**Staging Loss Chapter**

**Trace: Shame and the art of mourning**

By Louie Jenkins

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to stage mourning and generate performative memorialisation? Lisa A. Costello defines performative memorialisation as, ‘a layered memorial activity that […] create(s) a temporally fluid, Bakhitinian dialogic between the author and the subject (memory) and the event and the audience (history)’ (Costello 2006 p.22). The dynamic between the audience and text is interpreted as active rather than passive, engaging rather than absorbing, citational and subjective rather than fixed. I have chosen to apply the concept of performative memorialisation to the writing and performance of autobiographical mourning narratives. My contention is that the dialogic between author (witness), subject (death) and audience is problematized by shame-affect and that the agency inherent in this work is the personal and universal aspect of the material; we all lose people and we all die.

In the UK, autobiographical performances of mourning narratives are an emerging area of practice. Bobby Baker’s *Box Story* (2001) reflects on (amongst other things) her father’s death through drowning; Kirsten Fredrikson developed *Everything Must Go* (2009), which won a Total Award at the Edinburgh Festival, and recently Jo Bannon (in collaboration with Lucy Cassidy) produced the one-on-one performance/installation *Dead Line* (2014). The profile of these recent works, along with Ellie Harrison’s *Etiquette of Grief* (2013), and Michael Pinchbeck’s poignant one-on-one performance *The Long Winding Road* (2003-2009), presents a developing engagement with the performance of witness and mourning.

However, I argue, that the subjects of death and grief are shrouded in cultural constructs that impact the writing, performance and reception of mourning narratives, which is why autobiographical explorations of the experience of loss is limited. This contention raises some interesting question with regards to the authoring, and performance of autobiographical mourning narratives: if our experience of dying death and mourning are socially constructed, how does shame-affect, triggered by cultural injunctions, complicate the processes of autobiographical performance making? Secondly, how might the shame/identity index be subverted through autobiographical performance?

*Time Piece* (2012-2014), is a solo autobiographical performance of mourning narratives developed as part of the practice-as-research enquiry *Shame and its Positive: Mourning, Class and Queer Performativity* (2015). It is a fifty-minute performance composed of interlinked monologues exploring the deaths of my parents (Mum – 20th February and Dad – 25th November 1983), and partner, Rebecca (April 13th 2005). Significantly, *Time Piece* seeks to investigate the articulation and performance of mourning narratives by experimenting with structure and writing approaches exploring how the material validates social sanctions or challenges accepted codes of behaviour.

The autobiographical content of *Time Piece* is purposely confusing as I weave fictitious, often humorous monologues and real narratives within the theatrical space; the themes, content and articulation of self(ves) and self as witness, are confused. I present my middle-class queer self and proudly reflect on my Yorkshire working-class childhood, my experience of losing my parents as an adolescent, my love for Virginia Woolf’s writing and the traumatic experience of watching your partner die of a terminal illness. The structure of *Time Piece* is punctuated by humour offering the audience and myself moments of relief, moments of anchoring and reprieve from the narratives and experience that are either confusing, that resonate or are beyond comprehension. I did not use humor to deflect from the gravity of the experiences, but rather as a means of relaxing in to the telling through a performance register that coaxed the audience to engage with the difficult subject matter.

As the audience walk in to the theatre space is stripped of theatrical regalia: black curtains are removed revealing walls and ladders, exit signs become prominent and the occasional botched paint job is made visible. The set lacks initial signification: a hanging rope, a tin bath, a chair, a suitcase and a misplaced microphone provide a skeletal frame to the work, allowing the audience to invest whatever meanings they choose. It is rather a disappointing attempt at staging, lowbrow and apparently unimaginative.

I am in ‘costume,’ bare footed wearing a soaking wet black slip. When the last person enters I thank the stage manager and ask the technicians if they are ready, give the ‘thumbs up’ and nothing changes, no lights are brought down, the audience remain lit, I simply climb on a chair and *Time Piece* begins.

**EXPOSURE**

You’ve taken your seat and noted the unusual set; there’s a rope, a suitcase, a chair and a woman lying face down in a tin bath centre stage. [*Beat*] She wears a black slip she bought from Marks and Spencer’s in Chichester – for £22.50. It is a somber scene. [*Beat*] The lights are focused solely on the bath - on the body. Evocative music plays, [*Beat*] it has a beat. [*Beat*] Suddenly the woman looks up. She drips. [Beat] She finds you in the audience and stares. She’s not especially happy. [*Beat*] You know why…

*Time Piece* 2014

From the outset the audience is asked to play witness to my witnessing and in doing so reflect upon that very process. The physical space they enter offers no protection from my address, as we are visible to each other as I pointedly direct my speech to individuals, which in the context of autobiographical performance is a recognised method of presentation, but in relation to shame theory presents the opportunity to exploit the device.

SHAME-AFFECT

Whenever we are said to be *motivated*, it is because an affect has made us so, and we are motivated in the direction and form characteristic of that affect. Whatever is important to us is made so by affect. Affect is the engine that drives us.

Nathanson 1992 p.59 – italics in original

According to psychologist, Silvan Tomkins (1911-1991), who is accredited to Affect Theory, there are nine recognised universal affects that are identifiable during the first year of life: enjoyment, excitement, surprise, anger, disgust, dissmell (disgust expressed through the nose), distress, fear and shame. Affect theory relates to the study of human motivation: why individuals choose to do certain things, how ‘choices’ are triggered and how affects amplify the highly specific activity set in motion. The affect system is said to provide ‘the primary blueprints for cognition, decision, and action’ positing that ‘humans are responsive to whatever circumstances activate the varieties of positive and negative affects’ (Tomkins 1984 p. 139). Tomkins introduces the concept of affects as complex psycho-physiological structures with psychologist, Donald Nathanson, developing the theory, conceiving that affects are both pre- and post-cognitive, innate, ‘pre-programmed, genetically transmitted mechanisms that exist in each of us’ (Nathanson 1992 p. 58).

Affects are understood to have an adaptive social function preparing an individual for the suitable response to his or her external environment. The stimulus-affect-response sequence is especially potent in relation to shame-affect, which ‘protects an organism from its growing avidity for positive affect’ (Nathanson 1992 p. 140). Children learn about human interaction and social mores through relations with others. For example, when a child’s interest in another’s appearance exceeds the bounds of socially sanctioned propriety then the visual (face-to-face) or spoken negative/angry interaction triggers shame-affect through the sequence interest-rejection-impediment-shame (Broucek 1991 p. 22). The child’s interest is interrupted, eyes averted, thereby ‘protecting’ the child from the potential from another’s anger. Thus shame-affect is an innate and learned physiological mechanism – presenting as a literal turning away from what is otherwise attractive and desirable (Ostrofsky 2003 p. 10). As such, shame-affect establishes and reinforces embodied and socially sanctioned limitations. In order to avoid personal and societal rejection an individual, when faced with an exciting or desirable situation, will draw on historical scripts of embodied shaming to navigate the present situation through the capacity of affective resonance, assessing the ‘risks’ inherent in potential interaction. I use the terms ‘risk’ in reference to social relations, as well as culturally configured rules and societal norms and ‘affective resonance’ in reference to systems of human interaction.

Shame-affects evolve through time. Individuals experience and acquire collections of memory scripts formed through previous exposure to affects, which work to shape and guide present perceptions. Scripts, or ‘ways of living in the world’ (Tomkins 1992 p. 4), develop when body and affect, memory and mind, cognition and will, and social context, all intersect. Queer and cultural theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, contends that an individual has a lifelong relationship with the shame/identity index. The shame/identity index refers to the interconnectivity between shame and identity. Sedgwick (after Tomkins) suggests that the moment the shame-affect is triggered through interruption of identification then shame, too, ‘makes’ identity (Sedgwick 2003 p. 36). The proposition is that shame-affect is defining of an individual’s identity as:

one’s personality or character is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one’s relational and interpretive strategies towards both self and others.

Sedgwick 2003 p. 59

In developing autobiographical performance and exploring the identity/shame index there is a subtle shift between focusing purely on external factors (hegemonic cultural value systems) as determining of subjection, to focusing on the psychosomatic process of embodiment through shame-affect. Shame-affect is a significant factor in the (re)presentation of self in autobiographical performance. Not only do I present and perform ‘self’ through the shame/identity index, the act of authoring (my)self is subject to shame signification within the constricting bounds of social discourse and the field of autobiographical performance. It could be argued that without engaging with the shame/identity index and the sites of shaming then autobiographical writing and performance responds to identity formation through the lens of social determinism. Social determinism would suggest that identity formation is a fixed system rather than a generative and transformative one. Understanding that the social, cultural and biological are interactive mediums of identity formation positions the individual as possessing ‘a degree of control over their future, rather than as raw material responding rather passively to cognitive or learned phenomena’ (Hemmings 2005 p. 562).

Tomkins defines culturally reinforced sites of shaming as ideo-affective postures. He suggests that ideo-affective postures are the result of systematic differences in the socialisation of affects (Tomkins 1984 p.183). An individual in one culture will respond to a trigger in accordance with his/her ideo-affective posture – for example, in one culture a distressed crying child may be comforted, whilst in another the child may be berated: ‘Boys don’t cry!’. Familial and cultural interactions enforce relational injunctions through the system of affects. Tomkins argues that for the child, these potent interactions become internalised leading to the child inheriting and developing a subjective ideology stance of his or her own based on familial relationships and ideological positioning (Tomkins 1995 p.147). For Tomkins, ideological systems instill normative positions of socialisation. As such, ideo-affective postures are the consequence of ‘norm compliance’; my relationship to my parents’ and partner’s illnesses and deaths was formed within familial, regional and cultural rituals, politics and beliefs – generating an ideo-affective posture in relation to mourning.

MOURNING SHAME

**FOCUS**

*My father had shrunk*

*To the size of a peanut*

*Lost inside his suit*

*Dignified in his failing*

*Always*

*At fifty-two he was dying.*

*Not Drowning.*

*Not Waving.*

*Not Cobbling.*

*Dying.*

*And we had no money.*

*She. Her. That woman behind the Plexi-glass grill stared. Looked him up-and-down.*

*Sickly-Ill-fitting-suit-man*

*Sunken-cheeks-man*

*Tear-blue-eyes-man*

*Cough.*

*“No. Sorry. Erm (check notes) Mr. Jenkins. You. Are. Not. Entitled.”*

*He. Him. That man. My dad. He. Him. That man. Worked all his life. Was,*

*“Not. Entitled.”*

*Sigh.*

*He slowly took pen. Took paper. Avoiding her eye. He shakily wrote. One. Word.*

*“PRIDE.”*

*Folding the corners one-by-one.*

*Slipped it through her grill.*

*“Here, love,” he said, now holding her stare, “it’s all I’ve got.”*

*Time Piece* 2014

According to Tomkins, shame-affect is triggered in response to the affects ‘interest-excitement’ or ‘enjoyment-joy’ affects. This raises the question: how do positive affects relate to mourning shame if, according to psychologist Donald Nathanson, grief is said to primarily be associated with the negative affects distress-anguish (Nathanson 1992 p. 98)? Firstly, it is important to establish that for Tomkins the positive affects of enjoyment-joy are associated with a return to the state of contentment (relief from distress) rather than the state of happiness (Nathanson 1992 p. 79). This is significant because grief disenfranchises the bereaved, disrupting social relatedness and any sense of equilibrium and contentment. Grief is understood as the result of disrupted attachments not simply with those that have died, but with family, friendships, love and community; ‘it ruptures social narratives, belief systems and the sense of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others’ (Herman 2001 p. 51). The disruption of interconnectedness is significant for the bereaved because ‘to be a social outcast in one’s grief, is to experience one’s grief and thereby oneself, to be shameful’ (Kauffman 2010 p. 11). Grief and associated expressions of sadness can be profoundly isolating for the bereaved. The bereaved may seek emotional relief from the pain of isolation by suppressing expressions of sadness in order to be reintegrated in to one’s community. The desire for a return to the state of contentment is powerful when one experiences grief, this desire is often fuelled by the fear of rejection.

The spectre of rejection is interesting when considering making performance of mourning narratives because embodied shame has the potential to problematise the relationship with the audience impacting the writing, intention and performance of the material. When I first began to make performance around the subject of death and grief the work felt indulgent, as I was concerned the personal narratives would be distressing for the audience and I didn’t want to be perceived as seeking sympathy. Through developing my understanding of how shame-affect works in relation to death and mourning, I began to confront my fear of rejection by a process of (dis)identification.

(DIS)IDENTIFICATION

Performance scholar and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s book *Disidentification: Queers of colour and the Performance of Politics* (1999) investigates the performances of queer-racialized bodies as agents of change through the contestation of dominant ideology. Muñoz’s exploration into the performance of hybrid identities (non-white and queer) seeks to ‘offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself and thus seize social agency’ (Muñoz 1999 p. 1), through reconfiguring socially encoded scripts of identity, a process he defines as (dis)identification. The reason I find Muñoz’s work of interest in relation to the writing and performance of *Time Piece* is that shame-affect is a potent reflection of dominant ideologies that are often doxic embodied dispositions. Consider Sedgwick’s assertion that:

the forms taken by shame are not distinct ‘toxic’ parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed.

Sedgwick 2003 p. 63

If identity, in part, is formed and interpellated through ideological systems of subjection, then shame is a significant contributing factor in social formations, acceptance and control. Muñoz posits that (dis)identification presents an alternative approach to engaging with the theorizing of subject formation. The “good subject”, he argues (after Althusser 1970), identifies and assimilates discursive and ideological forms whilst the “bad subject” counter-identifies rejecting and resisting them. (Dis)identification, by contrast works on or against dominant ideology, transforming ‘cultural logic from within’ (Muñoz 1999 p. 11). The concept of working within the dominant ideology to explore interpellation, failed interpellation and embodied shame presents the opportunity to disrupt socially constructed narratives of self by discerning ‘the ways in which subjectivity is formed in modern culture’ (Muñoz 1999 p. 26). Muñoz maintains that ‘disidentification is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse’ (Muñoz 1999 p. 19) and, as such (dis)identification works as a conscious practice that challenges identification from within ideological discourse with the aim of disrupting representation and identification. To practically apply (dis)identification to *Time Piece* demands breaking socially recognised representations of my subjective self.

DEATH’S WITNESS

**TRANSPARENCY**

*We stood on the edge and I held her hand.*

*We stood on the edge and I stopped her from jumping.*

*We stood on the edge and I threw her over.*

*We stood on the edge and I watched her fall.*

*We stood on the edge and I pushed her away - avoided her advances.*

*Spat.*

*Fucked.*

*Cried.*

*Drowned.*

*We stood on the edge and the tide washed us away.*

*We stood on the edge and a car mounted the curb.*

*We stood on the edge and screamed against the wind.*

*We stood on the edge and I knew she would die.*

*We stood on the edge and stabbed each other.*

*We stood on the edge and ate cake.*

*She*

*Watches*

*Me*

*Time Piece* 2014

*Time Piece* explores the very processes of writing, making visible the act of composition revealing moments of ‘dialogue’ between author/performer and audience. The authoring of *Time Piece* fostered a poetic writing style that positioned ‘I’ the author in the role of witness. *Time Piece*, as a solo, autobiographical performance, presents a series of formal and informal monologues, which engage with the notion of ‘dialogue’ as a temporal contract between author/performer and audience. The structure of *Time Piece* defines the sections in relation to photographic terms: *Exposure*, *Positive*, *Focus*, *Negative* and *Transparency*. The significance of the photographic terms relates to philosopher Roland Barthes book, *Camera Lucida* (1981), and defines my interest in the concept of punctum.

Photographs, according to Barthes, are potent referential surfaces that fix live (and dead) subjects in time. Punctum, as defined by Barthes, inspires intensely private meaning often escaping language signification, the Real that catches one emotionally off-guard as you gaze at what is both present and absent in the photograph. The act of seeing the signification beyond the unknown image arouses, according to Barthes, desire and emotion, in relation to the encounter of that, ‘that-has-been’ (Barthes 1981 p. 77). The photographs that potentiate punctum, in the view of some analysts, have to be, ‘discrepant, incongruous, ill fitting, in order to deactivate that feature, which seems to be the very principle of photography: likeness’ (Scott 1999 p. 236). Scott’s argument is that familiar photographs have ‘gathered truth’ into themselves so that rather than being *aides-memoire* they have become the memory themselves and in order to prick ‘experiential repossession’ the viewer/narrator must happen upon and engage with unfamiliar images that they are, in some way, powerless against; powerless in the sense of not having defined the photograph with a personal connection/narrative.

*Negative* is and is not my mother’s story and is inspired by our close familial bond, whilst *Transparency* relates to my experience of living with my partner Rebecca, who was deemed terminally ill for 18 months prior to her death. *Negative* works through metaphor, whereas *Transparency* searches for an authentic rendering of the experience and aims to be explicit, counter to accepted social mores. *Negative* is not the story of my mother’s life, but it is the story of her death, or rather, the death I have chosen to conceptualise for her (and me). The story begins in the small town of Garforth, where we lived during my childhood, a former mining village on the outskirts of Leeds, Yorkshire. However, it quickly transforms through magical realism into a flight of fancy where a pregnant teenager circumnavigates the world, gives birth in the sea, raises her daughter on mackerel and eventually settles with her child in a crumbling lighthouse. As a devisor struggling to ‘write’ my own mother I found the abstract frame offered a creative safe distance from which to thread fact through fiction. There are authentic references within a metaphorical narrative, most potently the reference to my mother’s breast cancer.

The story could end here, [*Pause*] but there’s always Death. He waits by the rocks, he squats in the mine, he buys that extra round of drinks, he goads the fighters, favours the weak, - and he sits in the breasts of women, the breast of mothers; your mother and mine.

*Time Piece* 2014

I created a fictive frame as a metaphorical buffer for the audience and significantly for myself. The intentional act of composition reflects, I argue, the need to keep the dead and the experience of grief at a socially sanctioned distance from the living. Physiologically we understand the biological facts of death: the heart stops pumping blood around the body, the brain dies and breathing ceases. Yet, by virtue of our consciousness and imaginations it is often difficult as individuals to accept that death is the end of a person’s existence. Though If death were objectively interpreted by reason alone then culture’s relationship to life and living would be drastically altered. However, as conscious beings, apparent mortality is continually defied, and myths, superstitions and rituals are firmly embraced. A metaphor is a cross-domain mapping where one domain (life and death) is conceptualised through another (a journey) (Lakoff 1993 p. 202). In *Negative*, the journey I present is, in essence, about mother/daughter love, their life together and the mother’s stoic death. I found myself re-writing my mother’s death, our final moments together in a conscious effort to re-fashion the narrative away from fear, anger and sorrow towards strength, courage and pride.

When Death eventually called, the mother stood tall, and with politeness and pride she let him in. The daughter was there to catch her. She laid her on the kitchen table, closed her blue/green eyes and sewed her mother - memory by memory - into the sinew of her heart. The pyre she built sent sparks dancing in the night sky, and as the young woman tasted love’s tears, she stood tall - thought of mothers, of waves.

*Time Piece* 2014

The conceptualised death I devise for my mother and the response the daughter displays mirror the one mediated through the social expectations of British culture. Culturally, Western societies value ‘productivity, stoicism, and control [and] death represents the shameful loss of all of these things’ (Harris 2010 p. 77). To control one’s feelings or desires at the point when one feels completely powerless and disenfranchised is perceived to be important in order to prevent abandonment of the social support system. An individual may be expected to hide her/his grief because, ‘it interferes with the mandate to produce, perform, and function’ (Harris 2010 p. 81), and failure to conform to expected norms of behaviour produces shame. Other cultures are more permissive of explicit expressions of grief, where crying and wailing are encouraged, expected and occasionally paid for. Yemenite-Jewish wailing, as an example, is a tradition of lamentation performed at a ‘house of mourning’ by older women in the community in order to ceremonially bring the mourners together in a shared moment of reflection (Gamliel 2010 p.70). Fundamentally, one will experience grief through the social codes of one’s culture, which are established and expressed through religious beliefs, funerary ritual and social values. The cultural expression of grief is therefore often different to the individual’s psychosomatic experience of bereavement. The sanctioned expression of grief complicates and defines an individual’s experience of grief, with the disjunction between feeling and expression (desire and expectation/rejection) producing shame.

In *Transparency*, I emphasise the presentation of the ‘truth’, which I relate to the desires and urges an individual experience in the event of witnessing death but are sanctioned not to express. The suppression of such urges is embodied as shame as, ‘experiencing and believing one’s grief to be ‘not normal’ stigmatizes and isolates the mourner’ (Kauffman 2010 p. 15). *Transparency* articulates the original urges and feelings in an attempt to authenticate and normalise the experience contrary to societal rules and expectations. *Transparency* focuses on the complex experience of watching my partner Rebecca dying, the ordinary day-to-day existence of shopping and decorating alongside the traumatic reality of living with someone terminally ill.

We stood on the edge and you haunted me.

We stood on the edge and you lied to me.

We stood on the edge and the truth silenced us.

We stood on the edge and laughed at nothing.

We stood on the edge and it hurt.

We stood on the edge and painted the living room.

We stood on the edge and you baked scones.

We stood on the edge and became a cliché.

We stood on the edge and wrote our love in the sand

We stood on the edge and the tide washed us away

*Time Piece* 2014

The notion of ‘standing on the edge’ refers to the sensation of dissociation where there is an engagement with and detachment from reality. In the performance, I stretch holding a rope suspended from a roof beam, my toes barely touching the floor as I take the full weight of my body through my arm. The painful and potent, theatrical device underscores the experience of living with someone who is defined as terminally ill, the feeling of standing on a cliff edge barely anchored to reality: it hurts, and it is frighteningly unstable.

In writing *Transparency*, I wanted to remain authentic to the experience of living with a terminally ill partner – I wanted the experience to be transparent to the audience. The moments of anger, hate, confusion and fear, alongside moments of joy and enlightenment provided a series of snapshots, random spoken images that demand interpretation. There is a narrative thread leading up to Rebecca’s death and beyond, but the thread is ruptured by everyday-ness, moments that offer instances of resonance for the audience.

Lines such as: ‘we stood on the edge and carried shopping.’ ‘We stood on the edge and drank cheap wine.’ ‘We stood on the edge and forgot batteries for the smoke alarm,’ are threaded alongside more provocative and potent lines: ‘We stood on the edge and I knew she would die.’ ‘We stood on the edge and administered the medicine.’ ‘We stood on the edge and I kissed your blue lips.’ In creating *Transparency*, I wanted to open up the signification of the text such that the autobiographical narrative was marked by my personal story, but still open to interpretation and meaning. In playing with tenses, adopting a poetic repetitive structure, in referencing day-to-day life events and in being honest about the experience of loving someone as they die, I aimed to present a Barthesian punctive site of engagement.

Through the authoring of *Time Piece* I aimed to present a punctive site of plural significances where the audience were free to make meaning in the reflective spaces the scripting afforded. As such, the notion of ‘witness’ in *Time Piece* worked to expose grief as a cultural construct. Here, the signification of the author of the autobiographical mourning narratives expands the meaning of the narratives beyond the personal in order that a ‘different kind of representational space where questions of essence, which are treated as fallacious within writing, where meaning is always plural and substitutive, can be raised’ (Anderson 2001 p. 72). The concept of the plurality of meaning in relation to autobiographical performance is significant because an individual’s story is culturally inscribed and, as such, offers a reflection upon broader social constructs that are defining of experience. *Time Piece* worked to present my personal experience of loss and mourning as subject to cultural sanctions, affording the audience the space to reflect upon their own experiences of loss and subjection.

As a performer, the presentation of *Transparency* was profound. The intertextual nature of *Transparency* (the visual and spoken articulation of the experience of living with someone who was terminally ill) was unpredictable; initially it was difficult to anticipate the audience’s or my own reaction to the instance of performance. Over time, as the assurance of the piece evolved, the audience’s appreciation of *Transparency* appeared to change too.

Performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte’s concept of the autopoietic feedback loop (2008) suggests that ‘the feedback loop is a self-referential autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008 p. 39). Significantly, performance theorist, Gareth White, suggests that the feedback loop produces itself autonomously, in distinction from the creative work of the performance makers who have set it in motion (White 2013 p.162). As such, the emphasis of the feedback loop is on the transformative instance of performance through the reciprocal connection between the audience and performer. As the solo performer of *Time Piece,* in sharing personal mourning narratives, I experienced something truly transformational; I was seen and respected for my experience of loss rather than rejected because of it. I felt. My acceptance of the material meant that my relationship with the audience became validated. What I experienced when performing *Time Piece* was that the audience began to ‘hold’ me in the profound moments of sharing mourning narratives; literally they held my attention not breaking eye contact, often moving forward in their seats as I shared my encounter with dying and death, with love and loss. As previously stated, when shame-affect is triggered there is a physical turning away with eyes averted through a bodily act of rejection. With *Time Piece*, there was a physical acceptance and recognition of the experience of loss, no one turned away. In holding eye contact we (audience and performer) were ‘seen’ for our shared appreciation for the subject of death and the experience of loss.

My understanding of shame and my acceptance of my experience of loss enabled and enlivened the autopoietic feedback loop. As such, I believe that an awareness of embodied shame opens the potential signification of autobiographical performance through a collective understanding of shame-affect; *my* story, is *a* story, is *our* story. It is difficult to ascertain how you measure punctive force, possibly the transformation was a moment of shared understanding, acceptance or appreciation of the ‘honesty’ of the narrative. Possibly it alleviated shame in relation to personal encounters with death. Possibly that is, in itself, a form of punctive force.

Shame demands we explore relational processes and attempt to understand how they become embodied and reinforced through political, cultural, familial, economic, racial, religious and personal interactions. To perform solo, autobiographical performance is to depend on relational processes between performer/audience: aim, interaction, communication, resonance, provocation, transformation and agency. The choice of content, the authoring and the staging of autobiographical performance involve a conscious process that positions the audience as spectators/participants, interpreters and meaning makers.

The necessity to relate to the projected audience has the potential to enliven the content, writing and performance of personal narratives; conversely, to be conscious of the audience may problematise the generation and performance of autobiographical narratives. Therefore, writers and performers of autobiographical work need to consider how embodied shame, impacts their work, and how, if they choose, they might subvert it.

(Dis)identifying with shame demands exploring the point(s) of identity negation and formation by re-engaging with the embodied sites of shaming. The process of self-identification engages with the concept of (dis)identification, where, ‘the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit’ (Muñoz 1999 p. 6). As such (dis)identification emerges at a moment of resistance between fixed identity dispositions and socially constructed narratives of self. Engaging with mourning shame is complex because the sense of loss and rejection can be so profound. However, the process of understanding, acknowledging and (dis)identifying with culturally acceptable expressions of grief will, potentially, impact the experience of loss.

*Time Piece* is my attempt at performative memorialization, my search for the essence of my parents and my partner, Rebecca – it is an attempt that has empowered me to share my experience of loss and my relationship to dying, death and mourning. Ultimately it given me affirmation of my experience of loss and has enlivened what it means to be alive.

We stood on the edge and I placed some of you in a tin on the bookshelf next to your photo.

We stood on the edge and I don’t like being awake

We stood on the edge and you became sand

We stood on the edge and came full circle

You

Me.

Us.

*Time Piece* 2014

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