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Performance

Hannah Barrie

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# Empathy, Identification, and Life Narrative: The Political Potentials of Performance

*Hannah Barrie*

## **Abstract**

Drawing on Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon's 2014 book and live show, *Gender Failure*, and Vivek Shraya's 2016 book and performance, *even this page is white*, I argue that the performance of autobiographical storytelling enables a space of empathetic identification. Empathy as an agent of change is limited in its transformative potential, but performances of life narrative can ultimately lead to community-building, personal growth, and political change if situated ethically and relationally. These works by queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists embody intimacy and vulnerability to create a performance space that fulfills José Esteban Muñoz's concept of a liberatory potentiality.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, life narrative, performance, gender, identification

This paper is an amalgamation of work from 2017 and 2019. I've returned to these ideas after a couple of years and offer these thoughts as part of a conversation—a dialogue with a past self, with past methods, and with my past interpretations of theory and performance. I look forward to continuing the conversation here, as I was able to do at the UnDisciplined Conference this past April. I encourage readers to follow the links provided throughout the paper and watch the clips of the live shows that I discuss. The paper was originally a presentation and incorporating the multimedia elements for yourself will greatly add to the reading experience.

Drawing on Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon's 2014 book and live show, *Gender Failure*, and Vivek Shraya's 2016 book and performance, *even this page is white*, I argue that the performance of autobiographical storytelling enables a space of empathetic identification, and can ultimately lead to community-building, personal growth, and political change, despite the limitations of empathy as an agent of change. These works by queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists embody intimacy and vulnerability to create a performance space that has transformative potential. I've read each of these works as texts and have also seen them as live performances. I'll analyze both of these experiences here, and link to several clips of the live storytelling events to allow you to experience a version of the performances. Excerpts of the transcripts are included here for clarity. Here's an introductory sample of the *Gender Failure* show:

*Gender Failure Show, Part 8: 1:05-1:47. <https://vimeo.com/111140338>*

Ivan Coyote: We're standing on a street corner waiting for my friend who's at the store. And this guy I don't know, never seen him before, he just strides right up to me, and he pokes me in the middle of the chest, repeatedly. And then he says: 'Are – you – a female!' (Laughter) 'Um, kind of,' I tell him. 'What kind of an answer is that?' he asks me. 'What kind of a question is that?' I ask him back. And then I say, 'what kind of a fellow goes about poking perfect strangers in the chest without their consent, anyway?' And he *nods* at this. (Laughter.)

In considering the ways that performers express their life stories, I draw on the work of philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler, who writes about gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” rather than a stable identity.<sup>1</sup> Gender, for Butler, is what we are continuously doing, rather than being. This is her concept of performativity. Society restricts the gendered body to its expected enactments, but when subjects become conscious of this construction, it can be used for specific purposes, subverting societal expectations to embody a radically authentic self. Performativity is the repetition of acts that allows for the constitution of a gendered subject. Performance is different. It is a deliberate method of explicitly expressing lived experience and gender. A gendered subject may still be produced by its effects.<sup>2</sup> I propose that Coyote, Spoon, and Shraya, in performing narratives of gender, are deliberately exposing the script of naturalized gender performativity and creating new scripts of their own.

Performed storytelling generates affective and potentially transformative responses in its expression of intimacy and vulnerability. These concepts are relational because they necessitate a connection between two or more people. Psychologists Karen Prager and Linda Roberts define intimacy as possessing three conditions: “self-revealing behaviour, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings.”<sup>3</sup> These conditions, when exemplified onstage, allow for a deliberate, performed intimacy. Vulnerability can similarly be performed. As Butler writes, “the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition.”<sup>4</sup> But vulnerability is not reducible to its injurability, or simply the capacity to be injured by another; rather, it is premised on its relationality.<sup>5</sup> Bodies are vulnerable in their very physical existence in the world; we depend on each other every day to preserve each other's lives. Thus in the embodied presence and self-disclosure of performed storytelling before an audience, the artists construct both intimacy and vulnerability, while revealing the often-invisible scripts of performativity. Next, I'll consider the transformative effects that this might have.

*Gender Failure Show, Part 8: 10:30-11:02. <https://vimeo.com/111140338>*

Rae Spoon: After everything that's changed for me, I'm more inclined to just leave the narrative open for myself. Now that I define my gender and sexuality as stories I tell and agree upon, I try to leave it more open than I have in the past. I want to leave room for future possibilities I haven't been presented with yet. I'm a gender failure, and, I failed at the gender binary, unable to find a place in being either a man or a woman that was comfortable for me, but ultimately, I think it's the binary that fails to leave room for most people to write their own gender stories.

Coyote and Spoon perform an autobiographical narrative. The stories change throughout the show. The content begins with childhood and moves through the lives of the performers, but always ties back to their self-proclaimed gender failure. They speak with confidence and a rehearsed rhythm of storytelling, letting the audience into some of their most personal moments.<sup>6</sup> It is vulnerable and intimate as a space of confession, empowerment, and literal gender expression.

As they express in the above excerpt, Spoon considers their gender as narrative. Their gender has undergone so many shifts and expressions that it makes more sense to talk about it as a story, rather than a fixed intrinsic identity. As Butler would argue, their gender is continuously done. The storytelling performance of *Gender Failure* is the story of the performativity of gender made public.

As Spoon explains, they identify as a gender failure, but say that in fact, it's "the binary that fails to leave room for most people to write their own gender stories."<sup>7</sup> I argue that these performances create that space for readers and audiences to write these gender stories for themselves. In T Kira Madden's recent essay, "Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy," she discusses this space for the reader/audience, noting that if writers kept their full personal experience in their work, the scene would be bulky, bursting, with no space left for the reader.<sup>8</sup> She writes that there would be "no space for the third plane, for the *Me too*, for the reader's response or touch or memory to graze what's being offered."<sup>9</sup> Coyote and Spoon's storytelling is deliberately crafted to leave that space for the reader/audience to identify with what the performance offers. However, this identification is circumscribed by the whiteness of the performance: the gender narratives that they perform are necessarily white, which regulates the space for the reader/audience's response or identification, perhaps privileging those who can identify with whiteness.

Certain formal elements of performance are designed to foster identification, as Anna Poletti notes in an essay discussing intimate publics in digital storytelling.<sup>10</sup> In the *Gender Failure* performance, first person narrative, a warm tone of voice, autobiographical information, and eye contact with the audience all serve as formal elements that constitute the performed

intimacy and vulnerability necessary for an audience to identify with the performers. The bodily presence, stories, and emotions of Coyote, Spoon, and Shraya fulfill Butler's definition of vulnerability, wherein bodies suffer, enjoy, and respond to the "exteriority of the world,"<sup>11</sup> while condensing and stylizing their experiences enough to leave room for the reader in the work. In these ways, the performers facilitate empathetic identification, and prompt audiences to ponder what they might also explore and become.

Vivek Shraya, an artist, author, and professor, conveys her stories through poetry rather than prose. Shraya identifies as a South Asian, trans, bisexual, femme artist. As a racialized trans woman, she clearly writes from a different position than Coyote and Spoon; her performed stories/poetry in *even this page is white* disclose her lived experience as a racialized trans femme.

*Vivek Shraya, Fall Reading Series: 21:47-22:23.*

<https://vimeo.com/191649830>:

Vivek Shraya: pledged my flesh to iron / when soft wasn't safe / muscle to  
make masc / masc to make muscle / muscle to mask muffle / firm instead of  
supple / stubble instead of smooth / in rubble my woman refused / to buckle  
rumbled stayed subtle / chewed out leather muzzle / I would rather trouble /  
struggle rather a fist / ten knuckles than cede / one more vessel to men.

In the poem "muscle," excerpted above, Shraya performs strength and power in her body language, tone of voice, and words. She tells the audience that she built her body to be traditionally masculine in order to protect herself when she was unable to come out as a woman. Now, as a femme trans woman, she would rather face violence than back down in her femininity. She would rather risk a fist than cede anything else to men. In revealing the journey and construction of her identity, Shraya embodies a performed intimacy and, like Coyote and Spoon, creates a space for others to learn her story, empathize, and respond to what she offers.

Shraya lets us into her private life in the next poem, "agnostic:" "sometimes / the inconceivable: / i am tender / tensionless / in my body / my gender [...] / is this just because / in my bed / there is / a white man? / the first time / we kissed / my nose bled / and the second."<sup>12</sup> She constructs vulnerability in exposing her personal space in words, allowing us a glimpse into her bed, telling us about her bodily reactions, and performing these poems to others exposed, but on her own terms.

As this poem exemplifies, these performers tell multiple stories of their bodies throughout their performances. In considering the invasive bodily focus and the importance placed on physical transition that are common in discussions of trans issues, the artists display

their commitment to creating a space of vulnerability. They do not owe these stories to anyone, but choose to disclose intensely personal information to the audience in a performance context.

However, in returning to my thoughts on the performance of autobiographical storytelling, I am wondering more about the role of the life narrative for trans and gender non-conforming individuals. How often must trans artists tell their stories for the sake of others, and might that be unwanted labour? As Hannah McGregor, host of the podcast *Secret Feminist Agenda*, notes in a recent interview with Shraya, when trans and gender-non-conforming people, especially transfeminine people of colour, write about transmisogyny, racism, homophobia, or other forms of oppression, “there is an extractive element to what it seems some audiences want from [...] this kind of work.”<sup>13</sup> McGregor continues: “People want your story, and want to be able to extract particular narratives of trauma or of pain, and there’s a sense that that’s a price you pay for access to the literary world, or a price that white cis readers feel they have owed to them.”<sup>14</sup> But Shraya responds that she has been performing since she was thirteen, and is habituated to this exposure in her art; she says, “when I think about entitlement, it’s more about expectations outside of the stage,” such as when people send emails asking for labour without a consideration of her energy and time.<sup>15</sup>

Shraya’s response, while not to be taken up as the response of all trans or marginalized artists, reminds me that these performances are artistic creations. Rather than simply being a narration of life story, or the reading of a journal entry, the performance of personal stories is crafted with specific artistic intents in mind, and as I noted earlier, crafted to make room for the audience, too. While we must acknowledge the effort, labour, and social positioning of the artist, and privileged viewers must question their own motives for seeking particular narratives, the necessarily relational and contextual nature of art depends on an audience responding to their own interpretation of an artist’s work.

In the performance of autobiographical storytelling, sharing lived experience, and embodied presence, these artists create a performance space that is liberatory. José Esteban Muñoz writes that the stage can be a site for the performance of a desire of utopia.<sup>16</sup> As Muñoz argues, the concept of utopia can be important in activism, giving marginalized groups hope and a future to work towards. However, there is a tension between the staging of utopia that might occur in a radical, authentic, performative narration of one’s gender story, and the actual effects of such performances.<sup>17</sup> Can empathy and identification be enough for political change? Poletti argues that there are risks in “deploying affect and empathy as tools for politics.”<sup>18</sup> She states that in such contexts, “the expression, or merely the identification, of the personal gets mistaken for doing the work of the political.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the emotional connection the audience feels with the performer is deceptive, masking the lack of concrete action and political movements. Lauren Berlant, whose scholarship focuses on the affective components of belonging, argues that “vulnerability and suffering can become all jumbled together into a scene of the generally human, and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a passive and

vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion.”<sup>20</sup> Compassion on its own is insufficient. Often, discomfort and conflict, in their prompting to confront one’s own limits, can be more productive for learning and transformation than empathetic identification.

Even with these limitations in mind, I maintain that stories can form relationships, and storytelling, in its performed intimacy, vulnerability, and deconstruction of performative identities, can be transformative on both personal and political levels. I saw the *Gender Failure* show in 2014. The following year, I changed my undergraduate degree to Gender and Women’s Studies, and in 2019, I graduated from a master’s program in Gender Studies and Feminist Research. I can’t say that these decisions stemmed from one performance, but I can say that the performance created a space for me to identify with the artists in certain ways, prompted unpacking of my own thinking on gender, and ultimately influenced my studies, work, and activism in the subsequent years.

As Muñoz writes, “It is something like a trace or potential that exists or lingers after a performance. At performance’s end, if it is situated historically and materially, it is never just the duration of the event.”<sup>21</sup> The lingering effects of the artists’ performances generate a potentiality. When the performers leave the stage, nothing has ended. We might be inspired to tell our own stories, create relationships, and build communities working towards change.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 218.

<sup>3</sup> Karen J. Prager and Linda J. Roberts, “Deep Intimate Connection: Self and Intimacy in Couple Relationships,” in *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, eds. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect,” in *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect,” 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Spoon, *Gender Failure*.

<sup>8</sup> T Kira Madden, “Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy,” *Lithub*. March 22, 2019.

<https://lithub.com/against-catharsis-writing-is-not-therapy/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Anna Poletti, “Coaxing an Intimate Public: Life Narrative in Digital Storytelling,” *Continuum* 25, no. 1 (2011): 81.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect,” 33–4.

<sup>12</sup> Vivek Shraya, *even this page is white*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah McGregor, “Episode 3.14: Getting Shit Sandwiched with Vivek Shraya,” *Secret Feminist Agenda*, January 18, 2019, 31:40-32:25. <https://secretfeministagenda.com/2019/01/18/episode-3-14-getting-shit-sandwiched-with-vivek-shraya/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 97.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Poletti, “Intimate Public,” 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 41–2.

<sup>21</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 99.