

Performing Abjection, Performing Shame in the Music of Xiu Xiu

[Ex.1: “I Luv the Valley OH!” 1:15 – 2:15]

Jamie Stewart, founding member and lead singer/songwriter of California-based indie pop band Xiu Xiu, is a seriously afflicted man. Over the course of nine years and six full-length studio albums, Stewart chiefly assumes the role of horrified martyr, taking on and sounding his and others’ taboo suffering with embarrassing bravado. He performatively occupies the traumatized and shamed body, and in doing so wears multiple shades of abject on his sleeve. Weird, hysterical, psychotic, and terrified, Stewart unflinchingly performs abjection with uncomfortable earnestness, and remarkable persistence.

Xiu Xiu’s music, an amalgam of post-punk, synth pop, gothic rock, noise and folk, can be quite uncomfortable to listen to, both emotionally as well as physically. Although many of their more recent recordings tend toward the gentler sounds of abjection, painting their bruises with more delicate strokes of purple, the band’s first several studio albums are remarkable for their distinctly unpleasant brutality. Bursts of gnarly feedback, sheathes of white noise, and the clamor of clanging percussion populate the stark soundscapes of these recordings. Today I will be focusing mainly on this aspect of their sound (lucky for you all), and how it figures into Stewart’s performances of abjection.

I define abjection, at its base, as a state of exclusion or rejection by the social order. It does not describe anything inherent, but rather a situation imposed upon a being or material body by rationalized society in order for that society to maintain a semblance of

rationality or civility. To this society, the abjected body offends or disgusts, and gives reason for shame. To perform abjection, then, is to stage the abject body for an audience, potentially eliciting embarrassment, shock or confusion.

But what exactly do these performances accomplish? I would like to share how Xiu Xiu's performances of abjection enable an engagement with what Sara Ahmed calls the cultural politics of emotion. In blazoning the stigmatized outcast body, Xiu Xiu's Stewart confronts his listeners with the physical and emotional structures of feeling that characterize the individual abjected by the exclusionary play of social power, and the systematic cultural ignorance of this individual's painful condition. In doing so, Xiu Xiu threaten to display the means by which the social order prevents empathy with the feeling abject body.

At surface level this may seem like a strange claim. Xiu Xiu's often rabid musical performances seem willfully alienating, disowning any appeal to the audience's empathy. After all, Xiu Xiu's music does not simply deny its audience the comforts of conventional beauty, but in fact flies in its face with ugly sound. I do not just mean ugly simply in the sense of being willfully obscure or difficult (though it certainly is that, too), but also in the sense of an cacophonous, harsh, grotesque or deformed music. In Xiu Xiu's music, ugliness—the outwardly repulsive manifestation of aesthetic wrongness—becomes one shape in which Stewart's abjection takes form.

My next example, “Yellow Raspberry,” off Xiu Xiu’s fourth full-length album *La Forêt*, embodies the feeling of ugliness directly addressed in its lyrics. The refrain, an overblown wash of distorted bass, alarm-like synthesizers, thundering timpani and heavily processed vocals, blasts away underneath the whirl of what sounds like several rewinding tapes. It is not a particularly tuneful chorus, and comes across as a somewhat heavyhanded attempt to render musically the feeling of physical alienation. The sonic embodiments of ugliness figured in these sections converge in one particularly wretched moment during the second verse. Instead of reiterating the word “weird” from the first verse, Stewart unexpectedly twists out a grotesque guttural retch from the pit of his stomach. At this moment, Stewart figures his abject self-disgust in a gross vocal gesture that apparently could only be transcribed in the lyric sheet as “ZORP.” Here is the excerpt from the beginning of this second verse up through the second and final refrain.

[Ex.2: “Yellow Raspberry”: 1:30 – 2:45]

In “Yellow Raspberry,” Stewart—who openly identifies as bisexual—realizes the abjection of the body rejected by the normalizing conditions of desiring and being desired. The bodily desire expressed in the lyrics constellate around a core of disgust dispelled in the vocal retch, an expression of self-hatred instilled from the outside, but arising from deep within. While it’s not clear from the lyrics whether Stewart is singing about himself or about someone else, or even as someone else about Stewart, what’s more clear is how the individual in the song feels no less ashamed of himself following his self-awareness as an undesirable body than he had before. His disillusionment does not save him, but only makes his self-disgust more acute. In embodying the subject whose identity is configured,

but not productively transformed by the shame of his desires, Stewart performs the impotent condition of the abject body beleaguered by painful shame.

Xiu Xiu's lyrics frequently attend to the subject of unproductive shame in unfulfilled desiring. This tendency, however, seems to run counter to psychological and theoretical accounts that identify shame as a productive affect. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, shame evolves from the mirror stage in early childhood when the adult fails to return the child's gaze, causing the child to painfully realize his or her status as an individual whose desires may not be reciprocated by the exterior world. As the emotion continues to resurface when mutual return is expected by the child, but not reciprocated, the child eventually learns to avoid the pain of shame by accepting this loss of mutual return. In this way, for the individual adapting to social life, shame is a transfigurative emotion. It polices and regulates desire in a double movement by affectively rejecting one's potentially taboo urges, while at the same time affirming oneself as a sympathetic subject of narcissistic desire. Shame thus frees the subject to engage in civil society as an independent ethical actor. For the subject of "Yellow Raspberry," however, shame does not produce any liberatory meaning, nor does it transform him into anything less self-loathing. The subject is utterly abject, destined to nothing but repeated suffering. What, then, does the performance of shame accomplish for Xiu Xiu, if anything? I propose that in Xiu Xiu's music, shame serves as a core component of the political project that is performing abjection.

Perhaps the most telling marker of shame in Xiu Xiu's music comes across in Stewart's vocal performances. Stewart's characteristically quivering, breathy, and off-kilter vocality projects a body wracked by social anxiety, as he plays out all the pathetic, embarrassing vocal cues of the abject or ashamed individual, all of the cracks and gasps and other bodily sounds that the socialized subject attempts to cover up in public or social presentation of the self. His delivery frequently conjures the vocal squeaks of a pubescent boy, the cringe-worthy deviations in pitch of the tone-deaf singer, the wavering tremble of the overanxious actor, the shrill moans of a delirious bottom, the gasps of the individual about to break down and cry, the shrieks of the overworked mother losing control—or, most succinctly, the persona of a hysterical male at the end of his tether, and somehow somewhere beyond his shame. For this, Xiu Xiu's most vehement detractors have laughed off Stewart's performances as adolescent, self-indulgent, and histrionic. Yet at the other end, Xiu Xiu's most laudatory fans and critics praise Stewart for his unblushing willingness to grapple with the affective reality of the individual readily cast out by society. By theatrically staging the struggles of the emotionally abjected individual to vocalize, to feel grounded in a shamed body, Stewart confronts his audiences with a body of (but not in) shame; which is also to say, a body constituted by suffering, but not in pain. This seemingly paradoxical coexistence of performative shamelessness and performed shame in the same body, I argue, is elemental to the political performance of abjection.

To better explain this paradox, I turn to David Halperin, who in a recent essay addresses the performance or enactment of abjection as a political strategy, rather than a psychological condition. Accordingly, Halperin's definition of abjection stems not from

Julia Kristeva's landmark psychoanalytic account, but rather from the earlier literature of French novelist Jean Genet, and Genet's colleague Marcel Jouhandeau. According to these writers, abjection does not merely signal social death, but also enables an existential survival strategy for dealing with the predicament of social exclusion. This strategy is strongly akin to martyrdom. For the habitually shamed, socially condemned individual, the confrontation with one's own abject status may register as an *ascesis* or a spiritual labor, a test of endurance which stakes out the path to sainthood, or more specifically, "a path parallel to sainthood—though in the opposite direction" (72). And like the martyred saint, the performer of abjection unselfishly acts out an identity chosen *for*, rather than *by* him or herself. Along these lines, we may think of performing abjection not as something someone independently *wants* to do (even if that person does freely elect to perform their abjection), but rather as choosing to act out what he or she otherwise *has* to do in order to maintain agency. I think of this as a sort of soft determinism, or "consciousness of necessity," according to which the abject individual defiantly chooses to perform how he or she is already otherwise predetermined to act. By falling into the aberrant behavior that the social order expects of the abject individual, the performer of abjection, like the martyr, actively takes up the blame for what he or she would be accused anyway, and in turn gains mastery over his or her abject condition.

I would like to suggest, then, that one of the important ways in which Xiu Xiu's Stewart performatively takes up this blame is by enacting a critical distance in his unsympathetic audiences. To the point, a Stylus magazine review asks, "Does [Stewart] really have to continuously stretch his unforgettably limited voice past its natural boundary?... Does his

knack for gorgeous melody... have to be tempered by jarring, often-painful eruptions of screeching, synthesized cacophony?... [Stewart's] desire to *provoke* seems like an affectation." Indeed, in persistently using abrasive or unconventional sounds, and in parading the assumptively queer poses of the male hysteric, Stewart presents his abjection as something deliberate, and not just merely unfortunate. In doing so, Stewart takes up his station as an individual who cannot otherwise behave properly or assume conventional beauty in expressing himself. By constantly insisting on the intense performance of suffering, Xiu Xiu open a critical space for the enforcers of the musical and social order to attach the blame of endless suffering onto Xiu Xiu themselves, rather than upon the social structure that does not provide adequate social space to safely and blamelessly explore queerness, traumatization, and other abject conditions of selfhood.

"Ian Curtis Wishlist," the final track on Xiu Xiu's second full-length album *A Promise*, opens Xiu Xiu's performative project to criticism perhaps more bluntly and self-effacingly than any other song in their catalogue. Stewart's unhinged vocal performance in the song teeters precariously on the border between overweening sincerity and self-parody. The dirge-like swells and melodramatic flare-ups of the instrumental accompaniment, too, almost seem to exaggerate the somberness of the whole affair. And indeed, by citing perhaps rock music's most clichéd figure of doom in both the lyrics and the title, Stewart displays an uncomfortably astute awareness of the apparent contrivances of his performative suffering. Appropriately, the song is perhaps one of the most over-the-top moments in Xiu Xiu's recorded history (and, as you can probably guess, there are many).

This is what Stewart has to say about the title: “An Ian Curtis wish list is a list of things that you have convinced yourself that you want to have happen, but you know that are never going to happen.... So... like half of your body's completely fooled itself into believing something's happened and half of your body is totally beating yourself up because the other half of the body is fooling itself.” In the context of the song’s printed lyrics, Stewart’s “Ian Curtis Wishlist” entertains the impossibility of being desired by a certain “Jane S.”; however, in the recorded vocal performance, Stewart clearly enunciates “J.S.,” thus ambiguating the addressee of the lyrics: is it Jane, or Jamie himself? Or, perhaps, could it be both in one—“Janie” Stewart? Moreover, who is doing the singing? I don’t wish to resolve the matter here, in part because I’m not sure it can be done cleanly, but also because I would like to focus on how Stewart seems to perform with utter defiance, but also with shame intact.

[Ex.3: “Ian Curtis Wishlist” 1:35 – 3:25]

I was hoping you all would laugh, because truthfully, the song *is* kind of funny, if not outright embarrassing. And what better way for an observer to establish distance from an embarrassing situation, than through nervous laughter? However, in the context of the rest of Xiu Xiu’s music, it only makes sense that Stewart here is completely earnest about the undeliverable items on his wishlist, his many shameful desires. If we take the song as a self-aware commentary on Stewart’s political project of performing abjection, we may think of Xiu Xiu as fulfilling the sum of these desires by expressing prolonged misery—sounding off his “20 hundred private loops.” Yet Stewart—or, at least half of him—knows that this desire must be actively disclaimed from the outset. As with the subject of

“Yellow Raspberry,” we get a glimpse at a subject supremely aware of his abject position, but whose only means of expressing his awareness truthfully is through the vehement disavowal of any “wicked, stupid pride” one may have in performing such a morbid role. Stewart’s performance in “Ian Curtis Wishlist” as such denies the apparent pretention of Xiu Xiu’s performative project by going so entirely over-the-top in its disavowal, it completely overshoots camp, landing in the realm of total embarrassment.

It may seem at first glance that the uncomfortable humor that hovers over Xiu Xiu’s emotional excess threatens to rob it of any transformative or political potential. I argue, however, that the odd tension achieved between Xiu Xiu’s apparent extravagance, and the subject matter of abject shame, is what allows Xiu Xiu’s music to secure the political insight Stewart insists upon. Through their overwhelming musical and vocal performances, Xiu Xiu provide their listeners reasons to distance themselves in the presence of the disgusting abject body. “Ian Curtis Wishlist,” like the retch in “Yellow Raspberry,” might seem so emotionally contrived that one may feel the urge to decry Stewart’s theatrics as self-indulgent, or laugh the whole thing off as parody. And by disavowing his shame to the audience’s comic or critical relief—whether JUST KIDDING, or sounding the ZORP felt by the shamed body—Stewart vocally assumes responsibility for the awkwardness his sounding body imposes upon its beholders. Yet within the context of a musical repertoire fraught with hysterical self-loathing and ugly, scouring textures, Stewart in these songs takes up a far more profound dignity than his apparent shamelessness seems to allow. By letting us know *that he knows* we want to distance ourselves from the figure realizing his abjection—yet by continuing to assume

responsibility for its expression—Stewart demonstrates how the social order enforces a system by which the abject individual cannot gain mastery over his or her pain without simultaneously taking the blame for its purgation. In doing so, Xiu Xiu not only confront the socialized audience with the means by which they denounce the expression of abject pain as something shameful or self-indulgent. By unshying from the alienating conditions of abject suffering, Xiu Xiu also suggest the persistence of the pain of the stigmatized body that stretches beyond that body's self-awareness, beyond its disillusionment. And this is to recognize the condition of the person whose struggle brings him or her no closer to rapture, nor whose enlightenment brings him or her any further from agony, but whose only path to salvation is through the radical performance of passivity. Which is to say, passivity *with* agency, but also, crucially I think, *without* pride.

LYRICS

I Luv the Valley OH!

That's a pill and you've got to take it
That's a pill that you've got to take
That's a pill and you've got to take it
I won't rest until you take it
That's a heart that you made
That's a heart and the both of you made it
That's a heart that you made
And I won't rest until I break it
It's the histoire de la family
It's the histoire de la femme
It's the histoire de la family
And I won't rest until I forget about it
I won't rest until I don't care
I won't rest until I forget about it
I won't rest until I don't care
La La La La La La La La La

That's a razor and you'll make a threat
That's a razor make million billion threats
That's a razor and you'll make a threat
And I won't rest 'cause I heard it all before
My behind is a beehive
There's a buzz in my backside
My behind is a beehive
and I won't rest while you break my will
Je t'aime the valley
Je t'aime the valley OH!!!
Je t'aime the valley
I am an orphan de la valley
And I won't rest until I forget about it
I won't rest until I don't care
And I won't rest until I forget about it
LA LA LA LA LA LA LA LA LA

Yellow Raspberry

no one will eat him
a yellow raspberry
perched on top of the thorn bush
up high and ugly
up high and weird

this minute 20 years ago
your hair looked just as bad
talking nonstop to a little rubber pixie
what has changed when you tell
your doll hello?
more indignant, less recognizable
you became a bag lady's son
beating off nonstop
to the escort pages
what has changed when you tell
the cross hello?

you left with some money
more self righteous, less hopeful
up high and ugly up high and ZORP

this minute 20 seconds ago
your face looks just as dumb
singing nonsense to your voice mail
what has changed as you tell

your cactus hello?
more fixated, less relief
you became a faggot
dressed like a bunny
beating off nonstop
to the escort pages
what has changed as you tell
the mirror hello?

Ian Curtis Wishlist

some day Jane S. ["J.S."] when you tell me
everything
it will make me want to take it too far
and when you ask me everything
I will take it too far
the 20 hundred private loops
making up my AHHHHHHHHH!
Ian Curtis (I can't believe I said it) Wish
List
via heave and via gasp
it will seem like and will actually be
just wicked stupid pride
oh what will happen
will you ever bleat out
"DO YA LUV ME, JAMIE STEWART?!"
Jane S. ["J.S."] I am kidding
I'm just kidding!

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