

Encountering Identity: Affect, Writing and the Feminist Scholar

By Cristyn Davies

It is winter and the black ocean beats against the beach outside the fibro house. The house smells of timber burnt in the fireplace, old books, and musty carpet-residues overlaid by the aroma of baked vegetables and the ginger steamed fish consumed earlier in the evening. I have a third of a glass of red wine and a cup of hot black tea by my side-with each intermission in my reading, I take a sip from the cup of tea, then the wine glass, trying to decide which liquid will provide the most potent warming sensation. The book I'm reading is a page-turner-Jill Dolan's *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, [and] Performance*. More recently, I re-read Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's response to reading the works of Silvan Tomkins. Sedgwick and Frank describe the process of reading:

One conjoint of affect-effects we experienced on the way to becoming addicted to reading Tomkins: his writing excited and calmed, inspired and contented. Once one of us fell asleep reading and afterward explained, "I often get tired when I'm learning a lot." (Sedgwick, Frank, 2)

I thought more carefully about the clarity of the intermittently recurring image of myself reading Dolan's second book-being 'excited and calmed, inspired and contented' (Sedgwick and Frank 2). The effect of reading feminist theorists' writing about performance echoes for me the affect generated by engaging with live performance that offers a dynamic critique of representations of gender, race, class and sexuality. This is not to collapse the mediums of performance and critical writing, or to enter into a domain wherein performance is figured as the original, and critical writing, the simulacra. It is more productive to look at the ways in which some academics have transferred the affect of live performance through their critical writing. In addition, I am also keen to 'discover how the semantic and somatic are linked' in the triangulated relationship between performance, critic and reader (Stern and Kouvaros 2).

If Sedgwick and Frank were 'startled' by Tomkins formulations 'for their sharpness and daring, their amplitude, and [...] descriptive levelheadedness', then I too was startled to read Dolan's collection of essays and to discover critical writing about performance that privileged desire (2). In the introduction to her book, Dolan writes:

Despite all I know theoretically about the ideological dangers and misuses of performative presence, and its implication in structures of power and authority, I continue to find women's presence on stage seductive (1).

I continue reading:

[...] I'm not ready to give up the intense pleasure I find in a powerful female performer. I still find radical her power to know, intellectually and psychophysically, how to wield the authority of stage presence, how to control the seductions inherent in the frame, and how to speak the language so that authority, seduction and language mean something different about the status of women in culture (1).

Writing in a theoretically illuminating manner about performance, not only does Dolan register her own response to women in performance through critical writing, but she also engages the affects of interest and excitement in her reader. 'To think, as to engage in any other human activity', Silvan Tomkins argues, 'one must care, one must be excited, must be continually rewarded' (Tomkins 77). By writing her affective responses into her own text, Dolan encourages affective contagion in her reader; that is to say that in capturing, semantically, the transformations that women performers are effecting on stage, Dolan also encourages similar transformations in her reader.

In this instance, Dolan's critical writing interweaves personal narrative making her theoretical insights more accessible for her reader. Foregrounding her own subjectivity, Dolan creates a triangular relationship between performance events, her own embodiment as spectator-critic, and the reader. Nancy Miller argues that personal criticism 'entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism' (1). She traces the development in the 1970s of the "authority of experience" which continues to be dismantled and queried through critical discourse (14). Dolan's resistance to vanquishing 'bodies that matter', to borrow the words of Judith Butler, acts as a powerful intervention into discursive regimes that privilege a hegemonic critical subjectivity that erases difference (285). Drawing attention to debates amongst feminist scholars about the efficacy of 'visible identity as an origin of political action', Dolan reclaims the identity markers 'lesbian' and 'Jew'-'however constructed, positional, and unstable'-'as a place from which to begin [her] work' precisely because her 'embodiments and movements through culture and discourse' have been 'deeply marked' by these parts of her identity (12).

Assuming the role of feminist critic offers Dolan the very mobility that had been 'frozen' by her 'inability to fit the gendered performance model taught as desirable' (3). The effect of this gendered performance model on Dolan's body is marked:

The closed, awkward woman I became as an acting major in college compared uncomfortably with the way acting, as a teenager, had always given me speech and mobility, through the mediations of text, character and context. Since I could no longer embody my own strength, through characters and exercises that now seemed to drain it from me, writing about theater became the outlet I needed for presenting strong opinions and a highly constructed sense of self (3).

My reaction to Dolan's text was not just an intellectual, or even an emotional response; something else was at work here. Teresa Brennan captures this moment for me most aptly:

The transmission of affect whether it is grief, anxiety or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes as in a whiff of the room's atmosphere, some are longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject (1).

Dolan's observation that roles she was expected to play, and the performance exercises in which she was to take part, literally depleted her energy, is testimony to the energetic dimension of affect. 'Frequently, affects deplete when they are introjected', Teresa Brennan argues, 'when one carries the affective burden of another, either by a straightforward transfer, or because the other's anger becomes your depression' (6). In this case, 'the other' is personified precisely because this term stands in for the prescribed gender roles Dolan was expected to enact. These limiting roles resulted in Dolan fashioning herself as both cultural and theatre critic, and writer and enabler of new social scripts-domains in which women on and beyond the stage featured in dynamic roles.

By taking up the position of critic, Dolan finds a medium in which she can voice 'strong opinions' and crucially, develop and maintain a 'highly constructed sense of self' (6). It is this strong sense of self that enables Dolan to pursue her critical project. Referring to her experience as film and theater reviewer for feminist publication, *Sojourner*, she comments:

The editorial collective published my reviews, but no one seemed as convinced as I was of the importance of the performance critique I was trying to fashion. I was also growing cynical about the constraints of the feminist theater movement. Feminist Theater workers, young and few in the late 1970s insisted that feminist criticism function only as cheer leading. [...] Unable to give up some sort of critical position to support any and all feminist endeavors, I found myself as critic become anathema to the groups whose work I most wanted to engage (4).

Dolan's ability to distance and detach herself, curiously known as "self-possession" in psychoanalytic parlance, is one of many instances in which she resists the group affect. Critical engagement with performance is figured as feminine other to the *real* business of feminist theatre practice. Dolan's metaphor of writing criticism as 'cheerleading'-a traditionally feminine activity-is an interesting inversion of the charges against theory that sometimes position the theorist as masculine (7). 'A favourite theme of plays and screenplays', Teresa Brennan argues, 'is the lone resister, the one who holds out against a common affect, usually of persecution' (4). While many fictional narratives offer a protagonist the security of hero status and narrative resolution, Dolan's resistance is tempered instead by her political and personal commitment to the transformative effect not only of feminist performance, but also of feminist criticism. While 'persecution' is too strong a term to apply in this instance, it is critical to remember that Dolan's struggle to secure mobility is always read through the identity markers "lesbian" and "Jew", 'the two labels through which [Dolan] is most easily disparaged and historically reviled' (12). Dolan's intervention into discourses about racial, gender and sexual identities has brought about shifts not only in discursive regimes, but she has also helped to extend the imaginative possibilities of subjectivity.

Engaging with presence differently, Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, also published in 1993, self-consciously draws attention to the act

of writing about performance as 'a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present' (146). Live performance is personified in Phelan's writing, as her own memories of performative events are re-animated so that her reader is seduced by the affective presence of performance, while always already encouraged to mourn its absence. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros argue that the development of Performance Studies has meant that 'the ephemeral nature of the actual "live" performance has been constituted as a founding, though enabling (and often concomitantly fetishised) lack' (7). It is the recuperation of this presence with which Phelan is concerned, as she scrutinizes the politics of representation.

Again, I recall Sedgwick and Frank, and I am struck by the way their response to reading Silvan Tomkins echoes my reading of Phelan's *Unmarked*:

[...] a potentially terrifying and terrified idea or image is taken up and is held for as many paragraphs as are necessary to "burn out the fear response", then for as many more until that idea or image can recur in the text without initially evoking terror.[...] This rich claustral writing nurtures, pacifies, replenishes, then sets the idea in motion again (3).

Inviting a reader to meet the spectres and phantasms that haunt her, Phelan demands her reader's presence. *Unmarked* provocatively opens with densely worked figurations that invite an examination of visual representation through the lens of memory—a consciousness whose language is infinitely called into question and thrown into doubt by Phelan:

The question of belief always enters critical writing and perhaps never more urgently than when one's subject resists vision and may not be "really there" at all. Like the fantasy of erotic desire which frames love, the distortions of forgetting which infect memories, and the blind spots laced through the visual field, a believable image is the product of a negotiation with an unverifiable real. As a representation of the real the image is always, partially, phantasmatic. In doubting the authenticity of the image, one questions as well, the veracity of she who makes and describes it. To doubt the subject seized by the eye is to doubt the subjectivity of the seeing "I". These words work both to overcome and to deepen the provocation of that doubt (1).

Employing 'psychoanalysis and feminist theories of representation', Phelan interweaves theory and autobiography with her prose engaging with what it means to be haunted by performative presence (2).

While Dolan strategically retains the political efficacy of identity categories as a means to intervene into discourses about gender, sexuality and race, Phelan's mode of resistance is differently situated. She believes that 'visibility politics are additive rather than transformational' because of 'capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets' (11), and that there is 'real power in remaining unmarked' (7). Phelan's choice of adjective— "additive"—is employed ironically here, as she situates visibility politics alongside *unnatural* ingredients used for preservation within the market place. She questions the efficacy of the visible within a

capitalist system that commodifies identity, as if it were another saleable item to be purchased and consumed. Phelan employs psychoanalysis and feminism to understand performance practice, while Dolan utilizes a materialist feminist framework not only in her role as spectator-critic, but also in her own performance practice with students. What does it mean to situate Dolan and Phelan's differently figured arguments about identity alongside each other? In order to maintain engagement with the affects, interest-excitement, Silvan Tomkins argues:

One must look at the object now from one angle, now from another. One must watch the object as it moves about in space. One must switch from a perceptual acquaintance, to a conceptual orientation, to remembering it and comparing it now with what it was before. [...] To the extent to which such manipulation is guided by hypotheses and suggests new hypotheses, one's acquaintance with the object is enriched and deepened (79).

While identity should not be reified as the 'object' in this analogy, Tomkins theory of the affects interest-excitement suggests that in approaching a politics of identity productively, one must engage with all possible modes of being in order for one's conceptual framework to remain dynamic. Implicit in the ontological choices of both Dolan and Phelan is the vulnerability of one's own fragile body, which in the process of reading registers the affective choices of the author.

The affective impact of Phelan's argument is disclosed through personal narrative that suggests the significance of what it means to remain unmarked. Phelan recounts being driven by her father as a child in her family station wagon from Long Island to Massachusetts with her family, and the 'ghost of [her] dead sister' (9). Phelan recalls the effect of her mother's suggestion of a 'who can keep quiet the longest contest' (12)-an event that offered a reward for the winner. Phelan recalls:

I can't remember what the prize was, but I remember trying very hard to listen to the sound of the tires on the asphalt, the sound of my sister's breath, the sound of the wind turning over as the car went through it.

These contests had a strange tension for me, not so much because I was burning to speak, but because I thought my mother's weary sadness might infect us and render us all permanently mute (12).

Phelan uses the metaphor of infection to register the fear of affective contagion-that is, with the act of imbibing her mother's grief through transference, as well as carrying the weight of her own grief, Phelan imagines herself rendered verbally paralysed with distress.

There is a parallel between the rules of the game the Phelans played and viewing live performance. The game simulates watching live performance where an audience is expected to keep silent, unless cued by theatrical convention to respond. In this way, the spectator who breaks this silence outside of the theatrically cued moment ruptures the appearance of the audience as absent presence. Making noise draws attention to the body of the spectator, her flesh,

and her presence. For Phelan, her sister's presence functioned as 'a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh' (12). Refusing to keep this ghost locked in the role of spectator as absent presence, the Phelans' bodies re-animated the spectre's affect. In doing so, Phelan believes that her sister's 'non-corporeality' reproduced the other bodies in the family 'as fleshless' (13). In this way, Phelan's narrative illuminates the affective relationship between performer and spectator, or presence and absence as a delicate continuum.

Part of the tension Phelan reads into her construction of identity politics is that she is not affectively contained. Arguing about the transmission of affect and questioning the efficacy and authority of western psychology, Teresa Brennan aptly remarks, 'to understand how transmission takes place, metapsychology has to begin again, and from the standpoint that individuals are not self-contained, although the foundational fantasy fosters this illusion' (14). In contrast to Dolan who is eventually able to resist group affect, Phelan imagines the potential consequences of her mother's uncontainable affective grief. Curiously, this affective power is imagined as marking Phelan's body-rendering her mute-although, it is significant that such a marking does not enter the realm of the visible.

Phelan's personal narrative is employed to support her argument about subjectivity. The image of her mother's contagious affective state works against Freud's economy, wherein, 'only the subject experiences the affects he or she produces' (Brennan, 13). Phelan believes that:

Identity cannot, then, reside in the name you can say or the body you can see-your own or your mother's. Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to another-which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being (13).

Phelan's writing mimics a relation between affective experience and theory as she weaves personal narrative and anecdote throughout her analysis of performance practice as a way of conveying her thesis. Just as 'identity is perceptible only through a relation to another' (Phelan 13), so too are the *boundaries* of genre permeable-particularly the genre of academic writing about performance and autobiography, or personal narrative. Feminist scholarship ensures that these boundaries are continually resisted and extended, merged and blurred. So too does Phelan's identity merge with and through the identity of her absent sister, as a way of performing presence for the body that is lost. It is this experience that leads Phelan to believe that 'the physiological understanding of vision, like both the psychoanalytic conception of the gaze and the technologies of aesthetics, is also a theory of loss and distortion' (14).

This kind of retelling—an account mediated through the experience and interests of the teller—provokes a critical writing interested in soliciting affective engagement in a reader. 'The performance passes', Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros argue, 'the bodies we love, or despise are mere chimeras. But this passing away and passing behind leaves a memory trace that demands its own retelling - a descriptive process that is both inexhaustible and subject to the creation of its own phantasms and chimeras' (31). As I sit and read, I am calmed, contented, excited and pacified. I continue to alternate between my glass of red wine, and my cup of black tea. Now I know that each liquid will provide an equally satisfying, though differently textured experience.

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