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‘Dissemblage’ and ‘Truth Traps’: Creating Methodologies of Resistance in Queer Autobiographical Theatre

LAZLO PEARLMAN

After more than thirty years of solo autobiographical theatre created by LGBTQQIA¹ performers throughout the West, the primary focus of shows made by artists of these identities has more or less remained stable since 1980.² In 1982, queer performance artist Tim Miller presented the autobiographical solo show *Post-War*, and he is part of what is now a tradition of presenting out, celebratory, authentic LGBTQQIA stories onstage. As a self-identified trans³ performance artist and performing researcher, I have taken part in this practice. Performances, extending from Miller in 1982 to J MASE III in 2014, continue to revolve around the necessity of ‘coming out’, presenting the stories of how we came to know and experience the ‘truths’ of our identities. Performance theorist Deirdre Heddon confirms that these autobiographical works have largely been concerned with, and successful in, ‘using the public arena to “speak out”, attempting to make visible denied or marginalized subjects, or to “talk back”, aiming to challenge, contest and problematize dominant representations and assumptions about those subjects’.⁴ Works such as Miller’s *Glory Box* (1999), which used his personal history of having a partner who is not a US citizen to discuss gay marriage and legal immigration for same-sex couples, and trans and Tamil performer D’Loco Kid’s *D’FaQto Life* (2013), which presented an intersectionally marginalized trans person of colour’s experience and narrative, have been critical in supporting political and personal empowerment for audiences and performers alike.

Without diminishing the impact and importance of speaking out and talking back through autobiography and the political personal, my work now diverges from this tradition by resisting and seeking alternatives to what Heddon identifies as ‘problematic essentializing gestures’, ‘the erasure of difference’ and the ‘reiteration of normative narratives’ that can accompany autobiographical performance.⁵ In light of this, the primary focus of my current practice and/as research centres on interrogating what have become the expectations and requirements of autobiographical ‘truth-telling’ in identity-based theatre.

My work challenges what is now received wisdom that the primary goal of LGBTQQIA, crip⁶, POC⁷ and other theatre artists of marginalized identities is always to present and claim space for these identity ‘truths’. These performance acts of what Michel Foucault considers ‘confession’ are held to be key to advancing liveable identities, not only for and as artists but also for and as representatives of identity groups as a whole. For Foucault, ‘coming out’ was an instance of the manufactured desire to ‘confess’

one's self. This desire was created by the early church, was moved into psychology, and from there Western 'man' became a 'confessing animal'. My research and performance inquiry is motivated in no small part by my understanding of the Foucauldian idea that the Western moral and ethical need to confess our 'truth' is (also) an internalized and largely unquestioned regime of disciplinary power that creates, controls and regulates the limits of identities.⁸ As a female-to-male transgender performing artist, in my stage work I am using the material but not the identity of my body to test and challenge the expectations of autobiographical performance and manufacture pockets of resistance to this disciplinary power.

My research has revealed that very few examples of solo performance using non-gender-normative identity resist the expectation to confess and explain that identity. Even the highly stylized transgender performance artist Nina Arsenault, who uses her body transformations to look into feminine archetype, mythology and social construction, still grounds her work in autobiography.⁹ There are no performances that I can identify that attempt to use the material of the trans performer without making the performer's identity/biography the subject.¹⁰ What else might our bodies bring to the theatre beyond an explanation of ourselves and our circumstances? To subvert both the audience/societal 'need' to experience 'confession', as Foucault would have it, and the performer's conditioned desire to enact it, in my practice I offer 'autobiographies' that continually *lie* as an act of this resistance. In this writing I describe my most recent manufacturing technique.

I am naming this technique of continual lying 'dissemblage', inspired by the process of assemblage taken from the visual and literary arts and expanded by the ideas of assemblage theory as defined by twentieth-century French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*¹¹ and usefully interpreted and clarified by Mexican-American artist and theorist Manuel de Landa.¹² In visual arts and literature an assemblage is a collection of pre-existing images, texts, objects and other items that are combined to create a new/original work. Deleuze and Guattari (and de Landa) expand this to the social realm and include as an assemblage the people, things and structures that make up entities such as cities, organizations and communities. In a grouping that operates as an assemblage, each component is 'decomposable', capable of existing and functioning on its own. Placed together the components become a whole that is something other than, but utilizes, its parts. For the collection to function as an assemblage each component must retain its own 'capacities' that interact with and affect the others. Each must also have 'emergent' properties that come into being only in assemblage; the assemblage must 'amplify' these properties and produce the whole.¹³ I look into defining and using a 'dissemblage theory' for describing in part how collaging together series of dissembling (lying) acts might work to queer the machinery of confession in LGBTQQIA autobiographical performance, and offer this as a theatrical act of counterpower.

In my solo show *Strings Attached* (Collisions Festival, 2014) I build this process of dissemblage from a series of what I am calling 'truth traps'. These traps are made up of texts, bodily and visual images, and 'real' and 'theatrical' situations, each of which appears to be 'true' or factual. Each individual 'truth trap' is a seemingly autobiographical



FIG. 1 (Colour online) Lazlo Pearlman in *Strings Attached* (2013). Photograph by Juliet Shalam.

story or act that leads the audience down a false path toward 'understanding' my non-heteronormative identity. Once the 'authenticity' of each segment is firmly established, each is then exposed as and exploded into a lie. In line with assemblage theory, each 'truth trap' is a 'decomposable' act with individual meaning; the enacting of each will call some expectation into question.

Examination of my practice to date suggests that the presentation of any one of these acts alone does not have more than a fleeting subversive effect, but as part of this dissemblage the capacities of each section amplify and combine into the whole. For example, when I strip, the reveal of the 'lie' of my clothed gender has its own complex meanings and effects beyond my personal identity narrative. However, in my experience these effects are quickly incorporated into the rest of the performance. After the surprise of my body's hybridity cools, a new normative narrative of trans identity inevitably begins to solidify. When I then confound that solidification by denying that I am transsexual and insist that what I had revealed was instead that I have a 'micro-penis', a condition that affects approximately 0.6 per cent of men in measured populations, this new confession takes back or changes the reveal of my trans body, and recontextualizes and amplifies complexities of genders and of masculinities, while at the same time a new identity narrative starts to solidify around me. The springing of each singular trap refuses both solidification and expectation; the repeated and explosive reveal of multiple traps rejects the desire for answers and the possibility of a stable narrative in which an identity 'problem' is solved. Ideally, the effect at the close of the performance is that a space without solidity emerges, without the need for 'understanding' or confession, potentially a space not submitting to Foucauldian 'regimes of power'.¹⁴

Dissemblage theory, then, created from an assemblage theory in which all of the segments are lies, is a strategy of resistance to the pressure of confessional culture on queer autobiographical theatre, in order to explore what might be accomplished by theatre makers of queer identities in addition to and beyond 'telling our stories'. Through my praxis I am uncovering what other effects and affects our bodies and selves might engender onstage, what other spaces we might be able to open for ourselves, our cultures and our audiences, and in queer theatre-making for future practitioners.

NOTES

- 1 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual. The abbreviation has its origins in the 1980s when gay social and/or political groups began consciously adding the word Lesbian to their titles to acknowledge that the community did not only include gay men. Beginning in the 1990s, other non-heteronormative identity groups have also claimed acronym space under this umbrella of communities.
- 2 Prior to the 1980s, lesbian and gay characters in theatre and film were almost entirely stereotypical, tragic and/or grotesque.
- 3 'Trans' is an umbrella term for transsexual, transgender, and other gender-non-conforming identities.
- 4 Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave, 2008), p. 20.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 6 'Crip' is the queered or radically politicized disability identity.
- 7 'People of colour'.
- 8 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 60.
- 9 Nina Arsenault, 'A Manifesto of Living Self-Portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance)', *Canadian Theatre Review*, 150, 1 (2012), pp. 64–9.
- 10 Cabaret artist Rose Wood, also trans, may be an exception as she uses the reveal of her hybrid body as shock tactic: her rock and roll, gothic and gory late-night performances are underpinned by stories of anger and pain which are never spoken, and never identified as her own.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 8–9.
- 12 See Manuel de Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 18–19; also see de Landa's European graduate-school video lecture on Youtube: 'Manuel DeLanda. Assemblage Theory, Society, and Deleuze. 2011', at www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-15e7ixw78&index=23&list=PLQ4ntxaP_-oXkZ5xbutXIPSzYOAJTXcH, last accessed 29 May 2014.
- 13 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.
- 14 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 11.

LAZLO PEARLMAN (lazlo.pearlman@northumbria.ac.uk) is a performance-maker and theorist whose pieces are often, but not always, generated by his FTM transgendered experience. He works across physical theatre, performance art, cabaret, film/video and traditional theatre. Manifestations include the feature film *Fake Orgasm* (Zip Films 2012), performances *Dance Me to the End of Love* (2012), and *The Culture of Confession Booth* (2013). Publications include *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* (art editor and chapter author for *Trans Performance*, 2013) and the forthcoming *Kisses Cause Trouble, Le Vrai Spectacle: Queering the French, Frenching the Queer* (2015). He is a Lecturer in Performance at Northumbria University, Newcastle.