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Fragments of a self: Embodiments, (Re)enactments, and Re-encounters with Memory

Ellen W. Kaplan

Philosopher Charlotte Linde compares the self to "a cloud of butterflies moving across a garden." (quoted in Hardcastle 2008, 50). I can think of no description more beautiful or more apt.

The dictionary offers a more prosaic set of definitions of 'self': an individual's typical (or temporary) character or behavior; the union of elements (such as body, emotions, thoughts, and sensations) that constitute the individuality and identity of a person; the entire person of an individual.[1] In the Western tradition, philosophical arguments about the nature of the self range from Plato and Aristotle through Descartes, who equates mind and self,[2] to Locke's view that that the self is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places"[3] David Hume says "the self is a sum of sensations." (Manning, 2002, 119) Kant posits a rational self that performs a synthesizing, unifying function because it *transcends* sense experience.[4] Eastern traditions build from the Buddhist perspective that the self is not a fixed entity but ever-changing.[5] Nicola King aptly captures the thrust of postmodern thinking about (King 2004), in which a deconstructed self, a decentered self, or none at all, are viable theoretical positions.

We *crave* unity, we *feel* like a singular self, we *believe* that our stories give meaning to otherwise random memories. Memory, including the inaccessible memories of trauma, is deeply entangled in creative production, and is central to my work on stage. Like many producing artists, I cannibalize my own life-stor(ies) to explore the self-shaping work of narrative. As an actor, I have long questioned the relationship between self and role; as a writer, I am keenly aware of the intersections of memory and narrative in creating a "self" (*selves*).   Here, I reflect on ways that theatrical practices support and are entangled with self-narrative, through embodiment, performance, action and word. I examine the relationship between articulation, embodiment, and memory - including traumatic memories - to delve into some of the factors that contribute to writing, acting and creating narratives of the self.

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[1] "Self." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022.

[2] Descartes suggests that the possibility of *being aware of our selves* creates the sense of self. http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1683/the-lockean-memory-theory-of-personal-identity-definition-objection-response

[3] http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1683/the-lockean-memory-theory-of-personal-identity-definition-objection-response

[4] https://revelpreview.pearson.com/epubs/pearson_chaffee/OPS/xhtml/ch03_sec_07.xhtml

[5] Lao Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching*, says "Knowing others is wisdom. Knowing the self is enlightenment. Mastering others requires force. Mastering the self requires strength." Laozi, Lao Tsu (1989). Tao Te Ching, 35, Vintage Books.

35 YEARS OF JOURNALS: *WHAT,* NOT *WHO*

Life Stories: writing the self.

Most people imagine themselves to possess a continuous, coherent, self-authored identity. But as we excavate memory, we find a splintered, shifting, elastic perspective on 'who' we are. Memories and imaginings (both characterized by material absence, retrievable only in the *now*) are shaped and told as stories that offer only temporary coherence. Recognizing that our conception of the self constantly shifts, we remember, re-member and mis-remember the past, constructing versions of ourselves contoured too by circumstance, happenstance, cultural expectation; by archetypes, myths, fairy tales, and social scripts which operate in the shadows of consciousness. Self-narration as a process of revealing the ever-shifting "I" (the one who narrates) and the "Self" that is narrated, which comes into being through the many stories we tell ourselves. (Cavarero 2000) The self is conjured anew by each telling, in what Nicola King calls "a process of provisional reconstruction" (King 2004, 34)

For 35 years, I kept daily journals: meticulous lists of what I did, who I met, where I went, what I saw. I recorded the facts of my life, without context or explanation. [6] Ultimately, these diaries met with disaster: they were drowned in my flooded basement. But what exactly was lost?

Lists do not constitute a story. As Susan Manning writes of Boswell's diaries, they are nothing more than "a brute sequence," "an aggregation of his daily activities." (Manning 2002, 119-126) Making lists is a way to organize fleeting sensations, perceptions, and life's events. But they do not provide the unity of "narrative connectedness over time" (Hardcastle 2008, 121), nor do they weave a core self-story. We assemble, disassemble and combine fragments of memory over time, to create who we are. Writing a life-story offers a promise of self-knowledge, and potentially, self-reconstruction.

The materials in those lost journals constitute a *what,* not a *who,* as Hannah Arendt employs the terms. Arendt articulates a distinction between the *Who* (the "unique existent" or essential self) and the *What*, constituted by external identifiers (names, facts, actions). [7] This idea is elaborated by Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who retrieves Arendt's conception of narrative and memory to propose a theory of storytelling and selfhood. Stories express the "Who" of the self, in the sense that Arendt and Cavarero intend. *What* I am (a woman, a Jew, any noun that describes or names me); doesn't capture *who* I am, my "unique life story" (Cavarero 2000, viii). Roncalli, writing about Cavarero, identifies the "narratable self" as the source of the distinctive, unique and unrepeatable *who*. (Roncalli 2015, 8) Building on her analysis of Arendt's work, Cavarero makes explicit our desire for a unified self, "rendered palpable by the story." (Cavarero 2000, 13). Or, as Mary Warnock offers, "the broken and fragmentary self could be given a unity by the reliving of the past in the present." (Warnock 1989, 99). The project of self-narration is an expression of our deep desire for continuity, coherence, and unity of self.

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[6] As a child living in a highly chaotic household, I was not interested in making or telling a story but in creating order out of chaos, controlling the terrors of a child without resources or social network for protection.

[7] Arendt traces the initial mention of the *What* and the *Who* to Augustine in *The Human Condition* (2) and expands the distinction throughout her writing..

As a theatre practitioner – actor, playwright, educator – I find the encounter with self an ever-present source of creativity. My work is *haunted* by the splintered memories of an ever-changing self. Who am I? What is the hot center of my artistry? How do I retrieve this unique identity that is "me"? Is there a grammar, an orthography, to who I am? How do I, as the ancient Greeks suggest, know myself?

GHOST SELVES: TRAUMA, MEMORY AND ENACTMENT OF THE SELF

Playacting is something we engage in from our earliest years; as children, we explore, experiment, build imaginary worlds. Children will often enact their fears, which, like fairy tales, may offer a way to conquer them. [8] A three-year old boy in Afghanistan plays 'ghost' over and over, playfully trying to scare me while I have tea with his family. His mother explains: they were robbed at gunpoint when the child was present, and for months afterwards he kept acting out his fear in this game (a kind of *fort/da* wherein the 'ghost' appears and disappears as the boy hides, only to pop out from behind a doorway once again). Similarly, my son, also three, lived through an extremely powerful earthquake. For the next few months, he played 'earthquake' over and over, hiding beneath a table and shaking it vigorously, yelling "Emergency! Earthquake!"

The work of the actor: Emotional Recall

The languages of the stage - embodiment, articulation, and action – are instrumental in accessing often inaccessible memories, and can be particularly useful as a means of processing trauma, though healing is not the intention nor the goal of (most) theatrical practice. But though at times emotions emerge unbidden, it seems we only can retrieve what we are ready to know. My training as an actor included sense memory (at which I was quite successful) and emotional recall, [9] at which I was an abject failure. I had little understanding of what was occurring: I could easily evoke sense memories that drew from recent, emotionally unencumbered experiences like biting an apple or taking a shower and then recreating the sensations in the absence of the stimuli. The techniques of emotional recall build on sense memories of past events; but, when I tried to reach back to emotionally wrenching experiences, I would shut down, or become inwardly frenetic. (My resistance to using emotional recall is shared by many actors, and its value is disputed by modern practitioners and theoreticians alike). As Cathy Caruth explains: “In trauma sense perceptions often come back in fragments.” (Caruth 2019, 65) These fragments were unintegrated, and unintelligible to me.

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[8] There is a rich literature theorizing about how fairy tales enact children's fears. See, for example, Bruno Bettleheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) or *The Collected Works of Maria-Louise von Franz,* in 28 volumes, which Chiron Publications, began publishing in 2021, estimating a 10-year period for completion.

[9] "Emotional recall" in Stanislavski's method is the practice of evoking a personal memory comparable to that of one's character in order to assist in empathizing with the character. "Sense memory," developed by Lee Strasberg, is the recollection of the physical sensations of an emotional memory in order to incite a sensory state akin to that of one's character.

A basic principle of emotional recall exercises is that emotions cannot be accessed directly, which is why sensory recall is the basis of the work: to recall an intense emotion, you retrieve and revive sensations from a particular time you experienced that emotion. Say, you recall the smell of popcorn and that sensory perception evokes the joy you once felt at the movie theatre. There are many (aesthetic, ethical, practical, even political) objections to the practice, but my point here is that we cannot command emotions or conjure memories that are not integrated into our psyches. The memories live in us, we are haunted by them, and even repressed memories may “return” as physical symptoms; our traumatic memory re-emerges, often painfully, or poetically, metaphorically in the body. When we say, for example, we feel “stabbed in the back,” the image may well resound in posture and pain: shoulders protectively hunched, knotted or back muscles.

The work of the actor: Expressive Gesture

Actors use these images as clues, cues for behaviors and gestures that express fundamental traits. Perhaps the most famous example is Konstantin Stanislavski, playing the morally short-sighted Khlestikov in Gogol’s *The Inspector General* with a distinctive squint. He tells us: “If you do not use your body, your voice, a manner of speaking, walking, moving if you do not form characterization which corresponds to the image you cannot convey its inner living spirit (Stanislavski 1950, 5) This understanding of the fundamental role of physicalization guides my creative choices as I sculpt a character, for example, playing the silent woman in Strindberg’s The Stronger, by imperceptibly deflating my torso as she tries and fails to speak throughout the play. We display our inner reality through the body, and this holds true for repressed memory as for consciously selected traits. As van der Kolk says, “the body keeps the score.” The body reveals as much we may hope to know.

Trauma lives in the body

We respond to trauma with our bodies. Van der Kolk explains, in *Trauma, Memory and the Body*, that emotion is all about making your body move in relation to other bodies. The most primitive part of the brain reacts, through the nervous system, to fight, flee or freeze, to keep the body safe. He goes on to say that when we are (or feel) trapped, the body is immobilized, which leads to emotional immobilization. When that happens, we get stuck in reliving our traumas.

Memories give us a sense of ourselves as a unique and (somewhat) stable identity; from memories, we build our self-story over time. But some memories are inaccessible to consciousness, and not subject to recall on command. Memories of trauma reveal themselves (when they do) in bits and pieces; they may be suppressed or partially submerged, but they live within us, in our bodies as 'ghost-selves'. This is where the idea of embodiment, central to the stage, [10] is useful. Traumatic memory, or a tangle of memories, 'ghosts' unbidden and unbiddable, often emerge directly through the body.

First, a personal experience, which perhaps best illustrates the point. At sixteen, I hitch-hiked across the United States with no companions, no money and no destination other than a vague desire to head as far west as I could get. In Albuquerque, I was sexually assaulted at a house where I was staying. The next morning, there was a drug bust outside that same house. I half-hid behind a screen door and I watched as a neighbor, a mentally deficient man in his thirties, was badly beaten by the arresting officers for not following their orders; he was, it turned out, simply incapable of understanding what he was being told. I was spotted in the doorway and arrested for being a runaway, and left in a solitary cell in a Juvenile Facility, because I had a full body rash (this from a week's stay at a commune in Taos, where dysentery and other infections were rampant). For years, I spoke with rage about the man and the (brutal, unjustified) beating he received. I knew the facts of what happened to me but I was numb to it; I cried for the man but I didn't *feel* anything at all about what happened to me

Some forty years later, I was directing a play about runaways, self-harm and parental abuse,[11][12] when I learned that a close friend from my teen years had died unexpectedly. The night I found out, I had a nightmare in which I was being strangled, pressed down by an enormous weight, while I thrashed in agony and tried, uselessly, to fight a faceless attacker. I woke in a sweat of fear. That morning I had a craniosacral massage, part of my physical therapy regimen, which seemed to loosen something inside me. Suddenly, I was wracked with hysterical sobs; I couldn't stop, I couldn't contain and certainly couldn't explain myself. The weight of that body on me, like a rock; the struggle to breathe; the sheer terror: these had lived on in my muscles, my organs, my bones, my skin. The ghost of the rape, unattended for decades, lived on in my body. The memory, catalyzed by a confluence of events, burst out in a massive physical response. The body remembers.

In less immediate ways, this same mechanism has operated in my acting work. I offer two examples. The first instance took place in Madrid. I was co-leading a seminar on Federico Garcia Lorca, and at one point we did a reading of *Blood Wedding.* I was playing the Mother, who by the end, loses her son to violent murder. When we came to that section, my body began to shake uncontrollably. with rage and sorrow. In those moments, I *was* that woman. But in a sudden, vivid image, a memory emerged.

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[10] . Jens Brockemeier calls attention to phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who emphasize the embodied nature of human identity and subjectivity.

[11] When the police came, I half hid behind the screen door, fearing arrest as a runaway yet desiring to be seen. The screen door was a liminal space from which I both wanted to emerge and behind which I was desperate to hide.

[12] *Habitat*, Judith Thompson. Produced at Smith College, Northampton MA 2012.

In 2012, accompanied by theatre director Peg Denithorne, I traveled to Bosnia to interview Muslim, Croat and Serbian women who had survived the siege of Sarajevo. Outside of a women's center in Srebrenica, we came upon a middle-aged woman sitting at a picnic table, looking at photos. Her whole body was shuddering, and we asked her (through out interpreter) if we could help. But, no, she said, this is her life. The photos, she explained, were of her husband and son. They were Serbs whose small plot of land was here; during the war, the Serbian army tried to recruit them, but they refused, saying they would not be used to kill their Muslim neighbors. Both were arrested, both were permanently disappeared. She, the woman, has been trying to find their bones ever since. She didn't cry, but her body shook violently as she showed us their pictures. "My husband. My son." She repeated this over and over.

In Madrid, four years later, this uninvited memory of the Serbian woman came back to me physically, as a profound shuddering I couldn't control. It was as if, without any conscious connection on my part, she inhabited my body as I played out this parallel history in Lorca's play. We do have access to traumatic memories, and what may be called 'trauma-adjacent' memories, through the body.

One more example will suffice. In working on David DeSola's 2013 play *The Dictator's Granddaughter* (*La Nieta del Dictador*), my character, pampered, infantilized and secluded, remains frozen in her childhood memories. She returns to her home country after fifteen years away, to care for her dying grandfather, whom she remembers as kind and loving presence in her childhood. But in the present, the mirage of memory begins to disintegrate as she hears the protests of the mothers of his tortured victims. She begins to recall what she once knew. She remembers being happy when he played with her (once a week for an hour), but another memory emerges: in those weekly play-dates, he would watch with delight as she was sexually assaulted, at his command, by his top general. The violations La Nieta endured as a little girl were sanctioned and viewed with lascivious pleasure by her adored dictator-grandfather. Suddenly, she *remembers*.

This *bursting through* of traumatic memory, eluded portrayal. I was stymied by how to play the moment of discovery. At this point, the text breaks down into obsessive counting, splintered thoughts, endless iterations of splintered thoughts, but the emotional charge of the scene was inaccessible to me until I found a correlative action. Rhythmic pounding, pacing, shredding, gasping, pawing the air, and lying down next to grandfather's almost-corpse, released the character's emotional life and communicated the horror of her encounter with unrepressed memory. It wasn't until I lifted a chair, intending to smash it into his head, that the truth of the moment came alive. The act of lifting the heavy chair over my head and (almost) heaving it, was an embodied expression of the character's sudden recollection of deep trauma. In that final moment of clarity, as I was about to strike, my body and my psyche engaged. There was no need to complete the physical act, this would-be murder. The *action* released frozen *emotion*: the expressive moment released the character's emotional life and communicated the horror of her encounter with unrepressed memory

A key to unlocking the traumatic memory, instantiated above, is embodiment; the sequestered memory lives on as a shadow-self, hidden from consciousness, released by the physical engagement. Catalyzed by a dream, a text, a splintered recollection, it overtakes the self; vividly alive, deeply experienced, numinous, it feels to be almost autonomous, driven and directed by its own logic, until it is played out. Traumatic memories are 'stuck,' frozen in time, embedded in body, hidden to consciousness, until it is represented and articulated through physical expression.

Performing the embodied story relies on proprioception: through the body, voice, breath, word, the story comes to consciousness. But trauma is unspeakable, language is insufficient; how do we speak what cannot be represented? Annie Rogers calls traumatic events 'unsayable', in her book of that name (Rogers, 2008). In fact, *not* saying may be the preferred strategy for telling the full tale.

Not all traumatic memories are expressed with vivid physicality. A counterexample to the 'acting out' of trauma may be useful here. In *The Two Charlottes* by Nora Glickman, I played Holocaust survivor and acclaimed poet, Charlotte Delbo. (Glickman, 2004) In a 45-minute monologue (one of two in the piece: the other belongs to painter Charlotte Salomon, who died in Auschwitz), she relates her recollection of her life in the camps. Speaking as Deblo, I am struck by her matter-of-fact-ness, her dispassionate recollection of events: she is unsentimental, almost clinical, as in her poetry: she stands apart from that 'other self' who existed in Auschwitz. She is cold, affect-less, numb.

> "After sixty-seven days in camp I feel half dead but I no longer hurt. I can't smell anything anymore. I've forgotten the contact of water to skin." (Glickman, 2004)

The monologue is given directly to the audience, as a clear-eyed presentation of the facts of Delbo's life in and after Auschwitz. The challenge is to create the detached, even cold persona she presents as she describes the events of her life without emotion. I created a detailed movement score and focused on the physical life of the character: gestural, behavioral, scenic actions that communicate her story beyond the words.

> "After the war, I took leave of my skin; it had a bad smell, worn from all the blows. I found myself in another skin, beautiful and clean, although I didn't shed the old skin as a snake would." (Glickman, 2004)

Even at the end of the play, when her language is most wrenching, she is emotionally detached:

> "In my nightmares I see myself such as I know I was: hardly able to stand on my feet, my throat tight, my heart beating wildly, frozen to the marrow. My suffering is so unbearable, so identical to the pain I endured there, that I feel death fasten itself onto me. In my agony, I cry out. I am wakened by my own cries, and I'm drained. *It takes a long time to become myself again, the person you see, the one who can talk to you about Auschwitz*. " (Glickman 2004, my italics).

Delbo describes a double consciousness, a self that *is* and *is not*: this detached, observing self lives along with the feeling self, much as in the work of the actor, ever oscillating between role and self, me/not-me. Delbo is both the woman who survived Auschwitz and the woman who must completely forget.

WRITING MEMORY, COMPOSING THE SELF

Memory 'isn't a place, a store-house…but 'an intricate and ever shifting net of firing neurons" (Grant, 1998: 289) It captures experience, but it refracts and alters it. We can only know the past through the lens of what we know now. The picture is complicated when trauma has shattered the self.

Words can never truly represent traumatic experience; our languages simply don't have the capacity to speak all we endure. Nevertheless, the act of writing offers a potential path for recuperation. Whether through fiction, fantasy, fact, or, more prominently in contemporary genres, a blend, writing is a mode of self-inquiry. Psychologist Susan Brison describes her memoir *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self,* as "a personal narrative of recovery and a philosophical exploration of trauma." (Brison 2023, ebook) Coming to terms with a brutal rape requires Brison to "rewrite the plot." (Brison 2003, 76). By "transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative" (Brison 2003, 39) she bears witness to the assault and reclaims agency as she puts her life back together.

Veiled Memory: Emergent in Unexpected Ways

Trauma exists in the ever-present; the traumatic memory is frozen in time, though as Caruth has it, drawing on Freud, trauma resurfaces as a repetition compulsion. We revisit it without awareness of its genesis, in a (failed) attempt at erasure. The traumatic event plays out again and again, in new iterations, but in disguise. Traumatic memories return, but camouflaged: they remain, in Caruth's terminology, "ungrasped." (Caruth 2019, 65). Veiled memories, arising from the recesses of a shattered self, can begin to disentangle once-inaccessible knots of who we are.

When I write, I often begin without knowing where I am going. One of my first plays, *Cast No Shadow,* sprung from an emergent image that I didn't understand at the time. A young ballet dancer is frozen in a spotlight, terrified to perform. As I followed this image, character and plot developed: Hannah, who calls herself "China," fully rejects her Jewishness (including her embrace of ballet, a quintessentially Western dance form), fears she is being stalked by a neo-Nazi, and is literally immobilized by fear. She is frozen in the spotlight: she cannot dance. She comes to learn, (or remember, as she knew this once) that she is named for her great-aunt Chanah, who perished in the Holocaust. Now claiming her given name of Hannah, she imagines herself back in the forest where Chanah had hidden, until she was captured. The terror of the forest was replicated, unconsciously, within Hannah as she danced. She returns to a new (for her) kind of dance, drawing on her heritage, earthy, rooted.

Like the little boy playing 'ghost,' I was coming to terms with fears that I could not identify or articulate at the time. My father-in-law, who had survived five years in Nazi labor camps, followed by two years in a camp for displaced persons, was emotionally shut down: at the time of Michael's birth, he was a bitter, shrunken, cringing man who could not engage. Ultimately, I came to see that writing *Cast No Shadow* was a way that I could assimilate or extinguish my fear that Sol's dread would haunt my husband and my then two-year-old son. (Years later, I can say that there is more than a grain of truth to this). Synthesizing these impressions into an intelligible story was, for me, a precursor of understanding. In the shadows of consciousness, hidden from view, was a powerful image of a fear I didn't know I had, and re-transcribing it, to use Freud's term, brought it to awareness.

Memoir differs from autobiography, which tells the story of an entire life; memoir is also retrospective, but more selective. In either case, the self is created in a "narrative process" (Hardcastle 2008, 19) which may stabilize our fleeting perceptions, sensations and memories by linking them into a coherent story. We have selves, Hardcastle asserts, because we actively seek to make sense of the events in our lives. (Hardcastle 2008, 23-24). Meaning arises from "the ordering, telling and evaluating of actions" (Barthes, quoted in Hardcastle 2008, 37)

Our memories don't coincide neatly with 'facts', memory is malleable and is reformed by present knowledge, allowing us to revisit our history, to tell it anew, or as it were, aslant. Writing a memoir allowed me to suture the wound of parental abuse, in a re-encounter with sexual and bodily shame and acknowledge the repetitions throughout my life, disguised but identical in essence. But, as Goldstein makes clear in her discussion of David Hume, there are "limits to the objective point of view." (Goldstein 206, 76-77) Self-narrative isn't 'fact;' it is constructed. Facts can be recovered, but every story based on memory automatically includes what we didn't know that, presumably, we know now.

Self-disclosure presumes an audience; but I was the first and principal 'audience' for my memoir. Writing it was an expurgation [13]; it offered a path for discovery and for repair. I was able retell the story, as an artifact of "the desire for unity that only the narration [of self] can offer in a tangible form." (Cavarero 2000, 39) Memoir offers a sense of the self's unity through time, which is crucial for the feeling/belief that we really are a single, unified self. However, writing for myself as an audience of one is only part of the story.

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[13] Having lived for years with chronic pain, I often think of writing about scars and body shame as an exorcism, to rid me of 'dybbuks' that reside in my body.

THE RELATIONAL SELF

Identities are enacted: we perform them *for* and *with* others. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (2018) establishes that the story of the self is relational; Cavarero then unpacks the idea that self-representations are always contextual: we are embedded in nests of interpersonal relationships and social webs. Narration offers coherence, a provisional unity, and ultimately, exposure to others (Cavarero 2000, 34) Language(s) are a "cooperative tool." (Hardcastle 2008, 8) by which meaning is established and communicated intersubjectively. In this view, the self is porous, permeated by others, both a 'core' identity and a self that grows in an ever-renewing interchange.

Self-narrative (memoir, autobiography, life writing) insists on exposure; we desire and need to be seen to know who we are. Storytelling, "the weaving of a narrative out of actions and pronouncements of individuals, enables the retrospective articulation of their significance and import, *both for the actors and for the spectators*." (d' Etreve, 2002 Section 4.3. my italics) For ourselves and for an audience of others, we shape and reshape a putative identity which shifts, transforms, dissolves and reconstitutes itself over time and across circumstance.

Every actor knows the power of applause, every writer imagines an audience of engaged readers. As Brison says, "we need …an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them." (Brison 2003, 46-48). "To remain "unheard…is not to exist, to be annihilated" (Brison 2003, 62). As we speak we become authors of ourselves; as an act of personal autonomy, and a way to resist our own invisibility, even as we seek the shelter of shadows.[14] As Primo Levi says, survivors of atrocity must be listened to by an empathetic community. (Levi 1996)

ENCHANTMENTS OF THE STAGE

Lose yourself to find yourself. Cliché, mantra, or gem of wisdom, it serves in art as well as in life. On stage, actors experience a release from self-consciousness, a jubilant self-forgetting that often feels to me like 'dancing without my head.' Absorbed in the present (a requisite of stage "presence"), fully in her body, the actor is energetically alive. She *thinks* and *acts* outside of time, in reciprocal relationship to her stage partners, her fictive environment, and her audience.

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[14] Working with traumatized communities on death row; with Bosnian women who survived the siege of Sarajevo and continue to fear renewed civic breakdown and violence; with Roma in Eastern Europe; with Yezidi survivors in IDP camps in Iraqi Kurdistan, I recognize the insistent pleas to tell their stories, to not let them be forgotten by the outside world. "You can come here, we can't go there" a Roma father in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria tells me in a personal interview, 1996..

In role, I am *me* and *not-me*; an oscillating self. while the pedestrian ‘little me’ of personality momentarily fades away. Musicians, dancers, painters, writers all experience this heightened focus, this trancelike absorption, wherein the self dissolves into the work. My best work (like my ‘best self') doesn’t know where it’s going, only where it is.

In my essay, *Fool’s Faith: The Dionysian Actor,* (Kaplan 2011) I discuss the roots of theatre in sacred ritual, with a focus on *sparagmos,* the mythic dismemberment of Dionysus. Stephen Harris, in *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights* defines *sparagmos* as the “ritual tearing apart of a sacrificial victim, divine or human” (Harris 1995, 75). Symbolically, *sparagmos* is analogous to dissolution of the self. [15] Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, proclaims that “the process of symbolic identification and dissolution of self into the other is an important point of connection between the *maenadic* [maddened] and theatrical aspects of Dionysus” (Nietzsche 2000, 13). Erasure of the differentiated self is terrifying and seductive; pleasurable and horrible. *Sparagmos* is a process of dismemberment and re-memberment: we fear loss of an undivided identity; but that surrender into a greater unity opens the door to enchantment.

Rebecca Goldstein, in her essay on fiction (Goldstein in Rosner, 2016) says that “literature’s enchantment” leads to, as Plato claims, “being out of one’s own head” (Goldstein 2016, 78). “To enter into fictive enchantment is to feel the walls of the self becoming so porous that the sense of other lives intermingles with one’s own. (Goldstein 2016, 80) . This is analogous to the release, the intoxication, that the performer finds on stage. The poetic and musical aspects of language, the spell-binding nature of story, draw us in and release us from the quotidian ‘self’ into another realm, if only for a while. Part of the enchantment of the story, too, is that “Events *signify* in the world of the novel, or story, or play; experience is presented in units of meaning.” (Goldstein 2016, 80). The narrative coheres into a (temporary) unity, and that unification, apparent, illusory, evanescent as it may be, strengthens the sense of self.

THE MAGIC 8-BALL: PERSPECTIVE AND INTERPRETATION

Staging plays presents us with a panoply of interpretive choices; there are many (though not endless) ways to stage a script. So too, retrospective looks at one's life may yield very different interpretations. A single event or set of events signifies differently over time; we find ourselves narrating the same events but telling a different story. [16] Like a magic 8-ball, different answers are on offer, random but delimited by the pre-existing ‘text.’ When we tell a story, it may change, wander, double back on itself, but it always takes place within a marked boundary, a particular ‘forest’ (a novel, a play, a life); not *any* interpretation of a given text is valid. Narrative shifts in a process that is cumulative and subtractive, and we ascribe new meaning as we revise and reorder our story.

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[15] The breakdown of self that accompanies extreme trauma, for example, or the disintegration that characterizes psychotic break, are radical responses to radical experience, and are antithetical to the sublime collapse into primordial unity that Nietzsche takes to be the highest aspiration of the artist.

[16] One example: a wild and improbable adventure led me to believe the pronouncements of a self-proclaimed mystic. Many of the facts of my year-long encounter with this person were verifiable, and nothing (save my pride) was taken from me. The events in question enriched my life, but in retrospect, they easily be constructed differently; perhaps I was duped but what might have been an elaborate con job. My ‘teacher’ might have been a mystic, or psychotic, or simply playing a strange game. Depending on how I choose to look, I find different stories to tell.

As an artist/scholar, I reflect on the theoretical implications of my creative process: here, I have offered a consideration of role and self; memory and trauma; the relation between self-narrative and meanings of a story. Fundamental to these reflections are questions which Jens Brockmeier elegantly poses:

> What dweller in a modernist and postmodernist world can ever be sure there is a plausible and coherent interpretation of his or her life? That there will be an overarching unity or, at least, a coherent narrative, which will eventually emerge if we only search for it thoroughly enough? (Brockmeier 2015, 4)

Brockmeier goes on to say, “an event, experience, memory, or a fact can only be understood as a segment cut out of *a narrative web*.” (Brockmeier 2015, 10, my italics). This narrative web is always contextual; we are situated; our self-hood is both provisional and relational. Our fundamental assumptions about who we are, are embedded in language, shaped by the world-view we grow up with and life-scripts written before we were born.

Unconscious memories are timeless, but we exist in time, and we rewrite our stories in the present, again and again. The past is unstable, and never really past. Our sense of self is unstable too, but we have a strong belief in a unique, unrepeatable identity, a core ‘me’

We began this essay with the image of the self as a kaleidoscope of butterflies shimmering through a garden. Roncalli, in her essay on Adriana Cavarero, describes a “self that is ‘in-between’ the universal [self] and [the] sovereign self, as found in the western metaphysical tradition and the dispersed, diluted self, as articulated in postmodern thought.” (Roncalli 2015, 3) We *are* plural, we sculpt ourselves in time, our slippery ‘core’ subject to endless refraction. We write new editions of ourselves, playing the parts handed down to us and others which we self-assign.

In theatre we tell stories; we embody, enact, perform for others, though I contend we also tell and perform stories, in part to better know ourselves. Self-narrative weaves together the raveled threads of memory, in a continual process of self-creation. Aesthetic elements and the tools of craft support this work: form, genre, structure, character and plot supply meaning, even if the events we record are (seemingly) random. Composing our stories, including half-forgotten memories, the contradictions, the scars, the shadows and shapes of absence, is the work of recuperation and repair.

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