecessors were never allowed to leave an imprint in History with a capital H, if there is little to no evidence to be found of queerness in the heterosexual archive, it does not mean that we have no history: the history we inherit is a history of loss, comprised of fragmentary traces, incomplete hearsay, indeterminate gestures and ephemera.

Which is to say that loss is not characterized by a lack, but there is materiality to loss, there is concrete stuff circulating in the wake of queer loss that can be picked up by later generations, the way Ishmael Houston Jones and Miguel Gutierrez, the two co-directors of *Variations on Themes*, pick up the remains of Bernd's works. Jones and Gutierrez's reconstruction/reimagination, then, should not be seen as a recuperation of what is lost, or a creation of evidence to insert Bernd into History, but it appears perhaps as a gesture toward a generation that is lost to the AIDS crisis, only for that gesture to also lose itself in the act of reaching for the past into the future. I see the work and *feel* the work not as an effort to un-lose queer loss, but as an acceptance of loss itself. To accept loss is to accept queerness. To accept loss is to accept the impossible condition of queer history in face of the straightening imperative of heterosexuality. To accept loss is not only to come to terms with the amount of loss we queers inherit, but to also embrace loss as a mode of being in the world — a being toward loss that materializes in gestures and circulates as traces.



Photo by Ian Douglas

Variation on Themes opens with each of the seven dancers walking out one by one as an old-school rock song is playing in the background. Dressed in a white boxer brief, some also in a white tank top, they line up in a row at the front of the performing space facing toward the audience in a rather awkward manner — their gazes wander, their hands fidget, their faces appear nonchalant. Positioned upstage left is a red chair, an object that was frequently featured in Bernd's original works, an object whose haunting aura silently yet ominously asserts itself from the beginning until the end of the piece. When the light cue switches from a plain yellow light to a dreamy purple tint, the dancers slowly starts separating themselves from the row. They take a few steps backward, some make their way down onto the floor, some shift their facing to a different direction. Once they are settled in their position, they start singing and harmonizing to a piece of synth-driven music composition: "Oh hi hi hi hi, Oh hi hi hi hi, Oh hiiiiiiiiiii."

This quiet beginning in a way feels rather spiritual, almost as a ritualistic preparation to invite Bernd into the space so that he can give blessing to the re-enactment of his own dynamic choreography to follow. Slowly, the energy of the work picks up and pushes itself forward, allowing the fast pace of the work to animate Bernd's versatility as an artist. Not only are there dancing bodies on stage, but there are also his drawings being projected in the background, his own music compositions which are rearranged by Nick Hallet, and singing, poetry featured throughout. This interdisciplinary nature of the work can perhaps be read as a nostalgic newness of the 1980s, but for me it sheds light onto

Bernd's drive to live, to create, and to fight against the traction of his deteriorating health with an unstoppable momentum propelling forward.

This momentum can be viscerally felt in the choreographed movements themselves, as the dancers endlessly run around and jump across the space in a formal yet casual manner — once the engine of the work is ignited, the dancers simply cannot stop. Constantly changing costumes in between sections, they perform energetic phrases in unison, in canon, in separation, weaving in and out of each other to pick up and circulate the kinesthetic traces so that movements never come to an end. In between the formalized choreography emerges some campy moments where the performers mime the action of sword fighting, horse racing, tag playing, generating an atmosphere that is holy and serious, but is also funny, absurd, and undeniably gay.

At the center of the piece, both temporally and spiritually, the performers pull a table out into the middle of the stage, on which one can see a blender and a lot of ingredients used for a very special smoothie. Vegetables, apple cider, yogurt, beer, medications, vitamins — one by one they are added into the blender, encapsulating Bernd's will to live in the making of one smoothie, of a liquid that was his sustenance of life.

[...] AND I DO NOT WANT TO DIE, UNTIL I HAVE BEEN OF SERVICE TO MY DEATHS. AND THIS IS MY DESTINY, TO LOVE, AND SEEK LOVE. [...]

All seven dancers together scream these chilling words over the machine grinding noise, their eyes squeezed shut, their hands placed around the blender to hold it in place, to cling onto this material source of survival. It is extremely difficult for me to witness the unfolding of these several minutes. The moment I see the vitamins and medications being poured into the blender, my chest immediately sinks with an inexplicable heaviness: it is almost too painful to watch, but it is also too real for me to turn away. This is always a conundrum that I have to grapple with when I encounter the fleeting remains of queerness in the wake of the AIDS crisis, and the ephemeral memories of lives that are lost. I grieve; I mourn; I resent; I agonize; I shut myself off and eventually become paralyzed.



Photo by Ian Douglas

The rest of the dance vaguely washes over me as traces of rhythms and images while I sit in my chair dwelling on my feeling over a smoothie. It is a smoothie that sustains the lives of my queer ancestors when the heterosexual world refuses to tend to their survival. It is a smoothie that cannot, however, save them from their premature death, nor can it bring them back to life, but it opens up a portal to bring the alive closer to the dead, to the queer ephemera being left behind circulating like rumor in the air. The smoothie becomes an affective vision that makes visible, makes felt the alternative worlds, the alternative ways of knowing that have supposedly been lost together with sudden the death of a generation. There is materiality to that loss, a residual materiality that allows us queer to be in touch with who has come before us, to grasp a sense of history that has not been evidenced and archived by heterosexuality. *Variations of Themes* picks up that materiality of queer loss but not to further crystallize and canonize the figure John Bernd; rather, the work turns to the traces of Bernd to further lose itself among the unthinkable population invisibilized by the AIDS crisis, to miss a generation who has gone missing.