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Spalding Gray and the Slippery Slope of confessional performance

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SPALDING GRAY AND THE SLIPPERY SLOPE OF CONFESSIONAL
PERFORMANCE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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David Price Terry
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ABSTRACT

Beyond Spalding Gray's iconic position as a confessional performer, he serves as a representative character for a culture increasingly consumed with both self-reflection and self-disclosure, where confessional speech is understood as somehow more "authentic" or "pure" than other forms of discourse. I argue that confession is a performative, not a constative utterance (a doing not a saying) and that it is a productive not a liberatory act; it does not free an already existing self, but produces a new self in the act of performance. Consequently, though the confessional performance style typified by Gray can be aesthetically compelling for audiences and politically constructive for performers, the power dynamics between performer and audience in confessional performance are far from benign. Care must be taken to ensure that the act of confession is ethically sound and artistically/intellectually productive.

I begin by placing Gray's work into a historical context. In Chapter 2, I trace some problematics of the confessional voice in academic, literary, religious, legal and psychoanalytic contexts. Chapter 3 examines some of the contentious issues of the confessional voice in Spalding Gray's work, offering a reading of *It's a Slippery Slope* from a Foucaultian post-structuralist perspective. Finally I offer a reading of my own confessional performance work (inspired by and in response to Gray's) which has been created using the emerging analytical idiom of haunting, and which I believe to be capable of resolving some of the generic problems of confessional discourse outlined in my study.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme--
why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled?
I hear the noise of my own voice:
The painter's vision is not a lens, it trembles to caress the light.
But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact.
All's misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

---Robert Lowell, "Epilogue"

The monologue is always happening; there's no end to it as long as I exist. It's always framing existence. I would like to think that I could chronicle my death through some medium. If there is anything that terrifies me about death it's that I'll have to stop talking. But maybe I'll have exhausted myself by then.

---Spalding Gray (qtd. in Panjabi 161)

The only truly safe place I have ever known in this world, in this life I have lived, [is] at the centre of a story as its teller.

---Athol Fugard (qtd. in Hastrup 38)

Although Spalding Gray was only one of many autobiographical performance artists to emerge from New York in the late seventies and early eighties, he is certainly the most famous, or least the one whose fame most directly arose from his candid confessions. Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian, and Tim Miller, to name only a few, also

found large followings while telling tales based, to varying degrees, on their own lives, but none became as iconic a figure as Spalding Gray. The National Foundation for Mental Health asked him to be their spokesperson in the early nineties because they had “never heard anyone so articulate about their mental illness” (Gray, *Monster* iii). The *New York Times* called him “the grand master of the first-person singular” (Marks). Mr. Gray was an inspiration for the explosion of identity politics based confessional performance art in the late eighties and early nineties, or, at the very least—after the success of *Swimming to Cambodia*—a figure that subsequent autoperformers were/are forced to contend with.

The recipient of an Obie Award (for *Swimming to Cambodia*), a Guggenheim fellowship, grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, he was an “icon of our culture speaking out of it and back to it. Every Boy Corralled into Manhood, Every Fantasy of Boundless Sexual Adventures, Every New Home Owner, Sufferer of Symptoms, Son, Lover, Husband, Father” (Leverett 101-102). He was the quintessential narcissistic artist for an increasingly narcissistic culture during the “me generation” 1980s, and his name, not-infrequently appearing as a punch line on popular television programs such as *The Simpsons* and *The Family Guy*, became virtually synonymous with the act of turning “navel gazing” into discourse.

After a distinguished career in the theatrical avant-garde that included extensive work with Richard Schechner’s Performance Group and a starring role in the New York premier of Sam Shepard’s *Tooth of Crime*, he co-founded The Wooster Group with whom he wrote and starred in the autobiographical *Rhode Island Trilogy* (1975-1978). The three pieces, *Sakonnet Point*, *Rumstick Road*, and *Nayat School*, differed widely in

form, “but all three concentrated a single subject: the development of a character named Spalding Gray as a person and an artist” centering, particularly in *Rumstick Road*, on the experience of his mother’s suicide and its aftermath (Bierman 13). Rather than create fictional characters, he wanted to explore “the other inside of [himself], the constant witness, the constant consciousness of self” (Gray, “About” 35). For Gray the trilogy was:

Not only about the loss of my mother but about the feeling of loss itself. I’ve had this feeling for as long as I can remember. It is the feeling that the “I” that I call “me” is only a visitor here. No, not even a visitor because a visitor goes elsewhere after he visits. I have no word for it, and the work is the attempt to at giving expression to that absent word. (“About” 42)

His need to express the “absent word” to represent his sense of alienation can be read as his extension of the section of T.S. Elliot’s *The Cocktail Party* that Gray used heavily in the construction of *Rumstick Road*:

I should really like to think that there is something wrong with me—Because, if there isn’t, then there’s something wrong, Or at least, very different from what it seemed to be, With the World itself—and that’s much more frightening! (quoted in Bierman 26)

Fueled by such a deep existential need for grounding, he felt compelled to turn inward. Despite the historical importance that critics have placed on his work, Gray insisted, “I did not choose to work this way. I found it to be the only way I could work” (“About” 34).

This need ultimately led him away from The Wooster Group and into a solo career. As an admitted narcissist, he felt that, because of the collapse of his relationship with his former collaborators, “the world as we know it was coming to an end,” and he cast himself as a chronicler of that fall. He set out to document his life:

Orally. Because to write it down would be in bad faith. It would, first of all assume there was going to be a future. And furthermore, I have nothing against poetry and books, but we have enough objects; I cannot bear the clutter. And I thought, this will live only on my breath. I had this really romantic idea that it would be an epitaph—at the end of each evening, I would complete myself. If there was another chance to do it the next night, I would. (qtd. in Panjabi 156-157)

Thus began the minimalist performance style that he would employ for the next twenty years of his life at venues around the world. In stark contrast to the heavily abstracted and mediatized performances of The Wooster Group, he sat behind a simple wooden desk and told stories about his life into a microphone—like a newscaster reporting the events of his dysfunctional psyche—his only prop a glass of water and a worn notebook. He would tape each performance and listen for a series of connections, “just like psychoanalysis,” and re-work it for the next audience until “suddenly there [was] an arc” (qtd. in Panjabi 157). This allowed him to be in a state of near constant improvisation and fully experience “the power of that instant communication” that “electrified” him (qtd. in Schechner, “My Life” 156). Calling himself an “inverted method actor” he worked, with as little fanfare as possible, to transform “what might be considered a psychopathology (divided or schizoid personality) into a creative act. The presentation of self in a theatrical setting” (Gray, “Artist’s Notes” 171).

Without naming any of the roles in particular, he cast his audiences alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) as theatrical patrons, trusted friends, therapists in a session, priests witnessing a confession, and voyeurs who perhaps shouldn’t be privy to any of it at all. After unleashing a series of shockingly candid and seemingly disparate anecdotes, Gray would weave the divergent strands into a surprisingly coherent

metaphorical whole, finding transcendent, if temporary, victory over his conflicted existence for both himself and (the sympathetic members of) his audience.

Toward a Historical Context for “That Funny Guy Behind the Table Downtown”¹

Placing Spalding Gray’s work into a historical context proves to be more difficult than the minimalism of his performances might suggest. Gray may have been drawn to solo work partly because it gave him “CONTROL” and allowed him to “make all the choices” about what went into his pieces, but this control does not extend to the diverse categories into which his body of work is placed by critics (Gray, qtd. in Gentile, *Cast* 202). In the next few pages I will examine Spalding Gray in relation to three of the more prominent contexts in which critics have read him: the one-person-show, the storytelling revival, and performance art. While each perspective adds new dimension to our understanding of his work, depending on the background one assigns to “that funny guy behind the table downtown,” his work takes on radically different meanings. Furthermore, none of the categories seems to capture his work completely. As Trinh Minh-ha reminds us, “despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak” (94).

The difficulty in contextualizing Gray’s life and art, however, does not just stem from the difficulty of categorization as such. Gray’s work has trouble fitting into the categories of the one-person show, storytelling, and performance art I have outlined below, at least in part, because the scholars analyzing him have neglected or underemphasized the roll that confession plays in his monologues. Though they take various stances on Spalding Gray’s merits as a performer and his proper historical

¹David Letterman on Spalding Gray; qtd. in Auslander 61

placement, they all, to varying degrees, share the assumption that his monologues are a form of artistic “naval gazing.” This label, though understandable, is too easily applied and belies a much more complex and intricate relationship between performer and audience in confessional performance. My aim in this chapter and those that follow is to complicate some of our assumptions about Mr. Gray and autoperformance more generally by reading it not as a presentation of an already existing selfhood, but as the active and conscious production of self in the intersubjective relationship between confessor and confessant. The concept of confession does not only help us to categorize autoperformers, but also, perhaps more importantly, to deal with some of the ethical problems inherent in rendering the private public.

In his book, *Cast of One*, John Gentile places the work of Spalding Gray in the context of the one-person show, a genre that he traces “From the Chatauqua Platform to the Broadway Stage” and defines, as the title of his book suggests, based largely on the number of performers featured in each work. In the late nineteenth century, Gentile argues, “the prejudice against the theater [as too vernacular and anti-spiritual], the subsequent demand for a non-theatre form of entertainment, the solidity of a culture not divided into highbrow and lowbrow, and the intertwined interests in language/literature/reading/speech—contributed to the upsurge in the popularity of the one-person show in Victorian America” (10). In touring lyceum circuits and permanent Chautauqua platforms, audiences took in performances by noted authors such as Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, and Mark Twain, and former stage actors such as James E. Murdoch, Fanny Kemble, and Charlotte Cushman in large numbers. By the end of the century, he notes, “hundreds of performers appeared in the directory *Who’s Who in the*

Lyceum under a multitude of titles, including: reader, dramatic reader, elocutionist, expressionist, entertainer, impersonator, characterist, character artist, interpretive reciter, storyteller, monologist, and character impersonator” (63). Gentile credits much of the popularity of these performances to “the Romantic movement and its interest in the exploration of the individual” (62).

In the early part of the twentieth century the “commercialization of elocution and the over expansions of the tent Chautauqua” and the cultural shifts of “The Roaring Twenties, [which] meant that anything Victorian was stodgy [sic], dated, and ridiculously old fashioned,” led to major changes in the one-person show (73). Most notably the relative formality of the nineteenth century gave way to an acceptance of the vernacular, and the decline in antagonism towards the theater led many performers to move “closer and closer toward theatricalization” (82). Because it “dissolved the middle-class prejudice against the theater,” Gentile calls this theatricalization of Chautauqua “a kind of professional suicide,” as it led to its own demise (87). The major solo-performers of this period transformed the genre from “platform performance” to “solo theater” (96). Cissie Loftus and Dorothy Sands gave mimetic impersonations of contemporary celebrities. Charles Laughton gave readings of literature of “true merit.” Ruth Draper offered satires of contemporary culture, and Cornelia Otis Skinner gave lively performances of historical figures. Gentile claims that by composing their own work, the latter two performers “restored the bardic tradition to solo performance by becoming their generation’s storytellers and oral poets” (114). Regardless of their content, the structure and style of this work more closely resembled theatre than the lecture circuit solo performances of the preceding generation.

The vanguard of the contemporary soloist movement came in the 1950s with *Emlyn Williams as Charles Dickens* and Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight!* According to Gentile, the influence of these two works, themselves homages to two premier Victorian era lyceum/Chautauqua performers, "pervades the contemporary resurgence of solo performance in this country" (118). The popular and critical success of these two works proved that "a solo performer [could provide] a fully satisfying evening of entertainment" (121). This led to an explosion of "biographical one-person shows" centered upon "the solo-performer's impersonation of a single historical figure" (130). They all mimetically "re-create an experience that we are denied by death and by the passage of time" (147). Dozens of well known performers such as Uta Hagen, Ben Kingsley, Leonard Nimoy and James Earl Jones presented solo performances based on the lives of historical figures from Oscar Wilde, Dylan Thomas, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Adolph Hitler, Clarence Darrow, and Queen Victoria at well established theatres (133-134). Over time they moved away from mere platform re-creations and toward "intimate portraits of the private lives of the central characters" (135). Most of them also extended this intimacy to the audience through direct address and "requiring of the audience a collaborative imagining to fill in suggested scenes and evoked characters" (136).

Eventually, some performers such as Jack Smith, Stuart Sherman, Jeff Weiss, Lenny Sack, Linda Montano, Bob Carroll, Theodora Skipitares, and Spalding Gray began to turn inward to present "intimate private portraits" of their own lives. Gentile calls these autoperformers "the ultimate examples of the biographical one-person show genre (148). He credits the difference in focus to Richard Senett's idea of "the fall of public

man” and the “gradual national devaluation of the public façade and the resultant emergence of private persona in the public realm” (151). Gentile is careful to show the historical roots of Spalding Gray and his contemporaries, insisting that in many ways they “invented nothing but [were] carrying on an American tradition,” to quote Charles Laughton’s response to the discovery that his own work rested on the shoulders of Charles Dickens (102). Though the use of their personal lives as subject matter for public performance is a marked shift, for Gentile:

The impulse to create a persona is of vital importance, not only for Spalding Gray’s autobiographical monologues but for the one-person show as a whole. . . . Many of the major figures in this history have used solo performance as a means to invent or reinvent their public persona. Charles Dickens established himself through his readings not only as the favorite author of the period but also as the foremost overall (theatrical and literary) entertainer as well. Fanny Kemble, after her disastrous marriage, used solo performance as a way to reestablish her celebrity and her position within the Kemble family tradition of Shakespeare specialists. When her illness threatened her position as America’s greatest actress, Charlotte Cushman recreated herself as a prominent platform reader. (151-152)

Indeed, even the difficulty in categorizing Gray’s work that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter can be traced to the “persistent problem of genre classification of solo performance” in general (120).

In his contention that Gray’s work is “rooted in the art of storytelling and the basic human need to hear and tell stories” (150), Gentile agrees with Joseph Sobol, who places Gray’s work in the context of the folk art “storytelling revival.” Sobol centers his research on the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) and the National Storytelling Festival, which began in Jonesborough, Tennessee, in the summer of 1973, and hundreds of smaller storytelling festivals nationwide. He contends that this movement is based on a cultural need for a non-

dogmatic expression of religious impulses, and that its basic program is “the search for myth in a demythologizing time” (15). Participants describe the experience in terms of “‘one-ness,’ ‘connectedness,’ ‘community,’ ‘healing,’ and ‘magic’” (39). Sobol is careful to describe it in sociological terms as emerging from “the sixties cultural radicalism and the seventies inward-turning politics of personal growth” (14), in a way that “allowed psychic heat [generated by the radicalism of the sixties] to diffuse itself in ritual and ceremony” (9). However, he sees in the stories “a certain emotional quality . . . that has no normative equivalent, a quality of revelation, transcendent presence, *hitlahavut*,” which he identifies as “stepping into the aura of the archetype” (17). In contrast to the one-person show’s emphasis on creating a singular grounded persona, Sobol argues that:

The storyteller/physician brings harmony to a group because she carries the gift of *self-forgetting*. In her presence, we surrender the broken crusts of myth over which we are daily struggling—whether they are myths of power, gratification, acceptance, hunger, or survival. We let her lift us to an altitude from which we can see a whole mythic pattern unfold—sudden reversals, miraculous escapes, supernatural helpers, happy or tragic endings. Our psyches need stories the way our bodies need bread, to give form to our experience and to rebuild our sense of possibility. We give this power to the storyteller’s soothing voice when the teacher’s rage has no more to teach, because of what the archetype promises in a deep recess of our imaginations. Somewhere, we all know the storyteller. (35-36; emphasis added)

Whatever its source, Sobol argues that the archetype of the storyteller—characterized by the “halo and the stigma of the ordinary”—provides a “fulcrum for instinctive or systematic critiques of mass cultural hypnosis” (1, 16).

It might seem that Gray’s ironic, angst-filled narratives would be completely out of place on the Jonesborough stage defined in such quasi-religious terms. Reaction to his work at the festival was decidedly mixed. When Gray performed *Swimming to*

Cambodia in the 1985 festival, he used a four-letter-word “which had not yet made its festival debut,” causing many women to “grab their children and [run] for the edges of the tent,” yet his performance was for many others “the highlight of the festival” (198). Gray himself embraced participation in the festival and the connection between his work and other storytellers. Although he stopped short of evoking the “archetype of the storyteller,” after watching the Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks perform, Gray remarked, “he is a genuine autobiographical storyteller . . . I am doing this in my own kind of weird way” (113). This passing reference aside, Sobol notes that the storytelling revival “need not be directly cited as a source” or, I would add, embraced in all of its mythological terms, “in order to be marked as a part of the cultural context that breeds theatrical *métis* like Spalding Gray . . . or a holly host of autobiographical ‘one-person shows’” (235). For Sobol, these one-person shows are not only the result of their specific history of the individual performers, but also an instantiation of the trans-historical “archetype of the storyteller.”

RoseLee Goldberg places Spalding Gray in the context of performance art which, although it “defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists,” has a markedly different history from that of folk art storytelling or the theatrical one-person show (9). In the history of art, Goldberg argues, “live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art. . . . Moreover, within the history of the avant-garde . . . performance in the twentieth century has been at the forefront of such an activity: an avant avant-garde” (7). At first glance, there is nothing radical about a man sitting behind a desk talking about his life, but the inclusion of the prosaic in artistic discourse has been a favored strategy of the “avant

avant-garde” from the early days of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and Bauhaus to the present as “a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based” (7).

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the early twentieth century French/Italian Futurists with whom Goldberg begins her study, used improvisation and “simultaneity,” staging more than one scene at the same time and forcing the audience to choose between them, as a way to “capture the confused fragments of interconnected events encountered in everyday life” in performance (28). These Futurist experimentations prefigure Gray’s experiments with staging fragments of his life, particularly the fractured *India and After (America)*, in which he intermittently worked his way through six different anecdotes while being randomly interrupted by a ringing bell. After each ring his prompter would read out a random word from the dictionary which Gray would then incorporate into whichever of the six fractured stories he was telling at the time (Gray, qtd. in Panjabi 158). Despite many superficial differences in tone and style, Spalding Gray and the Futurists both seem to have been attracted to performance because it gave them “license to be both ‘creators’ in developing a new form of artist’s theatre, and ‘art objects’ in that they made no separation between their art as poets, as painters, or as performers” (Goldberg 14). In blurring the lines between stage and life, both are interested in the creation of an artistic persona as an object that is larger than the confines of the performed event. Although it carries echoes of the persona creation that Gentile ascribes to performers like Charles Dickens, for the Futurists the creation of the persona as object is an end in itself, not a means to create notoriety and revive a sagging literary career.

Even more explicit precedents for Spalding Gray's "so-easy-I could-do-it" art can be seen in the work of composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham that began in the late 1930s (Leverette 101). Cage insisted that "wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. . . . Whether the sound of a truck at 50 mph, rain, or static between radios stations, we find noise fascinating" (Goldberg 123). Rather than create music from scratch, Cage sought to "capture and control these sounds, to use them, not as sound effects, but as musical instruments" (Goldberg 123). Merce Cunningham sought a similar place for the everyday in dance, seeking ways to allow everyday gestures into his choreography because "these were accepted as movement in daily life, why not on stage?" (124). Cage and Cunningham sought an art that was "not different from life but an action within life. Like all of life with its accidents and chances and variety and disorder and only momentary beauties" (126).

As much as Spalding Gray's stories reflect his desire to have narrative control over his experiences, they also reflect something of the "chance and indeterminacy" sought by Cage and Cunningham. Gray frequently treats the stories that "seem to fly to [him] and stick" as something akin to Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades" more than as original creative works (Gray, *Sex and Death* iv). He juggles his own experiences like existential hot potatoes that are both a part of him and not a part of him. Although he does not take a deliberately absurdist stance toward language, he would certainly agree with Dadaist Hugo Ball's warning that "the artist who works from his freewheeling imagination is deluding himself about his originality. He is using a material that is already formed and so is undertaking only to elaborate on it" (Goldberg 56). The happy accidents of Grays "memory film" stream of consciousness, particularly in the early

stages of creating his monologues, often mirror the Surrealist technique of “automatic writing” more than the carefully planned scripts of a theatrical one-person show or the archetypal structures of folklore storytellers (*Sex and Death* x). We can read Cage’s decree that everyday sound is music into Spalding’s incessant talking and Cunningham’s insistence that everyday movement is dance into Spalding’s sleeve rolling and stubborn refusal to stand up from behind his desk.

Following Cage and Cunningham, Alan Kaprow proposed a theater in which “one puts parts together in the manner of making a collage.” In the fall of 1959 Kaprow staged *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery in New York. This performance and many other ‘happenings’ and related “Fluxus events” that followed in the next decade “increase[d] the responsibility of the audience” and in many cases required them to “act” as well, blurring the line between audience and artist in addition to the line between art and life (128). Gray explored a similar boundary collapse in his late seventies performance series, *Interviewing the Audience*, in which he invited members of the audience up on stage to answer questions about their own lives (Gray, *Sex and Death* 151-198). The term “happening” was meant to indicate “something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen” but, as Goldberg notes, the performers put in tremendous amounts of rehearsal to create the sense of spontaneity in much the same way that Spalding Gray frequently hid hours of preparation behind a veil of conversational improvisation (Goldberg 130).

Goldberg’s discussion of experimentations in minimalist dance, painting, and sculpture in the 1960s prefigures Gray’s sparse staging for his monologues. While Gray’s work seems almost reactionary in relation to some of Yvonne Rainer’s more

extreme claims about art, he would likely join her in saying, “no to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no the anti-heroic” (141). Other precedents from the period include Yves Klein’s *Anthropometrices of the Blue Period*, in which he had nude people drag each other across a large canvas as “living brushes” (145); Piero Manzoni’s *Living Sculpture*, in which he signed his name on various individuals and declared them his sculpture; Joseph Beuys’s untitled performance at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, in which he lectured to a dead hare about the meaning behind all of his paintings, “since even in death a hare has more sensitivity and instinctive understanding than some men with their stubborn rationality” (150).

Kleins, Manzoni, and Beuys reflected the aesthetic notion of conceptual art in which the art object became entirely superfluous: “an art of which the material is concepts” (152). They also contain seeds of both the “body art” movement of the seventies, in which artists concentrated on their own bodies as material for creating art, and the more posed, costumed, and stylized “living sculptures” which set the stage for intimate autobiographical work like Spalding Gray’s (153). This body of work is extremely diverse and resists easy categorization—there is no archetype of the avant-garde performer. While any summary of seventies performance art is necessarily reductive, it is critical to consider some of the immediate predecessors and contemporaries, however broadly and superficially, in trying to place Gray’s confessional work in context.

One strategy for moving the meaning of art away from the art object and towards the artist’s body involved placing the body in situations that involved varying degrees of

actual “real world” danger or pain (see Goldberg, ch. 7). Vitto Acconci whispered secrets—“which could have been totally detrimental to [him] if publicly revealed” (156)—to visitors in the early hours of a cold winter morning in dark shed near the Hudson river making his body, rather than the page, the site for recording his “poetry” in *Telling Secrets*; Dennis Oppenheim lay on a beach with a book on his chest and remained until the sun had changed the color of his skin in *Reading Position for a Second Degree Burn*; Chris Burden took body art to new extremes by having himself, among other things, shot in the arm, and covered in a canvas bag and dropped in the middle of a busy LA freeway. Herman Nitsch, Wilhelm Reich, Otto Muhl, Gina Pane, Maria Abramovich and her partner Ulay, inflicted varieties of pain on themselves from cutting themselves to driving around in small circles for sixteen hours at a time in ritualistic performances that were, in Muhl’s words, “not only a form of art, but above all an existential attitude” (165).

On a more tongue-in-cheek path, sculptors Gilbert and George of St. Martins School of Art in London declared themselves “living sculpture.” Though their performances were often full of wit and irony, they made “no separation between their activities as sculptors and their activities in real life. David Hockney called their work “an extension of the idea that anyone can be an artist, what they say or do can be art” (qtd. in Goldberg 169). Goldberg claims that the “seductive appeal of oneself becoming an art object” led directly to “scrutiny of appearances and gestures, as well as the analytical investigation of the fine edge between an artist’s life and his or her life [which] became the content of a large body of work loosely referred to as ‘autobiographical’” (172).

Major figures of the scene included Laurie Anderson, Julia Heyward, and Adrian Piper. Each of these women to varying degrees incorporated “intimate information about themselves,” but it is also striking how, from the very beginning, they all seemed interested in problematizing their own confessions (174). In *For Instants*, Anderson explored the difficulties in bringing autobiographical material into her work, notably that it creates two pasts, “there’s what happened and there’s what I said and wrote about what happened,” and later in song, “Art and illusion, illusion and art / are you really here or is it only art? / Am I really here or is it only art?” (172). In *God Heads*, Heyward forced “boys” to sit on the left and “girls” to sit on the right in order to “ironically emphasize the social roles of men and women” (174). Piper performed *Some Reflected Surfaces* in full white face as she sang “Respect,” and her taped voice told the story of how she had worked as a disco dancer in a downtown bar.

Goldberg notes these “performances were all easy to follow and the fact that the artist revealed intimate information about themselves set up a particular empathy between performer and audience,” in a way that makes their performances analogous to Gray’s storytelling. His more straightforward style, however, does not—at least on the surface—seem to share their concern with increasing “the audience’s awareness of their position as victims of manipulation” (174). This lack of obvious distancing devices combined with his visual minimalism makes his work more directly confessional and accounts, at least partially, for the ease with which Gray is called a “storyteller” and “one-person show” artist—labels that would be much more difficult to apply to Piper, Anderson, Hayworth or other contemporaries.

Gray is easier to place in the world of the avant-garde once it categorically rejects the “anti establishment idealism of the sixties and early seventies” and embraces hybrid avant-garde/popular art identities in “the artist-as-celebrity of the eighties” (190). After the success of “O Superman,” the song at the center of her eight-hour opus *United States*, Laurie Anderson signed a multi-album deal with Warner Brothers records. Eric Bogosian was able to use his character based monologues to acquire “a prestigious company of agents and . . . film and TV contracts” (192). Ann Magnuson made frequent appearances on soap operas. These more polished, marketable, and slick performers exploited “traditional theatre craft” as a part of a growing popular/avant-garde fusion that allowed Spalding Gray’s “autobiographical tours of landscapes from his past . . . to be seen as often on the performance as on the theatre circuit” (196). In fact, Goldberg notes that monologue work like Gray’s has become, in the past twenty years, “the longest running and most mainstream of performance forms in the United States” (213).

While listing some of the many direct historical precedents for Spalding Gray’s work may partially deny its status as truly “avant avant-garde”—is it really avant-garde if someone has done it before?—and while his project does seem quite tame in contrast with many of his contemporaries, it is clear that the process of turning his life story into monologues belongs in Goldberg’s history of “performance art”—however elusive the term, or broad the work it encompasses—as much as it does to the more stable categories of Sobol’s “storytelling revival” or Gentile’s “one-person shows.” In fact, the difficulty in placing him betwixt and between popular art (one-person show), folk art (storytelling), and the avant-garde (performance art), reflects an ongoing debate among critics and historians about what should be covered under the term “performance art.”

Although he does not reject it in full, Marvin Carlson argues that Goldberg's avant-garde genealogy of performance art is limited because it privileges the extremes at the expense of "the troubadors, the scalds and bards, the minstrels, the mountebanks, and that miscellaneous group of entertainers that in England were designated as the glee-men, a term which included dancers, posturers, jugglers, tumblers, and exhibitors of trained performing monkeys and quadrupeds" (88). He suggests that the history of the avant-garde ought not neglect vaudeville, minstrelsy, and the variety oriented European cabaret, which "enjoyed a far longer career and attracted a far larger and more diverse public than the various rather specialized and esoteric artistic avant-gardes" (94). This lineage leads most clearly to Jerome Savary's Grand Magique Circus, Incubus and Kaboodle, Beryl and Perils, and Cunning Stunts in Britain and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, all of whom are often called "new vaudevillians." The leading chronicler of the movement, Ron Jenkins, preferred the term "modern clowns" or "comic performers" in his aptly titled *Acrobats of the Soul*. He includes in their number:

Ventriloquist Paul Zaloom, a former member of Bread and Puppet, who manipulates society's detritus—toys, utensils, milk cartons, boxes, and automobile parts—into a socially satiric "theatre of trash;" banjo performer Stepehn Wade; the clown acts of leading contemporary circuses—the Big Apple, the Cirque du Soleil, and Pickle Family Circus; magician clowns Penn and Teller; monologist Spalding Gray; They Flying Karamazov Brothers, whose specialty is juggling almost any conceivable object; and two solo clowns, Bill Irwin and Avner the Eccentric. (qtd. in Carlson 124)

Although Carlson calls Gray's presence in this list "a bit odd," he certainly seems to argue that performance art's artistic achievements owe as much if not more to the alternate lineage of the court jester as to that of Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism (88).

C. Carr, the *Village Voice* columnist who chronicled the New York performance scene in the mid eighties through the early nineties, also applies the term "New

Vaudevillian” to Spalding Gray, but she doesn’t necessarily mean it as a compliment. She is attracted to “artists who rub up against something—the dominant culture—and . . . rub it the wrong way, thus pushing everybody’s limits” (xviii). She feels that “crossing over,” as exemplified by Gray’s success with *Swimming to Cambodia* and made possible by his accessible “we all know the storyteller” style, was a direct cause of the gentrification and downfall of the avant-garde performance scene in New York:

for the first time, performance artists began to “cross over” into Hollywood and record deals and slick magazine spreads—not in massive numbers of course. But as soon as a few had climbed the ladder, thus establishing that there was a ladder, it changed the perspective of those at the bottom rung. The axiom “money changes everything” had never been illustrated more graphically that it was in the East Village. The fun (for which the neighborhood’s first gallery had been named) degenerated into ambition and cynicism, and a few years later, into violence . . . with the Tompkins Square riot. (xvii)

When she discovered that The Kipper Kids, an act that is closer to her preferred “a little off terra firma” performance style “than, say, Spalding Gray or Ann Magnuson or any of the other New Vaudevillians,” she felt “a twinge of anxiety” at the breaking of boundaries that “crossing over” had created and the sense that “what was once at the center floats to the edge, and vice versa. Everything flattens. And the freaks aren’t happy in the sideshow anymore” (153).

Philip Auslander holds a considerably more hopeful view of “crossing over” in his 1992 book *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. In the topsy-turvy postmodern world as he sees it, direct resistance only serves to reify the power systems it tries to “rub the wrong way”; the only effective resistance is one that “crosses over” and allows itself to be partially corrupted by the mainstream, a popular/resistant art that *mimes* the dominant culture rather than reflecting it (48). He places the work of Gray alongside that of Laurie

Anderson, Andy Kaufman, and the Wooster Group and holds it up as a model of artists who are able to resist despite what Craig Owens has called “the impossible complicity of postmodern art: the necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced *in order to denounce it*” (Auslander 22; emphasis in original). In response to this “impossible complicity,” these performers make art that is, in Hal Foster’s terms, “‘resistant’ rather than transgressive” (qtd. in Auslander 23).

Auslander believes this group of artists emerged historically as a response to “the Artaudian/Grotowskian/Beckian line of thought” and the “ecstatic branch” of 1960s experimental theatre. This later generation resisted their predecessors’ assumption that performance ought to rest on the actors’ extreme presence based on “archetypal psychic impulses accessible through the actor’s physicality” (37). The purpose of this radical presence had been, according to Richard Schechner’s 1968 essay “The Politics of Ecstasy,” the expression of a “counterforce of great unifying, celebratory, sexual, and life-giving power” that is “more authentic than the civilization—the specific inhibitions—it opposes and frequently obliterates” (qtd in Auslander 37). In arguing for different forms of resistance Schechner—member of the Living Theater and founder of The Performance Group of which Gray was a member for some time—worried that this same ecstasy “can be unleashed in the Red Guards or horrifically channeled toward the Nuremberg rallies and Auschwitz.” He feared that the new expressionism came “perilously close to ecstatic fascism” (41).

Partial corruption or “crossing over” as a strategy for preventing this fascism becomes more important in a mediatized age. For Auslander the idea that “the validity of political art is measured in terms of its efficacy at creating a collective [in radical contrast

to the culture it critiques] is not responsive to postmodern culture, in which the most common form of collectivity is the serial relation of consumers and of the mass media” (44). He echoes Baudrillard’s warning that, in contrast to the idea that it controls people through any of its explicit messages, “TV by virtue of its mere presence is a social control in itself . . . it is the certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other, that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response” (qtd. in Auslander 44-45). In the context of mediatized culture, Gray’s talking from behind the desk is, in Herman Rapaport’s terms, “representing the hegemonic representations.” Gray the narrator is a mirror of a talk show host or a newscaster reflecting hegemonic representations back onto themselves rather than merely “making representations that reflect hegemonic ideology” (26). The persona he creates for himself within the monologues is like those of soap opera characters who “perpetuate the narrative by continuing to make the same mistakes,” particularly in his relationship with longtime lover Renee Shafransky (76). He offers us “things we have seen before”—soap opera plots—“not completely divorced from their original aura and significance but in surprising context”—his actual life (17). Auslander argues that Gray is not offering his “Everyspalding” persona as a direct critique of how we are living or as a charismatic alternate model for how we ought to live, but as a “point of possible resistance *within* the mediatized world in which we are already living” (51; emphasis in original). His work is radical not because of its *content*, but because of the way it plays with the hegemonic *form*.

Sally Banes, C. Carr's predecessor at *The Voice* who has made a "cross over" of her own from journalism to the academy, disagrees with Carlson's court jester lineage and argues that:

Where performance art resembles elite, popular, folk, mass, or exotic spectacles, it does so not for genetic reasons (that is, because it descended from them) but for strategic reasons (that is, because it alludes to them, either to criticize them or to expose aspects of them in a different context). For in terms of institutional formations and ideological commitments, even while being partially co-opted into the mainstream, performance art still locates itself as an oppositional, alternative culture. (8)

She also notes that there has been a "high volume of two way traffic" between popular and avant-garde performance that far preceded the 1980s (10). She argues that despite the "elasticity of mass culture, for every performance artist who crosses over into the mainstream, there are still myriad others who engage with popular and mass culture in ways that are either too critical, esoteric, or scandalous to be accepted by the mainstream" (11). She stops short of saying that this "critical, esoteric, and scandalous" art is more authentic performance art, but she clearly believes that performance art's history is, at best, tangentially related to the history of folk art or mass media.

Henry Sayre argues forcefully that the difficulty historians have locating a single history for what he calls the "postmodern avant-garde" is the direct result of strategies within the movement. The postmodern avant-garde has broken with modernism by

. . . attempting to strip the idea of "modernism" itself of the consistency, univocality, and autonomy (in short, the consolation) of a period "style." It has done this by "re-inventing" as it were, a neglected modernist heritage, and more important, by offering an art of its own founded upon contingency, multiplicity, and polyvocality. Performance, which was (and remains) styles, diverse, and conspicuously unprogrammatic, has consistently proved one of the most readily available means for realizing this strategy of opposition. (xii)

Performance is used by a variety of artists precisely *because* it is an “essentially contested concept,” which “defies precise or easy definition” and allows the artist to posit his or her own (anti) history in the moment of performance (Strine Long and Hopkins 183; Goldberg 9). Banes accuses both Sayre and Goldberg of anachronistically importing ideas from one period of history to another and suggesting “improbable causal links” between Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and contemporary art (Banes 8). For Sayre however these “improbable causal links” are themselves a major strategy of the postmodern avant-garde which, rather than suggest a clean break with modernism (as modernist avant-garde work does in contrast to the traditions it rebels against), seeks to problematize the very idea of a clear linear history for either “modernism” or “postmodernism.”

I agree with Sayre’s notion that Gray’s deceptively simple performances, full of what Carolee Schneemann’s interior scroll famously labeled “personal clutter and the persistence of feeling,” are difficult to place in a monolithic historical context because they intentionally straddle multiple categorizations (Sayre 90). Whatever side we might take in the debates over whether his work is heir to Mark Twain, Hal Holbrook and the one person show, Bill Hicks and the storytelling revival, or Hugo Ball, John Cage and the “avant-avant-garde,” whether we decide that Gray’s work is complicit with or resistant to dominant discourse, it seems clear that, as Sayre suggests, the difficulty in categorization is not a failure of analysis but recognition of something intrinsic to Mr. Gray’s project. As a middle class straight white male with a mildly impressive film and television resume, Gray is not a “marginal” figure in the identity politics sense of the term, which prompted Carlson to suggest that his monologues are automatically less socio-politically

transgressive than that of members of more “marginalized” groups (164). Gray has, however, staked out a place on the border between the popular art of one-person shows, avant-garde performance art, folk art storytelling, and film and TV star. This liminal space across generic boundaries, where Bakhtin suggests “the most interesting and productive life of culture takes place” (2), was the most fertile ground for Gray’s exploration of his aggressively candid confessional voice. It seems to me that he revealed the detailed secrets of his inner life, at least in part, to (re)produce himself as a marginalized and difficult to categorize figure (164).

In the spirit of “improbable causal links,” Sayre finds the most direct correlation to Spalding Gray not in what we might more conventionally label “performances,” but in the “documentary status” of photography and its ability to “reveal the aesthetic powers of the vernacular” (38). He also notes a strong connection between many of Gray’s confessional tales and the narrative paintings of Eric Fishl. Both embody a “suburban vernacular” in which they try to make the viewer “an unwilling witness to the event” rather than an observer of an “art object” and, through depictions of disturbing yet familiar events, force the “the narrative context [to dissolve] the formally basic”; they use uncanny content to disrupt the simplified form in which it is presented (26-27). This aggressive “suburban vernacular” creates a sense of uncomfortable intimacy that subordinates the painting-as-object to the painting-as-performance. He argues that “this kind of work has not lost its avant-garde status, not given itself over to the market and to bourgeois taste, or at least not meaningfully,” precisely because it locates the authenticity of art not in stable objects, but in transitory performances (12).

Though any study of storytelling, one-person shows, or performance art in the US over the last thirty years certainly would warrant at least some reference to Spalding Gray, these labels do not clearly capture his project. It is important that we also look at his monologues more specifically as works of confessional discourse. At his best, Gray “neither hides from nor hides anything” from his audience in ways that seek to problematize his relationship with them, resist his own objectification as a “celebrity” or “storyteller” and ground the meaning of the performance in a narrative of (temporary/awkward/unstable) presence (28). Sayre argues that Gray uses confession to “problematize—and not resolve—art’s relation to its audience” (19). The “object” of Spalding Gray’s performance is this experience of an immediate presence or “instant communication,” what Adrian Piper has called the “indexical present,” not the specific content of the stories he is telling at any given moment (Gray, qtd. in Schechner, “My Life” 156). Despite its apparent simplicity, the persona that Gray creates is, in Sayre’s reading, intentionally and essentially problematic. He simultaneously gives his audiences both candid confessions and reasons to suspect those confessions because he is not seeking to give them information but to create a specific kind of relationship with them, that of the aggressively vernacular confession. He is not trying to (re)present himself to them, but to (re)produce himself with them.

Preview

Though I feel most comfortable locating Gray as an aggressively vernacular confessional performer, confessional discourse itself proves to be a slippery notion to deal with in ways that Sayre does not directly address in his study. In the following pages, I argue that, though confessional discourse can be aesthetically compelling for

audiences and politically constructive for performers and academics alike, the power dynamics between confessor and interlocutor are far from benign and great care must be taken to ensure that the act of confession is ethically sound and artistically/intellectually productive.

In the next chapter, chapter 2, I compare the role of the confessional voice in academic, literary, religious, legal, and psychoanalytic contexts with its role in Gray's work to uncover some of its problematic characteristics. Drawing on J. L. Austin among others, I focus on the dynamic split between the self as subject-who-confesses (performative self) and the self as object-who-is-confessed-about (constative self) in order to explore the complex relationship between performer and audience in the confessional speech act and to stress the importance of critically examining both performative and constative selves when reading (or audiencing) confessions.

In chapter 3, I go on to trace some of the contentious issues of the confessional voice through Spalding Gray's work, offering a close reading of *It's a Slippery Slope* from a Foucaultian post-structuralist perspective. I argue that this monologue ought to be considered in relation to the confessional ritual described in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*; as he tells the story of his "midlife crisis," he does not release repressed information about himself as much as reproduce of himself as a subject in the act of confession. Throughout the performance, Gray questions the interaction between his performative and constative selves and becomes suspicious of the role that liberation and authenticity play in his identity as a performer. In Foucault's terms, he begins to see his own confessions as productive rather than liberating. He wonders if, through repetition,

each act of “liberating” speech has become a caricature of the last and if, in the act of confessing his “real” self, he subjects the “real” to regulation by audience expectations.

In chapter 4, I offer some reflections from my own confessional performance-scholarship, both inspired by and formed in response to Gray’s work in the wake of his suicide. Because he entered my life during my own bouts with suicidal depression, Gray had an enormous effect on me—as he did on many others—both artistically and personally. He was, for a very long time, what I wanted to be when I grew up. I sought a way to mourn him without pretending to speak for him or his family and without recreating the problematic confessional relationship that I had seen at work in *It’s a Slippery Slope*. I felt what Louise Woodstock has called both “the tug to stay silent and the pull to give voice” (247). This chapter accounts for how I used a haunting idiom both to negotiate between silence and voice and to overcome some of the generic problems of confessional performance in creating my performance piece *A Magical Mystery Tour of the American Theatre: A Tribute to Spalding Gray* in the Fall of 2004 at Louisiana State University. I believe that, by bracketing ontology in favor of ethics, the project described in this last chapter points toward reconciliation of some of the generic problems of confession outlined in the rest of my study.

Beyond Gray’s iconic position as a confessional performer, he serves as a microcosm for a culture increasingly consumed with self-reflection. We are, as Foucault has argued, a “confessing animal” (60). From the pages of supermarket tabloids and the episodes of “reality” television to the long list of autobiographical tell-all best sellers and the constant insistence that scholars locate themselves in their research, the demand for confession has never been stronger. Indeed much of the “personal narrative [that]

surrounds us; pervasive, proliferating, multiplying, consolidating, dispersing” is confessional in nature (Langellier, “Two or Three” 125). Within the relationships between Gray and his audiences, “at the creative edge where reality is socially constructed,” we may see some of “the fundamental epistemological and ontological relations of [our] society are likely to be implicated and worked out” (Schieffelin 204).

The implications of this study go beyond confessional performance as an object of inquiry. They extend to the increasingly confessional nature of qualitative academic work. The identity politics movement of the eighties and nineties has fallen short of its reformational promise largely due to problems inherent in the confessional discourse it employs. The creation and analysis of autobiographical texts has been called “the future of the [performance studies] discipline” (Sheron Daily, qtd. in Langellier, “Two or Three” 138). Finding ways to navigate the turbulent waters of confessional discourse is, increasingly, a matter of survival, particularly for scholars seeking agency for subjugated and silenced individuals, perspectives, and populations: for those wanting to “give bodies to bodiless voices” in ethnographic writing and to give voices to “voiceless bodies who desire to resist the colonizing powers of discourse” (Langellier, “Two or Three” 129).

Though I would certainly not urge a return to a false sense of objectivity and omniscience in scholarly writing and while I welcome the inclusion of voices hitherto kept out of the academy, I believe that confessional writing/performance risks circularity and often undermines its own agency. The close readings of Gray’s performances and my own that follow offer a description of the confessional impasse and a potentially productive—if partial—method for overcoming it.

CHAPTER 2. SONGS OF THE SELF

In the late 1970s and early 1980s many ethnographers—whose “object” of study, like Gray’s, was “life in the raw”—began to question the objective language they used to describe cultural life and began to advocate creating studies in which “the ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at center stage.” In these studies, “he or she can speak of previously ‘irrelevant’ topics: violence and desire, confusions, struggles” (Clifford “Introduction” 14) in order to give, in Langellier’s terms, “bodies to [the formerly] bodiless voices” of ethnographic texts (“Two or Three” 129). The so called “new ethnographers” began to interrogate the roll that “the ‘I’ that I call ‘me’ [which] is only a visitor here” plays in the structuring of ethnographic experience; like Gray, they sought to give “expression to that absent word” of transient subjective experience (Gray, “About” 42).

Sayre calls scholars working in this vein “critical performers” and believes that they extend the subjugation of text to performance earlier identified with the world of avant-garde art to the halls of academia. In the final chapter of *The Object of Performance*, he traces the beginning of this movement to Susan Sontag’s essay “Against Interpretation,” which argues that criticism ought to be subjective and personal, that “in place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (250). In contrast to other critics who dismiss this kind of scholarship as narcissistic, Sayre embraces it because its “autobiographical thrust” stands “against a much more narcissistic criticism that claim[s] to have the final word, to fix meaning, to close discourse” (250). He applauds Roland Barthes’s insistence that *all* criticism is ontologically self-revelatory and performative:

How could we believe . . . that the work is an object exterior to the psyche and history of the man [sic] who interrogates it? . . . Criticism is not at all a table of

results or a body of judgments, it is essentially an activity, i.e., a series of intellectual acts profoundly committed to the historical and subjective existence (they are the same thing) of the man [sic] who performs them. (Barthes, qtd. in Sayre 253).

The purpose of the art object is to elicit writing from the critic. The purpose of the critical text is to elicit similar writing from its readers. Each is an “unreproducible specter projected onto the stage of the present—vernacular, open-ended, undecidable, and eliciting, finally . . . its own production in us [the audience]” (Sayre 264).

By blurring the lines between artist and critic, Barthes and Sayre open up the possibility of viewing Gray’s monologues as a kind of scholarship and enable us to consider the relationship between Gray as a “poetic reporter” and experimental ethnographers working around the same time (Gray, *Swimming* xvi). But this conception of autobiography also leaves me with some questions: What are the power dynamics involved in the activity of “subjective criticism” or “critical performance”? Are there ways in which the confessional voice itself can “fix meaning and close discourse” as much as its “objective” counterpart? What does it mean to be critical of the person who experienced “violence and desire, confusions, struggles” in the past—“the I that I call me”—while embracing the person who is telling us of these “previously irrelevant” things in the present—“the ‘I’ that I call ‘I’”?

In this chapter, I examine views of confessional discourse in academic, literary, religious, legal, and psychoanalytic contexts in an attempt to uncover some of the genre’s peculiarities. Across the wide spectrum of its deployment, confessions (and scholarly responses to those confessions) tend to privilege the point of view of the confessant in the moment of confession while passing judgment on the earlier version of her- or himself that is the object of the confession. Even as the latter is treated as a constantly shifting

and unstable entity, the former is frequently treated as a stable and fixed unit of “ontological individualism” (Bellah et al. 143). I believe that we must find a way to interrogate first person performances in a way that addresses the self-doing-the-talking (performative self) as well as the self-being-talked-about (constative self) in order to understand the complex relationship between both of these selves and their audience(s).

The influence of the trend towards self-reflexive qualitative research in the humanities, the so-called narrative turn, is too ubiquitous to summarize here. It is, however, worth noting how well Mr. Gray’s performances fulfill the criteria for “new ethnography” laid out in the seminal collection *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Mary Louise Pratt argues that the experiences and recollections of naïve, untrained “mere travelers” or “casual observers” are just as valuable as “scientific” ethnographers (28). Vincent Crapanzano encourages ethnographers to take on something akin to the hyper-irony of Gray’s confessional persona and recognizing that whatever they discuss is really a “foil for . . . self-presenting” (71). James Clifford echoes this sentiment urging writers and readers of ethnographies to “struggle to confront and take responsibility for our systematic constructions of others and of ourselves through others” (“Allegory” 121). Stephen Tyler argues forcefully that ethnography, the practice of “evoking what cannot be known discursively or performed perfectly . . . is *the* discourse of the postmodern world” (123; emphasis added). The fragmented texts he describes, full of unresolved suspensions of oppositions seeking an emergent holism sound remarkably like one of Gray’s monologues (133). Both kinds of texts are “not a record of experience at all; but a means of experience” in the moment of performance (138). As Gray sheds a “strong and partial light” on his own world and experience, he creates partial, imperfect,

subjective texts that we can view not only as art objects, but also as models for the kind of scholarship that define postmodern ethnography; this study of his work can offer insights not only into the history of performance, but also into the future of performative scholarship (Clifford, "Introduction" 21).

By allowing the deeply personal into discourse that had been defined by the impersonal, Sayre's description of self-reflexive scholarship and the "new ethnography" that emerged in the eighties share certain key features with confessional poetry. Though often used pejoratively and shunned by most of the poets to whom it is applied, "confessional poetry" is meant to classify "poetry which . . . is limited to the self in nature and subject matter" and is the most influential genre of American poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century (Meyers and Simms 63). Associated with W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and more broadly with Allen Ginsberg and the Beat poets, the movement sought to overcome the "impersonal manner that could brood over spiritual conditions rather than an emotional instant" (McClatchky v). Confessional poets sought to move beyond the irony and detachment that defined modernist poets such as T. S. Elliot, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stephens and to speak in a "confidential tone" with "uncanny composure" (xxix). They wrote poetry infused with "the intimate and harrowing details of their accounts of betrayals and breakdowns, self-defeating and longing [in] an effort to admit into poetry what had been forbidden, suppressed" (xxv). While they differ in form, Spalding Gray's work shares with confessional poetry a sense of the power involved in rendering the private public, and a sense that "I have only to look at myself in order to enlarge and throw light on

some recess of the human heart”: an idea Alex de Tocqueville called quintessentially American (xxi).

In regards to their prosaic tone and episodic structure, we might better consider texts like Gray’s as personal essays, a genre that Phillip Lopate defines chiefly in terms of the intimacy it creates between writer and reader: “The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. It sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue—a friendship if you will—based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship” (Lopate xxii). He heralds the sixteenth century French Renaissance thinker Michel de Montaigne as the genre’s founder, as opposed to St. Augustine whose writing style in his first person “Confessions,” even when famously admitting to stealing a pear, lacks the sense of “eavesdropping on the mind in solitude” (xxiv).

Montaigne believed, long before de Tocqueville’s journey across the Atlantic, that “every man has within himself [sic] the entire human condition” (xxiv). Centuries before Spalding Gray, he set out to document his own life in great detail. I quote him at length below not only because he articulates the aims of his project and those that follow in his wake clearly, but also because his rendering of subjectivity is much more fluid and dynamic than conceptions of pre-modern selfhood might allow:

Others form man; I only report him: and represent a particular one, ill fashioned enough and whom, if I had to model him anew, I should certainly make something else than what he is; but that’s past recalling. Now, though the features of my picture alter and change, ‘tis not, however, unlike: the world eternally turns round; all things therein are incessantly moving, the earth, the rocks of Caucasus, and the pyramids of Egypt, both by the public motion and their own. Even constancy itself is no other but a slower and more languishing motion. I cannot fix my object; ‘tis always tottering and reeling by a natural giddiness: I take it as it is at the instant I consider it; I do not paint its being, I paint its passage; not a passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven to seven years,

but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must accommodate my history by the hour: I may presently change, not only by fortune, but also intention. 'Tis a counterpart of various and changeable accidents, and of irresolute imaginations, and, as it falls out, sometimes contrary: whether it be that I am then another self, or that I take subjects by other circumstances and consideration: so it is, that I may peradventure contradict myself, but, as Demades said, I never contradict the truth. Could my soul once take footing, I would not essay but resolve: but it is always learning and making trial. (Montaigne, Chapter XIX)

For Montaigne, “essay” is not a thing but a process, not a noun, but a verb meaning “learning and making trial” in contrast to “resolve” which we might more readily associate with Augustine’s introspection. As such, the *personal* essay is a “learning or making trial” out of/with/through one’s own personhood. It is not only a document of how the self is performed minute to minute, but is also *itself* a performance of self, what Tyler calls a “means of experience in the present” (138).

The self whom Montaigne essays is not at all static, and he recognizes that he “cannot fix his object.” His insistence that he will “never contradict the truth” stands in curious opposition to this deep-seated skepticism about the nature of the self that is both the inquiring subject and the ever-shifting object of inquiry. If there is a stable truth, how can the unstable knower described in the rest of the passage ever find it, and wouldn’t it by nature change as soon as it was found? This contradiction seems to fuel the obsessive, “from minute to minute,” nature of Montaigne’s project. The split between an unstable self and the presumed stability of self-knowledge is also a central and problematic feature of confessional discourse more broadly conceived, one with which Spalding Gray frequently toyed.

The implication that there is a “truth” to which confessants must prostrate their ever changing selves harkens back to the theological roots of confession in the Christian

tradition: the practice of admitting one's guilt to a priest, or in many protestant sects the entire congregation, in hopes that, "with regard to God; it will be a means of meriting from him more to bring about for your more perfect conversion." The only way to receive from God is to first catalogue and admit one's own shortcomings: "these graces he will communicate to you in proportion as he shall see you humbled before him" (Govinet, qtd. in Heggen 43). One's deeds must be obsessively and meticulously accounted for:

Because although you may be some time without falling into mortal sin, nevertheless without frequent confession you may fall into a great number of venial sins, which being multiplied and neglected lead to mortal sin. Without frequent confession you may be secretly engaged in wicked habits, which you will not believe to be such, and will be exposed to many dangerous occasions, against which you cannot guard yourself unless you be admonished. (45)

Believers are caught in a cycle of near constant confession like that of Montaigne's essays or Gray's monologues, because they cannot trust themselves without "admonishment" from the other.

As it is used in the New Testament, *confession* is both admission of guilt and a positive profession of faith. The revelation of inner truth to the divine is both held as an inevitable certainty and urged as a voluntary act. These uses are not always easily reconciled and the contrast between them is all the more poignant when fused with apocalyptic urgency. On the one hand, during the end times:

There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore, whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops. And I say unto you my friends, be not afraid of them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, fear him. (Luke 12:2-5)

The truth will come out eventually. All of our secrets and imperfections will be known. And we should fear divine wrath. On the other hand, those very innumerable prosaic secrets can be the source of salvation because they are of value to God:

Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows. Also I say unto you, whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: But he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God. (Luke 12:6-9)

In this case believers are urged to confess not a paranoid laundry list of (mis)deeds, but faith in the immutable Christ—the “truth” that is greater than the shifting tides of existence. We do not have to fear that we forget to confess one of our deeds or miss one of them in the litany, but that we fail to confess this bedrock truth.

As noted earlier Gray—who, though no longer practicing as an adult, was raised in the Christian Science tradition—began to chronicle his life out of a sense that “the world as we know it was coming to an end” (qtd. in Panjabi 156). There are certainly traces of the religious paranoia in the stories that he “felt as if [he] was peeling off and dropping into the audience’s lap so that [he] could breathe again” (Preface to *Sex and Death* x). As Lopate notes, “often the ‘plot’ of the personal essay, its drama, its suspense consists in watching how far the essayists can drop past his or her own psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty” (xxxv). This ideal of “deeper levels of honesty” connects the two meanings of *confession* outlined in the New Testament that color our contemporary uses of the term: admission of guilt and profession of faith.

We can also see traces of faith in a “bedrock truth” when Gray offers an almost *a priori* ontological status to storytelling:

Stories seem to fly to me and stick. They are always out there coming in. We exist in a fabric of personal stories. All culture, all civilization is an artful web, a human puzzle, a colorful quilt patched together to lay over raw indifferent nature. So I never wonder whether if a tree falls in the forest, will anyone hear it. Rather, who will tell about it? (Preface to *Sex and Death* ix)

This faith, reminiscent of Sobol's storytelling archetype, appears again when Gray insists that, at a time he felt the world was coming to an end, the stories "projected me into a future. And although this cannot fully assure a future, it has at least created one for me to move toward, as I watch it race before me" (xiv). Whereas the Spalding Gray who is narrated about is lost, the Spalding Gray who narrates sees the possibility of redemption.

Lopate believes that the contrast between self-judgment and transcendental hope can be explained by the dual nature of the self as object and self as knower of that object.

The duality allows for a magic act in which

. . . the personal essayist is a Houdini who, having confessed his sins and peccadilloes and submitted voluntarily to the reader's censuring handcuffs, suddenly slips them off with malicious ease by claiming, "I am more than the perpetrator of that shameful act; I am the knower and commentator as well." (xxviii)

Through the interplay of these contrasting roles, "the fulsome confession of limit carries the secret promise of an almost infinite opening out": the more damnable the sin, the more daring the escape, the more infinite the possibilities of "opening out" (xxviii).

Confessing is, in J. L Austin's terms, a performative as well as a constative utterance. That is to say, it is not only a saying, but also a doing; it not only points to truths about reality, but also changes reality in the moment of its performance. In the examples above, the self that is being confessed about, what we might call the "constative self," is damned, while the self that is confessing, the "performative self," receives some form of salvation through the performative utterance "I confess." The split raises the

possibility that one might offer an effective performance confessing something that is constatively false or an ineffective performance confessing something that is constatively true. One could convincingly confess to a crime that they did not commit and convincingly perform a repentant confession, perhaps alleviating themselves from guilt for an entirely different crime. Such an utterance would fail the locutionary (content) test but pass the illocutionary (performance) test of being a satisfactory confession. Conversely, one might confess to a crime that they actually did commit but do so in a way that is not illocutionarily satisfying as a confession.

This is cause for a deep-seated irresolution toward confessional discourse when its context is forensic rather than artistic. Peter Brooks outlines this legal problem convincingly in *Troubling Confessions*, contending that:

Our [US] attitudes toward confession suffer from certain uncertainties and ambivalences . . . these uncertainties and ambivalences should indicate that confession is a difficult and slippery notion to deal with. We worry about the trustworthiness of confessions because the speech-act that begins with the words “I confess” seems to be marked by contrary intentions and subject to contradictory uses by those receiving this most personal of utterances. (3)

On the one hand, due to its historical connection with inquisition and torture, “the law as we know it has elaborated as its most basic right of the accused the protection *against* involuntary confession” (18, emphasis added). Most first graders with access to a TV know that if arrested they “have the right to remain silent.” On the other hand, in their quest for forensic truth, the courts are invariably drawn to confessions because, “Western literature has made the confessional mode a crucial kind of self-expression that is supposed to bear a special stamp of sincerity and authenticity and to bear witness to the truth of the individual personality” (18). Those same first graders have doubtlessly also seen countless confessions exacted from criminals at the hands of savvy truth-seeking

detectives from *Matlock* to *Law and Order* (to say nothing of *Jerry Springer* and *Dr. Phil*).

Confessional speech is “inherently unstable and unreliable” so we must protect the accused from the possibility that their own “unconscious guilt may produce a crime in order to assure punishment” (22-23). Through what Gary Saul Morson has called “side-shadowing,” the confessant might project her or himself into subjunctive crimes that they *could* have committed but actually did not, as Mytja Karamazov does when he confesses to murdering his father: “I accept punishment not because I killed him, but because I wanted to kill him, and might well have killed him” (Morson 3; Dostoevsky, *Brothers* 509). Alternatively, the accused might have subconscious guilt from any number of sources that are happy to find release through transference onto the crime at hand regardless of the “facts.”

Beyond the problem of subjunctive or repressed guilt, confession is also unstable because, even if it is based on actual crimes, it runs the risk of being the kind of discourse that feeds Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* who, as J. M. Coetzee notes, finds “behind every motive another motive, behind every mask another mask” in an infinite regress of confessions (274). For the *Underground Man*, the goal of confessing is not truth at all “but a desire to *be a particular way*” (280; emphasis in original). He confesses not because there is some secret burning to get out, but because he enjoys the process of unmasking. In this case, the constative self is all but completely obliterated by the desires of the performative self.

Drawing on Freud, Brooks argues that these dynamics are not only at play in the extreme situations offered in Dostoevsky’s novels, but that in all circumstances

“confession is never direct, simple, straightforward, but rather a discourse whose relation to the truth takes the shape of a tangent” (51). It is a peculiar kind of discourse that frequently places the affective truth of desire above factual truth such that “elements of the analysand’s story may not in fact be produced by the person whose story it is but rather by the interlocutor, yet result in the conviction that these elements must be true.” The transference bond between confessor and confessant “can produce matter that is undoubtedly ‘true’ according to some measure of psychic need and desire, but not necessarily true in the world of outer events” (Brooks 54).

This affective truth is a large part of the pleasure involved in watching confessional performances like those that Mr. Gray produced throughout his career. If, as Brooks has suggested, “there is always something punishable going around” (61) and, later, “if misery loves her company so does guilt” (166), what better way to experience it than through watching someone bear their soul in a performance? As Gray peels back the layers of himself, he submits the “true world of outer events” to the rules of “psychic need and desire.” In an inversion of therapeutic transference, he allows audiences an opportunity to project their own subjunctive or repressed guilt and shame onto his performance in the creation of an “intersubjective, transactional, transference kind of truth” (Brooks 128).

Brooks is suspicious of the implications of importing this kind of unstable knowledge into the courtroom. Many therapists, who are less concerned that the content of confessions be “factually demonstrable” and feel more comfortable making decisions on the basis of “explanatory power,” take a much more hopeful view of confessional discourse (Brooks 118). In her book *Confessions in Psychotherapy*, Sharon Hymer

outlines several motivations that patients have for confessing: acceptance, guilt, rite of passage, unconscious guilt, demoralization, and the need to relate (16-41). All of them hinge on the patient realizing that “the self is not equivalent to the deed,” in a way that we might parallel with the division between performative self and constative self outlined above (20). Hymer argues that in this confessional splitting of self, separate from the implied judgment of a church or Supreme Being, “the redemptive nature of confession allows individuals to transcend destructive aspects of self” (99). Patients are able to move beyond poor conceptions of selfhood gained from family or social shame, alienation, and brokenness by revealing their secrets to an analyst; they are able to become more fully themselves. Although Hymer is quick to note the complexities of the relationship between analyst and analysand, and that “confession is not an isolated act, but an evolving process in which the patient’s whole being is bound up,” she does seem to consistently locate the “darker, disavowed aspects” of selfhood within what I have here called the constative self and the redemption with the performative self (267).

This latter therapeutic view of confession seems to dominate contemporary U.S. culture. In fact we give so much credence to the confessional mode that “many feel their very definition as personae, as selves, depends on their having matter to confess” (Brooks 140). Gray certainly equated his own selfhood with the act of confessing when he exclaimed:

The monologue is always happening; there’s no end to it as long as I exist. It’s always framing existence. I would like to think that I could chronicle my death through some medium. If there is anything that terrifies me about death it’s that I’ll have to stop talking. But maybe I’ll have exhausted myself by then. (qtd. in Panjabi 161)

One has only to look at the myriad of memoirs on bookshelves or the shift in television programming away from fiction and toward “reality” programming over the last few years to see the ubiquity of the desire to confess and be confessed to. A rapidly increasing number of our prime time options seem to be perversions of Rousseau’s utopian anti-theatre performances that “make the spectators the spectacle, make them actors themselves, make it so that each sees himself, loves himself in others so that all can become better united” (qtd. in Brooks 161).

This need to make the private public is both a response to and a perpetration of the individualism that Alex de Tocqueville warned “might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom” (Bellah et al. viii). It is an expression of “storytelling’s productive potential for creativity and resistance, and storytelling’s reproductive capacity to reinscribe conventional meanings and relations” (Langellier and Peterson 4). Storytelling, in the idiom put forth by Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven Tipton in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitments in American Life*, is very powerful as an expression of freedom, but it is very much a “freedom from” restraints rather than a “freedom for” any positive communal experience (25). Rendering the private public through storytelling offers temporary relief from a feeling of isolation, but it frequently does so by reinscribing what Bellah and his colleagues call “ontological individualism” in which the self becomes “the main form of reality” which again leaves individuals isolated from each other (143).

Peggy Phelan takes Spalding Gray to task along similar lines in her wryly titled essay, “Spalding Gray’s Swimming to Cambodia: The Article!” a critique of his

monologue turned film about playing a part in Rolland Joffe's *The Killing Fields*.

While she finds his project "in theory important and interesting," she faults him for not being able to transcend his individualism in relationship with his audience because he is so fixated on confessing previous experiences of transcendence:

For Gray, performative Perfect Moments consist of these experiences of "oneness" between himself and his audience. In *Swimming to Cambodia*, we hear so much *about* other Perfect Moments that there is little time or energy for creating a new one there in the theatre/film. (28; emphasis in original)

Later, she attacks him for using himself as "a kind of epistemological gauge" and for assuming that "all experience and all representations of that experience must be filtered through him." Phelan argues that when Gray attempts to connect his private life with a more social truth, in this case "the death of two million Cambodian refugees," he ends up finding "only another opportunity to see himself" (28). Furthermore, Phelan claims that—because "his most consistently expressed emotion is one of loss" even to the point of manufacturing "losses where there are none"—Gray doesn't even achieve "authentic exposure." She urges him to "abandon his boyish unconsciousness and explore his own misogyny, racism, colonialism, and economic imperialism, which run like sludge through his text." Although it has "an appealingly polished surface," for Phelan, Gray's refusal to allow for "authentic exposure" leaves his text with a "completely unthreatening substance" (29).

I certainly understand Phelan's critique of Gray's narcissism, but I question her insistence that an "authentic exposure" is the way to address the issue. Even if Spalding Gray does sometimes fail to do so, Sayre reminds us that the "autobiographical thrust" can stand "against a much more narcissistic criticism that claim[s] to have the final word, to fix meaning, to close discourse" (250). I doubt that Phelan would ever claim to have

the “final world” on any subject but, at least in this essay, she relies on something akin to the “ontological individualism” of which Bellah and his colleagues warn. In contrast to Gray’s persistent “feeling of loss,” she seems to pose that he create a more “threatening substance” and allow for the darker, repressed parts of him to come forth into more “authentic” confessional monologues. Even as she accuses him of hiding behind “boyish irony” her solution to the problem of narcissism is that he move deeper into himself. In order to encourage a more “authentic” confession, she casts herself as the benevolent interlocutor, offering that she “doesn’t care one bit” that he has this darker side and that she is only disappointed in his “assumption that it can be glossed over” (29). Only once he moves past his glossy subjectivity of loss and confesses the “sludge” of his “authentic self” can his work build a more communal meaning. As we shall see in the reading of *It’s a Slippery Slope* in the following chapter, when Gray attempts to do what Phelan asks of him the results are much less successful in overcoming narcissism than her analysis would have it. Indeed, “the reflexive option does not resolve the problems of authority so much as it creates new ones” (Bowman 137).

Phelan’s view of the power of confession, like most of those surveyed in this chapter, seems to rest on a “freedom from—from the people who have economic power over you, from people who try to limit what you can say or do” (Bellah et al. 25). Whether it is the grip of sin, universalist scholarship, the trappings of modern poetry, feelings of guilt, isolation, or apocalyptic hopelessness, the speech act that begins with “I confess” offers the “more authentic self” a way to escape the repressive powers that have entrapped it. In its most extreme version this “more authentic self,” the “truth” that Montaigne’s performative self will not betray though he is willing to betray his constative

self at every turn, is “a self free of absolute values or ‘rigid’ moral obligations” whose identity depends only on discovering and pursuing its own personal wants and inner impulses” such that “self-expression unseats authority” (Bellah et al. 77).

This view of confession as liberation has been a dominant, though by no means exclusive, view of the confessional autobiographical voice in performance studies scholarship. Tami Spry exemplifies this view of confession when she claims that “in the performative autobiographical process, my hide becomes a corporeal semaphore signaling to myself and others that I am the agent and author of the stories of this body. After three decades of reading my body according to my mother’s authorship, autobiographical performance has been a central tool in the reconstitution of my identity” (362). Similar sentiments have been expressed in the pages of *Text and Performance Quarterly* claiming agency on the part of silenced populations and perspectives from those of being an African American woman (Madison), a breast cancer patient (Park-Fuller, “Narration and Narratization”), an “exemplary lesbian” (Taylor), a gay man (Miller), and a southern African American queer (or “quare”) man (Johnson), to name only a few.

These autobiographical scholar/performers draw on the trend of using performance for “the construction or exploration of personal identity” that began with the work of influential feminist performers such as Carolee Schneemann, Linda Montano, and Yvonne Rainer and, in the eyes of many observers, grew to become “emblematic for modern performance art in general” during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Carlson 157). This movement found autobiographical performance to be a powerful tool for dealing with issues of selfhood because

. . . when a woman speaks within the performance tradition she is understood to be conveying her own perceptions, her own fantasies, and her own analyses. [She] combines active authorship and an elusive medium to assert her irrefutable presence (an act of feminism) with an [sic] hostile environment (patriarchy). (Catherine Elwes, qtd. in Carlson 164)

Even if the constative self is slippery, the infusion of real world identities into the fluid world of performance allows for the performative self to assert her “irrefutable presence.”

Similar strategies have been used by gay and lesbian performers in presenting their own autobiographies, “the real life experience of homosexuals in today’s society” as challenges to patriarchal culture (168). Most notable among their number are Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck, three of the infamous NEA Four who had their funding cut (and finally re-instated by the Supreme Court) because of the controversial nature of their work. The trend has also extended to the autobiographical performances about the experience of ethnicity by African-American, Latino/a, and Asian-American performers as well as to those with stigmatized physical difficulties in so-called “victim art,” among others (Carlson 171-178). Though their work is certainly much more complicated than the application of reductive labels like “gay performance” or “feminist performance,” they all, to varying degrees, share what Tim Miller calls the “autobiographical conceit . . . this notion that our lives matter, and that’s what you’re going to make work about” and that the exploration of self in this manner has profound political consequences (Gentile, “Interview” 272).

They all take for granted the value of “speaking up, coming in front of others, claiming your voice” that led Miller to call solo performance “a quintessentially American form” (275, 279). They share Judy Chicago’s idea that “authentic feelings” lead to more “powerful performances” (qtd. in Carlson 160). They tell stories, at least in

part, to try and “mainstream radical ideas” in order to claim greater agency (Finley, qtd. in Carlson 177). They use autobiographical performance to shed social masks and “position the audience to affirm the authenticity of the central persona and her experiences” (Pineau 99), and to make minority identities or perspectives “visible in a society that ignores, marginalizes, and erases [their] existence” (Langellier and Peterson 220). They assume a “me against the world” stance “in an effort to articulate a resistance toward detrimental societal values” (Corey 260). These performances or “testimonies” are believed to be transgressive “because they speak of absent or taboo topics,” because they are “tool[s] for uncovering hidden truths” (Park-Fuller, “Performing Absence” 22).

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* agree that confession offers a kind of agency, a “freedom from,” but follow with a haunting question: “freedom for what purpose?” There are, as Brooks notes, reasons to be suspicious of confessions as well: “freedom,” he might ask, “for *whose* purpose? The purposes of the confessor or the confessant?” The dynamics of the relationship between performative and constative selves and between confessor and confessant are far from benign. Recent performance scholars have begun to question the ways in which performance is treated as “more authentic or valuable because it is based on personal experience” (Langellier and Peterson 236). They are opposed to the tendency to “romanticize the immediacy and presence of performance” and are suspicious of those who “take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented” because those employing this model of confession “locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it” (Joan Scott, qtd. in Langellier

and Peterson 236). In short, this romanticism of the “immediacy and presence of performance” is problematic because rests on “ontological individualism.”

Conclusion

This latter group of scholars worries, as do I, that, despite its undeniable power, work like Spalding Gray’s and much of the work that has been done in the name of identity performance, “autoethnography” or the “new ethnography” with which we began this chapter treats the confessional voice as somehow more pure or authentic than other forms of discourse and that this notion of authenticity excludes a more dialogic relationship between performer and audience. When performers present their experience as “authentic,” the audience “is put in the position of either having to accept the [confession’s] sentiments as the authentic expression of one individual’s or one group’s . . . selfhood, or of rejecting it altogether” (Bowman 135). The presentation of an “ontologically individual” self, however intimate, precludes the possibility of communal experience.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Langellier and Peterson argue that we must view autobiographical performance as “a *struggle* for agency,” a performative and intersubjective production of identity, “rather than the expressive act of a pre-existing, autonomous, stable self that serves as the origin for or authority on experience” (238; emphasis added). Craig Gingrich-Philbrook appreciates “solo performance’s stake in (re)making, not merely representing or discovering, ‘reality’” (“Carnivorous Knowledge” 63). These scholars ask that we interrogate both the performative and the constative selves. They seek ways to create “solo performance that is not a solo act” but an exercise in “community-building” (Corey 267). They see the first person singular not as a voice

free of “cultural or subcultural affiliations” but as a microcosmic performance space in which “questions of embodiment, or social relations, or ideological interpellations, or emotional and political effects, all become” not just acknowledgeable as fixed answers to a yes or no question but “discussible” (Diamond 4). Personal narrative is not valuable because it falls outside of culturally constructed knowledge, but because it is itself a culturally constructed kind of knowledge that allows us to talk about the power systems that are creating it from *within* those systems.

Rather than celebrate the special nature of autobiographical knowledge as somehow more “true” or “real” than other forms of discourse, Gingrich-Philbrook celebrates its ability to “curdle” accepted binaries such as interior/exterior and personal/social, performer/audience, real/fictional, autobiographical/character based performance, emotion/truth, epistemology/aesthetics. This “curdling,” or “irreversible experience of hybridity,” refuses easy definitions in ways that “challenge efforts to retrieve autobiographical performance as a separate conceptual category, either to valorize or vilify it” (Gingrich-Philbrook, “Carnivorous Knowledge” 64).

In the next chapter I offer a reading of Spalding Gray’s *It’s a Slippery Slope* that explores both the performative and constative subject in the monologue and attempts to uncover some of the potential pitfalls of creating/reading confessional performances as the liberation of a more true or authentic self. I follow this critical reading with an exploration of my own attempts to answer Gingrich-Philbrook’s call for a “curdled view of autobiographical performance” in which performers and audiences, and what I have here called the performative and constative selves, are curdled into an emergent whole that is greater than the sum of its parts in a way that “calls upon both autobiographer and

audience to internalize a view of their relationship with each other as the object of reflection” (73).

CHAPTER 3. AUTHENTICITY AND GRAY'S CONFESSION

One of the key features of Spalding Gray's "aggressively vernacular" narratives is the play between truth and fiction. In the opening of the filmed version of *Swimming to Cambodia* he informs his audience, "everything I'm about to tell you is true except for one thing, the banana doesn't stick to the wall" (Gray, *Swimming* videocassette). When, an hour and countless hard to believe details later—in the middle of a particularly unbelievable scene at a sex show in Cambodia—he tells us that the banana sticks to the wall, we remember he told us earlier the banana did not stick to the wall and become aware that all of the other hard to believe details are, in contrast, quite true indeed. He asks his audience to question and believe him at the same time. He revels in the inherent paradoxes of the artistic portrayal of real world events. He constantly plays with the lines between what "really happened" and the performance he creates about those events. "I am interested," he says, "in what happens to the so-called facts after they have passed through performance and registered on my memory" (Gray, *Swimming* xv).

Despite the attention he draws to the artificial construction of his discourse, his famed candor still appears to have the effect of liberating the "real" Spalding Gray. Whatever exaggerations he might put into the stories, they are still based on essential truths about him. Most of us would never dare to reveal these kinds of secrets in public. All of his artistic license is but a spoon full of sugar to help him divulge truths about his narcissistic paranoia and mental instability, truths that might be too difficult for his audience to digest otherwise. Yes, he is witty. Yes, he has a brilliant sense of timing. Yes, he uses poetic language. Above all, however, he is observant and honest: "nothing eludes his eye or the sureness of his satire . . . his ruthless candor" (Winer 3). Through

brutal honesty he frees his inner madman to enter public discourse in a way that mirrors the “personal discovery or recovery of authenticity” of many coming-out narratives (Dow 126). His audiences are thrilled to see something so “real,” and frequently report leaving the theatre convinced that secret parts of themselves have been liberated via cathartic osmosis of his honesty.

In his 1997 piece, *It's a Slippery Slope*, Gray begins to question the role that liberation and authenticity play in his identity as a performer. In Foucaultian terms, he begins to see his own confessions as producing new truths about his life rather than liberating pre-existing parts of his life story. He begins to wonder if through repetition each act of “liberating” speech has become a caricature of the last. He begins to wonder if in the act of confessing his “real” self, he is not subjecting the “real” to regulation by the expectations of his audience. In short, he begins to see the complicated role that power plays in his discourse.

Spalding Gray's relationship to his own confessional impulse evokes the confessional rituals described by Michel Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Although Foucault describes confession in relation to sexuality, the *logic* of the relationship between pleasure and power in the confessional act remains relatively unchanged when the subject being confessed changes. As performance studies scholars continue to create more and more spaces for the first-person confessional voice in academic discourse, it seems a good time to reflect on some the experiences of this pre-eminent self-confessor. As scholars we are certainly not immune to the interplay of pleasure and power that the confession ritual always already evokes. While we should welcome the inclusion of personal reflection and revelation in the mystory and other

forms of experimental scholarship, we must be aware of the “polymorphous techniques of power” that accompany the use of the first-person singular (Foucault 11).

In the discussion that follows, I examine the confessional rhetoric in *It's a Slippery Slope* in relation to Foucault's understanding of the productivity of power. Under the auspices of revealing ever more personal truths about himself, Gray finds himself trapped in the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” of his own confessional performance (Foucault 48). Gray's ultimately unfulfilled obsession with his own will to confess demonstrates how Foucault's “repressive hypothesis” operates in confessional performances and reveals some of the pitfalls inherent in the practice. I conclude with a brief discussion of how an immanent conception of confession can shed light on some of the problems inherent in this hyper-reflexive moment in scholarly writing about performance.

Foucault: Repression, Power, Pleasure

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that “[the] Western [hu]man has become a confessing animal” (60). Far from being a rarity,

. . . the confession has become one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays part in medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rights: one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. (Foucault 60)

We are constantly confessing the truth to teachers, spouses, therapists, police officers, television cameras, letters to the editor, support groups, diaries, trusted friends, complete strangers. The impulse to reveal our “true” selves stands as one of the central features of Western civilization.

Foucault argues that part of the reason we confess is that we are under the illusion of the “repressive hypothesis”: the idea that power attempts to silence our “true” selves and that only by confessing the “truth” can we be freed from effects of repressive power. We have “praised the rights of the immediate and the real” because they can liberate us from the precautions that power has placed around us “in order to contain everything with no fear of overflow” (5-12). We are drawn to reveal our secrets because we believe that “confession frees but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom” (60). Only through talking can we find freedom, so we “transform [our] desire, [our] every desire into discourse” (11).

Foucault calls the posited relationship between confession and liberation the “internal ruse of confession.” In order to accept it, he argues, one must have “an inverted image of power.” The voices that repeat the “formidable injunction to tell what one is, what one does, what one recollects, and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking” are not speaking to us of freedom. They are in fact, “thoroughly imbued with relations of power.” Our near constant confessions have not liberated us, but “produced [our] subjection: [our] constitution as subjects.” Revealing the truth about ourselves does not free us. Instead it (re)produces us as subjects of power relations. “The obligation to conceal [the truth] was but another aspect of the duty to admit to it.” Our self-revelations have not made us more autonomous but transformed us into subjects that are ever easier to manage under the “millennial yoke of confession” (61).

In the act of releasing our deepest truths we allow the relations of power to “trace the meeting line of body and soul.” We shift the focus from our actions to “the stirring—so difficult to perceive and formulate, of desire” (21). We allow power relationships to manage not only our actions, but also our identities. Once we started to confess our sexual acts they no longer constitute simple acts to be punished, but identities to be controlled and managed. For example, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). Through the act of confession, the aberrant *act* (sodomy) becomes the *identity* (homosexual). Desires and pleasures do not necessarily have political implications; identities do. Only when it is put into words can sexuality become the “pure object of medicine and knowledge,” giving a political dimension to desire and increasing the subjugation of the individual (32).

We are not afraid to talk about sex, instead “we convince ourselves that we have never said enough on the subject, that through inertia or submissiveness we conceal from ourselves the blinding evidence, and that what is essential always eludes us, so that we must always start out once again in search of it” (33). Convinced that we are somehow repressed and in need of liberation, we turn our desires into ever more precise packets of discourse, giving our desires ever more defined political identities. These identities make us ever easier to predict and control. Sexualities are controlled not through a “barrier system” of repressions, but through “lines of penetration” made possible in the confession ritual. What appear to be barriers are merely “forcing [sexual identities] into hiding so as to make possible their discovery” (42).

The “inverted image of power” that makes the internal ruse of confession possible consists in thinking of power as transcendent rather than immanent. For Foucault, power

is not “a group of institutions or mechanisms,” or a “general system of domination exerted by one group over another.” The transcendent idea of an absolute hierarchy is not the source of power, but its effect:

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 92)

A transcendent model of power begins with a central point from which power is imposed on other points; an immanent model sees power as a “strategical situation” (92).

A “strategical situation” is neither static nor monolithic. Every move implies a counter move *ad infinitum*. Furthermore, we cannot think of these relationships in binary terms (i.e., oppressor and oppressed) because “power comes from below.” Large scale dominations are not *causes* of the complicated networks of social conflicts, but “hegemonic *effects* that are sustained by all of these confrontations” (92). Power is not transcendent to social relations, but immanent to them. Power that comes from above (domination as cause) can, at least in theory, be escaped. As long as it emerges from a single point or collection of points, one can find a place outside of the structure. One cannot, however, escape power that comes from below (domination as effect). Every attempt to escape only produces a more refined “strategical situation.” In fact, immanent power relationships depend on a plurality of resistances for their very existence: “[points of resistance] are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite” (96).

The “repressive hypothesis” exists because “power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself” (82). Our inverted understanding of power obscures how power actually operates and is itself part of the “strategical situation.” Immanent power disguised as transcendent power incites confession as resistance where a direct request for discourse would almost certainly lead to silence. At times, social apparatuses “penetrate and control everyday pleasure” through “refusal, blockage, and invalidation,” but they may just as well resort to “incitement and intensification” of those same pleasures. The techniques of power are “polymorphous” (11). As such, they contradict themselves from one relationship to the next, from one moment in a relationship to the next moment in the same relationship.

In addition to inverting our notions of power, the “repressive hypothesis” posits a false binary between silence and discourse. Silence “functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies.” Like power, discourse is immanent. We do not pull concepts from the realm of the silent and put them into the realm of the uttered. Rather we create and use a complicated network of both utterances and silences in strategic relation with each other. There are an infinite number of things about which one does not speak simply because one is unaware of them. To be silent on any given subject, one must be aware of it and choose not to discuss it. Even the love that dare not speak its name is discursively produced. Silences and utterances are not discovered *a priori*, but produced: “They are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (27).

Inverted notions of power also incite us to reveal our secrets through the sheer pleasure involved in the act of confession. To varying degrees, “sensualization of power

and gain of pleasure” always accompany the act of both making confessions and being confessed to by others. Personal revelations thrill audiences by transforming them—the listeners—into “the authority who requires confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (62). The pleasure in hearing the confession stems from the perceived repression that the confessor overcame in order to confess and the power that the interlocutor possessed in order to require them to overcome it. The greater the sin confessed, the greater the implied power of the one who solicited it, and the greater is their sense of pleasure at possessing that power.

The confessor feels pleasure in evading the power of the questioner and at being released from the need to evade at the final moment of disclosure. They also experience “power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.” Again, the greater the sin the greater the pleasure at hiding it, the greater their relief at finally no longer having to hide it, and the greater is their sense of power at having scandalized or shown off with it. They are “fixed by a gaze, isolated and animated by the attention they received.” For both sides the confession ritual induces “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.” Contrary to the suppositions the “repressive hypothesis” puts forth, “pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another, they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (48).

It would seem that the “spirals of pleasure and power” are firmly rooted in the authenticity of the confession, that only the confession of a pre-existing “truth” would produce these effects. On the contrary, Foucault argues that the strategies of power and

pleasure produce the very truths that they pretend to uncover. The discursive truths contained in confessions are not discovered, but “inscribed on the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.” Our identities, “the basic certainties of consciousness,” are but a “shimmering mirage” created by power and pleasure in the act of confession. We are not freed by confession because “truth is not by nature free—nor error servile . . . its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power” (59). The interlocutor corroborates the veracity of statements not on the basis of its relationship to other facts, but “by the obstacles and resistances it has to surmount in order to be formulated.” Its truth claims are immanently guaranteed “by the bond, the basic intimacy in discourse, between the one who speaks and what he is speaking about” as interpreted by the one to whom the confession is made (62). The audience of a confession is cast not only as the judge of character, but also as “the master of truth” (67). This hermeneutical function emerges from the interplay of power and pleasure and adds to it “the pleasure of knowing the truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing and telling it, or captivating and capturing others by it” (71). Truth does not exist prior to the confession waiting to be exposed; it is but one effect (and not necessarily the most important) of a complex “strategical situation.” Understanding the role that the productivity of power and the repressive hypothesis play in inviting confession makes it easier to understand some of the difficulties that Spalding Gray has with his own confessional impulse.

The Slippery Slope of Confession

The spirals of pleasure, power and truth in confessing or being confessed to are so attractive that we now pay money to experience them. We have become the “confessing animal” to the degree that not only do we have therapist “ears for hire,” but we at times

pay people who are particularly adept at doing so to confess the inner truths of their lives to us: confession has become its own form of entertainment (Foucault 7). Storytelling may be the oldest of art forms, but the particular brand of personal confession popularized by Spalding Gray among others seems particular to our age. His 1997 monologue, *It's a Slippery Slope*, functions simultaneously as confession and a meta-confession about the process of his subjectification through the matrix of pleasure and power that has unfolded as a result of his career as a confessional performance artist. It reads both as the story of his mid-life crisis, and as a crisis in the way he relates to telling stories.

Gray started doing monologues because he “wanted to live a passionate life onstage without any consequences” (Gray, *Slope* 5). He wanted to “die without ever having had to live” (6). When approaching his fifty-second birthday—the age his mother was when she killed herself—he becomes consumed by suicide fantasies of his own, convinced that he is destined to join her. In order to deal with these fantasies he accepts a role in a film wherein his character commits suicide. When the make-up crew has fitted him with slashed wrists and an ashy face, he revels in the feeling of being “dead and not dead” (25). He leaves the set of the movie and takes a cab back to his hotel still sporting bloody wrists, hoping to have a little fun. When the cab driver responds with, an “it’s Hollywood, you know, just don’t bleed on the car” blank stare, Spalding gets angry: “Am I not affecting anyone here? Does this not look real?” (26). He then runs into a drugstore and flashes his wounds to the pharmacist who begins to scream. Her screaming is apparently more of an effect than he had in mind. He mutters something about being in a movie and runs away.

Neither the cab driver nor the pharmacist allows him to be both dead and not dead. They do not create a space where he can be himself and not himself at the same time. He has a hard time dealing with them because they do not behave like the audiences at his monologue performances. He has, he confesses, become addicted to confessional performance: that “crazy irrational place that [is] somehow sanctioned and protected” by the audience (52). He describes himself as “a mesmerized moth flying at the flame of fame” (51). Gray notes that his growing success at talking about all the idiosyncrasies of his inner life had allowed him not to deal with “a lot of the complicated tensions that plunged below the surface” (49). He found that “telling a life was so much easier than living one” (55).

The primary function of the power his audience has over him is not, however, repressive; it is productive. His twenty years of near constant confessional monologues have not *liberated* one “real” Spalding Gray and repressed a “more real” Spalding Gray. The monologues have instead (re)produced a new subject through the “strategical situation” of the confessional ritual. Confessing that he is addicted to confessing does not in turn free him from the need to confess. His discourse produces the power that binds him. He attempts to escape the hold that the audience’s gaze has on him, but fails at every turn because the power does not act *on* him but rather *through* him. The audience’s grip is not a transcendent power that can be escaped, but an immanent power that reproduces itself through its subjects.

He takes up skiing as a way to learn how to “live a life and not tell it” (15). He cannot master the right turn because he always thinks about it too hard and falls down. With practice, he finds a Zen space on the skis where he can, for a time, stop “peeling the

onion of [his] mind” (19). He escapes the watching, judging voice in his head because “the mountain [is] beating [him] up so hard that it replace[s] that voice” (39). He starts to feel like he is coming back into his body, like he can be alone without feeling lonely, like he doesn’t need to be performing in front of anyone. Then he realizes that the woman he has been skiing with “wants [him] to do a monologue about this, and she wants to be in it” (44). Which, of course, he does. He fails to “spend [himself] to the point where no story is left” (11).

When he cannot escape the audience through Zen-like sanity, he decides to embrace the “wildness” in him not as a subject for analysis, but on its own terms. He describes muttering to himself and involuntarily shouting as he walks down the street in New York. He yelps and screams not to show anyone how crazy he is, but because he really feels like he is going crazy. Perhaps only because he lived in New York, “[his] scream was picked up by other people who passed it on down the street for blocks and blocks. What started out as a real panic was turned into a performance by the people” who watched it (55).

Whether the woman’s wanting to be in his next monologue or the people of New York passing his scream down the street “actually happened” is irrelevant for our discussion here. They are produced truths of the discursive situation. They are part of an overall strategy he employs to try and convince his audience in the moment of performance that part of him does not want them to be there, but he simply cannot escape them.

In his discussion of the temper tantrum he threw trying to get his girlfriend, Ramona, to let him go ski, he tells his audience candidly, “I’m like a four-year-old who

doesn't want to go to preschool. You would not have wanted to be there" (15). Of course, this comes in the middle of a fast paced description of the tantrum that seems designed with every intention of making us wish we had been there. In order for him to "be" and "not be" at the same time, he needs his audience to be there and not be there at the same time (6). Running away from them, ignoring them, pushing them away, remaining silent on certain subjects are all strategies unfolding in the power relationship between him and the people for whom he performs. Each evasion is also an invitation and they add to the pleasure for both the confessor and the interlocutor. His resistance to confessing only adds to the sense that he is revealing more difficult—and therefore more authentic—truths.

His most complex evasion/invitation comes into play during the discussion of how "[he] was systematically trying to destroy" his long-term relationship with Ramona (47). Ramona had been not only a lover, but also "a sort of mother/manager, nurse/container for [his] bottomless anxieties, as well as being the director for [his] work" (52). In fact, casting her as the unconditionally loving mother provided the ending to most of his previous monologues. Perhaps he gives her the pseudonym Ramona in his work—hers is one of the few names he changes for his performances—to keep her "real" presence separate from the act of performing so that she can adequately fulfill this mother role. He certainly can't hope to protect her identity by changing the name as she is (or was until this monologue) listed in the program as "director: Renee Shafransky."

The structure of most of his stories mirrors that of the act of touring to tell them: Spalding wanders the earth in a series of chaotic anxiety driven quests and misadventures that could continue indefinitely until he finally returns home to Ramona "at the gate

waiting for her man to come back from the Big See” (57). There is “always a new crisis, a new life drama” to talk about (10), and Spalding Gray is certainly witty enough to make talking about it entertaining, but the crisis can only be resolved when Ramona comes to the rescue.

Much as he wonders if losing sight in his left eye was not psychosomatically brought on for the sake of creating *Gray’s Anatomy*, he toys with the idea that he might have destroyed his relationship with Ramona “for the sake of the story” or possibly for the sake of trying to quit creating monologues (10). Perhaps the constant presence of “the image [he] had created of [himself and Ramona] in [his] monologues” proved too much for their relationship to bear (49). Again, the real world veracity of this idea does not concern us here. Of course his long and complicated relationship with her was not brought down by his monologues alone, but he makes the claim—and confesses that the claim is exaggerated—as a part of the “strategical situation” with his audience.

Having affairs was nothing new for him, but they usually only happened on the road. He and Ramona had an unspoken agreement that he would not “bring it back home” (56). He broke this unspoken rule in the case of Kathie largely because she was a single mother of a six-year old and “had no leftover mothering energy to direct toward [him].” She was a way of escaping from the pattern of having crazy adventures and returning home to the maternal figure he had developed with Ramona. His affair with Kathie manifested his desire to “have a little fun fling” and break off from the pattern of dramatic knots that only Ramona’s mothering could untangle (59). The need to be with Ramona was connected with the need to perform, and he wanted to have a “secret private life” (69). With Kathie he could have “sex without all of the complication of personality:

body love.” He could be both himself and a piece of “historic flesh,” part of the “great history of human sex organs doing their endless old in and out” (70-71). He could break away from the monologues he was constructing and be just another part of a larger story.

Feeling guilty about the affair, he proposed to Ramona. He was so nervous that he had to do it in front of his therapist who knew about the affair with Kathie and said nothing. A few months into the engagement he found out that Kathie was pregnant. He wrote a letter begging her to have an abortion and hid it in a book called *The Philosophy of Sex*. Then he “raved to Ramona about what a great book it was” (73). She found the note and he spent the next two days “rolling on the floor like an apologizing animal” (75). Kathie did not agree to have an abortion and Spalding’s relationship with Ramona deteriorated to the point where she exclaimed, “death would be easier than this” (76). At this point, he claims to have lost his “inner witness . . . to have no real narrative memory of the chaotic events that transpired” (76).

Even in the most fragile moment of his mid-life crisis confession, he references the meta-confession about his relationship with his confessional impulse. Whether intentionally or not, in breaking Ramona’s heart he achieved his goal of “spending himself to the point where no story [is] left” (11). His silence here is not, however, a binary opposite to the rest of his narrative. It is “an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate [his] discourse” (Foucault 8). Ironically, the idea that at the center of his crisis lies a truth so painful and complicated that it cannot be spoken about in narrative becomes the climax of his narrative. No truth, or silence about a truth, can break the bond that immanent power produces between him and his inner witness because each discursive act reproduces and strengthens their “strategical relationship.”

What sparse discussion Gray does give of the traumatic months that followed unfolds with much less ornamentation than the rest of his monologue. The sheer pleasure of revelation need not be decorated. The truth of his pain and remorse is corroborated “by the obstacles and resistances it has to surmount in order to be formulated” (Foucault 62). The fact that he cannot talk about it with great artistry adds to the illusion that it “does not belong to the order of power but shares an original affinity with freedom” (Foucault 60). Its power as revelation stems precisely from the notion that it is a deep inner truth that is difficult to talk about.

He was on the phone with Ramona in her office when he was interrupted by the call interrupt. It was Kathie’s mother telling him that he was the father of a beautiful baby boy; he responded, “oh great, thanks for calling,” and went right back to Ramona on the other line. When she asked him who it was he said, “oh, wrong number” (77). It did not occur to him to visit his son, Forrest, until Ramona finally left him eight months later and he drank a bottle of vodka in his grief. He had no idea that “eight months was quite a way along in the development of a child” (81). When he met Forrest, he hoped to find salvation in his son’s “mere being, pure consciousness” (82). His “no-agenda eyes” would succeed where so many women had failed because “there’s never just ‘another son.’ You don’t say, ‘Hey, look at that son. Hey, look at the tush on that son!’” (83). Of course, when Forrest “deposited a beautiful wet turd” on Spalding’s desk, he thought differently and started screaming at his son (84).

There are undoubtedly more inept candidates for fatherhood in the world than Spalding Gray, but few who are willing to talk about their ineptitude in public. Even after his initial shock has worn off, Spalding continues to ignore his son for long stretches

of time while he wanders around the world touring with his monologues which become “a way to fly out of reality” (77). This implies that at the very moment he is delivering this monologue to his audience he is neglecting his child. Perhaps we are enjoying ourselves at the expense of a child he ought to be spending time with. While we might feel disgusted with him for being such a terrible father, we love him for being willing to tell us. As his audience, however, we revel in “the pleasure that comes from exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light.” He might feel embarrassed at disclosing these things about himself, but he revels in “the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it” (Foucault 45).

Near the end of the monologue he accepts fatherhood. He is able to enjoy a non-idyllic skiing trip with his family—a far cry from the Zen experiences earlier in the story. He even begins to speak to Kathie’s daughter (whom he despises) with a “totally supportive, non-ironic voice,” which completely baffles him (Gray 102). He becomes so comfortable in his new role that he considers “retiring from endless touring of confessional monologues and becom[ing] a ski instructor for children” (Gray 103). Notice that he is still trying to evade his audience but now he has reversed tactics (Foucault 45). Instead of telling us that he is a bad father and perhaps we should not be listening to him, now he tells us that he is becoming a good father and perhaps he will not be telling us any more stories. The techniques exercised in the “strategical situation” are “polymorphous” (Foucault 11).

Although throughout *It’s a Slippery Slope* Spalding Gray wrestles with his identity as a confessional monologist and his relationship with his audience, he never

succeeds in escaping the identity or radically changing the relationship. Each layer of the onion of his mind (re)produces and complicates the relationship with the audience in his head. Each act of resistance acts as “the odd term in relations of power . . . inscribed on the latter as an irreducible opposite” (Foucault 96). The successive identities he forms for himself are not liberating because they are all “thoroughly imbued with the relations of power” (Foucault 61). Their “truth” is but another technique in the unfolding “strategical situation.” The pleasure of watching him tell his story is largely defined by the “complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” and the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” induced by the confession ritual (Foucault 48).

A Small Digression for the Purpose of Disclosure and Clarification

In the spirit of immanent turns, I have a confession to make: I am a serial confessor. I can’t help myself. I have known the truth, and the truth has set me free so many times that I am a slave to its power. I guess I should have known I was in over my head when I took over the revival meeting at church. Fifty of us took turns at the microphone confessing our sins to the body of Christ in an effort to bring spiritual Renewal. After a litany of mundane descriptions of pride, sloth, and envy—sins that were technically “deadly” but lacking in rhetorical force—I told them all how often I had been masturbating and exactly what I thought about while doing it. In the silence that followed, I looked the cute girls in the eye, tears streaming down my face, and apologized for having lusted after them in my heart. They began to cry, too. Most of them offered hugs. The whole room began to lay hands on me and ask the Holy Spirit to give me a new heart. I had never felt more broken. I had never felt more whole. I have never been

as close to the elusive “perfect moment” that Gray describes in *Swimming to Cambodia* (Gray, *Swimming* 79).

When I left the church during my college years, I began to do confessional monologues in theatres across the country about the process of de-conversion. When I ran out of material on that front, I started to talk about comparing my penis size to my father’s as an adult. I even confessed to my audience that I was only using them as a sort of dialysis machine for my life, that in the act of confessing to them I was in fact abusing them. When introducing myself to people I present the parts of my personality that they are likely to find most distasteful first in hopes that they will appreciate my honesty. At uncomfortable lulls in almost any conversation I look intently into the depths of my soul in hopes of finding some wrong I may have done that I can get off of my chest.

Alas, I must confess that I am exaggerating a little. When I was at that church revival, for example, I didn’t really look *all* the cute girls in the eye. I should have been more honest. And that part at the beginning was so over the top, so my-name-is-blank-and-I-am-a-blank-aholic. I can’t believe I just said that. I mean, I confess a lot, but alcoholism is a serious addiction and I never should have compared myself to people who suffer from it.

Actually I didn’t really think that I was comparing myself to alcoholics at first. That idea came to me later, right before I wrote it down, so I shouldn’t really have confessed it. I guess I lied when I was describing my confessions. I lied out of a desire to have something else to confess to you.

To tell you the truth, just now, when I said that I lied when I was describing my confessions and that I lied out of a desire to have something else to confess to you, I was stealing a line from Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* and I didn't even cite it.

If you can be forgiving, I am grateful. If you can't because you find this potential infinite regress of confession annoying, I am even more grateful as you have given me something else to which I can confess later should I feel lonely or boring and wish to lure you into giving me a hug, or need a way to conclude this chapter in a pinch.

In addition to the undeniable pleasure that I gain from this digression, I invite your mistrust of my motives in an effort to own up to the fact that this text is "in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces" (Foucault 10). Perhaps this disclaimer is clarifying. Perhaps it is (dis)clarifying. I am trying to push a train I am still riding: a decidedly messy business. Much as I might wish it were otherwise in my more narcissistic moments, it is not actually my fault that this is tricky to talk about. I cannot in good faith apologize for it. God, I wish I could.

No part of this digression is necessarily more "true" or "real" than any of my opinions on Spalding Gray or my summary of Foucault. No matter how hard I search my motives, I will never find a more "authentic" voice with which to speak. My confession here is only another discursive strategy in my larger discussion of confession. Though I am being frank, my frankness is just as constructed as the text that surrounds it and just as defined by power in the "strategical situation" between us. Really.

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion of power and pleasure in Spalding Gray's monologues—and the digression into my own confessional impulse—I have deliberately

avoided issues of larger social apparatuses and focused on the smaller “strategical situation” between performer and audience (or virtual audience). My attempt has been to demonstrate how the polymorphous techniques of power reproduce themselves on and through these subjects in the act of confession even when the subject being confessed is not one that we readily associate with Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis.” As scholarship becomes increasingly confessional in nature, we must beware of the potential ethical and epistemological problems implicit in the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” we produce through our confessions (Foucault 48).

Although at times it is both personally and academically fruitful to “peel back the layers of [our] formal Sel[ves],” what we find underneath is just as discursively produced as the image of us it replaces (Ceglowski 15). While in certain circumstances it may be the best or only voice with which to talk about certain subjects, we must resist the impulse to treat the confessional as somehow more “pure” or “real” than other forms of academic writing. Even as it seems to free the “real” self, each confession produces a “more real” self to replace it. Even when we seek it inside of ourselves, “the search for the exotic other is futile” (Hawes 292). In the words of Foucault: “We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come to play in various strategies” (100). Sometimes direct personal confession is a useful strategy; sometimes it is not useful. The inclusion of the first person singular voice has opened up countless doors for us as scholars investigating subjective experience, but we must beware lest, by treating the confessional as “the real,” we confess ourselves into holes that we cannot confess our way out of.

A main source of the confessional turn in academic discourse, particularly in ethnographic writing, is the widely accepted notion that scholars cannot, as E. Patrick Johnson notes, “ethically speak from a privileged place . . . and not own up to that privilege” (Johnson 9). I agree wholeheartedly; however, we must also be wary of the ethics of implicating others into the “strategical situation” of the confessional discourse with which we “own up” to our privilege or other aspects of our positionality. When we confess, we are casting our readers as the interlocutors who have sought out that confession. The power dynamics of the confessor-interlocutor relationship are not always conducive to the production of “non-fragmenting, community-oriented ways of knowing” (Lincoln 335). To paraphrase Johnson’s discussion of “quare” transgressive performances later in the same article, “while we may occasionally enjoy the pleasures of [confessional] performance we must [confess] responsibly or run the risk of creating sustaining representations of ourselves” that are antithetical to our aims (Johnson 11).

CHAPTER 4. A RESPONSE

All that is left of me is this horrid, lingering awareness that knows there is no longer any solid configuration of me that can touch and hold my son. It is a true horror. It's the making of a haunted ghost. . . . That is what I think of now as a perfect vision of hell.

-- Spalding Gray, 1999 (qtd. in Duke n. pag.)

In December of 2003, three weeks after I finished the first draft of the preceding chapter, Spalding Gray disappeared. Over the next few months, I followed the news for information about his whereabouts fearing that he had, as many suspected, killed himself, knowing that my paper would have to be revised if he had. Months later, after I had already submitted the paper for review, his body was found in the Hudson River.

I knew that I wanted to make a performance as a tribute to Spalding Gray in the wake of his death. Having only been an audience to his self-revelatory (non)fiction performances, I didn't really know him; but, in terms of Richard Schechner's famous double negation, I "didn't not" know him either (*Between* 112). Gray's work had an enormous effect on me, as it did on many others, both artistically and personally. The intimate nature of his confessional performances and the influential time at which he entered my life left me with more than a casual interest in his passing, and I sought a way to mourn him. I needed, however, to evoke him without pretending to speak for him or the family that lost much more than a pop icon in the icy waters of the Hudson River.

My act of mourning was further complicated by the fact that Mr. Gray committed suicide—a taboo subject made thornier still by my unwitting prediction, in a paper completed a few weeks before his disappearance, that his will to self-destruct would triumph. It seemed that, if only through the power of eerie coincidence, I was “not not” a witness to his death as well. Faced with—and strangely implicated in—a fragmented end to an otherwise meticulously well-documented life, I felt both “the tug to stay silent and

the pull to give voice” (Woodstock 247). This chapter accounts for how I used a haunting idiom both to negotiate between silence and voice and to overcome some of the generic problems of confessional performance in creating my performance piece *A Magical Mystery Tour of the American Theatre: A Tribute to Spalding Gray* in the Fall of 2004 at Louisiana State University.

Problematics of Confession, Suicide and Eulogy

In an essay discussing/refusing to discuss her mother’s suicide, Louise Woodstock notes that “those touched by death, especially violent, intentional death are made liminal by the experience” (256). Suicide is taboo, she argues, because it “challenges the notion that life, especially the suffering involved, is bearable. Suicide induces a crisis in need of a resolution” (256). Woodstock resists the notion that this resolution must happen through discourse. She questions the universality of the axiom that “publicly sharing painful personal narratives is powerfully therapeutic,” which she labels “the master narrative of personal narrative” (252). Wary of too easily and quickly narrating herself into the role of “survivor,” she seeks room for a more active (and at times silent) mourning that does not suffer from “an overabundance of emphasis on the individual that simultaneously obscures the social” dimensions of grief (258).

Most of Spalding Gray’s work can be read as an attempt to resolve the personal crisis brought on by his own mother’s suicide. He cites the days immediately following her death, the impetus for “The Rhode Island Trilogy” as “the beginning of [his] storytelling” (qtd. in Schechner, “My Life” 157). Her suicide and its aftermath stand as the most prominent trope in his monologues and are the expressed themes of his novel *Impossible Vacation*. Again and again he returns to the site of this trauma in an attempt

to “tell it right” so that he might move beyond it. Again and again, despite unparalleled skill as a raconteur, he fails—or at least does not succeed enough—to keep him from returning to the story of trauma in a scene of perpetual melancholia. The great storyteller’s suicide is thus doubly taboo. It simultaneously challenges not only the notion that “life, especially the suffering involved, is bearable” but also that telling stories about suicide is a “powerfully therapeutic” way to transcend the trauma of a loved one’s choice to take their own life. His suicide points to the failure of the very coping mechanisms we would turn to in hope of surviving the loss it creates.

The double taboo makes any potential performance about Mr. Gray’s death even more susceptible to the ontological traps of the confessional voice—the “spirals of power and pleasure” Foucault warns of (48). Confession surrounding the suicide of a serial confessor trying—and failing—to avoid suicide might attempt to reveal raw, bedrock truths in hopes of transcending this trauma, but, in fact, it will only produce a confessor/interlocutor power dynamic, alienating performer from audience and reifying the source of trauma as fundamentally outside of narrative. As we have seen in the last chapter, there is no way to confess oneself out of this hole. Though some have argued that we can use personal narrative as a “tool for uncovering hidden truths” so long as we perform the act “without repentance,” in Foucault’s description of confessional discourse, the insistence on “uncovering hidden truths” as though they are more “true” than the truths being replaced causes a problematic power dynamic regardless of guilty feelings (Park-Fuller, “Performing Absence” 22; Foucault 17-49).

Despite the uncanny prediction I made, I did not feel any conscious, personal remorse surrounding Spalding Gray’s death, but creating a performance wherein I

directly confessed my “true inner feelings” surrounding such a taboo subject, as though I could “get to the bottom of it,” struck me as unwise. Since taboo revealed always already carries the implication of being “more true” than anything else, it seemed likely to create a relationship between me and my audience that would be antithetical to the goals of tribute and mourning, not to mention an insult to Gray’s surviving family.

Of course, giving tribute was also difficult, because my relationship to Spalding Gray’s art and life has never been a simple one. Yes, he inspired me, but at times he also appalled me. He was not only a brilliant artist, but also (at times) a narcissist, a misogynist, an absent father and a culturally insensitive opportunist. Even when I was convinced that I wanted to “be him when I grew up,” I had serious ethical questions about him and his work. Was he addicted to living a certain way because it made for better performances? How could I account for the way he consistently casts the women in his life as Madonnas and/or whores? Is it OK to compare the suffering of millions of Cambodians with one’s artistic thirty-something angst? What about the problematic power relationships I had discovered in my reading of *It’s Slippery Slope*? These questions had only grown more pronounced after my own experimentations with autobiographical performance. I did not want to gloss over these complexities for the sake of creating a happy eulogy. At the same time, I felt that interrogating a dead subject, or merely confessing the ambiguous nature of my relationship with him, seemed likely to reproduce the problematics of confessional I have already discussed.

Haunting

To navigate this slick terrain I decided that rather than try and speak for Spalding Gray, I would allow myself to be haunted by him, using an idiom similar to that put forth

by Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters*. In her eloquent quest to get sociologists to believe in ghosts, Gordon insists that haunting is “a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted. [It] is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import” (7). She believes “that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken for granted realities” (8). Rather than simply present the “hard facts” surrounding Spalding’s life and death, I decided to allow the “seething presence” of his ghost to act upon my “taken for granted realities,” and I found that it drew me, as Gordon might say, “affectively, sometimes against [my] will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality [I came] to experience, not as cold knowledge but as transformative recognition” (8).

The import of haunting stems from its ability to witness in both “the juridical connotations of seeing with ones own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen,” which Kelly Oliver describes in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (16). Haunting seeks a “sympathetic magic, [which] is necessary because in the world and between us as analysts and the world we encounter to translate into world-making words are ghosts and gaps, seething absences and muted presences” (Gordon 21). Rather than see these points of excess as aberrations to be quelled, Gordon poses that we make “seething absences and muted presences” the centerpieces of a different kind of scholarship. These “ghosts and gaps” are useful precisely because they fall outside of our ready, analytical categories and question our notions of utility. They are cracks from

whence the objects of our analysis can find subjective agency to challenge the way we think.

The presence of “ghostly matters” brackets (but does not completely dismiss) ontology and reminds us that “the real itself and its ethnographic or sociological representations are also fictions, albeit powerful ones that we do not experience as fictional but as true,” without collapsing into a relativism that precludes political efficacy. By using the ghost as an ontological placeholder the idiom avoids “the twin pitfalls of subjectivism and positivism” (Gordon 11, 19). Rather than distinguish between them, the idiom attempts to “make the fictional, the theoretical, and the factual speak to one another” (26).

Though she sidesteps the question of methodology, Gordon’s research is guided by three assumptions:

- 1) Haunting exists between our ability to describe the logic of [power] and our experience of that logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, and ambiguous.
- 2) The ghost interrupts or puts into crisis the demand for ethnographic authenticity—what Jacqueline Rose has called the “unequivocal accusation of the real” (12)—that we expect from those who can legitimately claim to tell the truth.
- 3) We are part of the story, for better or worse: the ghost must speak *to me* in some way sometimes similar to, sometimes distinct from how it may be speaking to others.

(Gordon 23-24, emphasis in original)

The open-ended questions with which Gordon begins her work all delve into how the preceding assumptions play themselves out in the specific hauntings she investigates.

Searching in the cracks between systems of power and experiences of those systems, interrupting the demand for authenticity, and allowing ourselves to be part of the

story, all work together to subsume ontology to ethics. Haunting moves beyond the mere recognition or dismissal of truth claims and toward a “working through that demands constant vigilance towards responsibility in relationships” that highlights the social over the individual (Oliver 20). Haunted research is always already partial, intersubjective and personal, and in it

. . . reflection and self-reflection can no longer be conceived as mirroring operations that lead either to recognition or misrecognition. Self-reflection is not a turn inward but a turn toward otherness. . . . If the self *is* by virtue of a witnessing relation to another, then self-reflection is the reflection of that relationship. (219, emphasis added)

Subjectivity is not a static object but “a circulation of bodies, images, and language; it is a responsive biosocial loop” that Oliver calls the process of “response-able witnessing” (223).

Both Oliver and Gordon begin their research not by seeking phallic certainty, but by inviting the other to possess their lack, a position evocative of (though admittedly less extreme than) Avital Ronnell’s politics of “radical passivity,” which claims to be “stupid before the other” and “embraces a mode of absolute hospitality” that would “allow and allow and allow and allow” (qtd. in Davis 247). Rather than writing on/for/with the other, these researchers allow themselves to be possessed in hopes that the other will write on/for/with them. In fact, Oliver sees a world in which there is no longer enough certainty to identify *the* other at all “but [only] a multitude of differences and other people on whom my sense of myself as a subject and agent depends” (Oliver 223). And Gordon, though she recognizes that her own imagination fills in the gaps, does not claim to see a concrete ghost subject, but only “the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences” (200).

The death of the subject of inquiry is cause for neither despair nor celebration, but an impetus for ethical action: “to experience profane illumination is to experience a something to be done” (Gordon 205). John Durham Peters comes to a similar conclusion in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, noting that “dissemination is not wreckage; it is our lot” (62). We must abandon our “lofty expectations about communication”—a complete merging of self and other—and embrace partial communion: “a dance in which we sometimes touch” (62, 268). Rather than expect reconciliation or complete communion with the other—which is always an ethically suspect notion from the perspective of haunting—we must respect the other enough to recognize the impossibility of reconciliation and let that realization change the way we live.

Peters sees the breakdown of the “lofty expectations about communication” illustrated in Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, the copyist who refuses to work and, more importantly, refuses to give an account for his refusal to work. Bartleby denies his right to have an opinion and challenges our disciplinary axiom that “one cannot not communicate.” Bartleby finds agency by refusing the ready-made agency that is handed to him. Because he “refuses to refuse and will not will” and “simply prefers not. He is beyond communication” and must be taken on his own terms (Peterson 158). He haunts the discipline of communication studies, because he maddeningly prefers not to communicate much as Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* haunts economics, because he defies the pleasure principle, asserting that it is sometimes just as pleasant to smash things as it is to accumulate them—even if the thing smashed is his own agency. The stubborn impulse to refuse ready-made agency is the beginning of haunting, particularly

for disciplines that would have us behave in ways that are rational, predictable and communicable.

This is the kind of agency from which I attempted to let Spalding Gray possess me in my performance. Even as my performance was critical of him, it allowed him to be “a seething absence” rather than a eulogized caricature. I chose to honor him neither by telling a room full of people how I felt about him, nor by attempting to let him “speak through me.” The message offered by his last act—a silent disappearance—was performative rather than constative, and I chose to let that haunt me as I told stories not about *him*, but about *myself*. I tried to focus the performance neither on ontological information about him, nor on ontological information about me, but on an ethical relationship *between* us. As a ghost, he was able to act upon me rather than merely be represented by me. He was not an object known through his traits but a subject experienced through his material effects on my own memories and the audience with which I shared them.

In order to facilitate the haunting, I opened with the following introduction:

Introduction to A Magical Mystery Tour of the American Theatre

[Standing next to a desk with a microphone and glass of water]

This is a performance about Spalding Gray. The famous performance artist who traveled the world telling stories about his life for over 25 years at a desk like this one, with a microphone and a glass of water, more or less like these, and his notes. He said he was a method actor, but instead of pretending to be someone else, he pretended to be himself. He was also, for a long time, what I wanted to be when I grew up, one of many

surrogate father figures I took on when I decided that my own father was too boring to serve as a role model.

Last year around this time, I started writing a paper about the suicidal fantasies that Spalding entertains in some of his monologues and how the strategies he uses to overcome his self-destructive impulse through performance are ultimately ineffective. Just as I was finishing the paper, Spalding Gray killed himself. He took his two young sons to see Tim Burton's film, *Big Fish*—which features a son who is able to accept his father's death because the stories he told will live on. Spalding then sent his children home on a train to Long Island, boarded the Staten Island Ferry and jumped into the East River where, like the protagonist of the film, he drowned. Unlike Burton's father figure, however, Spalding did not emerge as a giant magical fish that could never be caught but instead was discovered—after several long months of searching—as a bloated, lifeless corpse.

Now, of course, Spalding lives on in his stories. Here are his complete printed works [*holding up the stack of books*]. You know, there was supposed to be another monologue on the end here, called *Black Spot*, about a traffic accident that he got into in Ireland and the head injury he sustained from it. I tried to go and see a performance of it at P.S. 122, but Spalding cancelled and checked himself in for electroshock therapy to try and overcome the depression that ultimately took his life. Beyond the obvious fact that suicide flies in the face of my fairy tale faith that life will somehow keep getting better and better as it moves along, I am struck by the amount of his life, of any life, that is left out of a linear printed record—even when that record is penned by the hand of the person who experienced it.

In the late seventies and early eighties Spalding did two performance tours. The first was called “Interviewing the Audience,” in which he asked members of the audience to come up on stage and tell their own stories. The second was called “A Personal History of the American Theater,” in which he had note cards listing all of the performances he had ever done, and he improvised a performance based on his recollections that radically differed from night to night. The improvised nature of these performances meant that each happened only once, and there is no record of them. I have here a stack of note cards with words that you, the audience, identified as things that have been important to you in the last week. I have a second stack that lists all of the performances I have ever done in my life. Using them, and the aforementioned works of Spalding Gray, I would like to improvise a performance for you.

The title of my performance is obviously a reference to Mr. Gray’s piece, but it is also a reference to the Beatles’ *Magical Mystery Tour*. I recently had the privilege of watching a Beatles cover band perform *The White Album* in its entirety (including the part where they go “number nine . . . number nine”). None of the people in the band could really sing, but they could play quite well, and we received their performance with a spirit of generosity that allowed us to have a wonderful time. It is in such a spirit that I would like you to receive my performance this evening.

In exchange I will make you two promises. The first is that I will not get naked [*spotlight hits a sign reading “Thou Shalt Not Get Naked”*]. I have been known to be at a loss for how to end improvised pieces and to take off my clothes in a pinch. I will not do that to you tonight. The second is that I will end on time [*spotlight hits a sign reading “Thou Shalt End On Time”*]. I am the son of an Evangelical preacher, and I know how

painful it is to sit in relatively uncomfortable chairs, listen to some white fool go on and on and not know when it is going to end. I won't do that to you either. From the time I sit down 'til the performance ends will be exactly one hour. I have a giant clock on the wall behind me to help me keep track of time [*points to oversized clock*]. You may notice that the time on this clock is slightly different from the time on any watches or cell phones you may have brought in with you (which, by the way, you should turn off). I would like to explain this with a quote from *The Goonies*: "It's their time out there. Out there it's their time. In here it's our time. It's our time in here." [*Sits down and adjusts books/note cards while lights focus in on desk at center stage*]

Before I even began to tell stories, Spalding's ghost "interrupted or put into crisis the demand for ethnographic authenticity" (Gordon 24). The performance is, after all, "about" him and not me. Even for those who did not know who he was, the fact that someone who did this kind of work (and whom I considered to be a role model) killed himself, despite his intimate knowledge of "the power of story," hung over the remainder of the performance. Furthermore, I invested the two large signs and clock hanging over my head with the power of a social contract between audience and performer, detailing both when and how the performance would end. This served to mark the performance as a performance and to further resist the notion that my stories were somehow transcendent and "more real" than any other performance. Most of the stories that I told during the run were not explicitly about Spalding Gray, though he did come up from time to time, but all of them represented the material effects of his ghost on my subjectivity. The

performance of his abject absence functioned as a critique of my performance of presence.

Of course, Spalding Gray is only able to cast a shadow of judgment over me because I have first cast judgment on him. By making insinuations about his suicide's effect on his "two young sons" in my introduction, I refuse to give him the benefit of the "his pain is finally over now" eulogy more typically offered in such cases, and there were certainly physiological issues surrounding Mr. Gray's depression—most notably the serious head injuries he sustained after an automobile accident—that would have warranted such a reading. The performance of possession/possession of performance is not completely passive. Performance, as both a practice and a theoretical lens, offers an important addendum to the abject hospitality of Ronell's "radical passivity." It is a matter of accepted knowledge in our discipline that performers always carry (at least) two personae—"character" and "actor behind the character," in the most simplified terms—and are never completely either (any) of them. This allows performance to infuse the "radically passive" stance with a temporary/ad hoc ethical judgment without presuming to have ontological verification for that judgment. In the case of my performance, the persona in the introduction passes judgment on to Mr. Gray, whose ghost in turn passes judgment on the persona telling stories once I sit down at the desk. No judgment in the chain is given ontological priority. This allows the performance to focus on ethical relationships rather than ontological pronouncements.

Furthermore, performance—even of a passive stance—is not a state of being, but a doing. Performance makes the passive stance of haunting "go" even as it "seems to go away" (Pollock, "Introduction" 1). Performance does not equate permanence with the

real but instead casts reality into an ontology that “becomes itself through the disappearing” (Phelan 148).

Here I suggest tempering the idea of possession with Bakhtin’s conception of a “creative understanding” that “does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture” in trying to understand the other. For Bakhtin, I must retain my own “unity and *open* totality” while being “mutually enriched” with the other. “Creative understanding” does not renounce its own outsideness, because it recognizes that “a meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning” (“Response” 7; emphasis in original). By way of clarification he references an old schoolyard joke:

The ancient Greeks did not know the main thing about themselves, that they were *ancient* Greeks, and they never called themselves that. But in fact the temporal distance that transformed the Greeks into *ancient* Greeks had an immense transformational significance: it was filled with increasing discoveries of new *semantic* values in antiquity, values of which the Greeks were in fact unaware, although they themselves created them. (6)

Even as I pay homage to Spalding Gray, my performance assumes that he didn’t know some of the most important things about himself “though he himself created them.” The dialogic stance of “creative understanding” thus enabled me to move from melancholia into mourning without completely losing the passive stance of haunting.

Another way that I facilitated haunting in my performance was to play on “the problems and astonishments of the dissociated voice” that Stephen Connor discusses in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, by creating a deliberate split between the visual and the aural landscape (3). I wore Spalding’s trademark plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up. I performed on a bare stage with only a desk, microphone and glass of

water, much as he did for the twenty-plus years he toured as a monologist. My publicity featured a floating head, as did the cover of most of his books. I both consciously and unconsciously borrowed many of his gestures and rhythms (if only because they are effective ways of storytelling). The scene was immediately recognizable to anyone even remotely familiar with Mr. Gray. I did not, however, make any attempt to imitate his voice. As such, though explicitly announced as being “about” Mr. Gray, the performance only meandered roundabout him. Without the presence of his voice, or anything even attempting to mimic his voice, the performance lacked what Merleau-Ponty calls “the phonetic ‘gesture’ [that] brings about . . . a certain modulation of existence” (qtd. in Peters 4). Though visually present, Spalding Gray was conspicuously voiceless and therefore absent as well, like a ghost.

According to Connor, the voice is different from other attributes, because its subject must actively produce it. Of course image *can* be manipulated—as I did with mine to mimic Spalding’s—but (with the possible exceptions of sleep-talking) the voice *must always* be produced; “my voice is not incidental to me; not merely something about me. It is me, it is my way of being me in my going out from myself” (Connor 4). It is not a thing, but an event. The graph of a sound—from attack and decay through sustain and release—looks remarkably like plot diagrams used to analyze stories in junior high school (Bracewell 7). Sound is, on a structural level, a story that happens over time and not (as visual stimuli at least give the appearance of being) something that can be isolated as a single trait, separate from other traits. Because sound is always already narrative, it contains active subjectivity in a way that the image cannot.

The texts from Spalding's monologues that I read to the audience (in some cases encountering them for the first time) resisted my relatively uninflected rendering. Latent traces of what Spalding's voice might have once brought to the words tried to peek through, but did not, for the most part, resist my reading very effectively. It was clear that something was missing, that the words were lacking the "modulation of existence" that had once given them life. When the text of his monologue, read in my unrehearsed voice, landed flat for both me and the audience, the dichotomy between active, bodily mimicry and muted voice was highlighted; now a *passive presence*, the visual cues of the Spalding-like scenery were contrasted to a *seething absence*, the text's resistance to my decidedly un-Spalding-like voice. At least in my experience, the ways in which Spalding was not there spoke louder than the ways in which he was. The visual provides a memory *of* Spalding Gray, the muted voice a haunting *by* him.

The performance was not just (round)about Spalding Gray's life, it was (round)about Spalding Gray's suicide. The paradox of mourning mirrors the paradox of the voice itself: "my voice defines me because it draws me into coincidence with myself, accomplishes me in a way which goes beyond mere belonging, association, or instrumental use. And yet, my voice is also most essentially itself and my own in the way in which it parts or passes from me" (Connor 7). Neither the attempt to make what I say go nor the attempt to get over what is gone is complete unless it fails. I become myself by letting my voice pass from me and losing control of the production of self. I mourn what is lost by repeatedly failing to make it present until I can accept it as absent.

Each evening of the performance, we recorded my voice as I spoke. The performance ended by playing back the recording as I, taking a page from the

ventriloquist's book, drank a glass of water, separating voice from body. In addition to its straightforward function as a coda for the performance, an opportunity to recap before moving on, the recordings served to complicate the act of confession. The voice over the speakers—floating, separate from my body, dislodged from its place in time and space, repeated in fragments—revealed to me just how much of my self I had revealed in the performance (particularly that smug tone that creeps in right before I say something that I know is going to make people laugh, the arrogance that taints my poor-little-orphan-boy persona). The fragments, seldom played in their entirety, were incomplete evocations of an event that had transpired only moments before. Even in its conclusion, the piece did not reach for transcendence, or at least reached for transcendence in a way that was designed to fail. The stories, I hoped, were not unified or moralized into something easily digestible, but left floating, to disappear and return in new combinations, in short, to haunt.

What is the function of confessional monologue if not “to give voice to . . . frozen feelings, in order to dissolve them and free” the monologist, the talking cure *par excellence* (Connor 41)? I love to perform with a microphone, as did Gray, precisely because it allows me to perform with the crooning voice full of “the individuating accidents of intonation and timbre” that Roland Barthes has called “the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production of language and music” (“Grain” 181). When performing through the microphone the massage of your own voice is twofold, first as it vibrates against your throat on the way out, but again as the amplified sound waves return to vibrate against your skin. Through the microphone the voice is both “a benign form of the demand of the cry” and the answer to that cry (Connor 41).

At least for the moment of performance, the vocalization of the infantile need for recognition is played back onto itself as the embodiment of very recognition it seeks.

This only works if there are bodies in the audience that the performer can fantasize as the source of that vocal embrace and if that audience adds appropriate (but limited) non-verbal responses—like good little dummies. The ancient need for storytelling and community aside, part of the pleasure in confessional work stems precisely from the ventriloquist act in which the audience is the dummy. Manipulating my voice made at least part of this dynamic transparent at the conclusion to the piece when the audience or I might be tempted to seek transcendence. Though the coda still provided a satisfying conclusion, the manipulation did not allow for complete closure.

By allowing Spalding Gray's muted voice to haunt my performance and ending with my own recorded voice, I attempted to problematize the power dynamics of the confessional relationship between performer and audience, and to dispel the illusion that I had somehow presented the "real me" or transcended myself in the act of confession. In addition to its roll in my relationship to Spalding Gray, his haunting created a space from which the audience could view my performance critically without being crippled by an ontology—my inner life—to which they had no access and over which they could exert no control. I used the paradox of the voice to complicate the paradox of mourning. I set the ghost of Spalding Gray—who killed himself despite having completed countless transcendent monologues revealing "deep inner truths"—against my own series of confessional stories as a way to complicate the power dynamics of confession and in turn, I hope, haunt my audience.

I will leave judgment of the success of this particular venture to others. I have presented it here, because it illustrates the way in which haunting can, at least potentially, offer a way around/through the confessional impasse. I framed my performance not as a detective story, but as a ghost story. Detective tales, centered on “just the facts, ma’am,” are obsessed with ontology, and once the facts have been assembled to determine “whodunit,” the story is over. This obsession with facts is the source of the confessional spirals that Foucault outlines. The ghost story, in contrast, begins where the detective leaves off. It returns to the scene of the crime not in search of new information, but in recognition that the crime always exceeds even our most thorough attempts to solve it. To confess with caution and resist creating sustained representations of ourselves that are antithetical to our aims, we must confess not as detectives/criminals but as those possessed by/in the presence of ghostly matters. We must allow our subjectivity to enter our artistic/scholarly work not as an ontological grounding, but as an ethical impetus.

CHAPTER 5. BLACK SPOT OR LIFE INTERRUPTED

Mom, why are all these people bringing food?

--Spalding's six-year-old son Theo, during the months after his father's disappearance (qtd. in Duke n. pag.)

In the summer of 1999, I read all of Spalding Gray's monologues within the span of a week. I had just finished my undergraduate program, and I didn't really have a clue what I wanted to do with my life. I had always wanted to be an Evangelical Christian minister, but I had lost my faith somewhere along the way. Years before, a friend had shown me a tape of *Swimming to Cambodia*, and in a manic fit I decided that I was going to be "the next Spalding Gray." I went to a Barnes and Noble just off of Washington Square Park and bought all of his published works, and I read them from cover to cover. "Yes," I thought, "this is it. I will chronicle my life just as Spalding chronicled his." By the time I reached *It's a Slippery Slope*, the most recently published of his monologues at that time, I felt like I knew him and Renee Shafransky personally, so, when he betrayed her, I was devastated. I think, on some level, I was afraid that he had done it just for the material, so I was not only really angry at him, but also decidedly less hopeful about my own future career as a monologist. "I want to be just like Spalding Gray but not so mean to the women in my life" didn't have the same ring to it.

On the flight back to Chicago, where I was then living, I happened to sit next to Martha Levy of the Steppenwolf Theatre, whom I recognized because she had given the commencement address—something about the importance of holding speech out into the void of an otherwise cold and dark world—at my graduation a few months earlier. She happened to mention that Gray was performing at the Goodman the next night and told me how I might get rush tickets. Despite my anger and disappointment at his behavior in

It's a Slippery Slope, this coincidence excited me for two reasons: (1) I had a huge thing for older women at the time and a bit of a crush on Martha Levy; (2) It all, including the crush, seemed like just the kind of thing that Gray might have riffed on in his monologues—a meta-message from the universe sending me one step closer to my destiny.

The next night I saw Spalding Gray give a performance of *Morning, Noon and Night*. His performance was thrilling. It was intimate, candid and howlingly funny. There were moments of confession reminiscent of *Slippery Slope*—“I hit my son Forrest just once. I was not in control” (*Morning* 47)—but there also seemed to be a marked shift in his storytelling. Instead of seeking an ever-elusive “perfect moment,” he now seemed to be finding peace in a “complicated present” with the wife and children that he adored (75).

Though he was, at times, his restless irony-laden self, he seemed comfortable with “the realization that there is no place where we can arrive. It is all transiency, impermanence and change,” because he was getting to share the experience of that impermanence with his sons (76). Yes, he seemed to be saying, he was still plagued with near constant thoughts of death, but he was happy to be alive because he got to explain to his son—who was “so glad that you met Mom or I would have been stuck inside of a sperm forever” (144)—that flies celebrate “by flying from one pile of poop to another” (95). At one point Spalding actually got up from the desk that had been the anchor of his twenty-plus-year inward gaze and danced an awkward dance around the stage, his feeble steps made possible by his children, his “for-better-or-for-worse anchor to this earth” (152).

A few years later, while in Ireland celebrating his sixtieth birthday, he got into a serious car accident. The only one in the car not wearing a seat belt, he was the only one seriously injured. A fractured skull and shattered hip sent him into a “profound depression” (Dewan and McKinley). Attempts at therapy on both his mind and body proved ineffective.

In his essay “Stage Death: Remembering a Painful Evening with Spalding Gray,” John Penner describes a March 2003 performance of “Interviewing the Audience” in Houston during which “the monologue and the man, ever hard to distinguish, had fused entirely. And vanished. All that was left was tragedy” (Penner n. pag.). Gray began the evening with dark comments critical of the then days-old US-led invasion of Iraq that were not well received in “Bush Country,” and a sizable portion of his audience walked out. Those who remained were on his side, “ready to play,” but Gray was unable to conduct a coherent interview for reasons beyond the early heckling (Penner n. pag.). In recognition of his discomfort, someone in the audience shouted, “What's wrong, Spalding?!” Gray talked about the accident for a bit and then began to hobble around the stage:

"I can't dance anymore," he explained weakly.

“What?”

"I can't dance anymore. With my kids. I can't dance with my kids."

We understand, but.

"I can't dance anymore."

He said it over and over. For the rest of the night.

Why was the accident so horrible? Why are you so depressed tonight? Why can't you snap out of it? What's wrong, Spalding?

"I can't dance anymore." (Penner n. pag.)

Gray tried to turn the experience of the accident and subsequent move to a new home (which he detested) on the morning of September 11, 2001, into a monologue, originally titled "Black Spot," and then, more optimistically, "Life Interrupted." Some saw hope that the "old Spalding" would return, that he was "healing himself through the act of performing" and that "we were all witnesses to this act of recovery" (Mark Russell, qtd. in Wood). Others felt that even when performing, he was trapped deep in his "reptilian mind" (Elizabeth Lacompte, qtd. in Wood). By most accounts, creating the monologue failed to give him enough critical distance to move past or through his pain. Then, after the trip to the movies with his sons discussed in the previous chapter:

On the night of 10 January 2004, Spalding Gray disappeared. Within days, the New York police had received hundreds of tips. He'd been seen shopping in Macy's that afternoon; he'd been haggling with a waitress in New Jersey; he had even been spotted in Los Angeles. It was a testament, perhaps, to his status as an American institution—or an 'Un-American original' as he himself had put it—that so many people thought they recognized him. But none of these sightings turned out to be real He had attempted suicide a number of times in the previous year, but always left a message, or a note. This time, there was nothing. (Wood n. pag.)

Looking for clues or a note, police have searched Gray and Russo's three residences, including an Upstate New York cabin, and found nothing helpful, Russo says. They continue to track tips that come in, but to no avail, police sources say. Russo's parents tracked a tip themselves and went to an Upstate diner where Gray was allegedly sighted sometime after Jan. 10. But the diner's surveillance cameras showed nothing. Police checked it out too. The tip was bogus. (Duke n. pag.)

Spalding Gray disappeared two months ago and his body was found Sunday in the East River. Apparently, as he had often threatened to, he committed suicide by jumping off the Staten Island Ferry. More about him after this from Walgreen's. (Osgood n. pag.)

I have discussed the details of Gray's death, which was given a purposely roundabout examination in the last chapter, more directly here primarily because the sense of tragic mystery surrounding his death mirrors, in many important ways, the mystery of selfhood that Gray so obsessively examined throughout his life. When did Spalding Gray die? Some might say he died when the water of the Hudson stopped his breath. Some might say he died when the car crash added physical damage to an already troubled mind. Others might call the injury a ruse, an excuse to act on wheels already set in motion. In their guilt, some survivors might feel that he died when they failed to get through his "reptilian mind" with words of hope in his final years; his eyes were certainly vacant long before he disappeared. Others might say he died when his main coping mechanism, his skill as a performer, began to elude him. Many, including this author, have pointed out that the signs of his will to self destruction were there all along, and performing was but a stop-gap. Still others might point out, with an air of eerie prognostication about Spalding's own children, that children of parents who kill themselves are much more likely to take their own lives. Gray was never able to properly mourn his mother's suicide. It is possible, they might prompt, that his death really began with hers.

In his last years, Gray frequently said that he felt his life was leading toward a kind of "creative suicide" (qtd. in Wood). Perhaps he was just too tired in the end to write a note, or perhaps he left a long and intricate note, the writing of which was inextricably linked with his life. His choice of drowning was forecast in more than one monologue. The new home that he detested was located on Ferry road. *Big Fish* was

hardly an coincidental last film. Still, these clues prove elusive. They may have “actually happened,” and they may offer a kind of poetic solace, but much as Gray’s inward gaze never gave him the grounding he was searching for, we will never know exactly when or exactly why Spalding Gray died. We just won’t. The search for origins is futile. There is ultimately no “mappable account” of his death, just as there is ultimately no “closed roadmap of his own construction resulting in a certain identity” (Gingrich-Philbrook, “Revenge” 378, 383).

In the preceding pages I have argued that although confessional work, like that exemplified by Spalding Gray, can be productive and fruitful for artists and scholars alike, it is not more discursively “pure” or “authentic” than other forms of discourse and that great care must be taken to ensure its use is both ethically sound and creatively fruitful. I have urged a move away from the assumption of “ontological individualism” and towards a partial, intersubjective, unfinished and polyvocal experience of subjectivity (Bellah et. al). I have urged that we look inward not as detectives seeking facts, but as those seeking “ghostly matters” (Gordon).

I began in chapter 1 with a brief introduction to Gray’s life and work before attempting to place him in a historical context. I surveyed the three major traditions that his work has typically been classified under—the one-person show, storytelling and performance art—arguing that though Gray’s work has influenced and been influenced by these traditions, it is important that we also examine his work in the context of confession. He was certainly neither the first nor the last artist to mine their own life for material, but his decades-long project of self-disclosure does make him an excellent test case for this study of the discursive problematics of the confessional voice. My attempt

has been to problematize our conceptions not only of Gray's work, but also of autoperformance more broadly conceived, autobiographical scholarship and other manifestations of our nature as "the confessing animal" (Foucault 60).

In chapter 2, I outlined some of the problems of creating and interpreting confessions in academic, literary, religious, legal, psychoanalytic and performance contexts. I noted that the split between the performative (confessing) and constative (being confessed about) selves makes confession a particularly slippery form of discourse. In contrast to the tendency to be mistrustful of the constative self and embrace the performative self, it is important that we interrogate both performative and constative selves in order to fully examine the complex power relationship between confessors and confessants. I offered that we must not treat the speech act that begins with "I confess" as though it presents a "pure" or "authentic" part of a pre-existing subjectivity, but that we must instead treat it as an active production of selfhood in the moment of performance.

In chapter 3, I answer the call to focus on "*how* 'particular' autoperformances do or do not work for us as contesting observers, rather than continuing to menace or celebrate such work as a whole" (Gingrich-Philbrook, "Revenge" 382; emphasis in original), with a reading of *It's a Slippery Slope* in relationship to Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" and the confession ritual he details in *The History of Sexuality*. From this perspective, Gray's monologue functions not only as a mid-life crisis, but also as a crisis in the performer's relationship to confessional performance. I read the piece as Gray's successive attempts to "get to the bottom of himself," which are repeatedly thwarted. No matter how diligently he looks or how candidly he confesses, "there is no self there," or

rather there is a different self there every time. He is not freeing his “inner madman” but (re)producing himself as a specific kind of subject in the power relations between him and his audience. This confession is a productive rather than a liberating act.

Chapter 4 accounts for my own attempts, inspired by and in response to Gray’s work, to create *A Magical Mystery Tour of the American Theatre* as a way to mourn his tragic death. My performance borrowed much from Gray’s work—wooden desk, microphone, water glass and plaid shirt, improvised stories from randomly selected cards—but it also differed from his monologues in important ways. My performance, haunted by his ghost, did not promise transcendence; it did not promise a “more authentic” me. The stories I told were often fragments intentionally cut short. I made no sustained attempt to connect them into a metaphoric whole but instead allowed them to remain as piecemeal clues to a mystery not intended to be solved. “There was no me there,” only a succession of transient subjectivities produced in dialogue with my audience and the ghost of Spalding Gray. This kind of subjectivity does not offer a sense of “ontological individuality” on which to “build a life,” but instead offers an experience of temporary selfhood that is an impetus for dialogic and ethical action towards others.

As performance studies scholars continue to embrace “performance art, personal narrative, autobiography, autoethnography, confessional poetry, subjective criticism, performative writing and whatever else we will have called it tomorrow or the next day,” it is essential that we do so with the problematics of confession in mind (Gingrich-Philbrook, “Revenge” 375-376). As we create theories by honoring the “extraordinary in the ordinary” in an attempt to create a “home space,” it is important that we do not treat the prosaic as somehow more “pure” than the theoretical (hooks 45). As we “make

writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, even pain” we must be careful not to reify that pleasure, possibility, disappearance and pain into a new source of false grounding (Pollock, “Performing” 79). As we locate ourselves in our scholarly work, we must be aware of the very real sense in which there is no self there save the one we are actively producing in the moment of speaking, writing, or performing.

Coda

I found most of the articles I used to tell the story of Gray’s disappearance and suicide at the beginning of this chapter via the LexisNexis™ Academic search engine. I typed in Gray’s name and searched for articles over the past year (from February 16, 2004 to February 16, 2005). The engine promised me 125 articles. I read through each diligently in sequence, noting the discrepancies between the accounts. Though I was working in a public place, I wept openly while reading the article about Gray “dying” on stage during the Houston performance of “Interviewing the Audience,” at accounts of how his suicide has affected his children, at the recollections of those who “might have been able to help him if only they had known” in the days before he slipped away. As the articles began to repeat—the exact same AP press release coming up again and again in different newspapers—I found myself unable to stop searching, sometimes re-reading an article four or five times “just in case,” obsessively checking my e-mail in another browser window, stalling the inevitable end.

I was trying to say good-bye to Spalding, I guess; I’m not sure. I thought I had grieved already. I mean I did that performance and everything. Maybe it was some other repressed loss that I was projecting onto him. I had the familiar feeling that I was

missing something but had no idea what, coupled with the suspicion that nothing I found would fill the void. My head was an exhausted swirl, thinking about the difference between mourning and melancholia, about the inevitable return of the repressed, about how in the hell I was ever going to finish my thesis on time, about how silly I must look crying in front of a search engine in a coffee shop. I finished reading article number 124 which I'm pretty sure was exactly the same as article number 122, and, with a twinge of anxiety, clicked "next." My browser brought up the following message: "We are unable to process your request at this time. Please wait a few minutes and try again. We apologize for any inconvenience." I tried to click that link dozens of times over the next ten minutes but each time found the same reply. The bottom of the page offered that, if I had any questions about this message or needed assistance in searching LexisNexis™ Academic, I ought to contact my library reference desk staff.

This actually happened; it was yet another so-crazy-he-can't-be-making-it-up-coincidence/metaphor-only-one-tiny-step-removed-from-mundane-reality that Spalding Gray might have used to conclude one of his monologues. Of course, Spalding probably would have taken the web page up on its offer of assistance and frantically called the reference desk staff asking the poor librarians if they knew of a good way to move from melancholia into mourning following the suicide of a hero. Imagining him doing this made me laugh. Hard. Right there in the coffee shop. In a way, it gave me what I was looking for. Spalding Gray seemed subjectively present in that moment in a way that the objective newspaper accounts would not allow for. It helped me to say good-bye.

Though I have been largely critical of the confessional voice in the preceding pages, I do not dispute the fact that personal narrative can be a powerful tool for healing.

Telling you this story just now made me feel better. It did. Catharsis happens. It is not always the cover for secret operations of subconscious power relations that are “more true” than the surface; to believe this would be to flip the “more authentic” reading of confessional discourse on its head and run the same ontological problems discussed in chapter 3 above.

To the degree that I am aware of what is going on inside my own brain, I can say that I really do have a personal attachment to the life and work of Spalding Gray, and a fair amount of my motivation in writing this document has been to resolve some of my personal feelings of loss surrounding his death and God only knows what other feelings of loss I projected onto the whole thing as well. I would be lying if I told you any different but, and this is a crucial “but,” that doesn’t mean that I am being *more* truthful now than I was at any other time during the construction of this document. (And by the way, in case you were tempted, you shouldn’t give this current meta-confession any special credence either.)

I have a hunch that you found this story somewhat touching and illustrative or, at the very least, a not too terribly annoying or offensive way to conclude my study, but I hope that if you did not like it, you would still be able to interrogate it without feeling like you had to accept or reject me as a person. In short, I hope that you read my confession as just one among many strategies I have employed in the dialogue between us. Thanks.

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