

Tell Me About It: The Role of Confession in
Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the role of confession in recent artistic practices in the United States and United Kingdom, as a recurring motif and as a method for addressing questions of identity formation and institutional power. Although deeply historical, confession also saturates the western contemporary moment, from judicial proceedings to reality television. Its very ubiquity, however, masks the mechanisms of power that elicit and analyze confession, particularly within the twenty-first century American culture of surveillance. Further, confession's significant role in constituting truths about individual and group identities means that it more dramatically affects minoritarian subjects than those in dominant groups. I bring together works from the United States and United Kingdom to consider the ways shared historical traditions of confession, in Protestant faiths and systems of justice, both persist and diverge in our contemporary moment. More specifically, these works are made and exhibited in a post-September 11th context in which the global consequences of the American political and military-industrial systems depend upon and are disseminated via confessional logic, including "enhanced interrogation," military imaging techniques aimed at discovering hidden secrets, and news media analysis expressed through feeling. By intervening in ongoing discussions on contemporary confession from an art historical perspective, I argue that analysis of the sensory experiences offered by art contributes to our understanding of confession in a significant way, distinct from other disciplines. I demonstrate that close attention to the relational and embodied practices of contemporary new media art allows us to understand the operations of power that establish and authorize expressions of truth and identity. I offer a consideration of ways artists engage conventions of confession, but, more importantly, argue for the potential for artworks to reimagine social relationships.

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Introduction

On *Saturday Night Live*'s cold open on September 29th, 2018, actor Matt Damon appeared as then-U.S. Circuit Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh in a parody of the supplemental hearing held by the Senate Judiciary Committee in advance of the vote to confirm his nomination to the United States Supreme Court.¹ In that supplemental hearing, Senators and Staff Counsel Rachel Mitchell questioned Kavanaugh and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford regarding her allegation that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her when the two were in high school. While the actual hearing included testimony from both Ford and Kavanaugh, SNL only portrayed the latter, finding him a rich subject of satire. In the sketch, Damon, in a gently teased wig resembling Kavanaugh's full head of hair, responds to questions from SNL cast members, who portray senators and Staff Counsel Rachel Mitchell, his face expressively cycling through a host of emotions: impatience, annoyance, outrage, grief, nostalgia. At one point, Damon-as-Kavanaugh holds up a spiral-bound calendar. "Dr. Ford has no evidence, none!" he shouts, pointing one figure accusingly at the camera [Fig. 0.1]. "Meanwhile, I've got *these*. I've got these calendars—" Here, his voice catches as though overcome with emotion as he gestures at the calendar, invoking its presence and contents as evidence against Ford's claims. As a parody, the SNL sketch heightened Kavanaugh's demeanor to more-comical levels than were present in his actual testimony, riffing on the intensity of his emotions and the incongruous, even absurd, nature of evidence examined, such as his diligently-kept calendars and the host of high school characters and slang terms detailed within. The tearful, quivering-lip description Justice Kavanaugh provided regarding his calendars, kept in imitation of his father's diligent diaristic habit, was turned up a notch by Damon,

¹ "Saturday Night Live," *Adam Driver and Kanye West* (New York: NBC, September 29, 2018).

who took the comical nicknames of Kavanaugh's high school friends and elaborated them into "PJ and Squee, and Handsy Hank and Gangbang Greg."

As political commentary both serious and parodic noted after the hearings, Kavanaugh displayed an intensity of emotion not generally expected in Senate nomination hearings. His affect, alternately tearful and agitated, annoyed and outraged, seemed even more absurdly heightened in relation to Ford's own carefully measured testimony. In another sketch on SNL, Colin Jost called the hearings "A classic case of 'she said, he yelled.'"² Not simply fodder for comedy shows, the hearing played out on a national stage, with more than twenty million viewers watching it air across six network news stations. The purpose of the hearing was not to convict or absolve Kavanaugh of wrongdoing, but simply to allow the statements of both parties to influence the eventual nomination vote. The narratives offered by both Ford and Kavanaugh are confessional, producing secrets and private knowledges from their pasts in ways that have bearing on their characters and, indeed, their future prospects. As the SNL parody pointedly mocks, too, Kavanaugh's confession, particularly, relies heavily on the evidence of both his past diligent diary-keeping and his present intense emotionality: tears and calenders similarly produced as proof of the fidelity of his memory and narrative. As we'll see throughout this dissertation, confession operates as a key method for producing truths about the self, including one's past actions, thoughts, and desires, and one's future plans, hopes, and fears. Evidences like those brought forward by Kavanaugh bolster and support these confessions, evidence and words co-constitutive of the truth purportedly produced.

Michel Foucault argued in 1976 that we have "become a singularly confessing society," in which we confess our deepest and our most ordinary actions, thoughts, and

² "Saturday Night Live."

desires in our every relationship, institutional and intimate.³ He argued that the confession shapes the way we interact with our teachers, doctors, parents, and lovers and that, within our modern discursive framework, the act of confessing is required of us in order to discover, understand, and confirm our identities. The rise of this confessional urge was not incidental, but was a key mechanism in the development of the intellectual and governmental structures of late nineteenth century capitalism and has continued to be part of Western society throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While autobiography has long been a literary genre, the introduction of the Internet, the rise of affective economies, and the growth of cable television, streaming networks, and twenty-four-hour news mean that audiences for personal narratives and divulged secrets are many, immediate, and diffuse. Social media encourages the continual sharing of feelings, desires, and experiences with an immediate audience, all while those confessions are captured, analyzed, and sold as data by social media companies to advertisers. First person narrative writing fills online news verticals, and television offers a proliferation of confessional outpourings, with reality shows and daytime talk shows orchestrating tearful revelations, bitter proclamations, and joyful self-identifications on the hour. And, indeed, the broadcasting of confessions such as those in the Ford-Kavanaugh hearings is not only made public instantaneously, but then becomes the subject of countless interpretations through political commentary, talk shows, satirical media, and personal interactions.

The week of the hearing, I was in Washington, DC, visiting for a feminist art history conference. Again and again, in my encounters with strangers and loved ones, conversation revolved around the hearing: the family friends with whom I stayed had

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction.*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 59.

remained glued to their television and radios and filled me in when I returned from a day of sight-seeing; my ride-share driver apologized if she seemed distracted as she was feeling disgusted and unsettled by the hearing; the hearing was acknowledged again and again by speakers at the conference in advance of their papers, including myself; a guard at the Smithsonian American Art Museum chatted with me about how different things would be if Hilary Clinton had been elected President. It was on everyone's lips, but more, it was in our bodies: in the shared grimaces and pained silences, in the visceral reminders of our own experiences of harassment, assault, and gaslighting. For me and many of my peers, Kavanaugh's volatile displays of emotion were noteworthy not for their humor, precisely, but because we could see that their presence in no way affected his eventual nomination. His shouting, his repetitions, his snappish remarks did nothing to discount his authority in the eyes of those senators who confirmed him. Could myself or any of my friends — women, queer folks, trans folks, people of color, disabled and chronically ill folks — sit in the Senate and shout and still get a lifetime appointment to the highest court in the U.S.? Could any victim of sexual assault act in that way in any trial and expect to win? Both Ford and Kavanaugh gave confessions, but their bodies spoke differently. He cried, pointed his finger, got red in the face; she didn't have that privilege.

And so, I start with this hearing, and particularly with the parody that pulls, so trenchantly, on the thread of Kavanaugh's embodied emotionality, to lead us into a consideration of confession not simply as words, stated or written, but as a performative act that works on, through, and between bodies. Confession, as I'll treat it here, *does* things: it changes us, as speakers and listeners. It has consequences no less serious than

Supreme Court appointments. While confession is all around us, in our laws, our news media, and our popular culture, we nonetheless struggle to see or understand its workings because the power relationships that elicit confession, the mechanisms that record and transmit it, and the analyses that afford it truth value are all naturalized within our social, political, and economic systems. While other disciplines such as legal studies, sociology, religious studies, or literature have all analyzed confessional culture, in approaching it primarily as verbal or written reportage of information, they have missed intrinsic forms of knowledge engaged by confession. Approaching the question of confession through the visual arts, on the other hand, allows us to examine its workings and implications through the sensory, affective, and embodied knowledges through which confession operates and in which the visual arts specialize. The development of contemporary new media art, as I will discuss further below, considers the ways information and understanding relays not only through visual or textual content, but through embodied feeling. Contemporary new media art often questions the artist/viewer binary, offers total immersive aesthetic environments, and probes at questions of community and intimacy. By engaging tactile, visceral, and affective aesthetic content, such works pull on our understandings of our own bodies, our relationships with others, and our understandings of the political systems around us. Art allows us to approach the void between watching as a bystander and feeling the implication of a confession, deeply and horrifyingly and reassuringly in our bodies. Art pulls on our bodies, it shoves us together, it heats our tempers or leaves us cold.

By way of an example, I turn to a pair of works made long before Kavanaugh entered the national consciousness, during a time when questions of embodied

expression, violence, and sexuality continually took center stage in Congressional proceedings: the Culture Wars. Two photographs by Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) and *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) offer a powerful encapsulation of the way confession works within and through art. Each life-size color photograph shows Opie from the waist up, topless, against an ornately patterned background, and for each Opie has undergone fresh acts of body modification that serve as bloody illustrations of her confessed desires. In *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, the artist faces away from the camera, her broad back taking up more than half of the picture plane and acting as canvas for a drawing incised into her own skin: the image of a house, a cloud with the sun emerging, birds, and two figures with triangle-shaped skirts, all done in a child-like stick-figure style [Fig. 0.2]. In *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, she has lined the fronts of her arms with hypodermic needles piercing the skin and carved “Pervert” onto her bare chest in script reminiscent of calligraphy, accentuated by two curving stylized leafed branches. Her face is covered with a tight vinyl mask with strapping, rivets, and a D-ring at the front of the neck [Fig. 0.3]. Each carefully posed image draws on Opie’s personal experience and desires, while also referencing the ways those individual feelings are constrained and defined by social and political forces. Caitlin Dover, online editor for the Guggenheim, where a mid-career survey of Opie’s work was staged in 2009, states that these works “are, at the same time, emphatic declarations of identity and emblems of trauma, physical and emotional, as it has been experienced by the artist and her community.”⁴

The hand-holding stick figures in *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, standing in front of their

⁴ Caitlin Dover, “Catherine Opie, Denise Duhamel, and the Stories of a Self-Portrait,” *Guggenheim* (blog), June 10, 2015, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/catherine-opie-denise-duhamel-and-the-stories-of-a-self-portrait>.

narrow house with its walls limned by coagulating blood, offer up a deeply personal desire for a partner, a home, a family. Through personal romantic misfortune and through legal restriction, though, such a longing was unattainable in 1993, a time when a number of states began proactively to define marriage as between one man and one woman, eventually leading to the passage of the federal Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. Thus, the confession inscribed in Opie's skin does not merely draw on a personal sense of romantic failing, but on the collective traumas endured by queer people whose lives, relationships, and families are outlawed by the state. Similarly, her slightly later *Self-Portrait/Pervert* engages the accoutrements and physical sensations of her queer S/M community, asserting a kind of connection, desire, and embodied experience at odds with the norm. In making visible these signs of her involvement in this community, she asserts the way queer connection often arises around non-normative desires, affiliations, and physical experiences. However, in confessing these desires and experiences, she is also subject to the forceful authority of both social norms and legal proscriptions. Mask and needles surround her bare chest and the bloody, vibrantly red script carved into the skin there, reading "Pervert" with flourished details. The sensations and relationships signaled by the accoutrements of S/M, therefore, coalesce into this judgment on her very being — a word thrown in hatred now reclaimed. In this way, *Self-Portrait/Pervert* visually enacts the ritual of confession. As I will describe more below, confession calls upon us to draw out our deepest secrets, to show our pain on the surfaces of our skin with blushes and tears, to accept the judgment of the authority who listens to us and declares us absolved or, indeed, perverse.

As with Matt Damon's impression of Kavanaugh, the context for Opie's self-

portraits was a series of Congressional debates taking place throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s regarding topics including the allocation of funding for HIV/AIDS research and treatment, marriage equality, the right of gay and lesbian individuals to serve in the military, and the funding of art with queer, sexual, or feminist content. From these debates, a number of pieces of legislation and official policy resulted, among them the 1991 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendation for restrictions on HIV-positive healthcare workers, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), the restriction against gay and lesbian soldiers serving openly in the form of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), and cuts and restrictions to the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In this context, Opie declares her subjectivity as a queer woman with deeply held and felt desires and whose person, community, expression, and profession are defined, constrained, and vilified by the State.

Where Damon's absurd emotionality fails to capture a sense of the embodied and traumatic experience of facing Kavanaugh's confession from a space of far less privilege, though, Opie's bloodied body forces discomfort on viewers. Her carved skin and welling blood demand a response. She feels this confession in her body and so must we; in this way, this pair of self-portraits enact the relational quality of confession unflinchingly. Yet, as these photographs and the works examined within these pages show, relationality is not pre-determined. A viewer might refuse to look, might feel sick, might only see the word "pervert" as a condemnation and insult. Yet, equally, a viewer might gaze longingly, might feel desire, might see a shared experience and community. Either response, indeed, attests to the relational quality of confession, its ability to provoke in listeners and viewers visceral, affective responses. As the art world has, for the past few

decades, been deeply engaged with questions of relationality, affect, and what it means for an artwork to exist socially, art history is uniquely poised to allow us to investigate the ways our confessional culture works in social, political, and embodied ways.

In 1998, art critic Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the term “relational aesthetics,” in his book of the same name, to understand the rise in the 1990s of art works that focus on dialog, interaction, and sociality. This art “[takes] as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” of modernism.⁵ Relational art is temporal, it “produces a specific sociability,” it “is a state of encounter.”⁶ Further, Bourriaud differentiates relational art from forms of collective art-making, performance, or happenings of the modernist period, articulating it as a product of post-industrial society marked by vastly increased communication and economies of behavior and affect; in this contemporary situation, he argues, the most pressing concern of artists is “the freeing-up of inter-human communications, the dimensional emancipation of existence.”⁷ The question he poses here asks how art can have efficacy in this post-modern era, how it might respond to a world in which visibility is at once overwhelmingly prolific, with new technologies allow the near-instantaneous spread of images, and increasingly suspect, with those technologies also able to manipulate and re-present imagery in a vast range of contexts. While criticism of his book pushes back on his instance that modernism, and indeed the rest of art history, was primarily concerned with objects, his questions about efficacy, the relationship between art-making and politics, and the human interactions sparked by aesthetic experience in contemporary art pinpoint major artistic concerns of our

⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 14.

⁶ Bourriaud, 16, 18.

⁷ Bourriaud, 60.

contemporary era.

Throughout the twentieth century, artists grappled with the role of art in politics, from the Dadaists to the Harlem Renaissance to social realism to conceptualism to the Black Arts Movement to 70s feminism and countless more movements and collectives. With the development of new media art such as performance and installation artists pushed at the boundaries between art object, artist, and viewer, while conceptualism questioned the existence of an object at all. These media made space for contemporary participatory art, in which acts of participation on the part of visitors, viewers, or community members are the content of the work and meaning arises in relatively unscripted and temporal actions and interactions. Like Bourriaud, philosopher Jacques Rancière is interested in these shifting relationships in art-making and art-viewing. In his 2010 book *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière argues for an understanding of the relationship between artist and audience that does not depend on binaries of active-passive, image-reality, or self-ownership-alienation. Emancipation, he writes, “begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing, and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection.”⁸ While we might certainly recognize this call to re-think the power relationships behind such binary oppositions in much of contemporary art, as artists seek more ways to reconfigure the roles of creator and viewer, this also resonates with the way confessional works, specifically, might call into question oppositions between listening and speaking, between compelling or authorizing a confession and giving one. Further, Rancière suggests that art has the ability to reconfigure embodied relational experiences by

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 13.

“disrupt[ing] the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations.”⁹ In articulating this possibility, Rancière argues that art, in fact, can help us consider new potentialities.

What is offered by artworks created by and for “emancipated spectators,” is:

a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in, and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ to handle it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable, and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation.¹⁰

In this way, he identifies the potential ways of being and knowing offered by art as distinctly political and, importantly for his work, as part of a Marxist project of reshaping the relationship between workers and means of production. Here we again see an interest in the ways post-70s art not only explores the political relationships between people and between individuals and institutions, but the ways new media that encourages “emancipated” spectatorship approaches those questions through embodied and affective experience.

While Rancière’s approach is largely situated in Marxist theory, he shares a certain optimism with other writers on participatory art, such as Grant Kester. Kester, in his book *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, offers up the term *collaborative art* rather than participatory art, in order to emphasize projects “that unfold through extended interaction and *shared* labor, and in which the process of participatory *interaction* itself is treated as a form of creative praxis.”¹¹ However, Kester criticizes the binary implicitly set by Rancière between “the museum-burning zealot and

⁹ Rancière, 72.

¹⁰ Rancière, 72.

¹¹ Emphasis mine. Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 9.

the *art pour la art* devotee,” arguing that Rancière’s argument relies upon a caricatured dichotomy in order to arrive at already-accepted ideas about the role of politics in art.¹² Recognizing the prevalence of ambiguity in contemporary art practice, Kester sets out to analyze the methods and affects of such ambiguity, rather than accept it as an end result or goal. Kester privileges what he calls “dialogic” models of creation, in which the actualization of a work or project comes about through a “process of social interaction mediated by a physical and cognitive co-laboring,” preferential in his conception to works orchestrated by an individual artist and carried out by participants.¹³ Nonetheless, he recognizes that in both forms of participatory art, the goal “is a transformation of human consciousness in a way that enhances our capacity for the compassionate recognition of difference, both within ourselves and in others.”¹⁴ Picking up on Bourriaud’s question of efficacy, Kester suggests that relational affective and aesthetic experiences lead to compassion.

On the other hand, Claire Bishop picks up Rancière’s interest in the aesthetic possibilities for discursive change in order to argue for relational art that heightens dissensus and negation, which she argues is a crucial political factor for democracy. In *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Bishop outlines a history of participatory art; unlike Bourriaud, she does not see the relational drive as solely existing in the post-modern world. The works under examination offer up not understanding or consensus, precisely, but relational and affective experiences that jar and challenge, that offer up perverse pleasures and negate easily-consumed meanings or the appearance of social cohesion. Bishop further argues against Kester’s “emphasis on

¹² Kester, 60.

¹³ Kester, 139.

¹⁴ Kester, 185.

compassionate identification...in which an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice.”¹⁵ The privileging of the social interaction itself, she argues, loses sight of what that interaction actually *does*, aesthetically and affectively. Here, I do not claim either compassion nor dissensus as the more important experience for understanding the efficacy of contemporary art. Rather, I bring together these voices to give us a historical grounding in the ways art-making and art history have, over the past few decades, been deeply concerned with questions of interaction, affect, and political response. Through the use of new media techniques of performance, installation, video art, and participatory art, artists have not only continually returned to the question of art and politics, they have done so by focusing on relationality: the affective claims made between bodies and objects, between bodies and space, and between bodies and bodies.

In this dissertation, I offer a consideration of confession in contemporary new media art in the United States, United Kingdom, and Ireland. While I begin by observing the spread of confession as content in art-making — alongside corollaries in fiction, journalism, entertainment, and many other media — I do not simply aim to track the trend of confessional art. Rather, in examining key case studies, I consider what the use of confession in art can tell us about its role in the formation of identity, the establishment of truth, and the stakes of social justice. Throughout this text, confession appears in myriad forms, from a variety of individuals, to diffuse audiences. Artists such as Tracey Emin offer messy, embodied confessions of mental states. Others, such as Nadia Myre, stage opportunities for visitors to share painful secrets. Still others,

¹⁵ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 25.

including Coco Fusco, examine the coercion and power behind institutions that demand confession. Their artistic interventions attest that confession is slippery and seductive; that it operates through speaking and silence, through words and through bodies; and that it is concerned, above all, with relationality. By this, I mean that confession does not simply seek to reveal individual being or experience, but rather that it demands responses and invokes responsibilities between individuals existing in a shared social context.

While scholarship on confessional culture exists in a variety of fields, including literature, legal studies, and communication studies, I argue that art history is uniquely positioned to help us understand it. Confession is not simply a voice through which individual being and experience are articulated, a mechanism through which secrets are made material, a strategy for control, or a compulsory moral practice. Rather, it is an interpretative process that deeply relies upon visibility and affect while producing embodied effects in all involved: speakers, authorities, and listeners. While on its surface, confession seems to be entirely about individual self-knowledge, I argue that it is, in fact, a deeply social and relational phenomenon. It not only requires more than one individual, its workings touch, flow, move, and force between and through people. As we will see throughout this dissertation, confessional power flows between and through the individuals involved, working on the bodies of speakers and listeners alike. It operates to constitute subjectivity, by which I mean not precisely the sense of the self as individual, autonomous, or agentic, but the self as a *subject under the law*, as an individual whose being is defined in relationship to institutions and networks of power. The confession helps us understand our secrets and shameful thoughts, true, but it more elementally works to constitute our position in society. Institutions and social norms wield the

confession as a tool to mark our bodies with race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship, agency, and legal rights. Art-making, with its own entanglements of institutional power, marked bodies, and imperial projects, is thus both implicated in the same power networks that demand confession and in unique position to interrogate the workings of confession.

The works selected are made by artists born or working in the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, and Canada, for a number of reasons. First, I am not asserting that confession is a global phenomenon; rather, the confessional forms with which I engage, arising as they do from medieval European practice, are perhaps most naturalized within Western Europe and places with significant settler populations of Western European descent. Considering places where confession is naturalized as part of not only judicial or religious practice, but in the most everyday spheres of social life, is key to my project as I aim to explicate the ways art can both accept colloquial assumptions around confession as a key, necessary, and liberatory form of self-knowledge and can challenge viewers' experiences of confession by provoking or revoking relational experiences. Thus, the works I examine are mired in a social milieu in which particular aspects of and attitudes to confession are so wide-spread as to be common knowledge or unremarkable, even as they might be contradictory. These areas of the world offer a microcosmic look at the way confessional forms distribute across Christian religions as well, with strong traditions of Catholicism, Anglicism, and a number of Protestant faiths in which the values of self-knowledge and confession play a variety of roles. In the entanglement of its religious, judicial, and social roles, confession in these areas has indelibly involved the management of bodies to construct norms regarding behavior, constitution, and

reproduction, often in forceful and coercive ways. Perhaps most importantly, these shared structural features exist due almost exclusively to the project of the British Empire and, both concurrently and consecutively, its successor, the project of American imperialism. Thus, in focusing on these geographic areas, I do not intend to ignore or deny the ways in which confessional forms play an important role across cultures but rather to thread together the projects under consideration with a shared history, albeit a branching and diffuse one.

While I do argue that confessional structures proliferate across our culture, the institutional and social power relationships of confession work differently on and through bodies marked as non-normative, whether in the expectation to come out placed on queer and trans people, the institutional denial of the words, acts, and defenses of African Americans against the police, or the demand for personal disclosure, oversight, and medical testing required of those seeking social welfare. Self-examination and verbalization is, I argue, more consistently, visibly, and punitively required of those who do not fall into the unmarked category of white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied men. It is, perhaps, not surprising that many confessional art projects are created by individuals who occupy one or more marginalized identity of gender, sexuality, or race, including all of the artists under consideration here. While this might, in a way, reaffirm the assumption that emotional self-examination and public confessions belong exclusively to a feminized realm, inhabited by women, gay men, and men of color, I also seek to consider the way these projects might question or sidestep the injunction to confess put onto the non-normative, the pathological, the marked. How might an engagement with confession orchestrated by those who are more often compelled to confess of themselves

reconfigure their subject position and that of the audience? How do these projects — and predominant critical response to them — presuppose their audiences, and what engagements are available to challenge those suppositions? In reveling in the instability of identities always in need of articulation, can these projects unmask the anxieties of normalcy, of white, cisgender, heterosexual culture?

I argue, further, that it is not incidental that artists interested in confession turn to new media techniques of video art, performance art, participatory art, and installation art. New media is often, though not always, temporal, ephemeral, and cheap. Using video cameras, their own bodies, the bodies of participants, and deskilled techniques, artists and participants might create with less investment of time, money, and education than the more traditional media of painting, sculpture, or even film. While this cheapness certainly doesn't apply to every work of new media, it nonetheless offers a low and relatively democratic point of entry. In turning away from traditional divisions between maker and object, new media techniques lend themselves well to explorations of identity and agency by minoritarian artists, a point well made in feminist histories of performance art, for instance. In new media, authorship is in question, individual embodiment manipulated, and art-making expressed through temporal experiences rather than objects. By using new media, therefore, artists examine and complicate confession's role in forming and affirming individual identity. Through these works, we see the concurrent yet contradictory operations of confession: both to constitute and to undermine individual subjectivity, to be demanded by institutions and claimed by minoritarian groups, to free and to persecute. While confessional forms appear across all artistic modes of production, I argue that within new media, specifically, the contradictions of confession entangle with

formal questions to create new ways of understanding what it means to be a social being. Though I will, next, establish some defining rules around what I include as confessions, the works I examine continually test those boundaries through formal choices that strain the relationship between artist and viewer, that leave room for chance, and that contend with understandings of artificiality and truth.

Thus, before proceeding further, I pause to offer some notes on the nature of confession. While confession exists as a specific ritual with structured actions, authorities, and results within institutions such as the Catholic Church, confession more broadly exists as one tool for the production of truth, among others. As outlined above, Michel Foucault argues that the confession is “one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth.”¹⁶ Foucault is useful here not just for his assertion of the importance of confession, but the way he sets out to consider the history of the *production* of truth rather than considering or defining historical truths in themselves. His most famous works deal with particular institutions — the prison, the clinic, the academy — as systems that organize and produce individuals and truths. These collected and complex sets of relationships he groups under the concept of regimes of truth, the “set of processes and institutions by which, under certain conditions and with certain effects, individuals are bound and obliged to make well-defined truth acts.”¹⁷ The concept of regimes of truth gives us a shorthand, therefore, for the intertwined relationships and workings of institutions, individuals, and the knowledge or discourse defined as truth within a specific historical context. Regimes of truth, which exist “under certain conditions and with certain effects,” exist multiply and concurrently, allowing us to

¹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2016), 94.

perceive as true knowledges produced through any number of institutions and rituals even when dissonant.

The works of art I consider here function at intersections of multiple regimes of truth, which bring with them particular legacies and logics that determine the truth value of the confessions within. That is, I will argue that our understanding of artworks using confessional forms is shaped not only by the markers of truth attached to the multiple realms of confession — the church, the clinic, the courtroom — but also those attached to art as paradoxically revelatory and artificial, those attached to artists as uniquely capable of speaking truths and inherently able to manipulate perception, and those attached to institutions and interactions such as the museum, gallery, viewer, and participant. By situating these artworks within concurrent and intersecting regimes of truth, I aim to consider the tensions and contradictions within and between different institutions, agents, and systems of knowledge that belie any fictions of absolute truth. Further, as Foucault argues, regimes of truth *bind and oblige* individuals to make truth-acts, demonstrating not only the imperative to participate but also the dependence upon the articulation of truth by individuals on the part of institutions. In using the concept of regimes of truth, I aim to interrogate this function of the individual further and with more precision than Foucault's treatment. Are all individuals bound and obliged equally? Are their truth acts afforded the same merit? As other scholars have argued, Foucault's broad treatment of cultural epochs tends to elide and ignore difference; by considering regimes of truth as inflected by and determinative of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability, we can more clearly understand both the precise nature of their processes and procedures, which are not incidentally classist, racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist, but in fact work to define,

segregate, and regulate difference to the advantage of particular classes. We can also, therefore, see how the nature of identity is relational, arising between and through social contact; material, in its physical workings on and through individuals; and discursive, operating as a set of intersecting regimes of truth.

Thus, my first tenet is that confession is relational: requiring at least two parties, the confessing subject and the listening confessor. Power, here, is not unidirectional. While confessions might be obligated by the tenets of a particular institution, as part of a Catholic sacrament, for instance, they must also be at least nominally voluntary, apparently undertaken by the will and agency of the confessing individual. Further, as we will see in some of the projects under examination here, both parties might exercise a certain amount of agency in determining the content, context, and form of the confession ritual. In institutional confessions, the listener is often charged with particular duties, responsibilities, and powers related to the office and authority to which the confession is made; without the authorizing power of that office and adherence to a set of rituals, the confession may not be considered valid within the confines of the institution. Within an artwork, on the other hand, the authority to listen to, hear, and confirm a confession might be more diffuse or indirect; the listening subject might be the artist herself, the presumed audience of the artwork, or other participants in a participatory project. Institutional authority might be given by the gallery, museum, or biennial in which the work is shown, but that authority might be skeptical, ironic, or challenging just as easily as affirming, judging, or comforting.

Further, the content of the confession is attached to the confessing subject. While articulations of truth writ large might take many forms, in order to qualify as confession,

a statement must be related to the actions, desires, thoughts, emotions, or understanding of self of the confessing subject. Colloquially, we might understand confession as related to guilt or culpability, of sins or crimes enacted *by* the person confessing. However, I argue that we should more broadly think of confession as relating to *secrets* rather than guilt. The content to be confessed should be, up until the process of confession, unshared with the world — perhaps even unknown to the subject herself — but for reasons that might be related to shame, lack of opportunity, or social niceties as much as related to guilt or culpability. It is, therefore, possible to confess something that happened *to* you, rather than *by* you, if such a confession also relays something about your internalization of the event. As Chloë Taylor argues in her genealogy of confession, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault*, confessions consist of “statements which claim to explain the being of the subject who is speaking, which are introspective, which utterances change her...and which are told despite claims of repression, or with difficulty and shame. As such, even a declaration that, far from having done wrong oneself, one has been wronged...can be called a confession if the subject finds this hard to say, looks inside herself to say it, and is changed by what she says.”¹⁸ Difficulty, interiority, and a promise of transformation are therefore the key components of confession, much more so than content. Throughout this dissertation, we encounter confessions of wrongdoings both petty and major, from shoplifting to incest to murderous fantasies, as well as atrocities endured, from rape to the deprivations of poverty to terrorist attacks. While it might seem that expressions of the latter should reside in the realm of testimony, I argue, like Taylor, that when expressed with difficulty and with the hope of some intrinsic

¹⁸ Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the “Confessing Animal,”* *Studies in Philosophy* (New York, N.Y.) (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 8.

change, they are indeed confessions. To argue so is not merely a matter of pedantry, but rather attests that confession is deeply entangled with notions of guilt, individualism, and personal responsibility.

This entanglement results because confession is fundamentally performative: rather than simply narrativizing a set of events, actions, or emotions, confession indelibly connects those actions or thoughts to the individual and produces the confessing individual as a particular subject. Foucault argues that one impetus for the contemporary wide-spread nature of confession is its construction as transformative, able at once to confirm and constitute the nature of the confessing subject. Therefore, the act of confession is performative, a set of utterances which bring into existence certain states of being: not only delimiting the roles of those who make the confessions and those who receive and legitimate them, but also the many and varied self-truths produced through the process. As a performative, confession is subject to a number of conditions in order to work properly. In coining the term ‘performative,’ linguist J.L. Austin defines these conditions within a set of rules, which may be summed up in these requirements: 1) an existing accepted convention for the performative; 2) appropriate persons and circumstances acting; 3) the performative executed properly and completely; 4) the performative executed with the appropriate thoughts, feelings, intentions, and subsequent acts.¹⁹ Only if these cases are satisfied may a performative be considered successful; otherwise, it may be considered *infelicitous*. Infelicities occur in many forms, including through acts, thoughts, and intentions that render the performative hollow, void, or without effect. The language Austin uses, in declaring performatives as “happy,” or

¹⁹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 15.

satisfied by the enumerated requirements, or “unhappy,” disrupted by infelicities, points also to the way confession becomes connected to freedom and personal gratification. Further, as Judith Butler argues of gender performativity, the performative of confession constitutes a subject while seemingly affirming a pre-existing truth. However, in both cases, that truth is fabricated through repeated gestures, rituals, and discourses that naturalize particular attributes as male or female or specific thoughts as symptoms of an identity. While each confession stands alone, its own moment of transformation, every confession nonetheless participates in a social repetition of norms. Confessions have meaning through comparison to their precedents: not only are confessions deemed such through the repetition of specific rituals, they are also interpreted through sets of social understandings that suggest specific actions, desires, or feelings have particular meanings. If the reality proposed to be drawn forth in confession is “fabricated as an interior essence, [then] that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body.”²⁰ As a performative, therefore, confession relies upon this “public regulation of fantasy,” a cultural buy-in to the interpretative framework that demands self-examination, and to a fixed meaning to the thoughts and acts under examination.

Confession is temporal and continual: the act of confession exists not only in the moment of vocal articulation, but is internalized through the ongoing, naturalized process of self-examination. In Foucault’s history of the confession as rooted in medieval monastic practices, he argues that the ritual arises out of the monastic value of *subito*, or submission to the will of others. He states that:

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173.

there needed to be, then, a total renunciation of one's will such that nothing in one's behavior appeared, nothing could be done in the course of one's life, or entire existence, during the day or night, that had not been ordered. I believe that at the very heart of the notion of *subditio* was the total penetration of one's entire existence and of all one's actions with the will of another...²¹

In order to achieve this "total penetration," confession combines a number of elements, including continual awareness of one's thoughts, desires, and actions; the determination of their inherent qualities as either godly truth or demonic illusion; and, most importantly, the verbal articulation of both. In order to submit to the will of the other, "[one] had to speak, one had to say everything that took place within oneself, everything one wanted to do, all of one's desires, everything one intended to do, everything that was going on within oneself, all the movements of one's thoughts."²² In this process, nothing could be left hidden; all thoughts and desires were sought out and dragged forth, laid bare for another's eyes. As we will see, this total attention to even the most unformed thought and fleeting desire is a key innovation of the medieval monastic confession, and one that has defined confessional forms in the centuries since. While confession offers revelation, such revelation must be continuously sought as one's thoughts and behaviors change over time. It is within this continual self-examination that confession is at its peak as both obligated and voluntary, both compelled by authority and desired by subjects, naturalized as it is within the very understanding of the self.

Thus, confession is truth-seeking and interpretative: rather than simply offering a litany of actions or thoughts, one's self-examination and confession should also work to judge and categorize those thoughts by their internal quality. In medieval monastic self-

²¹ Michel Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (Chicago ; London : [Louvain-la-Neuve]: University of Chicago Press ; Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2014), 139.

²² Foucault et al., 139–40.

examination, discovering all that was deep within oneself and analyzing it allowed one to “[draw] out the elements of truth...or illusion within the thought itself,” in order to determine whether it was a good, godly thought or an illusion driven by the devil.²³ Confession’s relationship to truth is thus multi-layered. What makes a “true” confession might differ across institutional spheres and be dependent upon not only the content, but also the location of the confession, the individuals present and their relative authority, and the presence or absence of any threats or coercion. While the content expressed should be “true” in order to be a successful confession, it is a truth of the self, a truth to the self, that is sought, an articulation of internal thoughts or actions that expresses their nature as experienced by the individual confessing. Thus, one might confess any number of things that are not factual, tangible truths to others, such as hallucinations, disproved opinions, or, in Foucault’s example, illusions placed by demonic forces. Truth, here, relates to the internal quality of those thoughts and their relationship to the subject’s understanding of self.

That understanding of self, too, might require the interpretative efforts of the listening authority, who categorizes, diagnoses, and otherwise makes sense of the confessed thoughts and acts in order to rationalize the confessing individual into a particular subject. For Foucault, this process is perhaps most apparent and naturalized around sexuality, in which the creation of sexual identity as specific category transformed “a habitual sin” into “a singular nature,” that of the pervert or homosexual.²⁴ This idea lingers in the proscription to “come out” in order to be “true” to oneself. Though Foucault does not address other axes of difference, I will argue that confessional imperatives work

²³ Foucault et al., 148.

²⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43.

differently across races, classes, and genders, and that demands to confess or keep silent, as well as interactions with authorities who listen or silence, simultaneously and cyclically constitute raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized subjects and arise from predeterminations about those factors. For instance, David W. Hill argues that within the confession-therapeutic landscape of television talk shows, what he terms “technologies of confession,” such as lie detector tests, paternity tests, or drug tests, are used “on guests who are deemed, by virtue of class position, to be untrustworthy.”²⁵ Class position predetermines a subject’s ability to give a confession correctly or truthfully, and technologies of confession offer the host and the audience a chance to access the “real” truth, and, often, prove a subject’s unreliability when the test contradicts their statements.

While, as I have suggested here, literature on confession in communication studies, legal studies, and literature is well established, very little published scholarship exists that examines closely the role of confession in the visual arts, beyond studies of particular works of art with confessional content. Outi Remes, who introduced and defined the term “confessional art” in her unpublished 2005 dissertation for Reading University, *The Role of Confession in Late Twentieth-Century British Art*, provides an important framework and genealogy. Remes classifies confessional art as a subcategory of autobiographical art:

Like autobiographical art, confessional art draws on the past, and borrows and amends real-life. It is based on a selection of autobiographical memories, feelings, occasions and events. While both autobiography and confessional art are self referential, confessional art promises to reveal more. Characteristically, it proposes to share the subject’s most intimate and private experiences, events and emotions with the viewer. It reveals something that is traditionally only revealed to a close friend, a therapist or a priest at confession.²⁶

²⁵ David W. Hill, “Class, Trust and Confessional Media in Austerity Britain,” *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 4 (May 1, 2015): 566.

²⁶ Outi Remes, “The Role of Confession in Late Twentieth-Century British Art” (Ph.D., The University of

Remes closely affiliates confessional art with secrets, therefore, and with the implicit presence of a listening subject — a viewer, standing in for a friend or an authority figure. She identifies the origins of contemporary confessional art in the Young British Artists (YBAs), arguing that their characteristic appropriation of modes of pop cultural consumption, their engagement with the media, and their entanglements of voyeuristic pleasure with questions of authenticity provided a stage for a confessional genre that bore significant similarity to reality television and daytime soaps. Indeed, she sees an affinity between confessional art and the simulacra of contemporary mass media:

The paradox of confessional art is that it reveals more than the viewer wants to know: more than the viewer experiences as ‘safe’. Therefore, confessional art reflects, mimics, parodies and is inspired by British culture, values and its ways of confessing. It reveals the relationship between art and society’s obsessive voyeurism. Like our confessional culture, confessional art pretends exceptional honesty in its approach to subject matter. However, it seldom presents a factual account, rather it manipulates and even fabricates subjective memories.²⁷

Part of Remes’s interest in confessional art, as this passage reveals, is its relationship to truth. She argues that, in many of the cases under her examination, the engagement with confession actually puts the viewer’s ability to judge the truth in question. However, for Remes, this confusion primarily originates from the content of the confessions given, which through her research she is able to judge as factual or non-factual, rather than from the formal qualities or sensory experience of engaging with the art.

As an early, and still the only significant work on confession and art, Remes’s dissertation by necessity does much of its work in establishing the category and identifying how confession works within individual artworks offering confessions from a

Reading (United Kingdom), 2005), 8–9,
<http://search.proquest.com.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/dissertations/docview/301666473/55646F27AFBA4F12P>
Q/1.

²⁷ Remes, 9.

variety of subjects, both artists and participants. Examining the work of three YBAs — Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing, and Richard Billingham — she also contends with the critical response to such works and the artists’ public personas, particularly that of oft-written-about Tracey Emin. As such, there is less room to consider the possible affective and relational engagements offered by the artworks, the ways minute choices in aesthetic form might suggest myriad readings. Finally, her assertion that confessional art “seldom presents a factual account” paradoxically situates her, the art historian, in the priestly role, ferreting out lies and half-truths, while suggesting that other confessions do, indeed, offer an unmitigated engagement with truth, with little investigation into the mechanisms through which confession *produces* truth. Therefore, while her work offers a critical examination of the way confession operates within a number of key works, I go further into the discursive workings of confession itself, to pin down the assumptions, naturalizations, and ways of reading to which we are habituated, and to question if and when artworks allow us to engage with those discursive workings.

Perhaps more than any other theorist, Michel Foucault has treated the topic of confession as a frequent and deep concern. The goal of confession, he argues, is not only to produce truth, but to produce, pronounce, and avow truths that serve at the same time to affirm something fundamental about one’s existence as an individual and identity as a subject. Here, Foucault refers not precisely, or at least not only, to a psychoanalytic subjectivity — a sense of one’s own self as distinct from the objects and others one encounters — but to subjectivity under the law. From the early modern period, confession has been “inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by

power,” he states.²⁸ Imbricated within and demanded by power relationships, confession not only requires showing knowledge of oneself, but producing it for analysis by various experts in ritualized and discursively-understood ways in order develop — at once to bring forth and create — an identity attached to an individual but understood through systemic taxonomies.

Foucault further developed his concept of confession in later writings and lectures, most pertinently those given at the Collège de France in 1979-80, published as *On the Government of the Living*, in 1982-83, *The Government of the Self and the Living*, and those given at the Catholic University of Louvain in 1981, recently published as *Wrong-Doing Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*. Across these texts, he outlines the history of confession as we understand it today and explicates some ancient precedents to the ritual of confession. Of most importance for the genealogy he presents is the development of Christian practice in medieval monasteries, where, he claims, the requirement of submission to one’s God and one’s peers necessitated a continual practice of self-examination and verbalization of one’s thoughts. Unlike earlier practices of self-knowledge or of verbalization of one’s sins, such as early Christian penance, the Greco-Roman concept of *parrhesia*, or free-spokenness, and the Stoic examination of conscience, the medieval Christian drive toward total self-knowledge and verbalization is marked by a desire to understand the internal moral or truthful qualities of one’s thoughts, not simply their utterance. One sure way to tell the provenance of a thought or action, its godly or demonic nature, would be to speak it aloud, for:

if one’s thoughts were honest, if their origin was pure, if they were good gold pieces, they would be easily avowed. If, to the contrary, they were born of evil, if the coins that presented themselves to our thought were of an

²⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

impure gold or were corrupted, then they would have difficulty manifesting themselves. They would refuse to be said, and would tend to remain hidden...Why did we blush and why did we hesitate? It was for the cosmo-theological reason that an evil thought, of course, came from Satan, and Satan, the angel of light, was condemned to darkness because of his pride: daylight was thus forbidden to him.²⁹

Here, the visual, embodied quality of confession is integral; rather than simply an incidence of the act of speaking aloud, the visible manifestations of one's embodied state — blushes and hesitations — are the result of a hidden and corrupted thought made manifest. This passage emphasizes the role of the embodied act of confession; one's blushes attest to the truth of one's act. In this way, a physical, embodied confession acts as a *basanos* or touchstone, a test to tell the quality of each thought and act. Literary scholar Page duBois argues in *Torture and Truth* that the metaphor of the *basanos* is used in ancient legal proceedings as a way of producing evidentiary truth. The body, through torture, produces the truth of a witness statement or confession like the marking of a touchstone shows the truth of a precious metal.³⁰ Confession, which maintains its dark connection to torture, similarly produces the evidence of truth on the surface of the body.

Foucault argues that it is this change from an ancient examination of conscience to an ethos of interpretation of thought that allows the development of a series of systems informed by Christian philosophy, including cultural, juridical, moral, and philosophical.³¹ The development of continual self-examination, of bringing forward and measuring one's every action and thought, is integral to nearly all of the institutions under Foucault's examination: the clinic, the prison, the courtroom, the academy. Significantly, it is the moral measuring and the impetus to articulate that examination, the

²⁹ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 151.

³⁰ Page duBois, *Torture and Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

³¹ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 152.

elements that make up the confession ritual, that transform ancient self-examination into a continual process of producing the self.

Some critics have noted that Foucault's treatment of early Christian thought smooths over or ignores the many nuances in both theory and practice amongst thinkers and followers of the time, including the total lack of engagement with Augustine's *Confessions*, an unexpected gap in his admittedly at times scatter-shot engagement with sources. For instance, philosopher Thomas Lynch argues that this abstraction of "religious practices [from] theological beliefs" overly simplifies the relationships of power within early Christian communities:

Ironically, his theory proceeds by the very logic of normalization that he purports; Foucault cannot envision technologies of power that are not reducible to domination. It is as if the beliefs of confessional communities are superfluous and may be peeled away to reveal raw networks of power relations beneath. He normalizes theological belief by reducing it to a grammar of power. This logic causes Foucault to miss key points about the nature of confessional practices.³²

Lynch argues that Foucault's insistence on submission and domination as the primary mode through which confession operates does not properly account for an understanding of the self related to love, memory, and God's will, as expressed by Augustine. He cites the work of anthropologist Talal Asad, who argues that confession "[allows] the penitent to recognize the truth about him or herself through *collaboration* with the confessor."³³

While I am far from qualified to weigh in on the ecclesiastical history presented or ignored by Foucault, I will linger on the concept of *collaboration* for a moment. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, too, expresses dissatisfaction with Foucault's conception of domination and power, arguing that in attempting to displace the false dichotomy

³² Thomas Lynch, "Confessions of the Self: Foucault and Augustine," *Telos* 2009, no. 146 (March 20, 2009): 129, <https://doi.org/10.3817/0309146124>.

³³ Emphasis mine. Asad paraphrased in Lynch, 128–29.

between repression and liberation, Foucault reimposes a new binary in the “even more abstractly reified form of the hegemonic and the subversive.”³⁴ While Lynch reads Foucault’s explanation of medieval monastic practice as too concerned with domination, Sedgwick similarly argues — albeit with more nuance than Lynch — that Foucault’s work, specifically *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, fails to fulfill an “implicit promise” to suggest “ways of stepping outside the repressive hypothesis, to forms of thought that would not be structured by the question of prohibition in the first place.”³⁵ Though Foucault recognizes that power is not a unidirectional, top-down flow, his work does not offer enough to contend with what Sedgwick terms “the middle ranges of agency.”³⁶ Indeed, one of my goals in this dissertation is to consider that call, to take seriously those “middle ranges” that do not fall neatly on either side of hegemony or subversion, to think about the ways artworks engage collaboration, relationality, and embodied responses that push and pull at the border between individual identity and social experience. In this, I bring together — and occasionally muddle — the differing concepts of subjectivity suggested above. Confession involves both our psychological development as self-aware individuals, the “subject” described by psychoanalysis, and our position within complex webs of institutional power, in which we are subject to particular laws, rights, and responsibilities.

Thus, to account for the relational aspects of confession — those elements inflected by, but not necessarily determined by or determinative of power — I make use of theories of shame, for its fundamentally relational quality, its embodied affect, and its proximity

³⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 12.

³⁵ Sedgwick, 12.

³⁶ Sedgwick, 13.

to self-knowledge. As Foucault notes of confession, our bodies produce tells that indicate the nature of truth being confessed — “Why did we blush and why did we hesitate?” he asks — and Sedgwick identifies shame as similarly experienced near the surface of the body.³⁷ In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick uses the work of 20th century psychologist Silvan Tompkins, who described shame as one of nine basic affects, along with interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, disgust, and contempt. He connects shame to interest, suggesting that activations of shame “are what either enable or disable so basic a function as the ability to be interested in the world.”³⁸ In the chapter focused on Tompkins, Sedgwick and her co-author, Adam Frank, read the technical and analytical elements of Tompkins’ work, elucidating the way affects differ from drives, the self-reinforcing feedback loop of shame and interest, and the way shame works both cognitively and affectively, each operation informing the other. For Tompkins, while drives might have very narrow and specific aims and operations — consuming food to give the body energy, breathing air to give the blood oxygen — affects are less constrained. Affects work together in feedback loops, for “[without] positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush.”³⁹ The body produces shame by taking in external stimuli and analyzing it — cognition — and generating a bodily response — a blush, a lowered gaze, a hanging head. For Tompkins, shame is originary, its evidences detectable even in infants; for many psychologists following him, this means that shame is the site wherein the sense of self develops.⁴⁰

³⁷ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 151.

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 97.

³⁹ Sedgwick, 116.

⁴⁰ Sedgwick, 98.

Especially important for Sedgwick's work is the way Tompkins' cognitive-affective conception of shame describes shame as dwelling in the body even while it is poked, prodded, cajoled and shocked into being by external stimuli. Shame works on all surfaces of the body, it "can turn one inside out — or outside in."⁴¹ Yet, shame is always directed toward and derived from sociability. It arises in those moments when painful recognition floods the self or when identification is denied: when someone in your vicinity violates a social code and you feel suffused with shame for them, or when you are denied contact, a smile unreturned. Shame is a disruptive moment "in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication."⁴² Sedgwick argues, therefore, that the experience of shame is an experience of doubted selfhood, that it attaches to "the place where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and relationally."⁴³ Through an interruption of identification, shame can still create identity, sensation "whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable."⁴⁴ In this way, shame can be understood as implicated in the constitution of the self, at once refusal and confirmation of the experience of the self as self-contained and whole.

Shame, too, sits near confession when considered as primarily attached to social objects, imbricated in power relations. Sara Ahmed begins her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, by challenging concepts of emotions as movable, as dwelling in either the interiority of the subject or the exteriority of the group. That is, she wishes to argue for a "sociality of emotion" that does not suggest the ability of emotion to be transferred, passed on, or held. Emotions, she argues, do not swell up from the internal

⁴¹ Sedgwick, 116.

⁴² Sedgwick, 36.

⁴³ Sedgwick, 37.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, 37.

subjective space to be directed toward external objects nor do they originate externally from the individual, within the social, and are then taken on by the subject. She argues, rather, that “it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such”; emotions might move us, but they do not move.⁴⁵ This differs from Sedgwick’s reading of Tompkins, which, in its origin in psychoanalysis, depends upon the direction of affect toward objects.

Ahmed’s reading, therefore, allows emotion its presence in individual bodies, recognizes how it is *felt*, while seeking to identify the way the objects of emotion are defined, change, and circulate. Shame, she argues, not only brings about a self-negation, or as Sedgwick might argue, brings into question the self, it is also intensified by being witnessed. The experience of shame is both awareness and avoidance: “shame feels like an exposure — another sees what I have done that is bad and hence shameful — but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject turn away from the other and towards itself.”⁴⁶ Yet, in turning toward the self, witnessing the self’s shame, there is simultaneously an attempt to expel the shame, a turning away. In moments of prolonged shame, Ahmed suggests, “the subject may have nowhere to turn.”⁴⁷ Attempts to expel shame are, furthermore, attempts to re-approach a sort of ideal, which Ahmed asserts is produced through the love that imagines and sustains communities. Shame is in failing to “live up” to that ideal. In Ahmed’s consideration of shame, the experience is by definition relational, dependent upon both community ideals and the experience of being witnessed.

In primarily situating confession, and, by extension, the works under examination,

⁴⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 11.

⁴⁶ Ahmed, 103.

⁴⁷ Ahmed, 104.

as relational, I also engage with a body of scholarship on participatory art practice, including those authors cited above: Bourriaud, Rancière, Kester, and Bishop. While only some of the projects discussed might be considered participatory in nature — including as their primary material the thoughts, actions, and products of participants other than the conceiving artists, sometimes but not always including the audience — the social concerns often addressed by participatory art, and the theoretical concerns around authorship, temporality, and the relationship between art and social ills permeate many of the artworks I examine. Throughout, therefore, I turn to a body of literature analyzing contemporary concerns and trends in art history, including the relationship between artist and audience at a time when art “objects” are increasingly diffuse and participatory engagement by audiences is more and more a key part of art projects.

In offering case studies of confession in contemporary art, I do not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of this trend nor a chronology of its development. Rather, I pick works — ten in all — that allow us to consider the multiple mechanisms by which confession operates. Thus, I organize my four chapters thematically, each investigating a particular piece that renders the confession ritual valid. These elements — transformation, authority, evidence, and voice — are component parts of the confession ritual. Further, though, these components operate together to produce the truth value of confession. This truth value — the sense of legitimacy produced through the ritual of confession — is not incidental, but created through these component parts and, within the works I consider, brushes up against the truth value of art itself.

I begin, in the first chapter, by considering the ontology of confession through two works of video art. Building on the working definition of confession offered above, I

delve into its operations to consider, following Clement Greenberg on painting and Rosalind Krauss on video, its medium specificity. Confession, I argue, is distinguishable from other forms of narration through the promise of transformation it offers. Video art that captures the confessions of anonymous participants puts that confessional promise on display, as we see in Gillian Wearing's 1994 video, *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* and Phil Collins's video *Hero* from 2002. For her piece, Wearing invited participants through a newspaper advertisement to confess to her video camera, resulting in a series of ten vignettes with figures disguised in makeup and cheap Halloween masks confessing a variety of secrets. On the other hand, Collins focuses on one person, an anonymous lifestyle reporter from New York. Plying him with alcohol and cigarettes, Collins records his memories of witnessing the events of September 11th, 2001, and his thoughts on the nature of journalism. Through these two works, I consider the cyclical way confession and video serve to reaffirm the other's truth value in visual art as well as entertainment and news media. Further, I argue that in putting the confessional promise of transformation on display, these works implicate viewers and require us to understand confession not simply as narcissism but as a deeply social ritual.

Next, in Chapter Two, I turn to works that directly engage figures and institutions that demand confession. These authorities — military interrogators, public defenders, and the Catholic Church — are approached, inhabited, and appropriated by artists who set the stage for semi-scripted confessions from participants. In Coco Fusco's video *Operation Atropos* (2006), she and a team of female volunteers undergo simulated interrogation from a team of former U.S. Army interrogators in an effort to learn their techniques.

Artist, poet, and criminal appellate attorney Vanessa Place inhabits her multiple roles of authority in her participatory and performance piece *The Lawyer is Present* (2013), where she invites visitors to the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art to confess their secrets to her, which she then composes and performs as a conceptual poem. Working with community members in a north Dublin neighborhood, Pauline Cummins records their wishes and hopes for the future in her 1997 video work *Good Confession*. The piece she then installs in one half of the confessional booth at the parish church, so that visitors might step into the booth and, rather than give their own confessions of sin, listen to the hopes of neighbors. As each of these works engages with the material power of individuals and institutions, I read the power, agency, and promise suggested by each to consider the claims art makes to transform our experience of the world. In asking what art actually *does*, I attune myself to the failures of these works, and the ways their brushes with confessional power serve to, in fact, highlight the material consequences that power yields.

In Chapter Three, I bring together works that offer confessions in which the material remains of the body operate as vital evidence. Tracey Emin's infamous installation *My Bed* (1998), consisting of an unmade bed littered with the detritus of a depressive episode, including cigarette butts, condom wrappers, and bloody underwear, offers a confession solely of material remains. On the other hand, Candy Chang's participatory project *Confessions* (2012) is replete with text: the scrawled confessions of myriad visitors to the project at Las Vegas gallery P3 studio, written with Sharpie onto small wooden plaques resembling *ema*, the plaques on which Shinto worshipers write prayers to leave at shrines. Throughout the run of the project, Chang chose a few

confessions to blow up into hand-painted canvases, replicating the particularities of each participant's handwriting. Similarly, Nadia Myre asks participants to produce an object, but in her *Scar Project* (2005-13), she has them confess not just in words but also through the visual and textural representation of a scar they carry. Producing small canvases torn and punctured with knife and twine, the participants create tangible representations of scars they might carry only in memory. These three works engage with the kinds of bodily evidence that might be tied scientifically or socially to our bodies and used as evidence in our confessions: bodily fluids, handwriting, scars. Further, I argue that they lay bare the vicissitudes of such evidence, which is both enduring and prone to decay, and require us to contend with our shared mortal fragility.

I return to works in video in Chapter Four, considering pieces by two queer artists that engage the confession ritual of coming out. In his 2014 video, *#Blackmendream*, Shikeith interviews eleven young Black men about their experiences of masculinity, Blackness, and community. Videoed in black and white facing away from the camera while speaking about painful pasts and their hopes for the future, the men embody a defiant vulnerability not often allowed to Black men. While voice figures prominently in *#Blackmendream*, Jenny Keane's 2008 work *Ingeminated Battology* silences her confession. Showing a split-screen of her own mouth filled with black ink, Keane presents a monstrous yet absurd confession as her mouth(s) open and her tongue(s) waggle, her lips pursing to kiss themselves. These works, I argue, contend with concepts of silence and the closet, vulnerability and shame, in order to find queer potentials in those things marked with weakness. The pressures and denials of confession are ever-present across these works, which contemplate (and vivisection, encounter, and blow

raspberries at) the contemporary demand to come out exerted on queer individuals and the social secrecy around queerness present in the reinforcement of Black masculinity or Catholic womanhood.

Finally, I leave us with a consideration of the one-on-one performances of Adrian Howells, specifically *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*. In these, Howells performed intimate gestures of bodily care to individual participants, such as washing, drying, and oiling their feet or bathing and drying their bodies before holding them wrapped in towels. Searching for moments of silent confession, Howells staged encounters through which participants might experience the relational, embodied transformation of confession without uttering a word. Art historical readings of his work frequently contend with the seemingly disparate loving care he exerted in his work and his death by suicide in 2014. Refusing to see these qualities of his life and death as unique to him, I argue that his tender performances implicate us, the viewers, readers, and bystanders, in much the same way the tawdry, anonymous videoed confessions of Gillian Wearing do. Rather than incriminate us in acts of lawbreaking and sexual violence, though, his works charge us with a social responsibility of care.

I end with Adrian Howells, but will offer, before moving on, a few of the lessons from his works that I carry with me throughout this dissertation. In the silent touch of his one-on-one performances, I see a methodological approach that privileges generosity, care, and criticism for the sake of growth. Thus, I argue for reading generously, particularly of participatory works. To me this means avoiding acting as the supreme judge on the availability of any experience related to these works. I suggest tendencies, I evaluate my own reactions, but, especially when considering the role of participants in

making a work, I avoid passing judgment on participants' experience of confessional transformation. I seek to analyze the ways transformation might exist, but not the way it shakes out; it is not in my purview to argue whether any given participant was or was not unburdened, changed, redeemed. In some cases, my vow of a generous approach is tested, as the works I've selected seem quite deliberately to invite judgment. Indeed, caring for these works has little to do with their likability. To care, rather, is to take seriously both the works of art and my own position towards them. My affections and revulsions are far from universal; I offer them as a possible, rather than definitive, way of engaging. Works that might leave others cold inspire in a me a warm fondness, a frustrated anger, a gleeful desire. To assert those sensory, affective, embodied responses is to grasp at vulnerability, honesty, and care: for the works, for myself, for my readers.

In calling these artworks to confess, I bring but one part of their story to the page. As the authority, I carry with me not just confidence in my method but a simultaneous uncertainty in my ability to bring forth all their secrets. They, still, have much hidden from me, much I turn away from, much I set aside. Further, though, in my role as questioner, interrogator, cajoler, judge, and arbiter, I make pronouncements that are, ultimately, relational, dependent on my position, my encounter with the artwork, my motivations. As such, I decline to declare their guilt or innocence. Rather, I seek to give them sincere readings, to see in their shortcomings places for understanding. Criticism in good faith operates to make room for growth, to know better the biases of our own experiences, and to understand failure as productive.

In all of this, I seek to resist what I'm calling a viewpoint of "postmodern skepticism." This approach, which has a firm foothold in the academy, privileges

knowledge based on a skepticism in hope, progress, and defiance in the face of late modern, neoliberal capitalism. Such a viewpoint is both easy and heartbreaking to inhabit: it argues that resistance is, in fact, futile; that reality is scripted, conditional, and easy to fake; that acculturation to horror is the basic human condition. Postmodern skepticism Knows Better. Postmodern skepticism isn't taken in by reality TV; it doesn't believe in the power of art to make change; it expects the worst in people and finds hope to be naive. Postmodern skepticism isn't surprised that Brett Kavanaugh was appointed to the Supreme Court, because it knows that politics is theater, power, and corporately-funded. Postmodern skepticism sees only the spectacle in depictions of pain and finds the world inured to the suffering of others. Postmodern skepticism is right — and it's also deeply, desperately wrong.

In finding refuge in skepticism, we claim a knowledge position of perpetual foresight: if you always expect the worst, then you're right when it happens. However, this fatalistic posture not only incapacitates projects of resistance, it denies us experiences of pleasure and connection that might be found through hope, rage, and care. We can know that political systems are slow-moving and corrupted by greed, and yet still gather in resistance. We can know that the affective economy capitalizes on our emotional expressions, and yet find communality in sharing personal stories in the public sphere. We can know that the truth value of realism is easily manipulated by technological simulation, artistic manipulation, and public-relations-crafted narrative, and yet find ourselves moved by things that ring true to our experience on the screen, on paper, and in galleries. We can know — and yet things pull on us, drag on our skin and catch our eyes, move us to tears and anger and action. It is to the *and yet* that I ask us to look.

Chapter One: The Promise of Confession

“[T]he feedback coil of video seems to be the instrument of a double repression: for through it consciousness of temporality and of separation between subject and object are simultaneously submerged. The result of this submergence is, for the maker and the viewer of most video-art, a kind of weightless fall through the suspended space of narcissism.”
-Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 1976⁴⁸

Writing in 1976, a decade after Nam June Paik picked up a newly-available Sony Portapak and videoed the crowds in New York City for Pope John Paul VI’s visit in 1965, creating a work frequently recognized as the first piece of video art, art critic Rosalind Krauss delved into the nature of video as a medium. In her essay for *October*, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” she argues that, unlike traditional media such as painting or sculpture, the medium specificity of video can not be located in its material qualities. While video depends on, and is created through, a set of physical mechanisms, she argues that defining it in terms of its machinery is inaccurate. Rather, the essential quality of video resides in the reflective feedback loop it creates — that is, the way the immediacy of a camera-image appearing on a monitor allows, or perhaps forces, an illusion of absolute mirroring wherein the subject and object merge, in psychoanalytic terms. Thus, for her, the medium of video is “a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object — an Other — and invest it in the Self.”⁴⁹ This turning towards the self as the object of attention, she states, is the condition of narcissism.

In the Introduction, I offer a definition of confession that works through its mechanisms: its ritual repetitions, institutional investments, and dialogic dealings. In this

⁴⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (1976): 58–59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778507>.

⁴⁹ Krauss, 57.

chapter, I aim to mimic Rosalind Krauss and find, let us say, the medium specificity of confession beyond its functional workings and in its psychological effects. Confession, like video, operates through structures that determine our use, access, and relationship to it. However, the fundamental specificity of each resides not in how they operate functionally, but psychologically. For video, Krauss argues, that psychological effect is to subsume the viewer in their own self. Confession's psychological effect similarly relates to the self-as-subject. Indeed, the charge of narcissism is frequently leveled against confession by cultural critics across disciplines who see its proliferation in contemporary society as evidence of neoliberal self-involvement. Krauss, here, uses a psychoanalytic reading of the "self," informed by the writing of Jacques Lacan, that considers the way individual subjectivity is formed through an awareness of the self as separate from objects and others. On the other hand, the concept of subjectivity with which I am more interested is informed by post-structuralist thought on the social construction of identity and the affective turn toward bodily experience and encounter as rich sites of knowledge. The self-as-subject in confession, as I read it now, is situated, relational, and embodied, formed through relationships with others rather than an awareness of separation. Therefore, I argue here that the fundamental quality of confession — what we might call its medium specificity — is not the enactment of self-knowledge, precisely, but the simultaneous promise of transformation and demand for relationality.

In this way, I suggest that confession faces both inwardly and outwardly, asking something of both speaker and listener. In this chapter, I offer two works of video art that contend with the problems of narcissism and confession in order to puzzle out the way confession differs from its nearest neighbors, particularly testimony and witnessing. Like

a painter winnowing away external illusion until left with a canvas and paint, like Krauss looking past miles of electromagnetic tape, camcorders, and television monitors to find a psychological submergence, I too wish to move through narratives of trauma, sin, glee, shame, and guilt to find the heart of confession. In this chapter, I will consider two works by British video artists whose early careers bookend the turn of the millennium. I bring Phil Collins's 2002 video work *Hero* alongside Gillian Wearing's 1994 work, *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* to examine the entanglement of different modes of truth-telling, including confession, testimony, and witnessing. These different acts often exist within the same institutions, require both listening and speaking subjects, and therefore are not always easily distinguished from one another. Their boundaries, too, become less distinct as the acts move outside of specific ritual contexts. Within the institution of the art world rather than the church or judicial system, for instance, these acts become unmoored from the specific definitions required to substantiate and authorize them within systems of absolution or justice. Here, as I will argue, the confessional promise, the suggestion of redemption and transformation the ritual carries, becomes central. As these works show, particularly when set alongside similar pieces in the same artists' oeuvres, the boundaries that separate confession from testimony or witnessing are not clear-cut. In *Hero*, an American lifestyle journalist recounts his experience in New York on September 11th, 2001, intermingling reminiscence with gossipy and inebriated extrapolation on the nature of reportage itself. In *Confess All...*, ten subjects disguised with wigs, masks, and makeup offer confessions from their past, ranging from acts of revenge to crimes committed to sexual secrets. Both videos mimic the "talking head" format made familiar by television news and

entertainment media, at once relying on the truth value offered by video and foregrounding the way it mediates our experience of information. By turns hapless, pitiful, or leering, the subjects in these two works — who appear predominately to be white men — may not inspire empathy. In this, these works are perhaps the most apt examples to consider the fraught role of confession in our society, as working through our discomfort as viewers allows us to engage critically with the promise of confession.

In this chapter, I consider the *promise* of confession as the key element setting it apart from testimony or witnessing. Confession more than other acts of truth-telling promises an intrinsic, individual result. Throughout this dissertation, I'll call this promise that of *transformation*, which encompasses but is not reducible to absolution. It is, rather, that giving a confession *in and of itself* promises change. As Foucault argues, confession is “a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.”⁵⁰ While confession requires a listening authority to demand and confirm the confession as well as pronounce judgment, change happens regardless of that judgment, in just the utterance. It is, I believe, that promise — speak and be unburdened — that draws so many artists to confessional forms, for it is within that promise that confession collides most powerfully with the promise of art-making itself. Speaking, rendering, articulating, or inscribing a confession *does* something, regardless of its listener or audience: it takes the inchoate stuff of feelings, experiences, thoughts, and actions and brings them together, organizes them into form, and ascribes them significance; it offers a release, change, unburdening, or new understanding. Art-making, too, relies on this

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 62.

assemblage of stuff, this making of meaning, this promise of transformation. In the same way confession exists between people and in its own utterance, art exists within its own material form and in human interaction.

Yet, inherent in the promise of transformation is a demand — or perhaps a plea, or a striving — for relationality. It is not simply that in confessing, we ask others to listen to our words and experiences, but that through those concurrent acts of speaking/listening, we form new social relationships. A confession seeking absolution also seeks a return to the fold, a re-affirmation of one's status within a community. As I argue in the introduction, confession is fundamentally concerned with our positioning as subjects, that is, as individuals within social systems. Confession operates to reestablish our subjectivity: to change, reaffirm, or indeed, sometimes deny our position in relationship to other individuals and to institutions. While confession promises an inherent change, it additionally asks for — but may not receive — a response of acceptance, forgiveness, absolution, cure.

It is this simultaneous promise and demand that makes confession's position in society, and in art, fraught. It is, at once, required and abhorred, privileged as intimately truthful and marginalized as biased and emotional, regarded as liberatory and narcissistic. The things subject to confession no longer reside within the realm of sin or wrongdoing, precisely, but encompass all that we might keep hidden, all that we might associate with some shame or secret pleasure. Thus, as we see born out in confessions throughout this dissertation, one might confess not simply actions committed — things for which the subject might claim culpability — but those acts endured, survived, or even witnessed. If early monastic confession encompassed every thought or desire, contemporary

confession includes every experience for which one feels shame, guilt, or the need for secrecy. These negative feelings, I argue, do not require a sense of direct culpability so much as an indirect, socialized shame resulting from the fracturing of one's individual control. In the late-capitalist societies of the US and UK, the veneration of individuals as progenitors of their own fates leads to the inevitable conclusion that, if one must control one's own success, one must also be at fault for one's own failures, difficulties, and traumas. We see this line of thought repeated in informal conversation, in news media, and in courts of law: people with chronic illnesses haven't stuck with the right exercise regime or vitamin intake; people living in generational poverty haven't worked hard enough, achieved enough higher education, or worn the right interview clothes; survivors of rape didn't stay sober, wear plain underwear, travel in groups, or carry pepper spray. I argue, therefore, that shame attaches in those moments when social pressures suggest something *should* have been within your control, but it wasn't; when preparation and knowledge utterly fail in the face of violence and power; or when the inescapable proliferation of possible alternative paths and choices plague your memories, no matter how false and unrealistic those choices were in the moment. Confession, arising as a way to reveal those things unknown even to ourselves, now also allows us to negotiate those experiences that violate our sense of ourselves as autonomous, self-determining individuals. Thus, the same subject matter might comprise a confession or a testimony or both at once, its format, specifically, its psychological effects sometimes allowing us to define it one way or the other.

I spend time exploring the hazy demarcations between guilt and shame and confession and testimony precisely because the subjects of these two works exist

somewhere in the fog. Of the ten confessions Wearing captures on camera, most resist clear categorization as confessions of guilt, offering up as they do some law-breaking, some dubiously-consensual sexual activity, some pranks and petty revenge, and some histories at odds with what the world presents as normal. Similarly, while the reporter in *Hero* witnessed an event that many historians of trauma now recognize as a cultural trauma, the way he articulates his witnessing is uncertain, indirect, and distanced. Neither a victim-survivor nor a first responder, he falls into the liminal space of uncertain witness that, particularly through the repetition of the events of September 11th, 2001, in the media, many people across the world also occupy: close but distanced from the “action,” affected but not destroyed. To read both works as part of confessional culture, I argue that the way we understand trauma is, in fact, indelibly stained by the promise of confession and vice versa — that the promise of confession exists because of the way we socially constitute trauma and its accompanying shame.

And yet — for there is always an *and yet* — though the works by Wearing and Collins brush up against trauma, they also, perhaps even more obviously, exude and inspire glee, revulsion, pleasure, discomfort, voyeurism, and spectacle. As works of video art, they make reference to two other stages for confessional culture: reality television and the twenty-four hour news cycle. Both artists call upon the truth value and entertainment value of the video medium, offering up sometimes tantalizing and sometimes repulsive glimpses at the secrets and psyches of anonymous subjects. In this, they contend directly with the fundamental quality of contemporary confessional culture: its simultaneous investment in the authority of institutions and in the diffusion of judgment across audiences. While institutional confessions are met with a vested

authority not just listening but passing judgment and producing consequences, whether a priest offering absolution, a doctor diagnosis and treatment, or a judge and jury a verdict and sentencing, many of those that proliferate across popular culture and art offer up their confessions for the diffuse, varied, and ultimately often powerless judgment of the general public. In this way, popular confessions in tell-all memoirs, first-person blog posts, reality television, and participatory art projects trouble the connection between speech and consequence. They dwell primarily in the space of the confessional promise, the heady moment of internal transformation. As such, they both offer space for confessions that have no institutional outlet and invite censure as mere narcissism. At the same time, the relational qualities of confession mean that a powerless public might, indeed, be indicted by a confession, be called upon as a culpable witness to acts of violence. The unburdening promised might seem relatively innocuous when given to someone confessing a minor infraction, a small white lie, a harmless secret, or beneficial for those confessing trauma, but we become ethically uneasy when faced with confessions of crime, violence, or harm to another person. Similarly, a voyeuristic audience eager for salacious secrets might become unwitting participants in aggressive sexual fantasies. In this way, public, diffuse confessions implicate the listening viewer in ways both pleasurable and discomfiting.

This implication, too, mirrors the question of spectatorship in contemporary art. As many artists explore ways of reconfiguring the roles of creator and viewer, theorists consider what being a “viewer” might mean in the twenty-first century. For instance, Jacques Rancière suggests that aesthetic experience has the potential to inspire “emancipated spectators” who imagine through art new potential political projects. While

emancipated viewers may not have the power to absolve or punish the speaker in a video work, such viewers may, through affiliation with the eye of the camera and the speaking subject at once, understand their own position within social structures in a different way. The knowing gaze of the camera, in both works examined here, is inflected by a post-modern skepticism, by a wry and ironic glance, by a smirking tawdriness. The subjects are not always likable, the aesthetic not terribly pleasing, the confessions given more mundane or uncomfortable than inspiring or enticing. And yet, I argue that they hold our ear and eye not simply because of our prurient interests but precisely because they invite us to grapple with our own position as listeners and, perhaps, as confessional speakers. It is to these polarizing and sometimes contradictory effects that Collins and Wearing point their cameras, I argue; their works are perhaps less about offering a space for confession than putting the confessional promise itself on display. In these works, with their not always sympathetic subjects, we the viewers are asked to step in as priest, judge, jury, not only of the confessions the subjects give but of the confessional promise itself. Does simply speaking offer transformation? If so, to what effect on the listener? If so, are there limits to who should be allowed to speak? When is listening an act of absolution? When is a listener indicted as complicit?

Phil Collins's *Hero* opens on a bleak scene: against a backdrop of bare plywood, a white man in a rumpled white shirt stretches awkwardly, arms akimbo above his head and face flushed. On the table in front of him, a mug with a seventies floral pattern sits next to an overflowing ashtray and a microphone pack [Fig. 1.1]. In the background of the video, Mariah Carey's song "Hero" plays, its lyrics declaring the heroism of facing one's own personal trauma: "Look inside you and be strong / And you'll finally see the

truth / That a hero lies in you.” As the song fades out, the man in the white shirt contemplates the mug in front of him. “Oh man...eurgh...I dunno — I don’t ever want to have another sip of that again,” he says. Is this our hero?

Shot from the waist up, seated behind a table, the subject moves and gestures as he speaks, stretching his arms above his head or resting his chin on one fist, occasionally smokes or stubs out a cigarette, and drinks from the mug. When the video opens, the man appears disheveled, his hair mussed, collar unbuttoned, and his speech slurring as he contemplates drinking more of the alcohol. Despite his uncertainty, he argues that his body’s reaction to the alcohol compels him: “It activates these certain salivary glands in the back of your mouth...it’s like...and they’re sort of squirting out juices. It’s like DO NOT...STOP DRINKING.”⁵¹ Indeed, he does not stop drinking, as throughout the video an arm occasionally reaches to refill the mug from a bottle of brown liquor.

As the video proceeds, the man’s words move from his own intoxication to considering aspects of his profession as a lifestyle columnist. Over the course of forty minutes, he ruminates on other reporters he knows, the pressures of his job, and, more directly toward the end, on his memory of being in New York on September 11th, 2001. The video progresses in stops and starts, marked both by his meandering reminiscences and by an editing sequence that unfurls the conversation backwards. What begins with a bleary contemplation on drunkenness ends with its own sober beginnings, the reporter’s confession cut into short snippets arranged chronologically backwards. The viewer, left to piece together the seemingly disjointed strands of monologuing, slowly attunes to the

⁵¹ Throughout this chapter, I use transcribed dialog from the work included in two exhibition catalogs: Phil Collins and Milton Keynes Gallery, *Yeah.....You, Baby You* (Hove: Shady Lane, 2005); Phil Collins, Siniša Mitrović, and Jarla Partilager, eds., *Phil Collins: Exhibition: Phil Collins - Jarla Partilager 2011 [17.3. - 1.7.2011 Stockholm* (Stockholm: Jarla Partilager, 2011).

plastic lid serving as an ashtray, which appears to grow emptier as the piece progresses, and to the composure of the reporter who slowly sits up straighter and constrains his gestures, his hair subtly neatening and collar perhaps growing slightly less ruffled. His stories circle around the events of September 11th, only ever arriving on that day towards the end of the video — which is, of course, the beginning of his narrative. As he proceeds through discussing a colleague, Petra, whose hard-hitting approach to war journalism he contrasts with his own attention to celebrity doings, to the death of *Wall Street Journal* journalist Daniel Pearl, to the presence of international fashion journalists in New York for Fashion Week who end up reporting on September 11th, he returns over and over to the idea of “serious” journalism. While Petra was “super-aggressive about reporting September 11th stuff,” Daniel Pearl was “sensitive” and “an apolitical reporter,” and fashion reporters stranded in New York and serving as the only sources of information for international news were “hapless.” This reflection on the capabilities, constitutions, and readiness of various types of journalists comes to a head at the end of the video, when he casts himself as the eager, but perhaps unprepared, correspondent flung into the hectic events of September 11th. “I didn’t want to write the human interest thing,” he says. “I wanted to go downtown.” His own reportage about the day, though, is jumbled and limited, overshadowed by the way he continues to return not to the events themselves, but to the nature of journalism.

His rambling narrative, alternately described in press reviews as an act of witnessing or a talking cure, seems to skirt the line between testimony and confession. Made only a few months after September 11th, 2001, when members of Al-Qaeda hijacked commercial flights and flew them into the two towers of the World Trade Center

in New York City and the Pentagon outside of Washington, DC, and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. military on October 7th, 2001, the work looks sardonically at the concept of heroism, the problem of interrogation, and the collective identities formed through the mediation of traumatic events. Confession, memory, and cultural trauma converge, all created and filtered through the news media of which this reporter is a part. In reading it primarily through the lens of confession, I consider the ways Collins provokes, enables, and ultimately manipulates his subject's narrative as a commentary on the truth value of confession.

While Collins's work considers public, culturally-shared events, in *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian*, Gillian Wearing videos subjects confessing intimate, personal secrets. As the title references, Wearing placed an advertisement in London magazine *Time Out* to seek her subjects. She tapes her subjects in close-up, with their heads filling most of the screen, but all are in disguise in some way: wearing masks, wigs, false beards, or exaggerated makeup. Participants arrived having prepared their confessions to various degrees: some recite a seemingly very rehearsed statement whereas others appear more hesitant, their confessions stilted and repetitive. Wearing provides minimal on-screen prompting and the confessions proceed without clarifying questions. As with other participatory works discussed throughout this dissertation, the confessions offered vary widely in content. A number relate to specific or repeated sexual experiences, a few to acts of revenge, and some to criminal activities.

In exhibition, Wearing's work is often enclosed in a small, constructed chamber with a cut-out door, big enough for three or four people to stand together and watch [Fig.

1.2]. This display, which solves practical considerations of space and sound containment in an exhibition containing multiple video works, also offers an intimate viewing experience. The booths are not quite confessional booths — they are sometimes brightly colored, as in an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, and they offer space for more than one person — but in their dark enclosure they bear enough resemblance to call up those structures. In this space, the subjects in *Confess All...* are near life-size, not monumental; they seem to speak directly to the viewers who duck into the small chambers to be met by these masked figures. The work, thirty minutes long, loops, so that a viewer might walk in on one of ten confessions and choose to watch a few or all. In each case, the subject begins speaking and continues confessing without interruption, any prompting by Wearing edited out.

The video opens on a man wearing a craggy mask, complete with deeply furrowed brow, large nose, and ruddy cheeks [Fig. 1.3]. A grey-tinged bristle mustache conceals most of the mouth opening on the mask. Underneath the mask he dons a long black wig, unbrushed, with short bangs sticking out over the top. He offers a confession of revenge against a previous boss, the owner of a pizza chain, and a customer at the same job, who each undermined and humiliated him for being gay. For the boss, he made “a nice thin and crispy pizza” complete with a custom topping of scabs picked from his own skin. To the customer, he exacted revenge by putting her phone number in a phone booth with the line “Busty lady wants to give men a good time,” so that she’d receive harassing phone calls. Though his gaze is averted, he speaks with a firm, unapologetic voice, and by the end of his confession he declares with certainty that his actions are acts of resistance against systemic discrimination: “But I’m afraid that’s the way it goes, we as gay people

cannot afford to be dumped on by society. Especially now that Parliament has just underlined the fact that we can be discriminated against. And if that's the case we're going to fight back."⁵² Here, he likely refers to the refusal of Parliament to pass legislation equalizing the age of sexual consent to 16 for both heterosexual and homosexual sex, leaving the age of consent for homosexual sex at 21. His confession thus asserts his guilt but attributes it to righteous resistance against injustice.

A few confessions describe encounters with sex workers. In one, confession four, the subject wears the same black wig as the first subject, this time obscuring his face with a shiny reddish beard [Fig. 1.4]. His confession is short and verbally offers no cues to his emotional reaction: "I went with a prostitute. I went first and left my friends behind. She directed me to a backstreet nearby and just had sex there. I was 18 at the time." Here, the verbal confession is largely confined to the facts of the case, but his body language invites further interpretation. His voice, quite soft, speaks with hesitancy, stopping after the first sentence. At that point, the listener can just hear Wearing's voice prompting him to continue, the only time her presence intrudes on the scene. His gaze catches the camera occasionally and with seeming difficulty, as he averts it quickly. On the other hand, the eighth confession also relates to engaging a sex worker, but verbally focuses more strongly on the subject's emotional state. He describes it as "the usual story: money was all she wanted," with a perfunctory massage and intercourse "designed to make [him] come as quickly as possible." However, where the earlier subject verbally offers just the technical facts, here the second part of the confession dwells on the subject's emotional response. He states that he "didn't feel any of the usual feelings you have after sex,

⁵² For the dialog of *Confess All...*, I use transcripts provided in the catalog for Wearing's Whitechapel Gallery retrospective: Gillian Wearing, *Gillian Wearing* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012).

especially with my girlfriend,” but he just “felt pathetic.” He has made a greater attempt at anonymity than many, fully covering his face and hair with a wig, sunglasses, false nose, and false beard, successfully obscuring his face [Fig. 1.5]. At the end of his statement, he offers remorse, stating: “She will never guess, she will never know. But if she does ever hear, I am sorry — truly I am.” His apology is unclear, however: is it offered for the sex worker or for the aforementioned girlfriend who doesn’t know his past? Is he remorseful for having engaged these services or for his lack of feeling? The camera remains trained on him after he finishes speaking, unlike with the rest of the confessions, where they cut off at the end of the subject’s words. After a long pause, he reaches under the false beard to remove his microphone, stands, and walks away, leaving the viewer uncertain regarding the emotions displayed, pausing for a long moment in the quiet inside the confessional booth.

While a Catholic confessional booth offers a screen of anonymity, occluding eye contact between priest and penitent, anonymity in these two works functions obliquely. I can imagine arriving to participate in *Confess All...*, having been lured by Wearing’s personals ad to tell my secrets, and rummaging through a pile of cast-off Halloween costumes to assemble my alter ego. In the pile: a long, black wig teased near the crown, which appears thrice in the video; another in curly brown with buoyant bangs, also used by three participants; an assortment of masks ranging from a craggy old man, bristle mustache and all, to a red-nosed, buck-toothed clown, to George HW Bush; a pair of false beards in brown and white; sunglasses, a false nose, and a length of clear plastic that, when pulled over a face, might distort it into something unrecognizable. Here, I must make choices regarding my level of anonymity. Some participants cover their entire

faces with masks or false beards and sunglasses, while others merely plop wigs upon their heads and go on. Do I risk a friend, a family member, a present or future colleague seeing the work and recognizing my unobscured face? Do I rely on the occlusion of the mask to disguise my voice? Is my own enjoyment of the experience, my brush with the confessional promise, reliant on the safety of anonymity, or is my pleasure heightened by the possibility of recognition?

While in *Hero*, the reporter's face and hands move expressively with emotion, emphasis, and intoxication, in *Confess All...* the tight close-up format and disguises conceal most of the visual meaning communicated through facial expression or gesture. The flatness of a plastic mask's mouth, the bristled obstruction of a false mustache, the encompassing fuzz of a fake beard deny the viewer attention to the movements of the mouth and lead the eye to search for other places of connection. Eye contact — or lack of it — becomes the primary visual way a viewer might track the emotions of the subjects, seeing in a direct gaze determination or reading averted eyes as ashamed. For instance, the only female participant, the third confession, appears with a curly brown wig perched sideways on her head and her face wrapped with plastic wrap, smashing her nose and mouth against its clear constraint [Fig. 1.6]. Though her eyes are hardly visible, with the flesh of her cheeks pushed up under the plastic wrapping, her gaze clearly faces forward, directly towards the viewer. She begins her confession straightforwardly: "My confession is drugging a man, robbing his house and stealing his credit card." As she proceeds, the narrative unfolds to reveal not a random crime, but calculated revenge against a two-timing boyfriend. She and the other woman involved with the same man worked together to steal back the gifts they'd given him, to drug him with sleeping pills in champagne,

and to run up a tab on his credit card at a hotel where they deposited him naked in bed. Though she proceeds with some nervousness, her words carefully spoken but slightly hesitant, the set of her shoulders and her forward gaze suggest her determination to give her confession. Revealing her secret, she ends on a slightly triumphant note, reiterating her introductory point but this time with more firmness to her voice. “So this is my confession for drugging someone, stealing their credit card and costing them quite a lot of money,” she says, shoulders pulling back just slightly as though with pride.

In the case of the second confession, the subject avoids eye contact but also does little to conceal his face. Donning just a blond wig with a peacocked spray of teased bangs, he looks down and to his right as he confesses, never quite making eye contact with the camera [Fig. 1.7]. In his confession, he describes a time in his past when he “was involved with a group of people who were making pornography.” His confession focuses less on the pornography itself and more on the drug addiction and abusive behavior others in the group engaged in, beating the women involved in order to force them to perform for the camera. He speaks quietly, with some hesitation, and in the averted glance and the slight forward roll of his shoulders the viewer might read shame and contrition. At the end of his confession, he places it in the past, stating that “At the moment I’m not involved with crime and hopefully I won’t ever be again.” This conclusion, which suggests his present knowledge of the wrongness of his previous actions, offers a plea to the viewer: to see him in charitable light, to recognize that despite his past, he is reformed, to allow him back into the fold.

Like the subjects in *Confess All...*, Collins’ *Hero* also remains unnamed throughout, tantalizing hints of his identity not immediately adding up to anything conclusive.

Though his face is unobscured, as he himself notes his position as a reporter does not place him in fame's eye. As a lifestyle and celebrity reporter, his job is "to put a famous face" in the "sky-box" — the teaser that appears on the front page of the newspaper to direct readers to his column — and thus it's the faces of celebrities that fill his work, not his own. Gesturing toward the camera, he gives a litany: "Who've I got this week? Jerry Seinfeld. Last week I had Diandra Douglas. Michael Douglas's ex-wife who's turned herself into a big socialite here. And the week before that? Erm...oh, Liza Minelli." Together, the names and the dismissive gesticulation suggest both the monotony and the happenstance of his work, attached as it is to the perhaps arbitrary actions of these famous figures. His work, he underscores, is different from that of Petra, so eager to get in the action, or Daniel Pearl, killed despite his apolitical reporting. He's not on the front lines, the front pages, or on the scene on camera. As a reporter of celebrity gossip, too, his work no doubt dabbles in the illusions and pleasures of anonymity and fame, perhaps offering blind items that tease at some revelation regarding an unnamed celebrity. His job, indeed, is to reveal the confessions of those in fame's eye while obscuring his own investment in the unveiling of those secrets.

Heightening our awareness of the reporter's anonymity, the banal staging of the video also emphasizes the unscripted nature of his confession. Our unnamed reporter sits in front of a plywood wall, at an unadorned table. His ashtray is, in fact, a plastic lid, and his mug an anachronistic '70s floral. Little about the setting suggests elaborate planning or set design; rather, it feels haphazard and makeshift. While in Wearing's piece the close crop removes much of the setting, the harsh light, casting a shadow to each participant's left, and the awkwardness of the cheap wigs and poorly-fitted masks offer a similarly

amateurish touch. As both are recorded on video they retain the noise characteristic of that medium: a graininess to the visual texture, a flattening of sound and buzzy static in the silence, and a slightly overblown white balance that erases textural details of the lightest tones. Like artists from the 1960s onwards, Wearing and Collins make use of the relatively cheap and portable technology of video, accessible particularly to both as early-career artists and easy to reproduce and present on non-specialized equipment. Both artists intervene with minimal editing of the resultant video, with only cutting and arranging visible to the viewer. However, beyond the ease and accessibility of video, I argue that both artists lean on the very ordinariness of both video and their anonymous subjects to explore concepts of authenticity.

Film scholar Catherine Fowler argues that the turn towards unknown, ordinary people as the subjects of video art, rather than artists themselves or professional performers, shows an interest in the concept of the subject. She states that artists including Wearing and Collins “show faith neither in reality nor in the image, [but] these artists do assert faith in the subject.”⁵³ Her use of subject here refers both to the concrete presence of a person chosen for representation as well as the way those individuals perform their identities. Similarly to my concept of confession, she argues that the use of anonymous, average people allows artists to explore the making of subjectivity not as an absolute internal essence but as a set of performative acts. The anonymous figures, who perform carefully selected actions, often with some kind of manipulation that interferes with their appearance, such as Wearing’s disguises, are removed from their everyday contexts. This decontextualization denies us, the viewers, from carrying preconceptions

⁵³ Catherine Fowler, “Once More with Feeling: Performing the Self in the Work of Gillian Wearing, Kutluğ Ataman and Phil Collins,” *MIRAJ, Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2013): 23, https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj.2.1.10_1.

regarding the slippage between “reality” and “performance” in the way we might were the subjects actors, famous figures, or the artists themselves.

While Fowler reads this move as one of faith wherein the artists show faith by “keeping their part of the bargain,” art historian Claire Bishop considers this type of “delegated performance” as grab for authenticity.⁵⁴ In describing works that use “ordinary” people as performers, Bishop argues that, while artists delegate power to performers by entrusting them with their artistic visions, “the performers also delegate something to the artist: a guarantee of authenticity, through their proximity to everyday social reality, conventionally denied to the artist who deals merely in representations.”⁵⁵ The very averageness of Collins’s and Wearing’s subjects suggests their closeness to a less varnished and mediated experience than the artists themselves can represent. However, as Bishop notes, the authenticity secured here is nonetheless highly authored. In these artworks, she states, “the artist both relinquishes and reclaims power: he or she agrees to temporarily lose control over the situation before returning to select, define and circulate its representation.”⁵⁶ Authenticity, sought and captured, is thus mediated through the aesthetic decisions made by artists and institutions. Here, we see those gestures toward authenticity in the unpolished staging of bare-bones sets and disheveled subjects. However, neither artist purports to offer these confessions up as unvarnished, unmediated truth. Rather, I argue that through their use of video and aesthetics of realism, both artists question the entanglement of confession, witnessing, and video footage in news and entertainment media to consider how we understand truth, identity, memory, and self-discipline.

⁵⁴ Fowler, 23.

⁵⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 237.

⁵⁶ Bishop, 237.

As Krauss argues, video effects a repression of temporality, offering an illusion of immediacy no matter how far removed from the moment of recording playback occurs. While it's true that film and photography also capture a moment for future viewing, both the immediate feedback loop available with video and its electronically-encoded data heighten the sense of immediacy available. Video's ability to be shown closed-circuit and viewed without developing keeps it in close temporal proximity to the events it records, an affective quality that persists even long after the video's creation. Its imperfection seems to attest to its factuality: truth, unvarnished, warts and all, offered seemingly without special effects or manipulation. Indeed, in early iterations video machinery offered no ability to edit beyond simply starting and stopping recording. The electronic encoding of analog video tape means that, unlike film, the material of video bears no visual resemblance to the captured or projected image. Video tape cannot be manipulated through the same dodging, burning, double exposure, or scratching techniques artists use on film negative, as markings made to the tape do not result in corresponding imagery when played. Video artist and critic Catherine Elwes argues that video art, because of these qualities, relies on an illusion of collapsed time. As she states, "Through the suspension of disbelief, viewers ignore the apparatus that creates the illusion and, instead, imaginatively read the flickering screen as a faithful representation of reality. The audience and artist enter into a kind of credulity pact."⁵⁷

Artists such as Wearing and Collins heighten this illusion of reality by staging oddly ordinary settings and by at once presenting and undermining artifice. In *Hero*, the haphazard arrangement of materials — plywood, a table, a plastic lid to serve as ashtray,

⁵⁷ Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London ; New York : London : New York: IBTauris ; in association with University of the Arts ; In the United States of America and in Canada distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 13.

a weirdly anachronistic mug — seem hastily thrown together, as though out of materials simply found in one's home or garage. While the subjects in *Confess All...* wear disguises, they fit poorly and the bright lighting reveals the plasticky sheen of curly wigs and stiff masks alike. These are not the fitted and specially-made disguises of professional stage performance. For instance, in the first confession, the subject dons a mask that turns his face into a craggy topography of wrinkles and heavy brow. It sits poorly on his head so that as he speaks, his eyes are nearly occluded, the eyeholes of the mask falling too far down his cheeks. The mask reappears for the fifth confession, where the subject pairs it with a curly brown wig that clashes with the salt-and-pepper of its bristle mustache. Another subject has picked up a stiff plastic mask, slightly too small for his face, that offers no movement or expression, simply a pursed-closed mouth and eyeholes that reveal not eyes but the skin of his lower eyelids and cheeks, disconcertingly mis-matched to the jaundiced yellow tone of the mask. As he speaks, the viewer's eyes fall to the soft underhang of chin revealed below the mask, the only movement of his speaking mouth visible. In the visual language of television, too, disguises do not always indicate deception: think of the use of shadows and screens to disguise the identity of whistleblowers and witnesses on news media, for instance.

The use of video, the staging chosen, and the subject matters all connect these works to other genres that rely on the friction between realism and sensationalism: reality television and twenty-four hour news media. Wearing's work might be read as both picking up on early trends in reality television entertainment and prophesying future directions. As a number of art historians point out, Wearing's work, and indeed that of her Young British Artist cohort more broadly, appeared at a time when daytime talk

shows and purportedly-unscripted reality television had begun to appear, but before either reached their saturation in the early 2000s. Wearing herself cites inspiration from documentaries following average people, such as 1974 BBC series *The Family*, which followed the daily lives of a working-class family in Reading. The show, along with the similar *An American Family* shown in the US in 1973, are often cited as reality television precursors. The tightly-cropped “talking heads” of Wearing’s videos perhaps most closely resemble the “confession booth” not of the Catholic Church but of reality shows like *The Real World*, which premiered on MTV in 1992. Unlike within news media, talk shows, or earlier reality television shows, the “confessional” format shows the subject alone, without an interviewer or host. The subject seems to talk extemporaneously, any prompting by editors removed. As with Wearing’s staging, the camera usually stays static, in a pre-determined location set aside for these confessional moments, and remains closely focused on the face and body of the subject. Media scholar Laurie Ouellette argues that the confessional mode pioneered by *The Real World* is “the closest reality television has come to constructing a personal subjectivity; in its bid for legitimacy and to convey the excitement of the real, it has relied on conventional practices of aesthetic realism, expressing subjectivity primarily through performative intensity.”⁵⁸ Here, Ouellette means subjectivity as individual identity and experience. The performative intensity mentioned, such as the use of emotion, gesture, and expression, affirms its own authenticity by appearing unscripted. The features shared by Wearing’s work and *The Real World* confession booth, including the static camera, single take shot, and amateurly-acted performances, all reside within the conventions of aesthetic realism Ouellette cites. The convention of the video confession booth, too, engages in something

⁵⁸ Laurie Ouellette, *A Companion to Reality Television* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 151.

of the “credulity pact” that Elwes describes but, rather than affirming an illusion of reality, confessing participants speak to a camera that stands in not only for the artist or producer, but for the many imagined viewers.

Ouellette and other scholars of reality television further note that the confession booth is one of many techniques of self-governance modeled in reality TV. In a number of his works, Foucault analyzes what he calls techniques or technologies of the self: operations that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”⁵⁹ Confession, of course, is one such technology. Others seen in reality television include financial management, hygiene, diet, or exercise. Significantly, both for Foucault and for our understanding of their operation in reality television, techniques of the self are not simply in service of personal enlightenment, but are, in various ways, encouraged, demanded, modeled, and coerced by institutions and authorities in pursuit of developing productive, self-managing subjects. In her book, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*, Ouellette argues that a number of common reality show formats represent to viewers “the cultivation of self-empowerment through personal responsibility and choice.”⁶⁰ Not only does the confession booth format suggest the importance — to one’s own life and to narrative entertainment — of expressing innermost thoughts, self-help, makeover, and “tough love” reality show formats moralize self-governance of finances, personal

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault et al., eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

⁶⁰ Laurie Ouellette, *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 79.

accountability, appearance, self-esteem, and health as individual imperatives, aided by capitalist consumption. This, she argues, operates as part of a neoliberal trend in shifting social welfare responsibility from the State to individuals and the market.

Similarly, media scholar Gareth Palmer argues that reality shows, particularly those focused on policing and the legal system, operate “to promote good behaviour and the correct use of authority” by emphasizing surveillance, judgment, and the punishment of illegality.⁶¹ Writing in the UK, Palmer notes the extensive use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage in reality television “to entertain and shame in equal measure.”⁶² As he notes, England and Wales have more public CCTV systems than any other capitalist nation, effectively covering the streets, shops, and public areas of urban spaces with a panoptic gaze. The presence of CCTV is equally enmeshed in television entertainment, from the use of actual captured footage on humorous clip shows and investigative reporting alike and on reality television focused on police, nuclear families, or workplaces to its fictionalized use in procedural dramas. In making use of CCTV, reality television both reiterates the message that systems of surveillance are essential to public and personal safety and models ways of being a “good citizen” through self-governance. Palmer argues that in watching such entertainment, “we ourselves become subjects, written into discourses as watchful citizens, grateful and obedient to the authorities.”⁶³ Across reality television, representations of “good” — self-governing, independent, responsible — and “bad” — criminal, negligent, unhealthy — subjects proliferate, effectively positioning technologies of the self as moral imperatives. In both cases, the

⁶¹ Gareth Palmer, *Discipline and Liberty: Television and Governance* (Manchester, UK ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the U.S.A. by Palgrave, 2003), 17.

⁶² Palmer, 23.

⁶³ Palmer, 36.

truth value of video melds with the production of truth through technologies of the self, offering up entertainment.

With the advent of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, we also see the bleeding together of the confessional mode of talk shows with the reportage of news media. Cable News Network (CNN) emerged as the first twenty-four-hour news channel in 1980, but it was its perceived influence in covering the Gulf War that sparked the arrival of numerous other round-the-clock news channels in the U.S. and around the world. Twenty-four-hour news relies on the technology of live video, produced by affiliate stations, agencies, or occasionally individual bystanders and available via satellite. Therefore, these news networks both depend upon and emphasize the attribute of “liveness” as key to understanding the events of the day. The continuous nature allows these networks to provide ongoing and continually updated information in the case of emergencies such as natural disasters, major accidents, or attacks. However, as a number of media scholars note, the need to fill round-the-clock coverage results in “liveness” becoming meaning in and of itself. In a chapter on “disposable news,” communications scholar Justin Lewis argues that liveness “represents a victory of form over content.”⁶⁴ “Liveness” privileges immediate visual content over informed journalism, context, and studied explanation and singular sources over stories that require multiple sources and inquiry to present. Similarly, as reporting live requires resources and planning, coverage tends to favor pre-planned events such as speeches and press conferences, which “allows those with the resources to create those events the opportunity to set the agenda.”⁶⁵ The commercial

⁶⁴ Justin Lewis, “Democratic or Disposable: 24-Hour News, Consumer Culture, and Built-in Obsolescence,” in *The Rise of 24-Hour News Television: Global Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Cushion and Justin Lewis (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 90.

⁶⁵ Lewis, 90.

demands for “liveness” were also noted by Rosalind Krauss as one of the conditions under which artists were increasingly turning toward video. As she notes, the relationship between the art world and mass media from the 1950s onwards changed the way artists produce and live from their artwork. As she states, “That an artist’s work be published, reproduced and disseminated through the media has become, for the generation that has matured in the course of the last decade, virtually the *only* means of verifying its existence as art. The demand for instant replay in the media... finds its obvious correlative in an aesthetic mode by which the self is created through the electronic device of feedback.”⁶⁶ Thus, she sees these two spheres of mass media and the art world co-authoring the aesthetic meanings of feedback and instant replay, as television offers a space to legitimize art and art returns with objects tailor-made for television, thus in turn legitimizing the seriousness of mass media. While Krauss writes at a very early moment in video’s lifespan as an artistic medium, we might clearly see that artists working in the following decades, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s after the explosion of twenty-four-hour news, are frequently self-aware of this mutually-constitutive function and, as Collins and Wearing do, exploit it for their own critical ends.

In the twenty-four-hour news cycle, news snippets of different genres live side-by-side, political coverage slipping into weather, followed by celebrity gossip and previews of the latest Hollywood blockbusters. While television news has always served to provide an array of coverage, round-the-clock coverage and market competition to keep viewers tuned in has led to more and more “soft news” treated as headlines. Media scholar Stephen Cushion attributes this to the “Foxification” effect, noting that the success of cable network Fox News has influenced other networks to adopt its approach of partisan-

⁶⁶ Krauss, “Video,” 59.

leaning, sensationalized coverage. Fox News, which began broadcasting in 1996, is not only the most-watched news network in the U.S. but the most watched U.S. cable channel overall.⁶⁷ In addition to the convention of using “breaking news” to indicate something immediate and important occurring, interrupting normally-scheduled programming, Fox added the use of a “news alert,” used more liberally than “breaking news” and frequently applied to topics such as celebrity gossip. As Cushion notes, the adoption of similar conventions across news stations means that “rather than indicating something new or significant had occurred, breaking news appeared to be part of a marketing strategy, a convention used to hype up the importance of a news story irrespective of its news value.”⁶⁸

This strategy also reflects the way twenty-four-hour news mimics tabloid approaches like those described by Collins’s reporter. Though his celebrity stories weren’t on the front pages, he was obliged to fill the “sky box,” the front-page teaser indicating the celebrity he was covering that day. At one point, he describes the pressure continually to fill the sky box with new faces: “You know that whole ‘V.HOT’ idea? Tina Brown used to write HOT on top of some manuscripts and V period HOT on top of other ones. So ‘V.HOT’ you know...oh man!” Referencing here the British-born former editor of *Tatler*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Daily Beast*, he describes a convention of trend-following and competition rooted in publications more commonly associated with “soft news” topics of fashion and lifestyle. After a break in the video, we return to the reporter at an earlier time, as he explains that his “column has to be V.HOT

⁶⁷ AJ Katz, “2018 Ratings: Fox News Is the Most-Watched Network on Cable for the Third Straight Year,” *AdWeek*, January 2, 2019, <https://adweek.it/2BtRhZ1>.

⁶⁸ Stephen Cushion, “Three Phases of 24-Hour News Television,” in *The Rise of 24-Hour News Television: Global Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Cushion and Justin Lewis (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 26.

every week. It's terrible." The rueful shake of his head suggests a knowing acceptance, an awareness of the market-driven pressure of his job to provide new celebrity news every week [Fig. 1.8]. As his reference to both his own job and to editor Tina Brown suggest, this pressure to present eye-catching headlines is nothing new. However, twenty-four-hour news accelerates this concept. Old stories are no longer "yesterday's news," they're the news from this morning, an hour ago, five minutes ago, already used up once the commercial break is over. This rapidity embraces and promotes a conception of the news as commodity, rather than social good, or as Lewis puts it, "disposability above democracy, and the instantaneous above the innovative."⁶⁹

Filling airtime in the mornings on most major news stations in the US and UK, morning shows or breakfast television have offered snippets of topical news, weather, and traffic alongside human interest stories since their advent in the 1950s with NBC's *Today*. Since then, interpretative news and infotainment has proliferated across major networks, including political pundit-headed shows analyzing political choices large and small and multi-host talk shows expounding on news items, trends, and human interest stories. The speculation suggested by such coverage invites us, the viewers, to parse meaning out of not just words and actions, but minute expressions, fashion choices, and unscripted gestures. Reality television and news media alike invite audiences to act as judges, either implicitly or explicitly. Coverage of a high-profile legal trial melds easily into new episodes of *Judge Judy*, positioning viewers as ultimately powerless but knowing judges, able to winnow the truth out of visual expressions, transcripts, and taped outbursts. In more active ways, viewers might call in to vote for their favorite singer on *American Idol* or log on to the Fox News website to take a poll about a new

⁶⁹ Lewis, "Democratic or Disposable: 24-Hour News, Consumer Culture, and Built-in Obsolescence," 86.

Congressional bill. These interactive exercises suggest to us not only that our opinion *matters*, but that we're already in possession of all the facts: we watched the videos. In this way, the proliferation of video — live and previously taped, spontaneous and scripted, full scenes and short sounds bites — is not simply evidence to be interpreted, it is representative of reality. Following the lead of our hosts, we needn't parse out all the factual context, spend time considering outcomes, or consult with experts; rather, we need merely to respond with our instincts. Presented with what Ouellette calls the realism of “performative intensity” that privileges the immediate, emotional, consumable, urgent, and entertaining, we can only react through gut-informed judgment.

In this aspect, the work of Wearing and Collins begins consciously to diverge from the reality television mode. By offering disguises, Wearing does more than simply provide anonymity. Indeed, as we see, not all the subjects even fully obscure their faces. Through this masking that repeats across many of her works, at times literal and other times simply suggested, she also controls our access to the visual cues we might use to pass judgment on another's confession. Without the micro-expressions of the mouth, we become more attuned to the movements of the eyes. Similarly, the cropping here removes access to their gestures; what we otherwise might read in clenched hands we now see in the hunching of shoulders. At the same time, this masking emphasizes the power of anonymity to provide protection, referencing, for instance, the camouflaging offered to witnesses and whistleblowers. Collins offers us more visual access to the gestural body of the reporter, but the repeated intrusion of his own arm pouring alcohol into his subject's mug reminds us of his artistic manipulation of the scene [Fig. 1.9]. Are the stumbling hesitations and slurred grasping for words a result of the reporter being overcome with

emotion, or simply the functional decline of a brain under alcoholic influence? In both cases, the use of ordinary, unknown subjects, of whom we have no previous knowledge, and the artists' control over their emotional expression requires us to consider the ways we read body language in passing judgment. As I will discuss further in Chapter Four as well, as humans we ascribe truth value to the gestural intonations of the faces, bodies, and voices of others, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Foucault states that confession must "be bitter, that is, accompanied by tears," but our perception of the line between tears shed in genuine contrition and those produced for effect is not fixed and is influenced by prevailing social biases around race, gender, age, sexuality, and ability, by our personal experiences with the subject matter being confessed, and by our prior knowledge of the individual confessing.⁷⁰ Popular culture, with its proliferation of lie-detector tests on daytime television and of preternaturally observant detectives on evening procedurals, reassures us that with the right training and tools, we can definitively detect the truths of the body, those things our bodies give away that our words might not. As figures of entertainment, the talk show host and the TV detective invite us to partake in the pleasures of judging for ourselves the non-verbal communication presented before us. The aesthetic detection on offer here, too, resembles the art historian's minute attention to the merest visual detail of a work of art, or the invitation presented by a museum for visitors to linger and luxuriously explore the surfaces and subjects of the works within. However, the certainty offered by such tools and figures is one of faith, not fact: in suggesting a determinate, universal truth to body language, they ignore the role unconscious bias plays in our readings of one another, the ways behaviors are developed through socialization, and the way confession works as a

⁷⁰ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 188–89.

tool to constitute and reaffirm subject position.

To offer just one example, in a review of the literature on gender differences in nonverbal communication, psychologists Marianne LaFrance and Andrea C. Vial argue that while a number of studies ascribe differences in conveying and understanding nonverbal to a binary construct of biological sex, very few have considered the role of sexual orientation or sex-role orientation in our abilities to show or decode body language. Investigating instances where research has shown divergence in male and female test subjects, such as smiling, eye contact, and touch, they argue that attention to the ways gender operates and is understood beyond biological assignment complicate assertions that men or women are more likely to engage in certain kinds of nonverbal communication. Their review of the literature shows that “there was substantial evidence that gender-marked nonverbal cues, far from being fixed and stable, are malleable and flexible, responsive to even small changes in the social and psychological environment.”⁷¹ Nonverbal cues are thus both embodied and understood differently across gendered bodies, rather than fixedly. Nonetheless, social perception of the gendered attributes of body language has consequences on judgments of truth. Legal scholars Randall T. Salekin, James R.P. Ogloff, Cathy McFarland, and Richard Rogers ran a study with mock trial situations to examine the effect that the gender and emotional affect of a defendant has on juries. In their study, they found that flat, moderate, and high affect — acting with little emotion, with “normal” or expected emotion, and with high emotion — caused little difference in the juries’ perception of guilt in male defendants. On the other hand, female defendants showing either flat or high, rather than moderate,

⁷¹ Marianne LaFrance and Andrea C. Vial, “Gender and Nonverbal Behavior,” in *APA Handbook of Nonverbal Communication*, *APA Handbook of Nonverbal Communication* (Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 2016), 154, <https://doi.org/10.1037/14669-000>.

affect, were much more likely to be perceived as guilty, suggesting that emotion outside of the “norm” has greater punitive effects on women than on men in this legal scenario.⁷² This study in turn could be complicated by LaFrance and Vial’s observation that sex-role adherence also effects non-verbal communication and thus it is possible that findings could be further complicated by attending to the effect on juries of individuals who present gender outside of binary roles.

Despite research showing that the use, meaning, and understanding of expression and gesture are not universally applicable, we are nonetheless attuned to using nonverbal communication to affirm or deny the truth value of confessed statements. In manipulating our access to and understanding of their subjects’ gestures, Collins and Wearing turn us into uncertain detectives, at once relying on and calling into question our instincts about the ways we understand the nature of someone’s words when we can see and hear their bodily intonations. Connecting to the televisual modes developing contemporaneously, they offer us familiar stages but unsettle our own roles in response. By presenting just the confessions, without the added context of captured footage, as in the *Real World* house, or of framing and interpretation, however slight, from newscasters, they reference both the live immediacy of video and its relationship to memory.

The very banality of the settings and the disheveled quality of the subjects, even those donning dramatic masks, connects it to the everyday uses of video to record family moments and special events, childhood performances, vacations, and other events of memory. The portability of video cameras and relative cheapness of VHS tapes allowed generations of families in the later part of the twentieth century to record any event, large

⁷² Randall T. Salekin et al., “Influencing Jurors’ Perceptions of Guilt: Expression of Emotionality During Testimony,” *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 293–305, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2370130208>.

or small. Though I haven't seen them in years, I remember my family's own tapes, with gleeful Christmases abutting dance performances that overlap with horse shows, childhood plays staged in the living room, and holiday pageants at school. The nature of video tape means that these snippets run into each other, operating not as discrete objects but as one long procession of temporally-confused moments, seasons indeterminate and years uncertain as the VHS cassettes were used to their full capacity. In this way, they mimic how memories abut and entangle, operating not as a seamless timeline of all we have experienced since memories started sticking in our childish brains, but as flash points, moments that connect in unexpected ways, that overlap and erase one another like re-used video tape, that surprise us by starting up in the middle as we recall a sensation, an object, the feeling of a hated garment or the sound of a parent's voice, and are thrown back to an earlier moment.

While both *Hero* and *Confess All...* each record the same setting over the course of a limited number of hours, they nonetheless perform this throwing-back in time. Settling in to watch *Hero*, indeed, feels similar to watching a family video. In exhibition in Belfast's Golden Thread Gallery, the work was presented on a large, blocky television on the floor faced by a small sofa, as though a miniaturized replication of a family living room. Sitting down, I picked up a pair of headphones and found myself immersed in the reporter's words, the rest of the gallery falling away. The video's duration of forty-five minutes means that any visitor is likely to begin in the middle, an experience made more disorienting by Collins's choice to present the interview effectively in reverse. Broken up into small snippets of a few minutes each, the interview is assembled with the last chunk, showing the reporter drunkenly ruminating on the seductive qualities of alcohol,

operating as the opening scene. His recounting meanders as memory does, with tangents about the roles of different reporters interrupting his memories of the actual day of September 11th, 2001, and self-corrections revealing the places where his memory does not quite accord with the official record. At one moment, for instance, he describes leaving his office to get closer to the World Trade Center after the first tower fell.

“Actually I took the N and R to City Hall,” he says, then pauses, a slight crease appearing between his eyes before he admits some uncertainty with that recollection: “I don’t quite get how I was able to do that because a few of the stations were demolished right below there. Maybe it was Union Square.” Here, later knowledge — that some of the stations near the WTC were demolished — interrupts his memory, the remembrance coming into conflict with the known record, and the two left in conflict. “Maybe it was Union Square,” he says, admitting the fallibility of his memory but not quite acceding to the correction.

Sitting on the sofa, viewers watch with attention as the reporter runs through the whole gamut of emotions, his malleable face offering up bleary pleasure at a refilled mug of liquor, furrowed seriousness as he parses through memories of his movements on the day, or the lifted eyebrows of wry sarcasm as he describes the pressure to make his celebrity column “V.HOT” every week. In this way, his presence references not the composed and scripted interpretations of events in the weeks and months following September 11th, but the disordered horror of those first few hours. While certainly not as tragic, his performance repeats both the disarray of news reporting that, in many cases, depended on the amateur or unprepared reportage of locals, tourists, and fashion journalists present on the scene in those first minutes, and the memories of millions

whose Tuesday was interrupted by something unexpected. By the end of the video, the reporter is composed, nodding to an absent question, and offers the beginning of his interview with a thread common to many — where he was when he first heard the news.

“You mean like that morning?” he starts:

Well I was late for work. I’m addicted to this news channel, in the morning, and so I had my coat on and my bag and everything, it was close to nine which is, I already should have left, especially that day, it was a Tuesday and it was deadline day. And I should have, I had meant to have gone in super early, and I was maybe just going to be in on time, maybe.

Offered as a flash point in time — a Tuesday, with his coat and bag already on — his memory references those of so many others who were at work or at school, in the car or just waking up, watching the news or listening to the radio.

However, as a reporter his memory takes a different turn. As a witness, Collins’s reporter is haphazard, his narrative meandering between his own experience and that of other reporters. Indeed, rather than testifying for us what he witnessed, he reflects on the role of reporter *as* witness, in ways that are often contingent, unexpected, and fraught with emotion and happenstance. He talks of Petra, aggressively pursuing her subjects: “You know, ‘Corpse – I’m there!’ You know? That kind of thing. But no holds barred for her.” Daniel Pearl, on the other hand, stands as a figure of warning of the danger even for reporters with less overtly-political subjects: “...one thing that it did was, I think it did, it made people realise that to go there actually, you know, is incredibly dangerous regardless of what you’re going to cover. I mean he was just such an apolitical reporter.” He offers a closer corollary to his own experience in describing British fashion journalists in New York for Fashion Week, beginning its fourth day on September 11th. Already in the city as flights were grounded and travel restricted, many reporters were their publications’ only representatives. Collins’s subject captures the haphazard, confused

way they scrambled to redirect their focus, his body language performing the urgency of the demand not just for information, but for imagery: "...it was like, you know, the only person we've got down there is like this fashion reporter. 'GET A, GET A CAMERA' seemed to be like the only thing they were hearing and they were just having to take pictures from their roofs..." he says, eyes widening as he shouts the words, a hint of the frantic energy those reporters must have felt lingering in the way his shoulders tense. For instance, *Evening Standard* runway photographer Cavan Pawson turned around on his way to the runway shows after hearing that one of the towers had been hit. His photographs of both towers on fire and of the south tower collapsing were the first to hit the British press. Pawson reflects on his impulse to take and transmit photographs of the event with an all-consuming urgency similar to the frenetic quality embodied by Collins's reporter, stating, "I was so tied up in meeting the deadlines and getting the stuff through as quickly as possible that the significance of what was happening didn't really hit me until after the event. At the time I was just trapped in three hours of complete chaos."⁷³

The narrative offered by the reporter in *Hero* thus attests to the unexpected, unprepared mediation of the imagery of September 11th by lifestyle reporters like himself, redirected from their primary areas of expertise. However, in the face of this frantic, uncertain, terrifying event not all reporters on the ground found themselves able to perform as adeptly. Less than a week after the event, when flights were still canceled and visitors to New York still stranded, *The Guardian*'s Charlie Porter wrote from his hotel room in Gramercy Park, north of the World Trade Center, about the experiences of lifestyle reporters caught in the action. Some quoted cite their emotional terror and guilt

⁷³ Rob McNeil, "Standard Photographer Wins Award," *Evening Standard*, March 20, 2002, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/standard-photographer-wins-award-6329643.html>.

at failing to act: “I’m afraid I didn’t rush out,” says catwalk photographer Chris Moore, “I felt guilty at one point, I thought I was being a bit pathetic. But I’m not really a news photographer.”⁷⁴ Others reflect on the unexpected weight of representing events to their home papers. Heath Brown of the *Times* said, “It’s the worst thing to ever write about...remembering things you don’t want to remember again. There we were one night with Debbie Harry and Hilary Swank, the next we’ve got this thing. I just want to get home.”⁷⁵ Around their experiences, though, the work is framed as a confession by Porter himself on his own failure to act. He begins the piece with a question troubling him: “Should I have gone down there when it happened?...With hindsight, I know that I could have started to report straight away. But at the time it never even crossed my mind. I stayed in my hotel watching the news and not leaving my room until it was over. I was glad that my window faces north so I couldn’t actually witness events first-hand.”⁷⁶ His confession articulates not an experience of journalism, but a refusal to act as a witness.

As a reporter, Collins’s subject, too, does not quite succeed. His narrative meanders from his own experience getting to the site of the World Trade Center, to the chaos of the scene, into reflecting on the act of reporting, spending little time actually discussing the events. As he speaks, the Mariah Carey song drifts in and out of audibility, her repetitive crooning reminding audiences that one need only to look inside oneself to find heroism. A generous reading might point to the ways fashion journalists, unprepared and untrained in the reportage of current and catastrophic events, nonetheless stepped in to send information, as best they could, to their home papers. A more sardonic reading — and the

⁷⁴ Charlie Porter, “Catwalk to Carnage,” *The Guardian*, September 17, 2001, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2001/sep/17/mondaymediasection.charlieporteronthefashion>.

⁷⁵ Porter.

⁷⁶ Porter.

one, I think, to which the endless repetition of the song lends itself most readily — critiques the cultural tendency to read traumatic events in terms of heroes and victims.

In narrating his own experience of September 11th, Collins's reporter does not merely offer a personal confession; rather, as alluded with the title *Hero*, his story is implicated in the ways the United States collectively narrativizes the events of that day and their greater meaning. The hijacking and crashing of commercial airplanes into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon building near Washington, DC, housing the administration of the Department of Defense, by members of multi-national militant group Al-Qaeda resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths, ongoing health problems in witnesses and first responders due to inhalation of debris, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress in witnesses. Due to the scope of the impact, which was spread and repeated through news media coverage across the United States and world, the events are often considered to comprise a collective or cultural trauma, a concept that encompasses events of large-scale destruction or national or international significance that have, either in their formation or in their historical narrativization, a connection to a sense of cultural identity. Sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander theorizes cultural trauma as events that, through interpretation by the news media, state bureaucracies, and scientific and legal discourses, develop as “acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity.”⁷⁷ Thus, cultural traumas are not simply any large-scale destructive event, but are events mediated, interpreted, and used to particular ends.

In a chapter on cultural trauma and the media, scholar of media studies Allen Meek argues that narratives of collective or cultural traumas rely on the figures of heroes and

⁷⁷ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2004), 10.

martyrs to “redeem unbearable losses and shameful acts.”⁷⁸ Focusing particularly on “mediated” traumas of the 20th and 21st centuries such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and September 11th, 2001, Meek theorizes that contemporary cultural trauma should be considered as not just a collection of narratives and repercussions of specific events, but as a way of experiencing collective identity in a technologically mediated society. He argues, alongside theorist of victimhood Fatima Naqvi, that victimhood has emerged as a privileged position and affirmation of social belonging. Collective traumas, mediated as dramas of martyr-victims and hero-victims, allow the development of a cultural identity in which the nation itself is a victim whose strength is revealed by enduring through trauma. In this narrative, the roles of hero, witness, and victim may be broadly applied; no member of the social body may be an unaffected bystander and still remain part of the cultural collective.

Collins’s video, first appearing in exhibition in late spring 2002, reflects on the contemporaneous construction of September 11th as a cultural trauma. Around the same time, Collins also completed his photographic project *Enduring Freedom*, which depicts locals and tourists at Ground Zero, the former site of the World Trade Center towers, in late 2001 and early 2002. The site itself never appears; rather he shoots people around the site as they gaze on it, examine guidebooks, or look at souvenirs available for purchase. Shot slightly from below, the photos catch these unnamed subjects unaware and seemingly nonchalant. In one, the frame is filled by four women standing in pairs captured from mid-thigh up [Fig. 1.10]. The two women standing further back shield their eyes from the bright sun illuminating their faces, looking at something above and

⁷⁸ Allen Meek, “Cultural Trauma and the Media,” in *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture.*, ed. Yochai Ataria et al. (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 27.

beyond the camera's position. In the immediate foreground, a woman wearing a grey windbreaker stands with her hands loosely at her sides, also looking off beyond the camera. From her mouth, incongruously, emerges the stick of a lollipop. To her left, the fourth woman seems to have noticed the camera, her gaze caught squinting against the brightness of the sun as she looks directly at the lens. In her hand she holds her own camera, a boxy grey point-and-shoot with its strap wrapped around the body, its lens not pointed outwards as Collins's own does, but held in her hand, unprepared for the act of recording. These four figures seem to perform their tourism ritual with perfunctory insouciance. In another photo, a group of people, perhaps a family, stand behind a pile of small boxes, which are topped with snowglobes containing the New York skyline complete with the towers [Fig. 1.11]. Amongst the piles peek a few replica New York Fire Department baseball caps, a small American flag, and a sign with the words "United We Stand." Collins captures the group in a variety of expressions: two of the adults seem to be eating, a middle-aged woman captured with her hand held up to her parted mouth as she looks to the left of the frame, where someone off-camera holds up a snowglobe, and a man in the center of the frame in the middle of chewing. Next to them, a young boy holds up a black plastic bag, suggesting that they've already participated in purchasing souvenirs. They, like others across the photo series, show no outward distress but rather seem simply prepared to observe, to follow the suggestions in their guidebooks, take a few snapshots, and perhaps buy a snowglobe. Referentially, Collins then had a selection of these photographs printed onto brightly-colored teeshirts and gave them away on the street near Ground Zero. The shirts, in lurid shades of pink, purple, blue, become souvenirs of the act of tourism.

These two works attest to the role of photographic and video imagery in the construction of memory and the act of witnessing. On many news stations, video footage of the second plane hitting the south tower, of the first then second tower falling, of bodies and debris alike falling to the ground as people jumped to their deaths, and finally of the frenzy of first responders rotated as continuous imagery in the days following the event. Such video footage became immediately embedded as memory for anyone experiencing the attacks through the medium of television — that is, for billions of viewers in the United States and around the world. In that way, the visual mechanics of memory are culturally shared, as the same videos, from the same points of view, showing the same scenes, at once constitute and link together the memories of countless individuals.

At the same time, the repetition of the same imagery, over and over, reveals the fundamental flaw of the act of witnessing: its distance and belatedness. While imagery proliferates of the towers after the first collision as they both burned and eventually fell, as one searches temporally backwards for visual evidence of the beginning, one comes upon greater and greater lacunae. There are three known videos of Flight 11 hitting the north tower, which together attest to the myriad roles of video in everyday life. Perhaps most famous is video footage shot by French filmmaker Jules Naudet who, with his brother Gédéon Naudet, was filming a documentary about New York's Engine 7, Ladder 1 firehouse, located about seven blocks from the World Trade Center. Following Chief Joseph Pfeifer and his fire team as they respond to a reported gas leak, Naudet heard the roar of Flight 11's engine and, tilting his camera up, captured it flying into the building only a block away. The footage the Naudet brothers subsequently captured of the first

responders' rescue efforts was edited into the documentary *9/11*, released by CBS News in March 2002.⁷⁹ More distant footage was captured by a stationary webcam set up by artist Wolfgang Staehle in his friend's apartment on the Brooklyn waterfront. Streaming live, the webcam captured freeze-frame still images four seconds apart, including one frame showing Flight 11 approaching the New York skyline and one frame capturing the moment of impact, as well as subsequent imagery showing the towers collapsing.⁸⁰ Part of a triptych, the New York webcam joined others set up to show a tower in Berlin and a Bavarian monastery, all of which sent their digital images to Postmasters Gallery in Manhattan where they were projected live on the walls of the exhibition. The gallery had not opened yet on September 11th, but viewers in Europe accessed the images in real-time on the streaming website. In 2003, a third video emerged to the public, a video postcard made by Pavel Hlava to send home to family in the Czech Republic. Hlava, his brother Josef, who was visiting, and his boss Mike Cohen, were driving from New York to Pennsylvania and went via the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel so that Pavel and Josef could see the towers up close. Hlava captured Flight 11 as it loomed closer then collided with the north tower before their vehicle entered the tunnel, then videoed for another hour on the other side of the tunnel as the second plane collided and through the collapse of the south tower.⁸¹

A documentary filmmaker, an artist engaged with modern video streaming technology, and a worker making a video souvenir. These three videographers and their

⁷⁹ David Friend, *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11* (I.B.Tauris, 2007), 187.

⁸⁰ Zachary Small, "The Brooklyn Historical Society Will Remember 9/11 With an Artist's Live-Stream of the Attack," *Hyperallergic*, September 10, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/458397/wolfgang-staehle-wtc-9-11/>.

⁸¹ James Glanz, "TWO YEARS LATER: IMAGES; A Rare View Of Sept. 11, Overlooked," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2003, sec. N.Y. / Region, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/nyregion/two-years-later-images-a-rare-view-of-sept-11-overlooked.html>.

footage attest to both the connections video has to truth, art, and memory, and show the haphazard and belated nature of witnessing. Each picked up a video camera because of the truth value ascribed to it: the way a hand-held video camera offers viewers an on-the-shoulder perspective similar if not identical to what the videographer witnesses; the way the real-time streaming of images across the Internet simultaneously creates and transmits an unedited image; the way a loved one's voice, narrating a sight-seeing expedition, can stand in for their presence across long distance. Moreover, as the interest in discovering images of "the" moment — the first impact — attests, video can stand in as a more perfect eye than the human. Though set up or held by human hands, the lens of the video camera has the ability to capture, unintentionally, those things at which we don't yet know to look. All three videos of the "beginning," of the first plane's collision, act as witnesses before there is something to witness.

In this way, these videos embody the fundamental lack inherent in witnesses, as described by philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben considers specifically the problem of witnessing in the context of the Shoah.⁸² He argues that, at its core, testimony contains a lacuna:

At its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who 'touched bottom'...The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony.⁸³

That is, the testimony of survivors stands in for the testimony that cannot be given, that of the dead or those whom trauma has rendered unable to speak. In the case of September

⁸² In the first section, Agamben writes on his refusal to use the term "Holocaust" and I follow his lead here. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

⁸³ Agamben, 34.

11th, too, surviving witnesses, including technological witnesses such as video, can only approximate the experiences of the “complete witnesses.”

Our unnamed reporter’s confession, so entangled with acts of witnessing and mediation, shows in uncomfortable flashes these moments of distance. In the last segment of the video — which is, of course, the beginning of the interview — the reporter seems to respond to a question from Collins, though any such prompting Collins edits out. “You mean like that morning?” the reporter asks, a clarifying question that nonetheless suggests the indeterminacy of witnessing. At what moment does witnessing begin? That morning, he says, he was late for work, still at home just before nine in the morning: “I should have, I had meant to have gone in super early, and I was maybe just going to be on time, maybe.” It’s unclear, though, if his lateness was incidental, allowing him to witness the earliest reporting of the first collision, which happened at 8:46 am, or if watching it made him late. Is he a witness then, when he’s first made aware of the incident, or later, when he actually gets close to the World Trade Center? How proximal must a witness be? His narrative drifts into the more firmly confessional at moments when, rather than relate his actions that morning, he gets close to suggesting his emotional response. At one moment near the end of the video, he relates standing in the newsroom at his paper, preparing to leave and go downtown, when an editor comes over to tell him and a colleague that the first tower had collapsed:

...me and her looked at each other and we laughed. It was strange, because it was like, “You’re kidding? That thing didn’t fall.” But clearly it had. It’s strange. I always feel like she — I don’t feel guilty about that at all, but she’s much more kind of straight-laced and I always think she feels guilty about that and I often tell her, you know, it was perfectly fine that we had a good laugh about that first tower coming down. Because what other reaction are you meant to have exactly?

Here, we see both his distance from the event — hearing about it third hand — and a

simultaneous confession and absolution of any guilt of which we, viewers, might accuse him. He doesn't feel guilty, he declares, and it is unfair to think he should. In this moment, one of the few where he verbally shows uncertainty with his own reactions, he repeats and interrupts himself, shaking his head at the camera to punctuate his point. At the end, he turns one palm upwards, emphasizing the rhetorical question with which he ends: "what other reaction are you meant to have exactly?" I am simply human, this question argues, I responded appropriately, I should not be punished or thought ill of. With this, his confession works not precisely to absolve him from his guilt, but to excuse its lack.

The modes of video covered here converge on a single concern: the judgment of worthiness. Who, the makeover show asks, has sufficiently suffered and therefore deserves help? Who, the crime show asks, has violated laws and therefore deserves punishment? Who, the news channel asks, has experienced a collective trauma and therefore belongs to the nation? Whose memories are close enough to act as witnesses? Whose confessions do we hear, and to whom do we grant forgiveness? Whose confessions spark from penance, and who seeks an excuse to cover bad behavior?

In their key text on testimony, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dori Laub consider confession in a few places, where it appears as either a clinical operation or as a method of excusing one's behavior. Reading Fyoder Dostoevsky's existentialist novella *Notes from Underground*, Felman describes it as a confession "that spites healing and does not seek cure."⁸⁴ In deconstructing and rejecting the clinical logic of confession,

⁸⁴ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11.

Felman suggests, Dostoevsky's text shifts from confession, primarily focused on the healing of the self, to testimony, encompassing "the political dimension of oppression and the ethical dimension of resistance."⁸⁵ Here, it is the attention to the historical occurrence rather than an internal state of being that marks testimony rather than confession. Yet, even within this brief case study of Dostoevsky's text, the fluidity of the terms used, with confession most always in quotation marks, suggests a slippage between the spheres with which Felman, concerned more primarily with testimony, spends little time. For instance: "The testimony to the sickness encompasses, in fact, at once the history that lurks behind the clinical manifestations and the political oppression that *signals mutely from behind the clinical 'confession.'*"⁸⁶ The institutional language, here, acts as a screen for the testimony that emerges, in Felman's reading. In my attention to the workings of confession, though, I would offer a slant-ways reading of Felman's proposition: figured as both institutional and individual, the confession masks its own investment in historical context and oppression. Offered as a democratic tool of self-knowledge, the confession seems almost to operate freely, with interest only in individual internal states of being. However, as we will see again and again throughout this dissertation, confession is in fact deeply enmeshed in historical, political, and social occurrences and networks of power; testimonies of political oppression may signal mutely from behind a confession not because it is not equipped to handle them, but because its ubiquity depends on their elision. Foucault states that confession must be both integral and voluntary, that is, interwoven into the spaces of everyday life and yet freely

⁸⁵ Felman and Laub, 12.

⁸⁶ Italics mine. Felman and Laub, 12.

partaken, mandatory but consensual.⁸⁷ To work properly, confession must always mask its own coercions.

Felman addresses this masking more directly in a later chapter focused on the works of Belgian-born literary critic Paul de Man. In this chapter, Felman re-reads de Man's work through the lens of secrecy and silence, to ask what we make of his influential criticism once we know that de Man contributed a literary column for Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* in 1941-42, after its seizure by the Nazis in 1940, and that throughout the rest of his writing he never offers a confession of these activities. Felman closely reads those *Le Soir* columns, de Man's translation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and, most pertinent for my purposes, a late-career essay on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* in order to suggest that the problem of witnessing permeates his work. In his essay, entitled "Excuses (*Confessions*)," de Man considers the role of excuses in the construction of confessions asking for absolution. Excuses, or articulations of the context and circumstances of knowledge and intent around an action, occur "within an epistemological twilight zone between knowing and not-knowing"; to perform an excuse is to suggest that one now knows better than one did before.⁸⁸ Excuses therefore operate to absolve individuals of guilt through a focus on intent rather than result through an articulation of one's internal knowledge or feeling.

In reading "Excuses (*Confessions*)" Felman takes the title at its word, in a way, letting excuses/confessions operate as synonyms. Felman suggests that de Man never offers a confession of his past actions precisely because he "knows that no excuse, and no

⁸⁷ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 188–89.

⁸⁸ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 286.

confession, can undo the violence of his initial wartime writing.”⁸⁹ De Man states of confession that it sidesteps ethical questions of good and evil in favor of those of truth and falsehood. By confessing, de Man argues, “the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start in the clarified atmosphere of a truth that does not hesitate to reveal the crime in all its horror....Confessions occur in the name of an absolute truth which is said to exist ‘for itself’ ... and of which particular truths are only derivative and secondary aspects.”⁹⁰ The slippage between confession and excuse occurs through this condition of ethical balance wherein telling the truth itself becomes the moral imperative, rather than evaluating the morality of one’s thoughts and actions. In this way, for de Man and, in reading his work, for Felman, confessions operate to excuse behavior, the act of truth-telling carrying with it an implied demand for absolution regarding the truth being told.

Excuses and confessions, Felman suggests, are “all too *readable*: partaking of the continuity of conscious meaning and of the illusion of the restoration of coherence, what de Man calls ‘the readability of...apologetic discourse’...pretends to reduce historical scandals to mere sense and to eliminate the unassimilable shock of history.”⁹¹ Here, Felman gestures toward the simultaneous impetus to continuously survey one’s own thoughts and the promise confession offers to make sense of them. Foucault describes this as a “technology of the self” that “takes shape in the constitution of thought as a field of subjective data which is to be interpreted”; that is, the determination that every thought both can and must be examined, categorized, and ascribed meaning.⁹² As Felman points

⁸⁹ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 150.

⁹⁰ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 279.

⁹¹ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 151.

⁹² Michel Foucault, Sylvère Lotringer, and Lysa Hochroth, *The Politics of Truth*, Semiotext(e) Foreign

out, this reduction to “mere sense” cannot account for the vast machinations of history, politics, cruelty, and trauma. It cannot change the results of any action. For Felman, it is testimony rather than confession that might offer change: “as opposed to confession, the meaning of the testimony is not completely known, even by its author, before and after its production.”⁹³ In this interpretation, the meaning of confession is knowable before its utterance, particularly by its author. Here, Felman indicates what I call the promise of confession, with what she identifies as “the demand for absolution that every confession necessarily implies” as a knowable end.⁹⁴ My more generous reading of confession begins to part ways with her here, but I read the presence of that demand for absolution as one of the complicating factors in considering what it means to exist in a confessional culture.

I read the line between confession and testimony as much hazier than Felman does precisely because I believe confession operates in multivalent and sometimes contradictory ways. What brings these different expressions together is both the promise of transformation and a grasping towards relationality. If we regard every confession with suspicion that it is predetermined, rehearsed, and acts as an excuse for behavior, we miss the ways confession can also work as a plea for acceptance and affirmation, as a way of claiming subjectivity, and as a way of grappling with the shame of victimization. On the other hand, if we praise too warmly confession’s ability to constitute and maintain our positions in society, we miss the way confession serves to mask institutional power and culpability in the language of individual shame. However, Felman’s reading of de Man serves us well here. While I argue, broadly, that the plea for relationality offered by

Agents Series (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 188.

⁹³ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 163.

⁹⁴ Felman and Laub, 149.

confession is precarious, dependent as it is on a response from the listener(s), the use of video in these works renders the listeners' power more impotent. Because they offer anonymous figures, recorded in the past, in conventions that relate to the use of video in news and entertainment media, these two works present us with confessions that we have little power to reject. Thus, I argue, they require us to contend with not simply our own judgment of the acts confessed, but more broadly with our understandings of worth, power, victimhood, and justice.

The displays of both works place viewers and subjects in close physical and emotional proximity, engendering an uneasy intimacy. For *Hero*, the mock living room offered by the small sofa and large television suggests the closeness and domesticity of home. *Confess All...*, nestled in a dark booth, requires viewers not only to stand close to the television screen as though in conversation with the masked subjects, but close with one another, aware of the presence of the maybe-strangers with whom one shares the space. In this way, the works create a familiarity between subject and viewer, who relate on a similar scale in a confined, discrete space, quite unlike the experience of a large cinema or black box viewing space in a museum. We, the viewing audience, are made both to be the confessors, listening and judging, and reminded of our own positions as confessing subjects.

The works implicate us as listeners, particularly in the places where the confessions offered operate through a kind of meta-knowledge, enacting the very thing being confessed. Across this dissertation, I argue that the listeners involved in confession are never simply passive receptacles, that their (frequently *our*) presence both demands the act of confession and is in turn impacted by it. Power, influence, shame, coercion,

affection, acceptance, and denial flow multi-directionally between and through the participants in confession rituals. Multivalent and often embodied, this flow of impact and interference becomes especially discernible at moments when Wearing's subjects discuss sexual experiences. Of the ten confessions, six of them deal with current or previous sexual experiences or practices, and three of the remaining four with sexual identity, sex work, or relationships. In this, the work accords with Foucault's conceptualization of confession as intimately entangled with the sexual domain. As he argues, within the confessional framework, the "most discrete event in one's sexual behavior — whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or an excess — was deemed capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one's existence."⁹⁵ In this way, we see participants affirm that their sexual desires and histories have long-lasting influences. In one case, a fetish for transvestism "can destroy a relationship"; in another, an encounter with a sex worker leaves the participant feeling "pathetic" and unable to continue life as usual; in another, witnessing his siblings kissing one another left the participant with "a total suppression of [his] character" and unable to have relationships. Some of them articulate that confessing here, on video for an artwork, is part of a therapeutic process alongside counseling or psychiatric care, affirming the relationship between confession and psychoanalysis.

In some cases, though, the confessional promise of transformation seems linked not a process of healing from difficult sexual histories so much as part of potentially ongoing sexual gratification. In one, for instance, a man describes an ongoing sexual relationship based on coercion and humiliation. Appearing in a clownish mask with an oversized, red-tipped nose and a grinning mouth with large teeth, he describes an incident in which a

⁹⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 65.

woman instructed him to put on lingerie and tight stretch leggings, a blouse, and high heels before taking him to a pub. The description of this clothing contrasts sharply with both the mask, with its waxy texture and rigid grin offering a surreal jollity, and the black shirt and collared jacket he wears, visible just to the shoulders. While the actions he describes seem at first to be part of a consensual relationship of domination and submission, wherein “punishment” for small infractions like arriving late are opportunities to stage humiliating exercises, later he suggests that he continues because otherwise “she’ll send off letters to my boss at work.” At that point, he reveals that his presence on the video is part of this coercion: “She was the one who told me to come along to do this session today and said if I didn’t she would punish me. And that’s my story.” His gaze slides to one side, the lack of eye contact appearing sheepishly embarrassed, a strange contrast to the clown mask’s wide-mouthed smile. The viewer’s involvement here is uneasy, and unclear: are we, as the imagined audience, part of his sexual play, or belated witness to an act of coercion?

One participant, the penultimate confession, wears a long black wig with blunt bangs and teased volume, as though embodying the studied carelessness of a rock star. His mouth is lacquered red and his eyes delineated with a swipe of eyeliner. The makeup, here, operates to mask and over-emphasize his features. Yet, as his confession reveals, he identifies as a transvestite who enjoys wearing women’s clothing. This is, unfortunately, something that “causes distress and unhappiness to myself and those around me.” The makeup, this confession suggests, is not necessarily part of a disguise but an enactment of his secret and, it seems from his confession, something from which he is perhaps now distant. The disguise, here, allows for the pleasures of both anonymity and the

gratification of his fetish.

In another, the confessional promise conflates with sexual release as the participant details a long history of making anonymous phone calls for sexual gratification. His confession proceeds as though rehearsed, his voice measured as he begins by stating that his confession “is about a subject dear to us all: sex.” He offers a progression of his own sexual history in anonymous encounters, including with sex workers, before moving on to describing his desire to make anonymous phone calls. Wearing a curly brown wig and a craggy, elderly-looking mask, his eyes are clearly visible as he faces forward and frequently makes eye contact with the camera. With his expression concealed, this eye contact takes on an intensity, the only means through which we might detect a hint of shame or, as I uncomfortably read it, the rise of his own gratification. He reveals that his pleasure in calling up random phone numbers with sexually explicit questions became almost necessary in order to orgasm before detailing his techniques for finding women’s numbers in newspaper advertisements for wedding dresses, flatshares, or children’s clothing. While he describes the different responses he receives — hang-ups, anger, or sometimes interest — he shows no preference for a specific response. Here, our implication in the subject’s sexual pleasure is even more apparent, as the distance and anonymity of a phone call is repeated in the process of video recording and later playback. His continual return to these phone calls over decades of his life attests to gratification in the power of non-consensual harassment, in forcing a response — any response. My listening to this confession, the carefully rehearsed words quickened by excitement, makes my skin crawl. Here, I am forced to recognize that my response of revulsion, of refusal, does nothing to deny this subject’s confession. Rather, my

discomfort affirms the relational quality of confession, accedes to its demands.

In other cases, we're invited to sympathize with — and, indeed, enjoy — the illegal acts of the subjects. Some of the examples offer clear cases of law-breaking and revenge: fraudulent credit card charges and blackmail; drug use, violence, and coerced pornography; stolen computers; disgusting pranks involving bodily waste. Yet, with these instances the subjects either indicate remorse, as in the case of the subject confessing to getting involved in making pornography, and the one involved in stealing computers from a school, or position themselves as the wronged individual gaining rightful revenge. In these cases, we are invited to experience the intoxicating taste of well-earned vengeance when one man serves a scab-covered pizza to his homophobic boss or a woman runs up charges on her philandering boyfriend's credit card. They aren't sorry and we cannot require penance; rather, we're invited to revel in the secretive pleasure of getting one over on someone who has wronged them.

This imbrication of the artist and viewer in the sexual gratification and satisfying revenge stories of these subjects illuminates the necessarily relational quality of confession in uneasy ways. The promise of confession, as I've argued, is the potential for transformation. While this transformation may be wrought within the individual, it is also inherently social. Confess, it says, and be brought back into the fold. I would argue that we often read confessions as narcissistic or conniving not solely because they're offered selfishly, but because they demand something of their listener, whether that's bearing witness, implication, acceptance, or absolution. Confessions are a way to lay claim on the social, to declare oneself part of a society — despite past deeds or thoughts. Further, though, that claim is inherently relational: as listeners to confession we are implicated not

simply in the absolution but also the enfolding of the individual back into society. That implication becomes far more uncomfortable when faced with the carefully composed and unrelenting confession of someone who finds sexual gratification through harassment and clearly does not intend to stop, or with a confession that might be part of a sexual game or might be blackmail, or, as Felman explores in relation to de Man's work, with an (imagined) confession related to past Nazi collaboration by someone well enfolded within the literary academy.

The implication of the viewer does not end in the act of listening. Wearing's title, *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian*, reiterates her presence and her process while also addressing us as possible subjects. We are at once reminded of her artistic hand in developing the concept, providing disguises, framing the subjects, editing the content, and choosing the display method and called up to participate. *Call Gillian*, the work suggests, rhetorically placing us in front of the camera ourselves. Would listeners react to our secrets with empathy, pity, revulsion? In watching these figures, are we able to distance ourselves, or, rather, are we called to remember our own embarrassing, difficult, or guilty pasts? As we parse out the merest detail of eye contact or wavering voice, we too are reminded that our own confessions will be subject to this aesthetic judgment. In this way, her work refuses us the position of unbiased judge as we grapple with the demand to accept these disparate confessions and to consider our own.

In *Hero*, we too are addressed as possible confessing subjects. The reporter begins his story in a place familiar to many of us: recalling where he was when he first saw news of planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers. As I've argued, this taps into the

idea of September 11th, 2001, as a collective trauma, an interruption in the flow of everyday life. His confessions of laughter and disbelief, too, call to us to sympathize: “What other reaction are you meant to have, exactly?” Here, we too might imagine ourselves confessing our own reactions, especially those that might be deemed inappropriate. However, unlike Wearing’s piece, in which the suggestion that we, too, confess comes upfront in the title, here we arrive at this place of implication after trekking through the rest of the piece, replete as it is with reminders of the ways news media interprets and influences our experiences. Our own memories and emotional responses are called into question. Are they our own, or are they manipulated? If we viewed the events through the screen of a television, can we say that our memories are individual and personal? How much does the repetition of facts and of imagery solidify certain impressions and erase others?

While Wearing offers ten subjects, some repulsive and some sympathetic depending on your point of view, Collins gives us one man, albeit shifting in tone as his drunkenness lifts. Responses by viewers to his demeanor vary, even throughout the experience of watching or in reflecting back on the work. Arts critic Caoimbin Mac Giolla Leith, in a review of the first exhibition of *Hero*, at the Kerlin Gallery in Dublin, finds the reporter “thoughtful and sympathetic” in his attempts to “address the unspeakable.”⁹⁶ Mac Giolla Leith credits the “disarming but never irresponsible charm of Collins’s work” in making “something so outrageously manipulative...genuinely moving,” a generous reading of the work’s inaugural show.⁹⁷ A few years later, art historian and curator Lawrence Rinder writes in a catalogue of an exhibition of Collins’s work at the Milton Keynes Gallery that

⁹⁶ Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, “Phil Collins,” *Artforum International*; New York, 2002, 189, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/214347049/abstract/83B1155634543DDPQ/2>.

⁹⁷ Mac Giolla Leith, 189.

Hero is “steeped in *schadenfreude* and even possess[es] a touch of sadism” in the clear manipulation of the reporter by Collins’s alcohol-plying arm.⁹⁸ However, he notes that the work, first exhibited a mere year after September 11th, 2001, now “seem almost refreshingly innocent, artifacts of a time when the violation of human dignity in the democratic West was still considered an anomaly and an embarrassment.”⁹⁹ The tongue-and-cheek presentation of Collins’s relatively benign manipulation and of the modest aspirations of the reporter, undercut by Mariah Carey’s reassurance that there’s a hero inside each of us, seem almost quaint in comparison to the later-revealed horrors of the U.S. Army’s treatment of detained people in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Yet, as Rinder notes, the bumbling ineffectuality of the reporter and the saccharine pop ballad both “expose the impenetrable and insipid adolescence that pervades America’s national psyche.”¹⁰⁰ As Allen Meek, cited above, argues, the construction of the American nation as innocent undergirds the entire construction of September 11th as a national tragedy and provides an excuse for the invasion of multiple countries in the name of anti-terrorism. Both critics suggest that the overtones of manipulation in Collins’s presentation contrast with the sympathetic innocence of his subject. However, we can see a more pointed criticism of the repercussions of this performative innocence in Linder’s essay, offered with more distance from the events of September 11th, 2001, and awareness of the intervening years.

Almost singularly amongst Collins’s work, the two September 11th pieces, *Hero* and *Enduring Freedom*, are suffused with a cynicism lacking in his other works. The similarly-timed *Young Serbs* (2001), for instance, comprises large-scale photographic

⁹⁸ Brief essay by Rinder in Collins and Milton Keynes Gallery, *Yeah.....You, Baby You*, 77.

⁹⁹ Collins and Milton Keynes Gallery, 77.

¹⁰⁰ Collins and Milton Keynes Gallery, *Yeah.....You, Baby You*.

portraits of young people from Belgrade, each shot in close up lying in the grass. Their gentle, soft expressions are warmly lit by the overhead sun. *Baghdad Screentests* (2002) delivers silent, closely cropped footage of actors in Baghdad, alternately smiling, bored, and defiant as they await instructions that do not come. One of his most famous works, *They Shoot Horses* (2004), a two-channel video work, captures young people from Ramallah dancing for eight hours. Full of the endearing awkwardness of gangling teenage bodies, the catchy and saccharine tunes of Western pop songs, and the tenderness of friends as they dance, sing, and rest together, the work is replete with fondness for this youthful vitality. In each of these cases, Collins works in places known in the U.S. and Western Europe for their contemporary conditions of warfare. In *Hero* and *Enduring Freedom*, on the other hand, he turns his lens on the repercussions of a discreet event. In all cases, he looks askance at the concept of “victimhood,” offering tender, defiant, joyful complexity in spaces construed as “war-torn” and sardonic apathy underlying the construction of the victimhood of the United States.

In this, Collins continually investigates narratives of cultural and national power. The reporter’s confession becomes less about his own experience and more about the happenstance and market-driven nature of contemporary reportage and, importantly, the role that work plays in the construction of national identity and policy. While a viewer might certainly find a sympathetic connection to his testimony, as Mac Giolla Leith does, I find myself returning to Felman’s interpretation of confession-as-excuse. Collins’s bumbling reporter, who finds such stress in picking out just the right celebrity gossip to sell papers and who was so vastly unprepared to report on the events of September 11th, 2001, stands in as American Innocence. If things simply happen to us, the nation, while

we're preoccupied with harmless hobbies, we cannot be faulted for our responses. If we believed invading Afghanistan was a correct and moral decision after twenty-four-hour repetitive coverage of uninterpreted and decontextualized death, destruction, and trauma, we cannot be faulted for our lack of foresight. Here, the power implications of the confessional promise arise more starkly. The mechanical operations of confession, wresting out from our depths difficult thoughts, emotions, and experiences, and its resultant truth value mean that the confessional form is, of course, ripe to appropriate for all manner of ideologies.

Viewed now two to three decades later, both works seem to carry a prophetic banality. In the interceding years since Wearing first placed her advertisement in *Time Out*, outlets for semi-anonymous public confession have proliferated so that any one of her subjects could now turn not to an artist but to Snapchat, Reddit, Instagram. Further, the video confessions of reality television that were, in 1994, only occasionally recognizable, have become not just commonplace but comical, fodder for gifs, repurposed for memes and disseminated far from their original context. The masked and wigged figures of her subjects, a little garish and awkward, seem to point to the heights of absurdity and, indeed, exploitation that the reality television medium would reach in the early 2000s. The plastic-wrapped face of her third confessant, with her eyes swollen by pressure and her nose smooshed off-center, precedes women sliced open, broken, and remade on plastic surgery-focused shows like *Extreme Makeover* (2002-2007, ABC) or *The Swan* (2004, Fox). The sexual predilections of multiple subjects would be equally at home on *The Bachelor* (2002-present, ABC) or *Love Island* (2005-6, 2015-present, ITV). The media manipulations suggested by *Hero* appear in hindsight to be an early way point

on the road that would bring us to an era of fake news, alternative facts, and the ultimate collision of reality TV and politics in the form of a reality television bombast as president. The truth value that confession claims, generated through the expression of emotion and the engendering of relationality, must be implicated in the use of emotional rhetoric to claim non-empirical truths. And yet — for there is always an *and yet* — its long-reaching influences cannot be merely dismissed, but rather should be understood as replete with variability, discomfort, validation, manipulation, and the full spectrum of human emotion.

Chapter Two: Authority

Across this dissertation, I arrange works of art, line them up and group them together, and make them speak. I listen to their utterances and read their gestures, decipher their blushes and averted gazes, dig into their silences and prod them for meaning. I draw conclusions; I make pronouncements; I declare their truths. I call them to confess.

Further, as an art historian, I make use of my authority to back up these claims, to lend weight to my judgments, to render my words true. My methods, my objects, my ways of looking, examining, listening, and proclaiming all carry with them gravity bestowed by the academic institutions in which I operate. My vested power as an art historian is to make artworks confess *and*, importantly, to render those confessions felicitous. Confession, in my working definition as outlined in the introduction, is a performative; it *does* something to the person confessing. Performatives, as J.L. Austin argues, must satisfy certain conditions in order to be considered felicitous, the first of which concerns the circumstances of authorization:

There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further...the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.¹⁰¹

The individuals involved, therefore, must have the appropriate position or authority for the context: a police officer has no authority to take a religious confession, a priest none to process a criminal confession. This vested authority carries multiple roles: the one who listens, as Foucault states, “was the master of truth...his power was not only to demand it before it was made, or decide what was to follow after it, but also to constitute a

¹⁰¹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14–15.

discourse of truth on the basis of its decipherment.”¹⁰² The power to demand, listen, and decide also includes the power to transform: words to truth, sinner to forgiven, accused to felon. This power is not immanently bestowed or unidirectional, but exists within and across all types of relationships, is continually re-negotiated, transformed, and strengthened, and while it may be most visible in the apparatus of the State or the Church, those sites are its “institutional crystallization[s],” the terminal but not exclusive form power takes.¹⁰³ In this chapter, I consider the repetitious, self-reproducing, networked nature of power through the representation of specific figures of authority within broader negotiations of power. I examine works by artists who closely approach, entangle with, and embody those appropriate powers; they imitate and re-present, yes, but they also sidle up closely to actual interrogators, actual lawyers, actual priests. I consider the ways those brushes with authority lend weight to the artworks produced and, more significantly, the way those sites of power entangle with the authority of the artist, vested with the power of the museum and gallery system. In stumbling occasionally, in offering uncertainty in the face of questions, in pronouncing not clarity but doubt around my objects, I also suggest that my role as an interrogator is prone to vicissitudes and fissures and my power far from absolute.

In Coco Fusco’s 2006 video, *Operation Atropos*, a simulated interrogation scenario puts the artist and a group of female volunteers under the authority of former United States Army interrogators. During the three-day simulation documented by the video, the interrogators use methods of disorientation, exhaustion, humiliation, and fear in order to provoke the participants to reveal secret information, then, on the last day, teach Fusco

¹⁰² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 67.

¹⁰³ Foucault, 93.

and her volunteers some of those techniques. The video footage, which is cut with interviews with the interrogators regarding their training and the justification for the methods used, highlights the theatrical quality to these forms of interrogation, dependent as they are on acting and improvisation. Here, though, theatrical does not mean false; underpinning the video as well as the other projects Fusco made from this experience is a sense of the very real consequences of such methods.

Artist, poet, and criminal appellate attorney Vanessa Place similarly troubles the relationship between “real” authority and the fiction of art in her participatory and performance piece *The Lawyer is Present* (2013). For three days, Place received the confessions of visitors to the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art then, on the final day, performed those confessions with identifying details removed. Visitors could also choose to have their confessions remain secret by paying \$105 per hour, the state-set rate for appointed defense attorneys in California, where Place practices. In this way, Place entangles her role as attorney and artist while also requiring participants to consider their desire to confess and their relationship with the institutions of the museum and legal system — likely very different from many of the felons Place represents as an appellate attorney.

I close the chapter with a work made on a smaller scale, concerned with the lived realities of a specific community. For *Good Confession* (1997), a video installation piece by Pauline Cummins, the artist worked with the inhabitants of inner-city North Dublin to draw on, and perhaps redirect, the authority of the local parish church. Cummins recorded participants of the neighborhood, which bore a legacy of tenement slum housing and a contemporary crisis of unemployment and drug use, speaking their hopes for the future of

the area. The resultant video took the place of the parish priest, situated in the confessional booth of the church, so parishioners could visit and, rather than give their usual confession, listen to the hopes of their neighbors.

Thus, I bring together three projects concerned directly and primarily with the institutions, mechanisms, and logics of the authorities that demand and authorize confession. Asking questions of the use of “enhanced interrogation” by the US military, of the role of defense attorneys in asserting the legal rights of accused criminals, and of the position of the Catholic Church in working class, urban neighborhoods, the projects here confront and reinterpret the sites, rituals, and techniques of power in confessional relationships. Further, though, I argue that in each project, the entwining of *artistic* authority with that of the US military, the US legal system, and the Catholic Church at once draws attention to the dramatized theatricality of confession, with its actors, scripts, sets, and improvisations, and underlines the truth value both sets of authority profess to hold. In revealing the mechanisms of power that drive confession, these artists make those institutions confess. The scenes laid and the dramatics performed in each project, too, seem at once to rely on the ability of art to reveal truth and to denature that function through artifice. In each, the artists mediate the relationships of power in institutional confession, alternately standing in as confessor, confessee, and translator in order to facilitate confession rituals that look askance at their own making.

In this chapter, a number of confessional authorities converge. As discussed in the introduction, the fundamentally performative nature of confession rituals requires the participants and situation to meet certain criteria. In performatives, as J.L. Austin argues, a connection exists between external circumstances, such as the following of a particular

procedure or ritual by appropriate persons, and internal feelings and intentions that accord with the performative statement. In the development of medieval monastic confession, as outlined by Foucault, a “total penetration of one’s entire existence and of all one’s actions with the will of another” ensured that confession existed not simply in the moment of utterance, but continually.¹⁰⁴ Thus developed, from the medieval moment to our own, a system of internalized self-scrutiny under the diffuse and penetrating authorities that demand confession.

The works under examination in this chapter bring their attention to specific figures of confessional institutions — the army interrogator, the criminal defense attorney, the priest — while also engaging with, and making more visible, the system of continual, regularized, internalized self-surveillance required by confession. The confessional instant, the moment of verbal expression, does have its place in these works, but in each the ever-present apparatus of confession lurks in the spaces and formal qualities of the projects. In creating these works, which each have a participatory element, within the context and purview of museums and galleries, further, these artists rely on the apparent truth-telling qualities of those institutions. These works make sense and make truth because of their entanglement within and between the spaces of art exhibition and the regulatory institutions of the army, legal system, and Catholic Church; both sources of authorization are necessary to make the confessions within felicitous.

In focusing closely on the loci of power in confessional situations, these artists highlight the way that power is developed through ideologies regarding the role of knowledge in military, legal, and religious spaces and then concentrated into the acts of specific, vested, individuals. Further than that, though, they offer situations in which the

¹⁰⁴ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 139.

moment of vocal confession is either occluded, duplicated, or redirected, its presence shifting and slippery, and the action around the confession brought to the fore. In this way, these works show not only the exercise of power by individuals and institutions, but the way that power depends on a total system of theatrical dominance, individual self-surveillance, and the integration of confession into communal life. Intentionally or not, these acts, too, highlight the similarities between these institutions and the art world. Art, too, demands confession: of its artists, of its subjects, of its audiences, of its social context. Both aesthetic experience and confession rituals are imagined as revelatory, transformative, and possessing a connection to the truth. This connotation is particularly prevalent in participatory works, in which participation in acts of making seem to offer a transformation of the self. For instance, philosopher Jacques Rancière, in formulating his conception of an “emancipated” spectator, suggests that in rethinking the dichotomy between viewing and acting, we can change the ways individuals relate to social collectives. An emancipated aesthetic experience, he suggests, has the ability to “change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible...[and allow] for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation.”¹⁰⁵ For Rancière, and for many artists, curators, organizers, and participants in participatory art, the experience of active engagement with art has the possibility to change ways of thinking — what is perceptible, thinkable, feasible — not simply on an individual level, but collectively, bringing with it the potential for political change. In this chapter, I look sideways at Rancière’s suggestion, bringing a sort of loving skepticism to his claims. The works I examine seem to promise that precise revelation, that new cartography, through their confessional experiences; yet, as I will show, the power of

¹⁰⁵ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 72.

artistic transformation is undermined by the seemingly overwhelming powers with which it engages.

In this chapter, I will focus less on the content of the confessions themselves than on the systems, spaces, and interactions in which they are produced. In this way, I consider not the experiences of individual participants but the ways these works mimic systems of power that compel confessions and thus to what extent a destabilization of such systems is or is not inherent in the formal qualities of the projects. In addition, the nature of these works, particularly those of Place and Cummins, means that I do not have access to the personal experiences of participants. I did not participate and, perhaps more importantly to an art historian, little to no documentation exists of either work, of the experiences or responses of participants, or even of the visual, aural, and temporal qualities of the video and performance components in exhibition. As the confessor of these artworks, my abilities are limited by what I can call forth from them, which includes the memories of the artists themselves, years — and in Cummins’s case, decades — after the creation of the works. In addition, when addressing participatory works, as I do here, I exercise caution when discussing the transformative potential of specific, individual experiences. I do not wish to deny the individual feelings of participants nor paternalistically suggest that they were duped or placated in finding those experiences powerful. What I read, therefore, is the logic of these works’ creation: the contexts of their making, the systems in which they participate, and the components they bring together. The words uttered by all involved — the harsh commands of Fusco’s interrogators, Place’s deadpan delivery of the words of museum participants and convicted rapists alike, the weary hopefulness of north Dublin parishioners — *do* have

meaning, and yet, in the manner of participatory and unscripted art, are in some ways inconsequential and subsequent to the form of the projects. For me, concerned with teasing out the confessions of these works, I focus not on those words that sit on their surfaces, but on their basic assumptions, their logic and frameworks. In this way, I reveal that my power, too, is contingent and fragmentary, dependent as it is on the compliance of my objects.

In examining the drama — the artistry — involved in acts of coaxing confessions, these works underline the training, the practice, the careful study required of confessors. The works of art under discussion in this chapter focus closely on not only institutions of authority, but specific and particular figures, spaces, and acts that authorize, require, promote, and make use of confession. Authority, here, is specific: the interrogator, the defense attorney, the priest. Crashing against, embodying, and supplanting those figures of authority, these artists draw on the truth value of actual power. Throughout, I use the term “actual” to delineate the professional training and practice of some of the individuals encountered and the consequences of their actions outside of the artistic context. Even as an adjective, the word carries with it a connotation of its verb form, to actualize, emphasizing not the immanence of a fact but its being *made* into being. Their projects take on a documentary air, a blush of the real, due to the proximity to military, legal, and religious sites and figures of power. Yet, the blush art leaves upon these figures, in turn, reminds us that their power, too, is socially constructed, agreed upon through the repetition of norms.

I argue that these works seek to destabilize those figures by revealing the contingent nature of their power. Highlighting the parallel confessional structures of art and military,

legal, and religious systems, these artists suggest similarity between their own roles and those of the interrogators, lawyers, and priests. And yet: they are not, cannot be, coequal. In comparison, in brushing up against *actual* authority, the abilities of these artists seem paltry. What power does Coco Fusco have, dressed in orange jumpsuit or military uniform, when the actual US military continues practices of torture? What do art-goers in Boulder learn about confession in the criminal justice system by experiencing Vanessa Place's stylized facsimile? How do the "good confessions" videoed by Pauline Cummins actually help change systemic issues of poverty and drug use?

It is, perhaps, an unusual choice to begin by arguing that artworks cannot, in fact, *do* much of anything. However, the question of *doing* becomes particularly important in reading participatory works, which often are tinged with a hint of activism. As I present in my introduction, recent art historical scholarship argues this question, as scholars of participatory art consider the entanglements between art and social practice. Few art historians suggest that participatory art has, by its nature, specific, measurable material results; rather, the discussion around its *doing* largely considers the ways participatory art opens dialogues, suggests affiliations, and promotes new ways of considering the world. In defining his term "relational aesthetics," Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the most pressing concern of artists working in a relational mode is "the freeing-up of inter-human communications, the dimensional emancipation of existence."¹⁰⁶ Jacques Rancière, as cited above, finds interest in the Marxist possibilities of art to produce emancipated spectators interested in "new possibilities of collective enunciation."¹⁰⁷ Grant Kester, in his examination of collaborative art, suggests a common ability of such works "to open

¹⁰⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 60.

¹⁰⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 72.

space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions.”¹⁰⁸ With the blessing of these critics, we are freed from determining the success or failure of participatory works based on material, quantifiable, or political results and to turn our attention instead to the ways they suggest new possibilities for human communication and collectivity. This approach, I argue, is fundamentally confessional, promising as it does the revelation of something hitherto unknown, the tantalizing possibility of discovering new ways of knowing oneself and one’s relationship to the rest of society, the pleasures of laying bare operations of power for all to see.

Throughout this dissertation, I engage works which, to greater or smaller extent, grapple with this confessional possibility of art. At times, I, too, embrace with cautious hope Bourriaud’s “freeing-up,” Rancière’s “new possibilities,” Kester’s “opened space,” the potential for aesthetic and relational experience to offer us something well beyond complaisance or bleak despair. In this chapter, though, I belie their approaches with a loving skepticism, suggesting not that such potential is impossible, but that within some works, it is precisely the failure to live up to that promise to which we must attend. The skepticism I exhibit here is not absolute. Artworks, after all, do lots of things, and to read works solely through their material effects on broader systems fails to consider the nuance of individual and interpersonal experience. Indeed, this standard of material change is not one we often apply even to systems outside of the art world. The very institutions with which these artists contend do, also, fail to live up to their confessional promises regularly — the military relying on “advanced interrogation” even while expert scholarship reveals its inefficacy, the U.S. legal system fraught with biases and contradictions, the Catholic Church enabling and covering up abuse — and yet, hold deep

¹⁰⁸ Kester, *The One and the Many*, 11.

and vast influence and power. Throughout this chapter, I will indeed articulate many of the things these works do: the effects of their aesthetic forms, the responses provoked in viewers, critics, and art historians, and the histories and connotations upon which they call. But I am also interested in what they do not do, particularly under the combined weight of confessional practices both artistic and institutional. That is, I suggest that in reading these three works in concert we might consider the ways they undermine, nuance, and indeed, utterly fail to live up to the revelatory promise of art. They do not — cannot — affirm conclusions, effect material changes, or provide transformation. It is in these failures I wish to dwell.

In this, I borrow Claire Bishop's wariness toward the insistence on reading participatory work through an ethical lens — the rating of their collaborative "goodness," that she sees in Kester's approach — as well as her interest in reading such works primarily as *aesthetic* rather than ethical objects. She builds on Rancière's insistence on aesthetic experience to consider "the affective capabilities of art that avoids the pitfalls of a didactic critical position in favour of rupture and ambiguity."¹⁰⁹ Where Kester, for instance, finds the most interest in works that result in identification and consensus among participants, Bishop privileges dissensus, even antagonism. Here, I propose to split the difference. What I examine are works that seem to suggest the possibility for a confessional transformation, for new knowledge of social workings, yet in the end falter under the weight of the authorities with which they engage, offering instead unease or only a weary sort of hope. What can we learn from confessional artworks when the confessions fall flat? When the revelatory moment, the transformation, is thwarted, deferred, subsumed under the excesses of power, the repetition of sexual crimes

¹⁰⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 29.

horrifying and mundane, the banal organizing of long-term activism? What do we do with artworks that leave us not invigorated, uplifted, or contemplative, but exhausted, trepidatious, or, at most, only cautiously hopeful? In taking up confessional forms, these works interpret and examine the use of those forms within institutions. They give glimpses and help us see anew practices of interrogation, legal defense, and religious confession. Yet, their ability to suggest alternatives, to challenge those practices lacks strength. Ultimately, it is the confessional power of artwork itself in question here, the limits of its revelations.

In 2005, Cuban-American performance artist Coco Fusco began a series of works exploring the role of gender in the use of “enhanced interrogation” by the US military against prisoners in the “War on Terror.” Provoked by the release of reports and photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in April 2004, which included images of the humiliation, torture, and rape of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers, including multiple female soldiers, Fusco set out to consider the ways gender was strategically used as a tool in torture. As part of her research, Fusco, along with six female volunteers made up of her students and acquaintances, underwent a simulated interrogation session with a group of former US military interrogators known as Team Delta. Using that experience as well as interviews with women with military experience, Fusco formulated a set of artistic projects, including a documentary-style video of the interrogation simulation, *Operation Atropos* (2006), a site-specific collaborative performance, *Bare Life Study #1* (2005), a multi-media performance given at various venues between 2006-07, *A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America*, and a book, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (2008). Here, I will focus primarily on the documentary video, not just for

its proximity to the authority of army interrogators, but for the close attention it pays to both the theatricality of confession rituals and the institutions that teach and enforce them.

In the literature devoted to analyzing this body of work, scholars have written copiously and convincingly about its commentary on the co-optation of feminist discourse to support women's roles in the military, of its place in a greater body of work protesting the "War on Terror," and of its use of reenactment and theater conventions to comment on mass media representations of war.¹¹⁰ Karen Beckman argues that the role of pedagogy in the works requires us to consider closely the relationship between training and re/pre-enactment. The focus on instruction and training across the body of work "reenacts and evokes memories of occurrences that exist in a complex relationship to the concept of the historical event," as documentary footage of something that happened, though within a fictitious, staged, repetitive context.¹¹¹ While Beckman situates this fraught relationship to the truth and the event in the context of the student/teacher relationships within, I shift the focus here to consider the entanglement of confessional relationships more broadly. Interrogator and prisoner, artist and subject, teacher and student all operate as confessional pairings. My interest, here, is in the way they shift and overlap and, particularly, the way the figures of authority embodied by Mike Ritz, the lead interrogator of Team Delta, and Fusco, the artist, both reflect and resist one another.

Nominally, my object and that of the interrogators with whom Fusco works and

¹¹⁰ Marta Cenini, "Coco Fusco's Room: Rethinking Feminism after Guantanamo," *N.Paradoxa* 30 (July 2012): 59–66; David McCarthy, *American Artists against War, 1935-2010* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Jonathan Kahana, "Introduction: What Now? Presenting Reenactment," *Framework; Detroit* 50, no. 1/2 (Spring 2009): 46–60; Ashley Black and Katherine Newbold, "Feminism in the Field," *Afterimage; Rochester* 36, no. 1 (August 2008): 28.

¹¹¹ Karen Beckman, "Gender, Power, and Pedagogy in Coco Fusco's Bare Life Study #1 (2005), A Room of One's Own (2005), and Operation Atropos (2006).," *Framework L*, no. 1–2 (Spring-Fall 2009): 129.

emulates is one and the same: the confession. Yet, across the media she produces, in video, performance, and text, the confession seems ever-elusive, the information sought indistinct, the priming of victims perpetual, a cycle without culmination. This body of work examines the structure of the military confessional apparatus, its logic, major players, tools, and tactics, while hardly approaching the spoken confession itself. In this way, it focuses on *subditio*, the continual and total forceful submission to the will of another; however, Fusco's aim is not to understand the experience of prisoners, but those of the interrogators. While Fusco and her volunteers undergo simulated interrogation, it is ultimately with the aim of learning not just resistance techniques, but how to become interrogators themselves, a task Fusco then later takes up in *A Room of One's Own*, in which she poses as a U.S. Army interrogator and gives a bombastically patriotic lecture on the role of women as interrogators and the logic of interrogation techniques, over a multi-media display of staged footage of her interrogating a prisoner. This material also comprises the 2008 book *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, which contains, among other elements, a numbered list of "coercive techniques" accompanied by cartoon-style illustrations showing a white, blonde-haired female soldier enacting the techniques on a brown-skinned male prisoner. Here, too, the stated aim is confession and "conversion," or "the creation of an enduring asset," yet the instructional techniques focus solely on getting prisoners to the point of confession while containing nothing on how to record, understand, or manage the information received.¹¹² Indeed, one technique, the "Fear Up Mild," states that it will bring a prisoner to "the crisis point where he will either confess, collapse, or both," suggesting a lack of differentiation in those potential results.¹¹³

¹¹² Coco Fusco, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 110.

¹¹³ Fusco, 140.

Fusco's artistic choices throughout this body of work thus highlight the creation of total environments of domination that overshadow their seeming results, specifically as a response to the already-spectacularized visuals of the "War on Terror."

In the first part of *Field Guide*, Fusco pens a long essay, written as a letter to Virginia Woolf, which lays out her own interest in the subject of gender and military interrogation, her response to fellow feminists brushing off the use of sexualized threats and harassment by female soldiers against prisoners, and a description of the experience with Team Delta. Starting from the release of photographs showing prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib, Fusco argues that the response by civilians in the U.S. to the use of such tactics operated through the proliferation of visual imagery. For the protesting left, "[the] orange jumpsuit and black hood became cultural icons" while a proliferation of simulacra, including fakes and pornographic adaptations, "demonstrates that the prurient qualities of those images as images transcended moral circumspection."¹¹⁴ Citing Susan Sontag, who, herself, picks up Woolf's own reflections on war and photography, Fusco notes the "pleasurable complicity" produced in us as viewers.¹¹⁵ As she argues, in the circulation of those images, their visual qualities are re-purposed to multiple, sometimes disturbing, ends, and the repetition, management, scrutiny, and explanation of their contents by Army officials, the media, and anti-torture activists works in fact to normalize torture and distance civilians and non-combatants in the U.S. from its implications. Her initial hypothesis, therefore, was that Army interrogators "learn through the discipline of military training, while the rest of us are coaxed into acceptance through

¹¹⁴ Fusco, 22–23.

¹¹⁵ Fusco, 22.

the pleasures of viewing.”¹¹⁶ The resultant works, though, offer significant nuance to that supposition. In *Operation Atropos* and the rest of this collection of works, discipline and logic are not easily separated from pleasure and visuality. Rather, the military training in question closely entangles with drama, spectacle, and, indeed, pleasure, though rarely the sadistic pleasure one might imagine of a cartoon-evil torturer, but the satisfaction of a job well-done.

For *Operation Atropos*, Fusco worked with a group known as Team Delta, former US Army interrogators who give courses on how to interrogate and resist interrogation to civilians. The team custom-design interrogation scenarios for a variety of groups, including those who might face kidnapping, such as aid workers, CEOs of multinationals, and law enforcement. In the US, Fusco notes, they are also popular with military aficionados.¹¹⁷ Over the course of three days, Fusco and six female volunteers, Trish, Mirelle, Tanwi, Christi, Hima, and Fabienne, are immersed in kidnapping, disorientation, humiliation, and interrogation by Team Delta, primarily founder Mike Ritz and colleague Marshall Perry. Fusco’s videographers shot over thirty hours of documentary footage, which Fusco then edited into the fifty-nine minute video. In the video, footage of the women as a group enclosed in the “pen,” an outdoor fenced area, alternates with individual interrogation scenes and cuts of Ritz, Perry, and their colleagues reacting to the interrogations and explaining their methods. In this way, we the viewers see not just the moment of interrogation, but the entire apparatus surrounding it, specifically the creation of a total emotional and physical environment of subjugation.

Operation Atropos, as a two-camera edited documentary, continually affirms the

¹¹⁶ Fusco, 27.

¹¹⁷ Coco Fusco, “Operation Atropos,” *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (March 2010): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.11.1.81/1>.

coexistent reality and theatricality of the events. The shaky camera-work, which frequently offers odd, off-center framing, delays in adjusting to new scenes of action, and jerky cuts between scenes, attests to the unpredictability of the scenario, to the unpracticed discomfort, fear, and anger experienced by the participants. The beginning of the video identifies Fusco's inspiration, the appearance of female soldiers in photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison "not as victims...but as victimizers," then shifts, tonally and geographically, to show Fusco along with her six volunteers sitting on an outdoor patio.¹¹⁸ Fusco reads, with comedic drama, an email from Team Delta outlining the potential activities of the weekend interrogation scenario. The email serves as both a warning and a negotiation; in it, the representative of Team Delta, presumably Mike Ritz, suggests types of language and physical encounters that might occur, while stating that Fusco can choose to declare any of them off limits. These include strip searching, the use of verbal sexual harassment, threats of physical violence, and racial slurs. However, Ritz is careful to delineate that this is a performance, stating, for instance, "I will tell you up front that no matter how they may behave or what they may say, no members of our cadre have racial prejudices." In this moment, and in others, Ritz separates the "reality" of interrogators' internal thoughts and personal lives from their actions and words and, perhaps more importantly, suggests that intention behind words and actions ultimately determines their truth. Racism, he seems to suggest, does not include the use of racial slurs if uttered in pursuit of truth during an interrogation. By separating the actions of interrogators from their thoughts — and affirming that he can, indeed, know what prejudices his cadre members do or do not hold — Ritz also holds himself and his cadre apart from the broader systems of racism that drive the War on Terror. They are, he

¹¹⁸ Fusco Fusco, *Operation Atropos* (Video Data Bank, 2006).

suggests, actors doing a job, the actions of which do not reflect their own personal beliefs. However, his statement is continually undermined by the visuals of the two teams, Fusco's comprising mostly young brown women and Ritz's mostly white, middle-aged men. Throughout the video, the disorienting cuts from the "pen" to interrogation to interviews with Ritz and Perry at once reaffirm this delineation by the contrast between the "action" and "behind the scenes" segments and complicate it by presenting it all with the same edited, artistic gaze.

Once the scenario starts, Fusco, her volunteers, and her videographers drive into a wooded part of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where their vehicles are stopped by Team Delta, wearing fatigues and balaclavas, who shout to them to get out of the car, to shut up, to put their hands behind their backs, then march the seven women off to another location. From there, the footage proceeds in a semi-chronological fashion, showing the events of the day. Multiple scenes take place in the "pen," a fenced enclosure where the women are first strip-searched then made to perform a variety of physical and verbal tasks over the course of the day [Fig. 2.1]. These demands include tasks like standing with arms outstretched holding a bottle of sunscreen, doing sit-ups, rolling on the ground along the length of the pen, and barking like dogs. The women are solely referred to by assigned numbers and required to respond with "sir" beginning and ending their statements. The activities of the pen are clearly meant to wear the women down, physically and emotionally, through repetition of arbitrary actions. Tactics of disorientation, such as demanding the women sit and pick grass, then taking the grass away and yelling at them for not accepting the "gift" of grass the interrogators have provided, combine with those of dehumanization, such as commanding they pose on their

hands and knees and bark like dogs. The footage of the pen intersperses throughout the video, the demands seeming to get stranger and more arbitrary as it proceeds; while this part of the scenario was only a day long, this continual focus on subjugation shows the way interrogators prime their prisoners for confession through perpetual domination.

Throughout the scenario, participants are removed for individual interrogation. The confession sought includes a fictional dossier of information supplied to Fusco and her volunteers the day before, including a mission, codeword, and contact number. Most interrogations take place in a dark, subterranean space with cinder block walls and a barred cell and are shot in close profile, showing the proximity between Marshall Perry and the individual women as he forces them up against a wall and demands they speak. Across the scenes, Perry takes different approaches and affects, sounding atonally bored in one, lecturing in another, and feigning emotional betrayal in one more. In these scenes, his purpose is to incite the women to give up their information; as the video proceeds, it becomes clear that some have pretended to break, giving the false information the group decided on prior to entering the scenario, and that Perry learns from that and shapes his tactics around it. In one interrogation, for instance, Perry slaps Trish's face between questions, saying "These lies, they hurt. They hurt me in my heart. They hurt me like a true betrayal," as she repeats the false information [Fig. 2.2]. Trish's angry shouts in return are silenced by his threat to break her hands. During interrogation, the women are sometimes hooded, particularly when Perry instigates a tactic known as "love of comrade," where he pretends to hurt another one of the volunteers in retaliation for intransigence in answering. The volunteers hear the cries of a female colleague of Team Delta; at the end of the video, text reveals that four of the seven "prisoners" broke and

gave up their pre-supplied information during this stage of interrogation.

Footage of the pen and the individual interrogations is interspersed with scenes of Ritz and Perry reacting to the interrogations, explaining their methods, or talking off-the-cuff about their experiences. In one moment, for instance, they admire the anger and resistance of one of the participants, noting that she's the toughest after Coco — “Nothing bothered [Coco],” Perry notes. In another, Ritz and Perry describe the way the “love of comrade” tactic works, arguing that it's dependent on how well the cadre member standing in as the tortured prisoner can act, and stating that this tactic, commonly used in actual interrogation, is always “just the result of trickery.” Another moment catches Ritz talking about what it's like when new acquaintances learn about his job and seem shocked at the contrast between his personality and their perceptions of interrogators. “You're an interrogator, but you're so nice,” he says. “I am nice, it's just acting. A flick of the switch.”

While in Fusco's later performances, the layers of interpretation and imitation she inhabits work within the artifice already contained in art-making, in *Operation Atropos* she reveals that her performance is not just a heightened imitation of Army interrogators, but that their own work is, always and already, a performance. Interrogation, in and of itself, is acting, is drama, is theater; it relies on the setting of a scene and the creation of a character, on improvisation and response. In an interview with Fusco, Ritz states that, “[not] all interrogators are actors, but good interrogators are good actors.”¹¹⁹ Further, he argues, the ability to act is not simply an inherent trait of good interrogators, but a skill built up and emphasized throughout training. In a detailed set of answers, he describes the

¹¹⁹ Coco Fusco and Mike Ritz, “Theatre as Discipline: Performing Military Interrogation: An Interview with Mike Ritz,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 52, no. 1 (March 20, 2008): 154.

way interrogation school equips students to assume useful identities and to build successful improvisational environments based on psychological readings of specific prisoners, their circumstances, social positions, moods, and motivations. Ritz points out that interrogation is one of the few military fields in which members are authorized to lie about who they are, including position and rank, in order to connect effectively to or wield power over their “sources.” As trainee-interrogators, students act and react, setting the stage by assuming identities and sketching out scenarios, improvising lines to build on their sources’ responses, and adapting established scripts to suit the scene.

While the video does not include any moments where the women broke and gave the interrogators the codeword and contact information they were supposed to keep secret, it does include footage of Ritz manipulating them into giving false spoken confessions about their motives for coming into the fictional country of “Modessa” where the scenario was staged. In these moments, the participants come to him after interrogation by Perry and long hours in the pen, and he treats them kindly, with water, candy, and chairs on which to sit down. Each is asked to read a document with a series of statements about their purposes in Modessa — drug smuggling, for instance — and to sign the written confession. They unilaterally refuse, but Ritz, in his agreeable persona, says it’s not a problem, they can cross off and initial any statements with which they disagree after reading them aloud. What he ends up with, of course, is footage of the women saying the confessions and their signatures on a document, all his to manipulate to his own ends. In an interstitial scene, Ritz articulates the importance of being able to change his own persona in order to manipulate his prisoners’ emotions. “Because I’m the first guy in this whole procedure who’s nice to them,” he argues, “they let their guard

down.” In this way, he is able to coax out a confession, though one that would fall into the category of “abuse” in both Austin’s conception of performatives and its more direct meaning regarding the breaching of mental and bodily autonomy. Here, his methods once again seem to parallel those of artistic creativity, taking the material of refused confessions and remaking it, his demonstration of achieving raw material that could be edited into a positive confession mirroring the fragmented, choppy editing of the work itself.

The experience, of course, is in service of learning. The final scenes of the video show the women taking on the role of interrogators trying to get Ritz and Perry to crack, and Fusco adopts the persona of a prison guard for *Bare Life Study #1* and a U.S. Army interrogator for *A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America*. The entanglement of Fusco’s role as a performance artist with that of an interrogator makes more sharply visible the way interrogation is already permeated with performance, while also casting viewers in the — at times uncomfortable — position of interrogator, confessor, analyst of truth. As Karen Beckman argues, even within the fictional framing of the video, the slippage between acting and genuine emotion, the state of the work as both edited work of art and documentary, cajoles viewers into adopting the same close gaze as that of the interrogators. As Beckman states, “as we try to distinguish the women who are ‘just acting’ from those who are ‘really traumatized,’ we find that the role of the critical viewer also overlaps uncomfortably with the role of the interrogators, who must, as one of the interrogators himself points out, ‘[observe] the source objectively and [apply] their skills in analyzing body language, eye-accessing cues, voice intonation,

etc.”¹²⁰ In one moment in the video, for instance, Ritz reflects on the need to be trained not just in listening but in reading and interpreting voluntary and involuntary bodily responses when Fabienne seems to be exhibiting signs of extreme stress. As they question her, she stares, shows signs of confusion, and stays quiet. In that case, they back off and sit her in the cell with a bottle of water. In *Field Guide*, though, Fusco reveals that Fabienne had been faking the signs of stress and did initially fool the interrogators, though they discover her ruse eventually. “I found it quite telling that it was the woman who acted like a weakling who performed the most convincing persona for these interrogators,” Fusco writes.¹²¹ By only intimating Fabienne’s feigning later in the video, when Perry and Ritz congratulate her on her performance after the end of the day-long scenario, Fusco places the viewer in the role of interrogator, reading Fabienne’s body language for the truth it might give away, and asks us to consider the way our own preconceptions of gendered power dynamics inflect our readings of the work.

Fusco further reveals in *Field Guide* that the interrogators, perhaps wary of the presence of cameras, deliberately chose to tone down some of the power dynamics of an all-male team interrogating an all-female group of participants, though certainly not all. The “prisoners” were subjected to diatribes about women’s inability to be logical, to demands that they perform in feminized ways, and, when later acting as the interrogators themselves, advised to play dumb rather than tough. Interrogating Trish, Perry lectures to her with calm detachment, stating, “women, they are ruled by their emotion. You allow your anger to come forward. You use logic as a tool and live by emotion, whereas men live by logic and use emotion as a tool. Your anger will defeat you.” In the pen, the

¹²⁰ Beckman, “Gender, Power, and Pedagogy in Coco Fusco’s Bare Life Study #1 (2005), A Room of One’s Own (2005), and Operation Atropos (2006).,” 131.

¹²¹ Fusco, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, 78.

women are instructed to do high-kicks, “Like showgirl I saw on TV,” says one guard, in the vague Eastern European accent adopted by Team Delta. At the end, when the participants move into the role of interrogator, Ritz blatantly refuses to deal with them, demanding that they “Bring me a man to talk to.” Nonetheless, this posturing seems to be the limit of their willingness to engage in misogynistic tactics on camera. While a strip search is mentioned in the initial email as a possible tactic, Team Delta chooses not to remove the women’s underwear during the search that takes place, and, Fusco states, “decided against staging a mock-rape during the course.”¹²² This hesitancy on the part of Team Delta emphasizes the staged quality of the scenario, the fact that for Fusco and her participants, boundaries certainly do exist, lines between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in service of teaching. In this, though, Fusco leaves viewers with uncertainty around where those boundaries *actually* reside, for prisoners of the War on Terror.

This ambiguity coalesces in the moments when the audience is faced with identifying with Ritz, who laughs easily and willingly engages with Fusco’s broader project, including participating in interviews in which he appeals to a general sense of justice in endorsing his interrogation techniques. “I’ve learned,” he says, “that few people want to protect the guilty by jeopardizing the lives of the innocent, for all people of conscience fear becoming guilty themselves.”¹²³ Here, he positions himself as not just a person of conscience but indeed the one who acts on the collective impulse not to protect the guilty. He aims for the protection of the innocent, which justifies his actions.

Therefore, in articulating “I am nice, it’s just acting,” Ritz differentiates between his sense of his essential truth and the role he takes on. In that moment, earlier references to

¹²² Fusco, 76.

¹²³ Fusco and Ritz, “Theatre as Discipline,” 159.

the fictional quality of the weekend scenario, such as the assertion that the “torture” of the female colleague would all be simulated, come together into the admission that all interrogation is acting. It is to the videographers, and thus, by proxy, to Fusco herself that Ritz “confesses,” offering up his truth for the artistic gaze. The interplay between the performances of the members of the cadre, acting as versions of careers from which they are retired, and the essential element of performance inherent in interrogation overlies one another in this moment, as Ritz asserts the truth of himself — “I am nice” — and the truth of the job — “it’s just acting.” Here the piercing gaze of the camera does fulfill its role as revealer of truth. Yet, it is, of course, not so simple. As Fusco herself notes, both sides of this project entered with some preconceptions about the other that were, in some ways, upended by the experience and that disallowed Fusco to treat Ritz, particularly, as a foil or a caricature. She states that Ritz offered a number of surprises, by accepting the group as students “despite his perception of [them] as leftists and potential critics of the military,” by allowing them to film, and by his willingness to engage further in public dialog about his work.¹²⁴ At moments, particularly when questioned about the use of torture and resultant prisoner deaths, he remained impenetrable. Fusco writes, “I found it unsettling that he was so difficult to read as a person, even though I now understand that this is a learned trait that he used in his work.”¹²⁵ As a subject and as a representation of the figure of interrogator, Ritz embodies the problem of the desire for revelation — from a confession, from a work of art. In Fusco’s work, he calls up and manipulates confessions and instructs Fusco, the participants, and by extension the viewers to do the same, but is also the subject of Fusco’s confessional authority.

¹²⁴ Fusco and Ritz, 153.

¹²⁵ Fusco, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, 70.

Yet, the power of Fusco's confessional authority is limited. Not only does Ritz evade some of her questions, by presenting the video with a documentary flair but little direct interpretation, Fusco herself stops short of confessional culmination. Her work reveals, but does not necessarily transform; tells us how things are but does not suggest new ways of understanding or approaching the political realities of the work's context. Rather, as Karen Beckman suggests, it leaves us with a sense of complicity, refuting "a version of feminist discourse that has persistently placed women in the role of victim," and, specifically, in the mobilization of that narrative by the Bush administration to justify the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as liberatory, and affirming a "position of implication and responsibility" for all participants and audience members.¹²⁶ By positioning herself as student, as complicit, Fusco "places [the abuse of detainees] within a broader context, connecting the dots that run, for example, from the scene of education to the scene of torture," reiterating the connections between the logic of torture and the broader power systems of education and justice.¹²⁷ José Muñoz suggests that *Operation Atropos* and *A Room of One's Own* interrupt, in a small way, the state's process of "ideological camouflage," the use of strategies such as declaring a national emergency and the delineation of particular acts as terrorism in order to create a state of exception, as Giorgio Agamben theorizes. Muñoz argues that Fusco's work "enacts a kind of hypercamouflage by pushing camouflage's process of naturalizing."¹²⁸ That is, in overtly, obviously mimicking the strategies of interrogation, in showing the logic behind its use through Ritz and Perry's own words as well as Fusco's performance, the work lays bare

¹²⁶ Beckman, "Gender, Power, and Pedagogy in Coco Fusco's Bare Life Study #1 (2005), A Room of One's Own (2005), and Operation Atropos (2006).," 127–28.

¹²⁷ Beckman, 131.

¹²⁸ Coco Fusco and José Esteban Muñoz, "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America," *TDR* (1988-) 52, no. 1 (2008): 138.

the mechanisms through which the naturalization of the state of exception happens.

I find myself drawn to the moments in which the obviousness of Fusco's performance slips out. The blurring of documentary and artifice in which the video reveals operates with a haphazard, occasionally comical absurdity even among the viscerally unpleasant images of the participants cowering, exhausted, under Perry's overbearing, loud, misogynistic presence. While shots of Ritz remind the audience again and again of his own delineation between himself and his actions, other moments, too, show Fusco's own mental disengagement from immersion in the situation. At one moment in the pen, the camera cuts away just as Fusco starts to laugh after a command from the interrogators, echoing her comedic flair when reading Ritz's email at the beginning of the video. At other moments, a hint of a smile shows as she responds to prompts by the guards in the pen. Fusco attributes her demeanor to her role as an artist:

I was making a movie...so I was really happy because even though I wasn't behind the camera, I was working with a cameraman who I've worked with on several occasions and I knew that we were getting something that I would be able to use....I've also been doing kinds of weird performance stuff and putting myself in kinds of risk situations for a long time. So I went through my moments of panic fifteen years ago thinking, if something hit me when I'm not in control of the situation, is someone going to harm me, will I be able to get away, what will happen if someone is going to shoot me? I've had those nightmares already. In this scenario I knew they weren't going to kill us.¹²⁹

Here, Fusco reveals not just her interest in the workings of the scenario as an artist delighted to be getting good material, but as an artist who has, over the course of her career, thought about and carefully managed her exposure to risk. Throughout her career, Fusco has exposed herself to the managed physical and emotional risks of endurance and engagement with audiences, perhaps most famously through a series of collaborative

¹²⁹ Fusco, "Operation Atropos," March 2010, 90.

performances with Guillermo Gomez-Peña entitled *The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians visit the West* (1992-4) in which she and Gomez-Peña performed as “undiscovered Ameridians” in a cage at multiple locations. Her articulation of those “moments of panic fifteen years ago” suggests that for her, at least, engaging in this scenario is less an escalation of risk than business as usual. While she is careful to delineate that her project is not intended to replicate the experience of prisoners, but to understand the training, expertise, and logic of interrogators, she, and to a greater extent her participants — whose knowledge of and (in)ability to quit once in the scenario Fusco carefully managed — nonetheless engage with the aesthetics of risk.¹³⁰ In considering the use of risk in the art world, art historian Jane Blocker argues that in the art world of the ‘60s and ‘70s, the artist-as-risk-taker was increasingly lauded even while critics such as Alan Kaprow noted the overshadowing of artistic risk by the spectacle of “actual” violence like the war in Vietnam.¹³¹ The artistic interest in risk, too, fed the expansion of the definition of “art” into all activities of life — but particularly those deemed most risky. Blocker expands this concept to the context of the twenty-first century wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the way the management of those wars as projects of risk-transfer and image-management inform art-making. In Fusco’s piece, we see what Blocker deems “the conversion of actual risk into rhetorical risk” through the use of extensive contracts and arrangements, the presence of the cameras, and, indeed, Fusco’s

¹³⁰ Fusco states: “I didn’t let them know about the subject of my film until the very last minute because I was afraid that they would think I was trying to make a soft-core porn film....I told my group that they had every opportunity to get out before we started. I showed them films about what these guys did and said if you think you can’t do it, don’t do it, but I’m paying for this and it is costing a fortune and making a film and I can only do it if everybody sticks with it...” Fusco, 84–85.

¹³¹ Jane Blocker, “Aestheticizing Risk in Warfare: The SLA to Iraq,” in *The Aesthetics of Risk*, ed. John C Welchman, vol. 3, SoCCAS Symposia (JRP Ringier, 2008), 191–223.

own comfort with putting herself into potentially vulnerable situations.¹³² In this way, the risk to the participants is carefully managed — and that management deliberately visible.

I argue, therefore, that while Fusco’s work does contribute to a culture of aestheticized risk, it accepts as bare fact the insufficiency of that risk in changing the broader context of continual and distant war. The risk she undertakes mimics not the “recklessness, aggression, and virile heroism” of the avant-garde, but the cold, tactical risk-transference of contemporary war, in which trained professionals construct scenarios through which danger to U.S. soldiers and civilians at home is minimized — and danger to those deemed the “enemy” accepted as the price.¹³³ In her specific interest in women’s roles in interrogation, Fusco asserts that, yes, women can, too, take on this role. She does so to face the seeming contradiction of a U.S. military that she sees as “a model organization of integration and promotion of women in racial minorities” compared to other major workforces in the country that, at the same time, operates as “a death machine legitimating torture.”¹³⁴ And that, broadly, is where she leaves us. As a confession ritual, this work reveals but doesn’t transform; it leaves us dwelling in these secrets brought forward, uncomfortably.

While Fusco learns from and imitates the authority of interrogators, performance artist, poet, and criminal appellate attorney Vanessa Place entangles a number of different institutional powers as her roles in multiple spaces inform one another. For *The Lawyer is Present* (2013), a three-day participatory project culminating in a performance, Place set up a space at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art to listen to and record the confessions of museum visitors. Within the “Present Box,” a space in the museum’s front

¹³² Blocker, 216.

¹³³ Blocker, 195.

¹³⁴ Fusco, “Operation Atropos,” March 2010, 92.

lounge intended for short, site-specific projects, Place created a mirrored enclosure, featuring a table with two chairs surrounded by short walls affixed with large mirrors on both sides [Fig. 2.3]. The chairs, which face each other across a small wooden table, purposefully mimic the set-up for Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010), a performance piece for the MoMA retrospective of the same name, in which Abramović sat silently at a table in the MoMA atrium and maintained eye contact with the participant-viewers who sat across from her. Unlike Abramović's piece, in which the long lines of people waiting to sit down with the artists wound through the atrium, a captive audience for each silent interaction, in *The Lawyer is Present*, the performance space is purposefully partitioned off. For visitors waiting for their confessional moment, the voyeuristic scene presented is fragmentary, the muted sounds of another visitor's confession floating over the walls and, perhaps, occluded by visitors' own reflection in the mirrored walls. Similarly, while in Abramović's piece silence dominates, with the contact between artist and participant centered on eye contact and expression, in Place's piece confessions are enacted — and re-enacted — vocally.

Place recorded and had transcribed each confession, gathering the words of participants to use in her final performance piece. For that piece, which took place in the same space, now opened up for a seated audience, Place composed and read a conceptual poem based on the transcripts with identifying details such as names, places, and dates removed. Visitors were also offered the option to choose to have their confessions stay anonymous by paying \$105 per hour, the state-set rate for representing indigent felons on appeal in California, drawing on Place's other role as an appellate defense attorney in California. No participant chose to pay to have their confession sealed. Before

confessing, each participant read a legal disclaimer asserting that the performance was not intended to create an attorney-client relationship and that the conversations did not constitute legal advice. In order to confess, participants also signed a waiver of liability and hold harmless agreement, a legal agreement in which participants affirmed that disclaimer and, further, waived Place, her representatives, and all staff and representatives of the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art of any liability or claims related to any loss, damage, or injury resulting from participating in the performance. In this way, Place established that, while the confessions *themselves* did not create or constitute a legal relationship between herself and participants, those participants nonetheless were legally bound to certain behaviors.

The confessions offered varied in content, from the banal — “smuggling something through customs, shoplifting” — to things more serious, such as, as Place describes, “having sex with a sibling, having been gang-raped.”¹³⁵ Place notes that participants generally confessed a secret, something they had not said before, and often described something from childhood.¹³⁶ As the examples show, confessions included both actions done by the participant, such as shoplifting, and violations against them, such as rape. For the final performance, Place created a poem from the transcripts of the confessions, removing identifying details. The poem operated as a single work, without marking or identifying the beginning or end of each confession; Place envisions the work as “a seamless collage, a kind of metaphoric scroll, like an epic poem.”¹³⁷ Rather than attempting to mimic the tone and affect of each participant, to perform the words as they had, Place instead adopted a narrow range of tone and affect in order to act as a

¹³⁵ Vanessa Place, “Questions Re: The Lawyer Is Present,” July 25, 2018.

¹³⁶ Place.

¹³⁷ Place.

mouthpiece. Not quite deadpan, her voice offered the confessions dispassionately, without the emotion one might imagine accompanies the confession of difficult, painful, or secret things.

In the exhibition space, the confessional cube was surrounded by visual and aural items that both reiterate and fragment the legal references. High on one wall, two framed prints of the text of the Miranda warning, the legal right to silence affirmed by the 1966 Supreme Court decision in *Miranda v. Arizona*, remind visitors, in English and Spanish, that they have the right to remain silent, while a third presents the text of the legal warning recited before presenting a witness with a photographic array of possible suspects, known as a photographic showup admonition. In nooks around the room, sculpted body parts linger as though forgotten, fragments of ears and mouths reaffirming the bodily processes of speaking and listening. Visitors access two sound pieces via headphones, one a soundtrack of Place speaking from transcripts of confession interviews with the sex offenders she defends and the other her impassive voice reciting rape jokes. In the first, she removes the questions, leaving only fragmented answers. As Place states, “It’s everything from someone saying, yes, I touched her here, I did this, to someone just saying yes, yes, yes and agreeing with everything the police have said.”¹³⁸ In this way, the recited texts suggest not only acts confessed to but the relationship between police interrogators and accused felons. Appropriately for Place’s positioning within the criminal justice system, the constructed space resembles not a confessional booth so much as the popular imagination’s version of an interrogation room. With its bare, minimal furniture and mirrored walls, it simulates the police precinct stage of every crime

¹³⁸ Vanessa Place, “Artist Vanessa Place Wants You to Confess for The Lawyer Is Present,” *Westword*, April 11, 2013, <http://www.westword.com/arts/artist-vanessa-place-wants-you-to-confess-for-the-lawyer-is-present-5788895>.

drama on television, wherein the mirrors operate as one-way glass for external observation. The uncanny familiarity of the clean, white space, hovering indistinctly between the dramatic stages of art museum and police procedural, teases revelation. Here, things will happen, truths will be revealed, it seems to suggest. In this case, though, the mirrors on either side of the “Present Box” space double the gaze rather than occlude it, reflect their surroundings rather than present autonomous works of art like the protective glass giving a glossy shine to paintings; the observer is not a faceless detective, the object not a piece of modernist art, but the visitors themselves.

Thus, the project visibly, textually, and aurally reiterates its positioning within the intersecting institutions of the law and the museum. BMoCA’s text regarding the performance recognizes the similarities shared by those edifices, stating, “What do courtrooms and museums have in common? They are often thought of as sites where truths and facts are revealed – about crimes and about the inner lives of artists and their publics. Artist and criminal defense attorney Vanessa Place’s BMoCA exhibition focuses on confession’s role in legal and aesthetic revelation.”¹³⁹ Here, Place is identified and situated as existing within — and, subtextually, receiving authority from — both institutions as an artist *and* criminal defense attorney. An agent of the state and the museum, Place uses confession as her tool for revelation; however, unlike the dramatic courtroom confessions of procedural television or the expressive aesthetic insights one might read into art, Place situates confession as something mundane, if intrusive.

While in Fusco’s piece, interrogation occludes the confession, rendering it secondary, in *The Lawyer is Present*, the confession dominates. During the three days of

¹³⁹ “The Lawyer Is Present - Spring – Exhibitions,” BMoCA – Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://bmoca.org/exhibitions/2013/spring/the-lawyer-is-present>.

her performance, the constructed confessional space overtook the exhibition space, its large mirrored surfaces reflecting and refracting the activity of visitors, museum staff, and Place herself. The confessional space, with its white walls and large, unframed mirrors, offers little aesthetic interest in itself, only activated by the actions and gazes of those around it. Causing a sense of self-surveillance, the mirrors prime visitors into a consciousness of the total and continual act of self-examination that defines the western tradition of confession. The mirrors, which double and emphasize not just each movement visitors make, but the surveillance of museum staff and fellow visitors, require a public engagement with one's own self-awareness. Visitors thus begin self-examination long before sitting down across from Place. It, too, provokes a sort of moral temptation, as visitors might choose to peek over or around the walls and satisfy their curiosity about their fellow visitor-participants. "Everything you choose to do," Place states, "in one way or another, implicates you. In one way or another, you choose to collaborate in your own guilt, so to speak."¹⁴⁰ Yet, the guilt here comes with few consequences beyond possible embarrassment; while both courtroom and museum discipline the bodies within them, the stakes of that control differ vastly.

Indeed, the aesthetic content of Place's work vacillates, uncertainly and perhaps uncomfortably, between those spaces and their tools of control. On the one hand, the setting in BMoCA stages and references conventions of art display, with blank white walls and small presentation nooks resembling a plethora of other white-cube spaces and a proliferation of mirrors reiterating the act of looking. Place's sculptural objects of mouths and ears, tucked into those nooks, fluidly draw on surrealist references, and the use of both sound installation and performance fit smoothly into the contemporary

¹⁴⁰ Place, "Artist Vanessa Place Wants You to Confess for The Lawyer Is Present."

museum space, accustomed to the presentation of new media. However, with Place's actual authority as an attorney, not mimicked or temporarily adopted, the objects, words, and gestures of the piece carry legal weight as well. The textual wall pieces, taken from legal language, and one of the sound tracks, borrowed from real-life appeals cases, bear a truth value affirmed by Place's vested authority as an attorney; they would not mean the same thing offered by an artist who lacked that jurisdiction. Yet, in other ways, the aestheticization of those objects mitigates their truth value. For instance, blown up to large scale wall pieces, the texts of the Miranda warning and the photographic showup admonition become at once monumental and incidental. Place calls them "decorative" and, prior to staging the work, anticipates "that people will ignore them, as people do," merging together the familiarity of their visual form and the seeming compulsion to confess, even when warned of a right to remain silent.¹⁴¹ The regularity of the text, in neat typed lines that bleed into the margins, filling the space of the frame, resembles the stark minimalism of other conceptual art pieces, but their placement, above the wall-length mirrors on one side of the space, suggests their secondary, decorative nature. Similarly, the the pairing of re-staged criminal confessions from sexual offenders with another track of Place reciting rape jokes comments less on the specificities of the criminal justice system and more on rape culture writ large. In photographs from the piece, Place appears in a somber skirt suit while seated inside the confessional booth, pale hands and face set off by dark cuffs and a tall cowl scarf, while for the final performance, she wore a black sweater, hood pulled up and long sleeves tugged down over her wrists [Fig.2.4]. Her garments themselves thus take on the conscious neutrality of both spaces, the attorney's dark suit and the performance artist's black knitwear, each seemingly

¹⁴¹ Place.

carefully chosen to deflect visual attention.

Unlike other participatory confessional projects discussed later in this dissertation, such as Candy Chang's *Confessions* or Nadia Myre's *The Scar Project*, in which visitors engage with an aesthetic process of rendering their confessions in text and fiber objects then displayed in exhibition, the presentation to the public flows through Place herself, as she speaks the recorded confessions in performance. In this way, the aesthetic transformation is Place's alone; the participants must be content with the conventional act of verbally confessing rather than engaging in creative acts to transmute the act of confessing into art. Further, her re-presentation of individual confessions flattens their differences, as she recites a series of excerpts in a relatively noninflected voice. The final presentation, thus, amalgamates the individual experiences into a litany, specific acts of confession presented not as individual and distinct but one of many, removed from the agency of each participant via the aesthetic filtering through Place, as a representative of larger legal and artistic apparatuses.

Legal confessions operate within a network of agents, authorities, and responsibilities; there is no one ultimate authority but rather an array of figures with different stakes and abilities, including a variety of police investigators, criminal defense attorneys, state prosecutors, and judges. While most of those figures, at least nominally, work to unearth the truth from evidence and individuals, the defense attorney, on the other hand, ensures that those processes proceed in a legal — and ostensibly fair — manner. For Place, in her role as a criminal defense appellate attorney, the truth is not her concern. In her book, *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and Law*, Place uses sexual felony cases in which she acted as attorney to examine the contemporary American

criminal justice system and its relationship to truth, morality, surveillance, and the concept of evil.¹⁴² Most of her clients, she states, “are factually guilty by virtue of their acts; all are legally guilty by virtue of their convictions.”¹⁴³ Her role is not defender of the innocent, it is defender, period, and often, her job is easier if a defendant has not, in fact, confessed. As she suggests of one case, “[the] jury seemed to believe that if he admitted he was guilty of something, he might well be guilty of everything.”¹⁴⁴ The defense attorney’s role is to interpret and judge the framework of those confessions, if they are taken within all legal bounds, if the performative is felicitous. Further, the defense attorney’s job is not to provide absolution, but to prove enough reasonable doubt to avoid a conviction. Emphasizing that role, Place prefaced each participant confession with both the legal disclaimers and waivers discussed above as well as a verbal reiteration of her role:

Before each session, I would tell the participant that I was a criminal defense attorney, not a therapist or religious figure. Thus, my role was not to make them understand what they had done or forgive themselves or atone or be forgiven. *My job was to help them get away with it.*¹⁴⁵

Thus, the lawyer can act as protection, as a shield or filter, and as an exculpatory figure. Place states of *The Lawyer is Present* that “[there] is no communication between me and the work and the audience — what I’ve done, or what I’m doing, is creating a platform for the audience to look at itself...my voice doesn’t come into play — it’s only the audience member’s voice. It’s them saying indirectly what they may not want to say directly, publicly.”¹⁴⁶ She figures herself as a conduit, a mere conveyance for the words

¹⁴² Vanessa Place, *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and Law* (New York: Other Press, 2010), 10.

¹⁴³ Place, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Place, 232.

¹⁴⁵ Emphasis mine. Place, “Questions Re: The Lawyer Is Present.”

¹⁴⁶ Place, “Artist Vanessa Place Wants You to Confess for The Lawyer Is Present.”

of the participants, yet her position and the aesthetic choices she makes do transform the words, in the manner of all confession rituals. If removing identifying details and performing the confessions in the same flat tone creates a sort of equality between them, it also serves to mask any sense of the original speaker's intent or emotion, their glee, grief, or guilt. Place articulates a deep interest in demanding that her audiences recognize their own complicity in both individual actions and systemic inequalities, hoping that they see that in every action "you choose to collaborate in your own guilt, so to speak."¹⁴⁷ Yet, within the context of the project that guilt goes nowhere, nothing is demanded of it, it is transformed not into consequences or results but into a homogenized litany. Her job, as she states, is to "help them get away with it," but they already *were*. Though she suggests to participants that she does not seek to offer atonement, in retrospect she also recognized that many participants nonetheless "become visibly relieved and pleased by their unburdening."¹⁴⁸ This seems unsurprising to Place, who connects it to the ways in which shows of sympathy by the police will often induce suspects to speak, despite the Miranda warning. While it is unclear whether or not Place herself finds this turn to be a failure of the project, I argue that it results from not simply a human compulsion to confess, but precisely the entanglement of authorities Place enacts here, and the ambiguity of their purposes in this specific context.

Two years later, grappling with the response to another project, in which Place undertook to tweet every line of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* in an effort to comment on racism, white supremacy, and copyright laws, she writes: "I am familiar with representing the guilty, and with being the white body that serves as both defense

¹⁴⁷ Place.

¹⁴⁸ Place, "Questions Re: The Lawyer Is Present."

against the State and its emblem.”¹⁴⁹ While Place’s *Gone With the Wind* more directly references the guilt of white supremacy rather than the amorphous guilt imagined for *The Lawyer is Present*, though not necessarily in a compelling or successful manner, as her critics point out, here she also articulates the question of *her* authority that she evades in *The Lawyer is Present*.

In May 2015 a group called the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo (MCAG) — a portmanteau combining “gringo” and “conpo,” short for conceptual poetry — denounced Place and, specifically, her *Gone With the Wind* project with a series of tweets. The first tweet stated, in all caps, “VANESSA PLACE IS RACIST. DEFEND HER AND YOU ARE COMPLICIT. VP WORE BLACKFACE. VP TWEETS GONE WITH THE WIND. GO AHEAD, DEFEND HER.”¹⁵⁰ The blackface to which MCAG refers seems to be her use of an image of Hattie McDaniel, the actress who played Mammy in the movie adaptation of *Gone With the Wind*, as the profile picture for her twitter project. Later tweets also condemned her performance of her poem “What What Nigger,” in which she appropriates transcripts from trials in which use of the racial slur during a crime was used to prove guilt, either of a hate crime or complicity between multiple defendants. Tweets over a few days as well as a Change.org petition resulted in Place’s removal from panels at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, the annual conference of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs, and a performance at the Whitney.

The material Place borrows for those projects is unquestionably racist. Ways of

¹⁴⁹ Vanessa Place, “Vanessa Place – Artist’s Statement: Gone With the Wind @VanessaPlace,” Genius, May 19, 2015, <https://genius.com/Vanessa-place-artists-statement-gone-with-the-wind-vanessaplace-annotated>.

¹⁵⁰ Tweet by @againstgringpo on 13 May 2015 qtd in Kim Calder, “The Denunciation of Vanessa Place,” Los Angeles Review of Books, June 14, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-denunciation-of-vanessa-place/>.

understanding how that reflects Place's own position in white supremacy, though, depend upon considering what art *does* and for whom. Literary scholar Kim Calder suggests that Place's conscious knowing, her continual positioning of herself as "a knowingly guilty white body," informs and complicates readings of her work as merely appropriative or retraumatizing.¹⁵¹ She suggests that Place's antagonistic, knowing reuse of racist material "explores complicity and interrogates our reception of that complicity, from which none of us our exempt," a reading remarkably similar to the way Beckman and, to a lesser extent, Muñoz, read Fusco's *Operation Atropos*.¹⁵² Yet, as poet and literary critic Lillian-Yvonne Bertram argues, at some point, the knowing acknowledgment of complicity tips into not necessarily a demand for change, but a rehabilitation of whiteness itself. As Bertram says, the project of unmasking the racism in *Gone With the Wind* is not really work that needs to be done: "This whiteness-behind-blackface has been obvious since its initial writing and it is obvious behind every white frat boy yo, sup homie, ad infinitum."¹⁵³ Therefore, Place's use of this grim, knowing white guilt operates to "rebrand" whiteness "by virtue of triumphant self-assessment."¹⁵⁴

While this discussion around her later works does not comment directly on *The Lawyer is Present*, it nonetheless offers a way of considering Place's multiple authorities, as a lawyer, an artist, and a white woman. Her grim knowingness, here, does not operate quite so obviously on the primary vector of race, but given the disproportionate numbers of people of color arrested and imprisoned in the U.S., particularly Black, Native, and

¹⁵¹ Calder.

¹⁵² Calder.

¹⁵³ Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, "Canvases Pale: A Minstrelsy So Easily Absorbed," text/html, Poetry Foundation, May 23, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/05/canvases-pale-a-minstrelsy-so-easily-absorbed>.

¹⁵⁴ Bertram.

Latino men, coinciding with the disproportionate numbers of museum-goers who are white, race, as well as class, bear significance. In the entangled contexts of art museum and legal system, Place at once claims culpability as an institutional authority and avoids declaring any consequences for her knowing.

Place, as lawyer and artist, offers herself as mere conduit of information, an empty channel through which words flow, while at the same time undermining that fiction. It is, after all, her presence that demands confession, her presence backed by the weight and authority of those institutions that vest her with an identity: the California state bar association, the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. It is her particular body that channels the confessions, her listening ear and her speaking mouth, but only as a single particular course in the vast and branching networks that make up those intersecting institutional information flows. Indeed, the inclusion of sculptural fragmented body parts suggest the interchangeability of the human agents within the system, mere replaceable parts. In the context of BMoCA, her authority both lends the performance meaning, skirting closer to a sense of the “actual,” and voids it. Her license, of course, while valid in California has no real bearing in Colorado, and her relationship to participants is no more binding than that of any other performance artist — which is to say, binding only through the emotional heft participants choose to give it, but none of the legal substance with which the performance is tinged, particularly given the legal documents denying attorney-client privilege that all participants must sign. In repeating now-anonymous confessions in the same fragmented stream, she does suggest a hint of collective culpability yet sidesteps reference to the specific demands confessional institutions make on individuals. The entanglement of institutions here leaves the power of both of them

uncertain and ambiguous, the promise of revelation vague and indeterminate.

For she is, of course, both demanding confession and protecting its speakers from consequences, couching it in anonymity or even keeping it secret if the financial transaction goes through. In this way, the work calls into question the very revelation it seems to promise. If, as the BMoCA promotional material suggests, art can provide an “aesthetic revelation,” what does it mean to stage confessions artistically in a context informed by a legal authority concerned less with the revelation of truth than the regulation of justice? What does it mean to limn the mundane confessions of museum visitors, utterances that risk no consequences beyond provoking discomfort in the artist or audience, with the confessional affirmations of convicted sexual felons? What does it mean to bring the words of indigent felons into a white-cube gallery space or to frame confessions of *guilt* as universal without engaging specifics about systemic privilege and discrimination?

While it seems, with this as with other projects, Place intends to indict white supremacy, the prison industrial complex, and the artistic institutions that protect and uphold systemic inequalities, the presentation of her work at best falls flat and at worse operates to cleanse and rehabilitate whiteness through that indictment. In *The Lawyer is Present*, specifically, her goals utterly fail — or, perhaps, are insufficient to begin with. She suggests that her work “[creates] a platform for the audience to look at itself,” a goal that is certainly literally achieved through the proliferation of mirrors but one that falls too easily into pleasurable spectacle.¹⁵⁵ The promotional material for the show, further, seems unresolved on Place’s own role. While in the legal disclaimer, waiver, and spoken preface presented at the beginning of each confession, Place insists that no client-attorney

¹⁵⁵ Place, “Artist Vanessa Place Wants You to Confess for The Lawyer Is Present.”

relationship exists and that legal confessions are not intended as atonement, the brochure accompanying the exhibition suggests otherwise. In describing the confessional time available, it states, “These confessions will be held in a confidential setting within the gallery, and are protected from involuntary disclosure by the attorney-client privilege,” clearly emphasizing the “real” quality of Place’s position as an attorney.¹⁵⁶ Further, the brochure describes the final poem performance as “a public act of atonement by Place,” suggesting that, rather than operating as a mouthpiece, Place offers herself as a scapegoat, carrying the sins of her participants out of the confidential confessional booth in order to perform guilt in their place. In this way, the legal and religious roles of confession are muddled; should viewers and participants walk away cleansed, their sins atoned for by proxy, or struck by their own culpability in guilt and in a mired and labyrinthine legal system?

While emphasized in the marketing for the show, the weight of Place’s knowledge and authority as a lawyer, here, does not seem to pervade the rest of the work. The seriousness of her demeanor, her crossed arms and dour face in seemingly endless repetition within the dual-mirrored space of the confession booth, and the contrast between the confessions she recites and those available via headphone, also fail to mitigate the seduction of the participatory process. While some of the confessions offered do relate to serious sexual crimes such as rape and incest, they are interspersed with relatively banal offenses such as shoplifting. The confessions, too, proceed relatively unprompted; Place simply opened their time together with her disclaimers and then listened. Thus, while the audio pieces based on felony confessions progress in a

¹⁵⁶ Brochure text provided by artist. “The Lawyer Is Present (Brochure)” (Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013).

fragmented, circular fashion, with repetition, clarifications, and disconnected answers to erased questions, the confessions offer fuller narratives. The museum's description of the work, which states that "*The Lawyer is Present* celebrates the act of confession," emphasizes a festive tone, and further suggests the seductive pleasures of participatory confession by arguing that Place "shifts the burdens and pleasures of listening from herself to her audience."¹⁵⁷ Here, we see the pre-determined tone of enjoyment that accompanies many invitations to participate in art projects. The museum, after all, wants butts in seats — and that they got, with Place's final performance standing-room-only. This presentation of the fun one might have in participating in art aligns neatly with the ubiquitous amusements available via confession in contemporary society. Claire Bishop sees this alliance rather grimly, stating: "In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of egos levelled to banality. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it."¹⁵⁸ While I don't necessarily agree with Bishop's disparagement of confessional culture, her reading of the trajectory of participatory works as increasingly related to neoliberal concepts of consumption is particularly useful here. As she states, the formal qualities of participatory art in the early twenty-first century "dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labor)."¹⁵⁹ As I argued in the introduction, confession's ubiquity in the present moment also relates to a number of these forms, perhaps most particularly in the many ways individual feelings are commodified, sold, and promoted as fact across news media, social media, and advertising. Therefore, artists taking up confessional

¹⁵⁷ "The Lawyer Is Present - Spring – Exhibitions."

¹⁵⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 277.

¹⁵⁹ Bishop, 277.

forms contribute to that commodification through the extension of confessional labor into the museum and gallery, made attractive by promotion of its spectacular and voyeuristic qualities.

As an art historian, therefore, I ask what else do these works *do*; is there anything beyond, before, or between those spectacular qualities? Place, in all her articulations of the goals of her works, seems to strive for the sort of grim implication in complicity achieved by Fusco, a sense that, in confessing their own sins and secrets, visitors might dwell on the ways they also benefit from the legal systems that demand confessions from others or, at the least, the similarities in the institution of justice and art. But her work falls flat. The mirrored setting too easily slides from surveillance to carnival, the audio tracks providing transcripts of rape jokes and convicted sex felons' confessions are easily avoided in favor of the tantalizing promise of hearing your own, or your neighbors', secrets performed on stage. Would formal choices demanding something bleaker, something more onerous and harsh, convey the vast divide between an art-world confession and the last-ditch effort of a convicted rapist to go free in a meaningful way? A work that enforces a little cruelty might, as cultural critic Maggie Nelson argues, "offer unpredictable insight into...the sometimes simple, sometimes intricate ways in which humans imprison themselves and their others, thereby causing suffering rather than alleviating it."¹⁶⁰ Yet, that approach, too, falls in line with the art world's reification of risk, with, as Nelson states,

the avant-garde's long commitment to the idea that the shocks produced by cruelty and violence — be it in art or in political action — might deliver us, through some never-proven miracle, to a more sensitive, perceptive, insightful, enlivened, collaborative, and just way of inhabiting

¹⁶⁰ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, 2012, 11, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=DE585C43-272E-4964-A542-6A0859005FE8>.

the earth, and of relating to our fellow human beings.¹⁶¹

While I think there are ways in which, contrary to this obsession with shock, artists might evoke compassion, safety, silence, and the practices of “gentle aversion” that Nelson says “deserve to be called sweetness,” and I am, admittedly, drawn to those practices at other points in this chapter and dissertation, to avow that as the only appropriate route for considering the dehumanizing practices of disciplinary confession also seems insufficient, or at the least too totalitarian.¹⁶² Thus, in considering this project, with its forms not quite cruel and not quite kind, I remain stuck on the figure of Place herself, and what we are to make of her. The neutrality she seeks both cannot be, for not only does everyone occupy a particular subject position, but Place, as a queer woman, is already on the outside of the socially acceptable male, heterosexual neutral, and yet can still be conceived of because of her whiteness and because of the vast projects of disciplinary power in which she operates. The criminal justice system, particularly the appeals courts, intended to give a fair second chance to those convicted, operates on a naturalized system of neutrality. That neutrality, of course, is belied by the facts: of disproportionate rates of conviction of men of color and people in poverty, of rape cases hinging on the victim’s clothing or past sex life, of for-profit prisons demanding more and longer sentences, of an increasingly militarized police force, and of the many small and horrifying injustices due simply to inefficiency, cost-cutting, and overwork. Yet, here, Place asks visitors to consider the ways they “collaborate in [their] own guilt” without making formal choices that provoke a questioning of her own role in the system or of the naturalization of that

¹⁶¹ Nelson, 265.

¹⁶² Nelson, 269.

system, beyond the novelty of an artist who is — gasp — also an actual lawyer.¹⁶³

Perhaps to say it fails its confessional role is entirely inaccurate, then, for confession rituals, too, only operate through the normalization of their powers and authorities. As artistic revelation, though, it falters under the too-easy consumption of its spectacle.

While Place created a confessional cube within the space of the museum, for *Good Confession* (1997), Pauline Cummins extends the logic, authority, and resources of the gallery into the confessional booth. For this work, Cummins interviewed local inhabitants of inner city North Dublin about their hopes, fears, and dreams for their community, then edited their responses into two videos which she installed into the confessional booths of the local parish church, Our Lady of Lourdes. While the works by Fusco are non-site-specific and repeatable and that of Place site-specific but solitary, Cummins's piece was created as part of the *Inner Art* project, a multi-artist, year-long project organized by the Fire Station Art Studios as a response to the contexts of both the poverty of the area, seemingly sidestepped by the Celtic Tiger economic boom that benefited other parts of Dublin, and the occasionally ill-thought-out enthusiasm for "community" arts projects that have little to do with the actual communities they purport to serve. Fire Station Art Studios, founded in 1993 to provide residential studios for visual artists, is located a mere stone's throw from Our Lady of Lourdes and, in the late 1990s, was one of very few arts institutions north of the River Liffey, an area that has tended to be more predominantly working class in the 20th century.

Inner Art selected thirteen artists from Ireland, Spain, Germany, France, and England and gave them the brief of working closely with local communities, with the assistance of community liaisons familiar with both the history and dynamics of the area

¹⁶³ Place, "Artist Vanessa Place Wants You to Confess for The Lawyer Is Present."

and the workings and resources of Fire Station, to develop works that responded to and supported local activism combating widespread heroin use. As Fire Station director Tony Sheehan and artist Brian Kennedy argue, it was vital that the approach not be an attempt to “solve” a problem in the area, but a way of recognizing and bolstering the local activism already underway. They state that when they conceived of the project,

[drug] dealing which was taking place openly in the streets had been stopped by local people who, driven to despair by the rising death toll due to heroin, were forced to tackle the problem by a series of silent marches and protests. By 1997, open drug dealing had ceased, and local community workers and organisations had gained significant victories in their fight for prevention and treatment.¹⁶⁴

To avoid works that condescended to their audience or did not hold particular relevance to the space, submitting artists were first given a brief about the political and geographical history of the area, and those selected worked closely with specific community sectors for weeks or months before the works went on display in September 1997. Thus, of the works discussed in this chapter, *Good Confession* engages the most with the questions of ethical engagement raised by art historians such as Grant Kester. In arguing in favor of “dialogical projects,” Kester suggests a sort of delayed aesthetic: the concept of site-specificity in these cases means “a generative locus of individual and collective identities, actions, and histories, and the unfolding of artistic subjectivity awaits the specific insights generated by this singular coming-together.”¹⁶⁵ In pairing artists with community liaisons and delaying the creation and display of the works to follow community dialog, Sheehan and Kennedy assert this mode of collaborative engagement for the *Inner Art* show. The project was also supported by a number of

¹⁶⁴ Tony Sheehan and Brian Kennedy, “Inner Art,” Fire Station Artists’ Studios, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.firestation.ie/programme/project/inner-art/>.

¹⁶⁵ Kester, *The One and the Many*, 139.

government agencies, including the Arts Council and Combat Poverty Agency, whose joint report, *Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts*, released during the project's development, informed and reinforced its mission.

The context of an economically shifting Ireland offers some urgency to the question of access to the arts, as at the time Ireland had the third highest level of poverty in Europe, and was facing increased stratification due to the economic boom known as the "Celtic Tiger."¹⁶⁶ Geographer Niamh Moore argues that the development of Dublin as a dispersed, commuter-based urban region under the Celtic Tiger "creat[ed] and intensif[ied] the lot of an urban underclass as manufacturing and some semi-skilled service jobs disappear outward."¹⁶⁷ In this context, the overall economic growth of the Celtic Tiger exacerbated existing income disparity between working class North Dublin and, for instance, the long-standing government, academic, and artistic institutions south of the Liffey or the developing financial center in the Docklands. Jeanne Moore, the researcher who prepared the *Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts* report, identifies art making as an entitlement not of the few but of all, and art as closely linked to expressions of contemporary experience. In the introduction, she states:

All sections of society have an entitlement to engage in the process of making meaning through the arts. Such entitlement is not restricted to the expression of a small, though culturally dominant, section of society. The arts embrace the expression of the marginalised in their articulation of a contemporary experience. At a time of major social and economic change in our society, characterised by changing patterns of work, leisure and family structures, it is essential that forums are provided for those affected by poverty and disadvantage to explore their distinct cultural identities. In spite of this, most arts organisations and institutions do not include

¹⁶⁶ Jeanne Moore, *Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts : Report of a Working Group on Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts* (Combat Poverty Agency, 1997), 25.

¹⁶⁷ Niamh Moore, "Transforming Social and Spatial Structures in Celtic Tiger Ireland: Dublin in the 1990s," *Hommes et Terres Du Nord* 1, no. 1 (2004): 15, <https://doi.org/10.3406/htn.2004.2859>.

specific considerations of poverty and disadvantage in their planning.¹⁶⁸

Here, she connects art specifically to the exploration and expression of identity and experience, alluding to the confessional qualities of art to suggest truths and provide transformative experiences. Kester argues, similarly, that collective or dialogic art-making practices maintain this potential, and indeed, can possibly enhance it. He states, “it’s possible for creative agency to be de-individuated without diminishing its critical or transformative power. In fact, I would argue that *this capacity can actually be enhanced* if the experience of creative agency itself is treated in a more reflective manner.”¹⁶⁹ If done in a “reflective manner,” therefore, participatory art might, in fact, have the most confessional power, in this formulation. In the context of *Inner Art*, the exploration of this creative agency is less about individual identity than the connection that personal experience has to a broader community. In considering *Good Confession*, therefore, I am interested in many sources of institutional authority — of the Church, of Fire Station, of the Arts Council, of grassroots activists, of Cummins herself as a working artist — converging during the confessional moments recorded, which are reflective of ongoing convergences and negotiations between individuals, communities, and authority figures. Further, I also contend with the failures of my own authority as this work, more so than any other work included here, offers a minimal archive of its own presence. I have not seen the video and, by the account of the artist, it may no longer exist, lost somewhere in

¹⁶⁸ The report went on to review existing literature and data on the subject of participation in the arts for those living on low incomes, to summarize the views of a number of policy-makers, arts organizations, and artists surveyed for the report, and to document the experience of those living on low incomes in relation to access to the arts, as reported through small group discussions and door-to-door questionnaires. Finally, it offered suggestions for improving access to the arts for those on low incomes, including increased arts education at primary and secondary levels, greater coordination between funding bodies, and specific policies, funding, and monitoring to “give meaningful equality of access for those experiencing poverty and disadvantage to arts which are publicly funded.” Moore, *Poverty*, 2.

¹⁶⁹ Emphasis mine. Kester, *The One and the Many*, 138.

the digital reaches. Thus I rely on interviews with Cummins, a few still images, and contextual research into the conditions in which the *Inner Art* project emerged and hope to produce a suggestion of the way this small work might have interacted with its context. Here, I take Kester up on his claim and wonder about the transformative power of a work of art situated in a context where, by all accounts, the local inhabitants already have the day-to-day work of activism already well in hand.

For *Good Confession*, Cummins met with inhabitants of the local community, building conversations over a period of about three weeks before video recording long interviews with twenty-three participants. In the interviews, participants spoke about their own personal situations, what they loved about their community, and their hopes for the future of the area. Cummins edited the interviews into a fifteen minute long video which was installed into two of the confessional booths of the church. She states that the resultant videos captured a wide range of opinions, experiences, and ages, including “people in their 70s and one 9 year old.”¹⁷⁰ Participants spoke about their own experiences with addiction, the need for more addiction clinics in the area, and local activism stepping in where the police failed as well as their love for local institutions like the community pool and the distinctive Georgian architecture that marks the residential area. As Cummins states, “It was important for them to be seen as a well rounded area, yes damaged by drugs, but that was not the only story.”¹⁷¹ The expression of a variety of experiences suggested a closeness to truth; reviewer Michael Ross states that *Good Confession* was “art that reflected life’s realities.”¹⁷²

Cummins installed the videos into two of the confession booths in Our Lady of

¹⁷⁰ Pauline Cummins, “Email to the Author,” February 16, 2018.

¹⁷¹ Cummins.

¹⁷² Michael Ross, “Be Here Now; Cover Story,” *Sunday Times*, May 10, 1998.

Lourdes, on the priests' side. Parishioners or other viewers could then enter the booth on the penitents' side, kneel, and listen to the words of their neighbors [Fig. 2.5].

Interspersed between the interviews, close-up shots of the neighborhood suggest histories of decline and the hope for renewal. In one, the craggy, soot-darkened brick of a Georgian row house fills the screen, hinting at the area's decline from affluent merchant homes to slum housing in the late nineteenth century. In another, crimson poppies sway in a gentle breeze, a suggestion of concrete visible behind a tangle of stems and grass. Poppies, redolent with meaning, call to mind the opioids at the heart of the area's addiction problem, the symbolic connotation of mourning those lost, and processes of renewal and regeneration. Unlike in *The Lawyer is Present*, where the chance to overhear a given confession carries with it a hint of salacious temptation, here the confessions do not bring to light the secrets, sins, or shames of participants but their hopes, "what they want for their community, their ambitions for themselves and their children."¹⁷³ In some cases, participants describe their own experience with addiction, while others discuss the difficulty of watching young people become addicted. In this way, personal narratives are affirmed as part of a local community context. Thus, a young boy talking about how much he likes to swim at the local pool suggests the need to provide community resources to young people as an alternative to drug use, and a middle-aged woman arguing, with frustration in her voice, for more addiction clinics suggests the opportunity for rehabilitation. This hope and community involvement is what makes them "good confessions," according to Cummins.

Situating them as confessions rather than simply interviews draws on the specifically performative aspect of confession and its transformative qualities. Confession

¹⁷³ Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 37.

is a ritual “in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has to surmount in order to be formulated...a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it,” as Foucault argues.¹⁷⁴ Cummins adopts the ritualistic power of confession to “[produce] intrinsic modifications” and aims it not at individuals, but at a community. Further, by placing the videos in the seat of the priest, Cummins specifically imbues the words with the authority of the clergy, and by extension, God, subtitled the work *In Loco Dei* (in the place of God), the transitive position of authority taken on by priests during certain sacraments. The formal, ritualistic environment of the confessional booth, too, gives the works a transformative air. Seen through the privacy screen between the sides of the booth, images in the video feel distant, perhaps even inaccessible at first. Indeed, in images of the installation, the screen creates a gridded barrier overlaying the video, conjuring the sense of mystery and unknowability that imbues Catholic ritual [Fig. 2.6]. However, the brightness of the video screen perseveres against this barrier, spilling over into the penitents’ side to wash visitors with light. In this way, the work borrows the spiritual connotations of the confession ritual, its truths brought to light through the overcoming of obstacles and through the grace of God by way of the priest.

The videos supplant the priests but, of course, are also installed with their cooperation. Critic Gemma Tipton, in a cautiously skeptical review of *Inner Art*, reiterates three times the necessity of the agreement and approval of the Church for installation. She writes that work on the project “began with a close look at the immediate area, its contexts, and its concerns, and immediately included the people who lived there. Their support and agreement became, in varying ways, vital to the existence of the

¹⁷⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 62.

project,” and later that “if permission hadn’t been sought for Pauline Cummins’ installation...[it], quite simply, couldn’t have gone ahead.”¹⁷⁵ Other works in the project required permission not from the local council or the Garda, the Irish police force, but by local anti-drug vigilante groups.¹⁷⁶ While the Catholic Church, as a broader institution, has, to put it mildly, a troubled history of abuse in Ireland, the specific context of this church allowed Cummins to engage with it in a collaborative rather than adversarial way. Indeed, Cummins identifies the clergy of Our Lady of Lourdes as “part of a liberationist movement [who] believe that the poor have rights and should be liberated from oppression.”¹⁷⁷

The church also served as a meeting place for anti-drug activism in the ‘80s and ‘90s. What began as, according to then-activist and now Dublin City Councilor Christy Burke, a “a room full of mummies and daddies with an IRA activist and a priest,” turned into a powerful community movement focused on, first, vigilante patrols and later policy change.¹⁷⁸ The resultant organizations, including Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD), Coalition of Communities Against Drugs (COCAD), and Inner Cities Organization Network (Icon), with some support from the Provisional IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein, led actions to run dealers out of the city and marches to protest for new policies. Indeed, what Sheehan and Kennedy call “a series of silent marches and protests” in their introduction to *Inner Art* also included marches that converged on

¹⁷⁵ Gemma Tipton, “Art Projects: Opium of the Masses?,” *Circa*, no. 82 (1997): 31–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25563208>.

¹⁷⁶ Tipton recounts the negotiation between these groups and the artist Shane Cullen to site a mural on the gable end of Mountain View Court, previously a prominent “site for expression of local anger and outrage” through anti-drug and anti-Garda graffiti. Tipton, 31.

¹⁷⁷ Deepwell, *Dialogues*, 38.

¹⁷⁸ Burke qtd in Patrick Freyne, “‘We Marched on Four Dealers That Night’: Dublin’s Anti-Drug Wars,” *The Irish Times*, September 16, 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/we-marched-on-four-dealers-that-night-dublin-s-anti-drug-wars-1.3221041>.

known residences of drug dealers with the express purpose of intimidating them into compliance or kicking them out of the city.¹⁷⁹ Describing the first meeting of CPAD in 1982, Burke says, “We marched on four dealers that night. Three of them agreed to cease and help out and one didn’t and we put them out physically, [me] and the priest and the mothers and fathers. We took out their possessions, which wasn’t much and we told them to leave.”¹⁸⁰ CPAD continued similar actions through the ‘80s and ‘90s, alongside organizing and activism by other groups. Fergus McCabe, former chairman of Icon, suggests that it was in the meetings where the hard work of organizing and education happened. As he describes:

There’d be big public meetings in the church on Sean McDermott Street [Our Lady of Lourdes]. There might be singing from Christy Moore and Frances Black. There’d be an hour of a process, which sometimes involved a prayer... There might be a report on dealing in Summerhill. Dr Joe Barry [from the Eastern Health Board] might give a talk about addiction. Then we might have had a copper or an addict would talk.¹⁸¹

Thus, Cummins steps into a space already steeped in conversation, discussion, activism, a space marked by both ecclesiastical and grassroots authority. That history, too, is marked by an ambivalence toward the official authority of the state; while individual Gardaí might be sympathetic to the cause, such as the “copper” who might have spoken at one of the public meetings at Our Lady of Lourdes, prevailing sentiment among activists was that the Garda were negligent in their duties in finding and arresting drug dealers in the community, while expending abusive effort on monitoring, arresting, and beating anti-drug activists. In his memoir of his time in COCAD, André Lyder describes a march converging at the Dolphin House building in Dublin in 1996:

¹⁷⁹ Sheehan and Kennedy, “Inner Art.”

¹⁸⁰ Burke qtd in Freyne, ““We Marched on Four Dealers That Night.””

¹⁸¹ McCabe qtd in Freyne.

By the time we had covered the few hundred yards from the Community Centre to the block in question more police descended on Dolphin House than I had ever suspected existed in the south inner city. There were squad cars, plain-clothes men in unmarked cars, cops on motorcycles, and even a Black Maria [police van]. It was particularly astonishing given that I could have sold heroin there all day and not seen a single member of the Garda Síochána.¹⁸²

In drawing on ecclesiastical authority but supplanting the voices of priests with those of community members, Cummins attests to the importance of parish churches as gathering spaces and sites for community engagement that does not always follow the rules of disciplinary power. In this way, the power she brushes up against is not just that of the clergy, but also, and more importantly, the collective power wielded by organizers, activists, and educators.

Organizers of the show Sheehan and Kennedy saw her work as emblematic of “the project’s focus on discussion and collaboration” in its use of both sustained interview techniques and the presentation of the voices of participants.¹⁸³ The collaboration suggested is between the artist, backed by the authority of Fire Station and its funding bodies, including national agencies, and the local participants, backed by the authority of their own experience and a history of community organizing. In this work, a number of confessional authorities converge, their power directed to work not towards individual transformation or personal engagement with art objects, but toward ongoing grassroots activism. Like in the works by Fusco and Place, however, Cummins’s authority as an artist ultimately pales in comparison to those she mimics and borrows. In temporarily supplanting the presence of priests in the the church’s confessional booths, *Good Confession* takes on the authority of the clergy but does not question or trouble it. It is,

¹⁸² André Lyder, *Pushers Out: The Inside Story of Dublin’s Anti-Drugs Movement* (Trafford Publishing, 2005), 286–87.

¹⁸³ Sheehan and Kennedy, “Inner Art.”

perhaps, the participants themselves whose authority is most powerful. Their good confessions are, indeed, not simply hopes and dreams, but also reiterate the ongoing long-term activist work performed by community members when the official authorities failed. The space into which Cummins steps is not in need of her transformation, for its inhabitants are already engaged in the hard slog toward gradual change.

In this way, the work attests to the fundamental difficulty of socially-engaged art. Her work does not transform ways of thinking so much as bring together the voices of those who are already challenging dominant narratives. In a symposium held in conjunction with *Inner Art* at the Our Lady of Lourdes Parish Hall, just next door to Cummins's repurposed confessional booths, a community activist, a community arts worker, an art critic, and two artists came together to discuss the topic of "Art in Marginalised Communities." Throughout the discussion, a summary of which is represented in the *Inner Art* catalog, the speakers reiterate common concerns with community arts projects, including the presence of artists from outside the community imposing their vision, the difficulties around ascertaining the impact of arts projects on participants and viewers, superficial approaches to barriers in participation that did not address systemic disenfranchisement, and the potential value or pitfalls in long-term collaboration between artists and local inhabitants. The discussion, in the end, was not conclusive regarding the relative success or failure of *Inner Art* as a community project; rather, it suggested an ongoing set of questions which can only be imperfectly and incompletely answered with any project. For community activist Mick Rafferty, community art is "a circular process by which a group of people explore issues together,

feed those issues back to the community and carry on.”¹⁸⁴ This concept of creating community art as an ongoing, cyclical, perhaps at times tedious process is reiterated by Kester in a slightly more subdued moment of his text, reflecting on art and urban space. In the absence of a grand transformation or “single emancipatory telos,” “change becomes sustainable and extensive only through a *cumulative* process of reciprocal testing that moves between practical experience and reflective insight.”¹⁸⁵ Bishop, even in her antagonism, finds some middle ground with Kester here, by arguing that “[at] a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved.”¹⁸⁶ She suggests that the disappointing results of much of participatory art today are due to its missing both a political *and* artistic aim. The task, she argues, “is to produce a viable international alignment of leftist political movements and a reassertion of art’s inventive forms of negation as valuable in their own right.”¹⁸⁷ In these cases, it seems to me, the underlying suggestion is that the aesthetic experience of art, in both creation and consumption, is at most only a small part of broader circuits of activism, education, and organizing. The confessional revelatory potential of Cummins’s piece, while certainly more hopeful than those of *Operation Atropos* or *The Lawyer is Present*, nonetheless still does not reside within the artistic sphere itself. In using the words of those already engaged in the work of change and by situating her piece within the very site where the quotidian, banal, and continual work of organizing takes place, *Good Confession* refutes the concept of singular aesthetic revelation in favor of the transformative power of steady, slow, and at times frustrating labor.

¹⁸⁴ Fire Station Artists Studios, *Inner Art* (Dublin: Fire Station Artists’ Studios, 2000), 4.

¹⁸⁵ Kester, *The One and the Many*, 212.

¹⁸⁶ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 283.

¹⁸⁷ Bishop, 284.

I emphasize the brushes with the “actual” provided by the three works in this chapter to affirm and recognize the limitations of art’s ability to affect material consequences. Certainly each of them grapple with vast and complex systems against which individual artists, with a handful of participants, would always be relatively helpless. Each project, too, requires us to consider on what terms, then, we analyze and understand participatory art focused on social issues. Once we get that easy gotcha out of the way — that art isn’t, in fact, the same thing as political policy or social activism — we have space to think through what individual projects, in their own aesthetic and contextual forms, imply, provoke, or fail to inspire. Considering art making and display as a confessional apparatus itself requires us to critically engage with the assumption of art’s revelatory and transformative potential, and to see what we learn when sitting with works that utterly fail that potential. This, I believe, requires a slight renegotiation on the part of arts professionals — art historians, critics, curators, artists — and what we promise to ourselves, our peers, and our readers, students, visitors, viewers, and participants. It has, indeed, required a personal adjustment in my own approach to the works contained here, a recognition that the sort of compassionate approach I seek also requires a sharp and critical eye, an occasional affirmation of distaste or reproach. Thus while I plead against those who would disregard confessional culture as yet another aspect of an increasingly narcissistic and willfully ignorant public, I also caution those who proclaim uncritically the transformative power of self-divulging. While at this point, to be in the in-between is a post-modern cliché, the hallmark of the humanities scholar who wants to think about change seriously but perhaps not too literally, I nonetheless tentatively step in, to wonder what we might find if we ask art to tell us small things, to

make us dwell uncomfortably, to efface its own efficacy?

Similarly, what happens if we art historians occasionally let our hands fall to our sides and say, “I’m not sure”? Can we abide in the place of gut response for a while, the place where those things provoked in our bodies — aversion, humor, enchantment — don’t easily stick to specific sources? As confessors of art, we aim to make works not just divulge, but to transform those bits of evidence, significant and paltry, into meaning. That role of not just revelation — bringing to light — but transformation — interpreting value, consequence, significance — co-constitutes our authority and that of the objects under our study. Griselda Pollock argues of art historical canons that they “may be understood...as the retrospectively legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity, a consolidated narrative of origin, conferring authority on the texts selected to naturalise this function.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, art history creates the very history it purports to discover and inherit. Charmaine Nelson argues, too, that art historians who actively center their own choices, desires, and methods, thus making transparent those creative acts of canonization, are too often set against those who do not, who are thus “accepted as the ‘norm’ of the discipline, the specificity and exclusivity of their desires masked as the paradigm of the discourse in which they operate instead of being revealed as the very fabric of discursivity.”¹⁸⁹ If we accept the naturalization of art history as already existing, not self-invented, we ratify it as one of those comprehensible systems in which “the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to

¹⁸⁸ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*, Re Visions (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

¹⁸⁹ Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007), xvi.

have invented them.”¹⁹⁰ Is it, indeed, a necessary function of authority to elide its own making? By analyzing the powers of these artists, I assert my own. I aim also, in finding their slippages and confusions, their places of deliberate or accidental uncertainty, their moments of cooperation rather than innovation, to suggest my own position in telling a certain story, with all the failures to which that may be prone.

¹⁹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

Chapter Three: Bodily Evidence

In the center of the room stands a bed. The sheets, a discolored white, are rumped, coming untucked in the corners, and a duvet slips precariously off one corner. A pair of pantyhose drapes over the top of the covers, one toe dangling toward the ground. Four pillows, stacked near the head of the bed, bear creased pillowcases. Next to the bed, a dark blue rug is partially obscured by a profusion of everyday items, including empty liquor bottles and pill boxes, underwear stained with blood, folded newspapers, cigarette butts, and used condoms. Something, it seems, has happened here, some human actions to rumple the sheets and strew the detritus, some human bodies to leave behind sweat stains, blood, and semen. A crime, an act of passion, a period of despair, of joy, of fear?

The bed is Tracey Emin's, located not in a crime scene but a gallery. Staged and re-staged multiple times over nearly two decades, Emin's installation work at once suggests and resists narratives of sexual violence, mental illness, and depression, compelling viewers to tease apart the merest details of the scene with forensic care. While some turn away from the scene of seemingly emotional excess, embarrassing in its messiness, others peer closely at the carefully-preserved detritus, make out traces of lipstick, snot, or sweat, sniff the air for the stale scent of trash and unwashed bodies, and still others imagine the tossing and turning of a body entangled in bedsheets, the reach of a hand toward an ashtray, the swallow of a throat on the last mouthful of vodka. For each, the piece is replete with meaning, written across its crumpled surfaces, and each possible engagement, even that of refusal, activates the viewer as interpreter and the objects as evidence.

Emin is far from the first artist to use bodily products in making her art; she builds

upon a twentieth-century history of interest in and use of the body, such as Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* in *Womanhouse* (1972) or Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975), both of which, in turn, draw on modernist interest in the gesture as much as concepts of gender and human subjectivity. Here, I wish to turn our attention to the use of bodily products and traces in art not just as material, laden with psycho-social meaning, but also as evidence. Evidence is not just the stuff of our bodies or the world around us; it offers proof, it suggests truth, it makes facts, feelings, actions, and desires conspicuous and clear, and when used to assert guilt, innocence, complicity, or intention, it carries with it consequences. Bodily evidence, particularly, relates to confession. Both attach to identity, asserting particular truths about the self. Those traces we leave behind index our movements, attest to our presence, and document our actions. The use of bodily evidence, operating as an index of the artist's body and, in many cases, recording the gestures and movements of that body, also draws on notions of the performative power of the artist's gesture important to the American abstract expressionist painters and those they influenced. In *The Tradition of the New*, Harold Rosenberg argues that the "innovation of Action Painting was to dispense with the *representation* of the state in favor of *enacting* it in physical movement. The action on the canvas became its own representation."¹⁹¹ This move from representing to enacting locates the importance of a work in the act of its making, not as a demonstration of mimetic skill or the ability to create beautiful or aesthetic objects, but as a transformative act in and of itself. Rosenberg argues that action painting is "essentially a religious movement...[concerned

¹⁹¹ Original emphasis. Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, Inc., 1959), 27.

with] the creation of private myths.”¹⁹² That is, it acts as a way of accessing an understanding of individuality and self, freed from the constraints of previous political, aesthetic, and moral values. Foucault writes of confession that it “produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it.”¹⁹³ Similarly, Rosenberg argues that a good action painting “leaves no doubt concerning its reality as an action and its relation to a transforming process in the artist....Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question.”¹⁹⁴ The attempted goal of this process is an affirmation of — or at least a striving towards — the subjectivity of individual recognition, “a new moment in which the painter will realize his total personality-myth of future self-recognition.”¹⁹⁵ However, as explicated earlier in this dissertation, subjectivity as it arises through confession is not merely about a sense of personal autonomy, but is also a way of situating the self within a web of social relations, authorities, and institutions. In this chapter perhaps more than any other, the friction between those concepts of the subject appears in both fruitful and frustrating ways. In reading bodily evidence as indexical and gestural, therefore, I aim to emphasize how its presence is marshaled, across artistic, legal, and medical spheres, as both a marker of and complication to individual subjectivity.

I consider art-making in a contemporary context in which increasing attention to and analysis of the material of our bodies within medical, criminal, legal, and investigatory institutions leaves us ever more aware of that material as related to both kinds of subjectivity: our individual embodied identity and our position under the law.

¹⁹² Rosenberg, 31.

¹⁹³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 62.

¹⁹⁴ Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 33.

¹⁹⁵ Rosenberg, 31.

The development of technologies for reading DNA, handwriting, and fingerprints, for collecting and collating the medical records of whole populations, and for recording and recognizing the physiognomy of specific bodies gives us increasingly precise ways of connecting specific physical evidence with individual persons or identity-based communities. Bodily evidence is made to confess its hidden truths in ways that corroborate or, increasingly, overtake the vocal or written confessions of individuals, and accompanying this switch is a trust in the objectivity of technological apparatuses. I argue that the trust we place in scientific means of reading bodily evidence is part of a greater cultural desire for a teleological progression toward absolute objective truth, a desire that uses the same logic as confession while proposing to supplant it and that relies on acts of subjective interpretation while anticipating their erasure. Along the way, however, this shared cultural desire is continually complicated by the actual scientific processes used to determine, collect, analyze, and make sense of evidence, processes that at once depend upon, reconfigure, and muddle notions of objective truth.

Further, as it, too, depends on visibility, the analysis of material traces, and an awareness and management of physical, embodied responses, art history offers a particularly appropriate lens for considering the interpretation of bodily evidence. In the twentieth century, traces of the body — the artist's and the viewer's — proliferate across art-making, viewing, and experiencing, offering themselves up in poignant and fraught ways as symbols and as evidence. We might think of the bodily index of abstract expressionist painting, of viewers holding scissors in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* or a loaded gun in Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, of the bloody cuts made in the flesh of artists such as Catherine Opie or Ron Athey, of Piero Manzoni's feces and Andres Serrano's urine. In

this chapter, I examine three contemporary projects that make use of bodily evidence, not just the fluids and waste products of human bodies, but the indexical traces left by and on bodies, in order to investigate the ways the processes of art — its making, exhibiting, viewing, experiencing, and analyzing — engage with acts of evidence-making and analysis towards truth. Tracey Emin's installation work *My Bed* (1998) brings bodily evidence, largely in the form of bodily secretions and waste, into the gallery space, offering it up as forensic evidence to be interpreted. Candy Chang's participatory project *Confessions* (2012-16) asks visitors to offer up short written confessions, and I argue that in her staging of the work, the individual particularities of handwriting take on a subsumed but foundational importance to the experience of the project. Finally, Nadia Myre's *Scar Project* (2005-13), a large-scale, multi-site participatory project, brings together the tangible, indexical quality of bodily evidence with the more impalpable affective, psychological, and social effects of moments of trauma by asking participants to create visual and textual representations of physical or emotional scars they carry. Each project uses bodily evidence as material; further, though, these three projects adopt and adapt forensic and biopolitical techniques of collection and analysis in order to place the visitor in an investigative and analytic role. These works thus engage with the very act of *making* evidence, that is, not just the sloughing off of bodily traces, but the discursive processes through which trace becomes evidence. This process, these works show, continually contends with the vicissitudes of bodily traces: left behind as material remains yet prone to decay, related to our subjectivities and reminders of their fragility, and able to provoke responses of revulsion and distance, empathy and communality all at once.

By insisting on reading the material of these works as evidence, I position them within a contemporary context in which technological advancements seem to place everything — the most minute traces and the most indistinct relationships between objects — in the realm of evidence, as potentially holding some greater truth able to be teased out with the right techniques and tools. This awareness of the forensic potential of every cell we shed, I argue, at once shares the logic of confession while seemingly rendering it obsolete. In the framework of confession, it is our most hidden and indistinct desires that we seek to pull forth, those things “lodged in our most secret nature.”¹⁹⁶ Each and every thought and action works as evidence toward our diagnosis, just as every trace fingerprint, shed hair, drop of blood, saliva, or semen add up to proof of one’s presence or actions. However, in their seeming objectivity, the technological tools of analysis for trace evidence are continually figured as more objective and less prone to bias than other forms of truth-telling, such as confession and witness statements. This trustworthiness of technological means, I will argue, is a fundamental narrative within our contemporary concepts of justice; and yet, it is a narrative continually accompanied by, in need of, and complicated through human interpretation.

None of these works make use of the sort of machinery, technology, or equipment one might find in a forensic lab. They are, broadly, handmade: assembled by the artist, hand-written or painted, wrought with needle and thread. The acts of interpretation they request of their viewers, I will argue, are affective, empathetic, visceral, and individual, rather than the analytic repeatability prized by scientific and forensic analysis. However, these works nonetheless contend with an overarching desire of modern western society, promoted by the post-Enlightenment drive toward increasing scientific analysis,

¹⁹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 60.

categorization, and naming and accelerated by contemporary technologization: the automation of analysis. Across a number of cultural forms throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, we can trace a shared cultural narrative of teleological progress toward absolute objective scientific testing, ideally with the removal or minimization of human error, interpretation, or bias. I hesitate to call this a fiction or falsity; rather, I identify it as a shared cultural desire, one that determines the direction of many parts of scientific exploration, that informs and is informed by the criminal justice systems of western nations, and that speaks loudly — sometimes through silences — about our concerns and anxieties around concepts of human self-interest, bodily integrity, hierarchies of power, and our fundamental inability to comprehend the subjectivity of others. This desire for automation crops up in the narratives of our fictional classics as well as our favorite TV shows, but it is also articulated by judges and scientists, who routinely reference such books and shows in legal decisions and academic papers, where it causes both comfort and alarm.

When Dr. John Watson first meets Sherlock Holmes in the laboratory at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, for example, Holmes is enmeshed in developing a test to detect the presence of small quantities of blood. As Holmes not-so-humbly states, his test "is the most practical medico-legal discovery for years....Had this test been invented, there are hundreds of men now walking the earth who would long ago have paid the penalty of their crimes....Now we have the Sherlock Holmes test, and there will no longer be any difficulty."¹⁹⁷ Detecting the presence of blood, which, when aged is easily mistaken for mud, rust, or any number of other stains, is thus offered by Holmes as a deciding — and

¹⁹⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger, 1st ed, vol. 3 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 21–23.

decisive — piece of evidence. Blood, he suggests, brings with it definitive proof, its presence an index of the injury which caused its spillage. Throughout Arthur Conan Doyle's stories of the fictional consulting detective, Holmes solves various and sundry crimes and mysteries using similar instances of bodily evidence — blood, fingerprints, discoloration in the skin and flesh, scars and wounds, an absolute proliferation of footprints, and the telling characteristics of handwriting — to form his theories and catch his man. In many cases, the narrative structure of Conan Doyle's stories build to a criminal confession in which the caught villain's words work to confirm Holmes's readings of the evidence.

Some eight decades later, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg would echo the fictional detective's sentiment in the majority decision for *Escobedo vs. Illinois* (1964), a case that held that, under the Sixth Amendment, suspects have the right to counsel during interrogation. In elaborating on the position of confession in criminal proceedings, Goldberg writes:

We have learned the lesson of history, ancient and modern, that a system of criminal law enforcement which comes to depend on the 'confession' will, in the long run, be less reliable and more subject to abuses than a system which depends on extrinsic evidence independently secured through skillful investigation.¹⁹⁸

The *Escobedo* decision argues that a system reliant solely upon confession is prone to corruption, coercion, abuse, and torture; while the force of the decision lies in the assertion of right to council in order to challenge abuses of power, the underlying warning of overt reliance on confession lurks. Confession, the decision suggests, carries with it the suspicion of coercion; "extrinsic evidence independently secured through skillful investigation" does not. Citing this passage from the *Escobedo* decision, a

¹⁹⁸ *Escobedo vs Illinois*, U.S. 478 (Supreme Court 1964).

National Institute of Justice booklet from 1984 entitled *Forensics: When Science Bears Witness* outlines some of the forensic tests available at the time of its publication with the implication that the ongoing development of such technologies will allow the justice system increased assurance in criminal convictions through reliable evidence. Included are serology tests for the presence of markers in blood that seem descendants of the fictional Sherlock Holmes test; the booklet anticipates scientific discoveries that render forensic technologies more and more precise, stating that “research may turn toward developing the existing *art* into a *science*.”¹⁹⁹ The juxtaposition between *art* and *science*, here, implies a progression from the imprecision of art, so prone to individual interpretation, to the more solidly dependable rigor of science.

In 1998, the NIJ referenced Holmes in another booklet describing advances and uses in DNA testing technology:

Since before the turn of the century, at a time when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was spinning his tales of Sherlock Holmes, objective scientific evidence has been routinely used to investigate crime. Today, although most crimes continue to be solved through confessions and eyewitness accounts, forensic evidence—most often drugs, fingerprints, firearms, blood, and semen—has come increasingly to be used to establish the truth.²⁰⁰

Here, the NIJ suggests an ongoing shift in which confessions and eyewitness accounts — modes of truth-telling dependent on the circumstances, recollection, words, and biases of individuals — are overtaken by the analysis of forensic evidence, in which technological readings of trace evidence combined with comparative databases connect individuals to acts.

¹⁹⁹ My emphasis. National Institute of Justice, Marc H. Caplan, and Joe Holt Anderson, “Forensics: When Science Bears Witness.” (US Dept of Justice, National Institute of Justice, October 1984), 10.

²⁰⁰ National Institute of Justice, Victor Walter Weedn, and John W. Hicks, “The Unrealized Potential of DNA Testing” (US Dept of Justice, National Institute of Justice, June 1998), 1.

The technologies and databases used to analyze forensic evidence are often given a prominent — and highly fictionalized — role in television procedural dramas. The plot lines of shows such as those in the *CSI* and *Law & Order* franchises, as well as Sherlock Holmes-inspired stand-alones such as *Elementary* or *Bones*, depend not only on the prowess of their lead investigators, but on teams of technological experts able to produce rapid, accurate results in fields including DNA, fingerprint, blood content, and ballistics analysis as well as facial recognition, photo and media manipulation, and digital forensics. The character Gil Grissom on CBS's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, for instance, expresses a similar mistrust of confession and witness testimony as Justice Goldberg, saying in one episode "I tend not to believe people. People lie. But the evidence doesn't lie."²⁰¹ Using *CSI* as a case study, anthropologist Corinna Kruse argues that science-focused procedural dramas offer forensic investigation as not only more reliable than confession or witness statements, but as the ideal way of accessing truth and effecting justice. Forensic analysis, within such shows, "steadfastly delivers indubitable and absolute truth on which equally infallible judgments can be based," rather than the probability-based evidence offered by non-fictional forensic science, which is assessed and interpreted within the broader spaces of the judicial system, not just the lab.²⁰² While the creative license used in depicting the speed and accuracy of such technologies allows these shows to offer weekly stand-alone episodes, moving quickly through a single case over a forty-two-minute air time, it also offers comfort in depicting functional, reliable, and ultimately righteous justice systems. Kruse calls the forensic investigation offered by procedural dramas "wishful thinking science," arguing that they "also [deliver] a fiction

²⁰¹ Danny Cannon, "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," *Crate 'n Burial* (CBS, October 20, 2000).

²⁰² Corinna Kruse, "Producing Absolute Truth: CSI Science as Wishful Thinking," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2009.01198.x>.

of a better society, delivering images and rhetoric for thinking about what nonfictional society should do, or should be able to do, about crime.”²⁰³ In this way, procedural dramas engage in and further the collective desire for objective truth accessed through evidence.

In each of these cases the speakers and authors — Holmes himself, Justice Goldberg for the majority, the NIJ writers, *CSI*'s Grissom — suggest the presence of a future in which the precision of forensic evidence is able to overtake the nebulous authority of confession. There “will no longer be any difficulty”; we will have learned the lessons of history; the *art* will turn to *science*; those taking Grissom’s advice will “tend not to believe people” but know that “evidence doesn’t lie”; and thus forensic evidence will increasingly help establish the truth. In this, each expresses a yearning for greater certainty, for more effective and infallible ways of understanding the stuff our bodies leave behind. The 1998 booklet suggests the deeply held promise of DNA, particularly:

Thanks to DNA, biological evidence is now used in new ways, and many more sources of evidence are available than in the past. Yet the potential of DNA may be greater than its accomplishments thus far. Realizing that potential means first overcoming a number of limitations— in procedures for testing DNA evidence and systems to collect and access DNA information.²⁰⁴

Thus, forensic evidence from and of the body — what I am calling *bodily evidence* — holds particular knowledge that, with properly attuned equipment and more sensitive and accurate tests, offers more and more secure routes to the truth. In only one of the examples here, Justice Goldberg’s majority decision, is there a suggestion of the role of human interpretation — “skillful investigation” — in gathering, testing, and making sense of bodily evidence. Despite the span of decades between Conan Doyle’s writing

²⁰³ Kruse, 88.

²⁰⁴ National Institute of Justice, Walter Weedn, and Hicks, “The Unrealized Potential of DNA Testing,” 1.

and our contemporary moment, and the attendant post-modern skepticism toward absolute truth, the appeal of hidden truths waiting to be uncovered and technologically proven persists.

Taken at face value, therefore, the shared desire toward automation suggests the hope for a future system of justice in which the production of truth — the compelling outward of the hidden secrets of bodily evidence — is unhindered by human bias. Unlike individual humans giving confessions, DNA, fingerprints, handwriting, and ballistics will not be able to lie, as we invent increasingly more sensitive technology to uncover their truths. When it comes to decreasing incidences of false convictions and increasing conviction rates for cases wherein cultural prejudices devalue the testimony of victims, such as rape and sexual assault, the development of increasingly sensitive tests holds immense value. However, the narrative of increasing automation all but erases the actual processes of developing new techniques and technologies of analysis, the setting of standards and norms through which evidence might be analyzed and considered significant (or not), and, significantly for the criminal justice system, the interpretation of results into conclusions with bearing on a case. That is, the desire for automation ignores all the human effort that cannot be removed precisely because automation is created and used by humans. Further, the suggestion that forensic evidence can be absolutely, definitively analyzed — at least eventually, whether or not we have the technology currently — leads to assumptions about the nature of scientific inquiry that do not reflect the actual practice of the use of forensic evidence in the judicial system.

Writing about the use of scientific expert witnesses in court cases, legal scholar Susan Haack argues that efforts to make use of scientific evidence in courtrooms have

been based on false assumptions about scientific inquiry. Judges and juries frequently are asked to make determinations regarding scientific findings in fields in which they are far from experts, and for which they might have been presented with conflicting expert opinions. Further, by its very nature scientific inquiry does not offer a single progressive path toward greater truth, but a diffuse and diverse field in which a number of relevant theories are tested at once, so that definitive conclusions, particularly in new fields, are not guaranteed. She argues that “the closer scientific work is to the frontier, the less comprehensive the evidence so far available, the more room there is for legitimate disagreement about what background information is reliable, hence about what evidence is relevant to what, and hence about the warrant of a claim.”²⁰⁵ In order for scientific claims, procedures, and results to be trustworthy — to be generally agreed to bring forth truth — a comprehensive foundation of repeated and related tests must first be established, a process that requires experimentation and disagreement.

In this, scientific inquiry and art historical scholarship share a remarkable kinship, in testing and applying different, sometimes contradictory, methods in order to generate results that may or may not stand up to future scrutiny. Here, therefore, I wish to linger in that space of “legitimate disagreement,” in order to consider the ways in which bodily evidence, particularly, at once complicates and drives the desire for ever-more-objective methods of analysis. I will argue that the works of art under investigation here illuminate the cultural desire for automated truth-telling as fraught with both comfort and unease. In emphasizing the act of interpretation and analysis as deeply human, no matter the technologies available to aid in such efforts, these works also articulate interpretation as

²⁰⁵ Susan Haack, “An Epistemologist in the Bramble-Bush: At the Supreme Court with Mr. Joiner,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 26, no. 2 (April 2001): 226.

bound to and a tool of power. In systems of justice as in art, what counts as evidence — of a crime, of an artwork’s meaning — is determined by and through networks of power, informed and shaped by individuals with interested motives. Similarly, these systems determine who is able to leave evidence, and whose evidence is collected and conserved. They enshrine the positions of interpreter — the forensic pathologist, the art historian — and regulate their methods of analysis, substantiation, and publication. Throughout this chapter, I consider the manifold decisions, actions, networks, strategies, and tools that determine what counts as evidence, who leaves it and who reads it, and what role it has in determining consequences within legal and justice systems to be an apparatus of interpretation.

Michel Foucault uses the term apparatus to delineate power relationships, made up of heterogeneous elements. The apparatus, he writes, is “always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it.”²⁰⁶ In the case of an interpretative apparatus used to constitute traces as evidence, we might consider the role of systems and methods as diverse and interconnected as trace evidence collection and chain of command standards, the dispersal of funds to research scientists determining which studies proceed and in what areas, interview techniques and sample collection methods for gathering medical data then used to create population norms, jury selection strategies and expert witness testimony used by prosecution and defense attorneys, and many other techniques informed and implicated by cultural assumptions around truth and identity. The ways through which any particle, remnant, or object *becomes* evidence are not only subject to

²⁰⁶ Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 196.

the norms and procedures of a number of institutions across the scientific, legal, and judicial spheres, but to the cultural biases and prejudices that require some bodies but not others to be the norm, that collectivize data from some populations and not others, and that inform the application of interpretation to the justice system.

The works under investigation here do not seek to do away with or entirely overturn these systems of power; rather, they play around within the apparatus of evidence interpretation, they borrow its tools, they ask the questions it elides and consider the assumptions upon which it is built. By focusing on the apparatus of interpretation, I draw our attention not just to the uses of evidence, but the methods through which we constitute bodily traces as evidence in the first place. What must we overcome or ignore in the process of analysis, and how do works of art confront those acts? How does art help us understand the ways bodily evidence might elude methods of collection, interpretation, and categorization? What can individual, subjective responses to bodily evidence in art tell us about our systems of truth-telling and criminal justice?

While the field of evidence, as I have argued, extends across the minutiae of our existence, attention to bodily evidence, particularly, raises questions not just of truth but of selfhood, bodily integrity, and empathy. Bodily evidence, as I will argue throughout this chapter, at once affirms and unsettles both conceptions of subjectivity engaged by confession. With the knowledge that our most minute bodily traces contain genetic material read with increasing accuracy by scientific equipment, we are ever more tied to those fragments we leave behind. Handwriting and bodily markers such as scars stand as identifying marks, and while both are prone to forgery and manipulation, computer imaging also renders them increasingly readable. DNA evidence held within bodily

traces, particularly, carries with it a cultural weight that speaks to anxieties about individual identity. In *The Poetics of DNA*, Judith Roof argues that popular cultural concepts of DNA carry with them implicit narratives about systems, taxonomy, individuality, and self-determination. Analogies of DNA, she argues, “encourage a hyperbolic sense of agency and control as well as a host of Western ideologies about identity, gender, and difference.”²⁰⁷ Forward-looking yearnings for “unlocking” the potential of DNA assume and reaffirm the idea that elements of identity are simply hard-wired into our most basic genetic material. When played out in both cultural and legal spheres, this idea has material consequences for minoritarian subjects, whose racial, gender, or sexual identities are thus placed firmly in the realm of scientific fact, away from the nebulous reaches of culture. As Roof argues, commonplace conceptions of DNA analysis replace probability with scientific truth, leading to a concept of individuals not as changing and polymorphic but as fixed and singular:

DNA’s probabilities work to secure a traditional notion of a stable individuality, one that can always be relied on to point to the same body, through time and even after death. In this way identity becomes sutured to the body as identity’s guarantee and repository. And this is a problem insofar as linking identities to bodies has long served as a way to discriminate based on the projections culture makes onto those bodies in terms of value, ability, and privilege.²⁰⁸

In this way, bodily evidence, made neat and clean, points to fixed and comprehensive subjects, taxonomically organized and hierarchically placed. Yet, in many cases, the presence of bodily fluids, waste products, or scars all suggest the fragility of the human body and the disruption of bodily autonomy. For Julia Kristeva, the most abject are those things which violate borders: “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not

²⁰⁷ Judith Roof, *The Poetics of DNA*, *Posthumanities* 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3.

²⁰⁸ Roof, 195.

respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”²⁰⁹

These abject traces are evidence not just of a crime against the person such as assault, murder, or rape, but of the piercing of bodily borders writ large, of our tendency to be unmade, to lose a sense of our own self identity and bodily contours in moments of violence. The responses we have to the abject, of disgust, abhorrence, and aversion, must be overcome in order to clearly collect and analyze bodily matter, yet in their lingering and provocation they haunt the interpretative apparatus.

For those whose recorded histories are denied or erased by the violence of colonization, enslavement, and genocide, bodily traces are in some cases the only evidence of lives lived. A dilemma becomes clear when considering ways of reading bodily evidence when it is all that endures, when waste products and remains of human bodies offer the only evidence of unnamed lives and unrecorded experiences. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman’s history of the Atlantic slave trade and her own journey to seek out stories, evidence, and effects of its victims, actors, and institutions, she describes the experience of standing in the dungeon in Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, one of the commercial forts built to imprison enslaved people before slave ships transported them across the Atlantic. The floor, after decades of use in the slave trade and a century and a half of disuse before the conversion of the fort into a museum, was covered in a layer of compressed feces, blood, and shed skin.

Hartman writes:

Waste is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large, that is, history as the tale of great men, empire, and nation....Waste is the remnant of all the lives that are outside of history and ‘dissolved in utter amnesia.’

²⁰⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror : An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

The only part of my past that I could put my hands on was the filth from which I recoiled, layers of organic material pressed hard against a stone floor.²¹⁰

The erasure of all history except the accumulation of undifferentiated waste or bodily remains is thus a mechanism for controlling truth, an operation of power that forcefully ruptures generational identity. Here, bodily traces cannot act as corroborating evidence, for the testimonies of the victims of the slave trade no longer exist; it is, on its own, evidence that demands and resists interpretation. As Hartman's own act of recoiling from the accumulated waste attests, part of this resistance to interpretation is due to the abject state of waste, that which we eject and remove from our bodies and for which we feel disgust. By condemning to abjection the remnants of hundreds of thousands of lives — of multiple generations — the individuals and institutions operating the slave trade also deny those pieces of evidence a place in any archive.

Hartman herself expresses disgust toward “the filth from which I recoiled” while resigning herself to the concomitant need to overcome that disgust in order to re-figure waste into evidence. Gayatri Gopinath reads Hartman's work as a project of “re-vision” that allows a reconsideration of what is included in histories of the political, particularly those of queer diasporic subjects. Gopinath calls for a rethinking of forms and relations that “may be dismissed as ‘merely’ personal, apolitical, trivial, or transitory,” which she terms “the materiality of the everyday.”²¹¹ While, as I have suggested, the proliferation of techniques to “read” evidence throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has expanded the category of evidence to include potentially the most minute traces, the

²¹⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 1. ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 115.

²¹¹ Gayatri Gopinath, “Archive, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions,” in *Political Emotions*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Morris Reynolds, *New Agendas in Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 168.

networks of power that determine the ways in which evidence might be authorized and used nonetheless do discriminate. Thus, Hartman and Gopinath both call for a re-examination not of the materiality of evidence so much as the process by which particular traces come to carry with them the weight and authority of evidence.

Hartman also makes use of abjection in her book as something of a rallying cry. The establishment of evidence out of abject traces depends upon the management of revulsion; forensic analysts cannot look away from the filth of crime scenes, but must carefully mire themselves in it, examining closely that which repels their instincts. Even so, our criminal justice systems depend not only on notions of objectivity but on the concurrent fear, revulsion, empathy, and communality experienced when encountering the abject. What is justice without a sense of common harm? The determination of severity of crimes relies upon constructions of innocence and harm, revulsion to pain and bodily trauma, and, to some degree, empathy and a sense of common good. Hartman and Gopinath both strategically call for criticism not precisely of these concepts of justice and community, but of the ways in which our racist, sexist, homophobic society leverages those concepts in order to exclude particular people, bodies, and experiences not just from gaining agency within the justice system, but from producing evidence at all, their traces left to decay rather than being taken up within the interpretative apparatus.

In picking up Gopinath's concept of the materiality of the everyday and Hartman's reading of the fragmented remnants of lived experiences of enslaved people, I do not intend to suggest a direct correlation to the works under examination here; while the works of these three artists do dwell in experiences of minoritarian subjects, their resultant projects do not seek to engage with specific histories of violence and diaspora in

the way Gopinath and Hartman do. Rather, I bring them here to elucidate the broader stakes of the examination of bodily evidence. Within the projects I explore, bodily evidence stands in for the artists and participants while also operating anonymously and removed from their bodies, it both requires and repels close looking, and it attests to secret, subjective, and ignored narratives while gesturing towards more universal affects of shame, pleasure, fear, joy, and pain. Entangled within the interpretative apparatus, these works engage with the processes through which trace becomes evidence, requiring us to consider the relationship between interpretation and power, the slippages and elisions present in the constitution and use of evidence, and the possible negotiations and strategic engagements to open up sites of agency.

Perhaps one of the most infamous works to be dubbed “confessional,” Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* (1998) has, in the two decades since its making, transformed into a cultural shorthand for any number of trends and impulses in contemporary art, the art market, and the world of art criticism. For some, her work offers up a poignant and deliberately feminine take on the bodily secretions of artists like Piero Manzoni, Andy Warhol, or Andres Serrano; for others, it is emblematic of aesthetic corruption in the contemporary art market; for still others, it is a site of provocation. The pages and pages of alternately adulatory and agitated prose dedicated to its display, particularly during the Turner Prize competition for which it was an entry, attest to its status as point of conversation and contention within the art world. Criticisms of her work are difficult to disentangle from discomposure about her public persona as well as the state of contemporary art, writ large. Most writers responding to Emin’s work identify its primary strain as confessional, testimonial, or autobiographical, with only some differentiation

between the terms. Her work is “essentially testimonial art”²¹²; her oeuvre is “obsessively confessional,” containing “harrowing frankness, ...relentless self-disclosure, [and] unreserved sexual revelation”²¹³; it “bears testimony to the value placed on confessional art, as [her] success is inextricably linked to apparent self-reflection and revelation”²¹⁴; it contains “emotionally maddened confessional revelations”²¹⁵; her “life and art are bound up so tightly together that they cannot be separated”²¹⁶; and she herself “has become a prominent figure of personal sexual suffering and public exhibition.”²¹⁷

For some, her work rises above what they identify as the crasser, more commercial form of confession offered by reality television. Poet and author Jeanette Winterson, for instance, writes that:

at a time when we are drowning in reality TV and live confessionals, when everything in life is about display, Emin has managed to turn the popular agenda into a new kind of cultural challenge...By refusing to disentangle art and life, by fusing her own autobiography with her artistry, Emin creates a world where personal truth-telling moves beyond the me-culture and into collective catharsis.²¹⁸

For others, Emin seems to offer herself as a commodity, little more than an extension of crass commercial confessionalism, as argued by Lance Esplund in a review of Emin’s first US solo show. His review, subtitled “What is the difference between a flasher and an artist,” argues that Emin’s work is “so self-absorbed, so self-referential” that it suffers under the “limitations imposed by Emin’s own suffocating presence” and that viewers

²¹² Mark Durden, “The Authority of Authenticity: Tracey Emin,” *Parachute*, no. 105 (March 1, 2002): 28.

²¹³ Introduction to Emin’s Turner Prize show, qtd in Vivienne Jabri, “The Self in Women as Subject of Art and Politics,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 4, no. 1 (April 2002): 124.

²¹⁴ Christine Fanthome, “Articulating Authenticity through Artifice: The Contemporary Relevance of Tracey Emin’s Confessional Art,” *Social Semiotics* 18, no. 2 (June 2008): 223.

²¹⁵ Neal Brown, *Tracey Emin*, Modern Artists (London : New York: Tate ; Distributed in the US and Canada by Harry N Abrams, 2006), 7.

²¹⁶ Patrick Elliott, “Becoming Tracey Emin,” in *Tracey Emin: 20 Years* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2008), 17.

²¹⁷ Mandy Merck, “Bedtime,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 11, no. 3 (January 1, 2000): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040010003115>.

²¹⁸ Jeanette Winterson, “Foreword,” in *Tracey Emin: Works 1963-2006*. (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 6.

“get the sense that she vomited it all up and said, ‘Deal with it.’”²¹⁹

For many, Emin’s messy vocalizations, her arts-and-crafts aesthetic, her use of bodily fluids, and her references to bodily activities are distinctly gendered, for better or worse. Vivienne Jabri argues that Emin’s work seeks to “disrupt constructions of gender and sexuality in women’s lived experience,”²²⁰ while Gülsüm Baydar argues that her work reflects Luce Irigaray’s theories about the lack of feminine articulation in the symbolic realm, in which “Emin’s work femininity is clearly associated with loss.”²²¹ On the other hand, in a lackluster review of the Turner Prize show, Martin Gayford bizarrely identifies Emin as “the sort of woman who wears macrame badges reading ‘Women are Powerful,’” and as “rather like...those alarming women to be seen in a campaign for vodka a few years ago, sloshing triple measures around and guffawing in a menacing sort of way,” a seeming inability to reconcile Emin’s public persona and art but through patronizing caricature.²²²

In offering up these snippets, I argue that Emin’s work is easily, perhaps even transparently, read as confessional; further, that the confessional urge is, in her work, coded feminine, excessive, and emotional. The argument for inclusion of her work into this project is thus easily made, and to repeat it would have little purpose. What I wish to do instead, therefore, is to focus not on the aggregate of her works, their meanings and words and shared contexts, but to look closely at the material presence of a single work in order to consider the ways its physical, organic matter carries with it signifiers that bear particular importance to the construction and implementation of confessional evidence.

²¹⁹ Lance Esplund, “Blood, Sweat and Tears,” *Modern Painters* 12, no. 3 (September 1999): 102.

²²⁰ Jabri, “The Self in Women as Subject of Art and Politics,” 126.

²²¹ Gülsüm Baydar, “Bedrooms in Excess: Feminist Strategies Used by Tracey Emin and Semiha Berksoy,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 33, no. 2 (2012): 30.

²²² Martin Gayford, “What a Fuss,” *The Spectator*; London, December 4, 1999.

My Bed, replete with organic decay and indexical impressions, works as a confession not through any verbal means nor even simply through the expressive presence of the artist's body and experience in the formal organization of the work, but via the (purported) evidence it offers. Reading *My Bed* as *evidence* of a confession rather than an *act* of confession, therefore, requires us to consider the ways in which physical matter — especially that tied to or produced by the body — stands in for things far more ephemeral, such as a person's movements, thoughts, torments, actions, and sins. Furthermore, the work, re-displayed many times over nearly two decades, and its many interlocutors writing throughout those same years, betray the fact that evidence is not self-substantiating. Evidence, in cases of forensics, law, religion, medicine, education, intimate relationships, and, indeed, art, is constituted through a complex apparatus of norms, definitions, and limits, and it requires interpretation to produce truths.

In *My Bed*, Emin's entry for the 1999 Turner Prize competition, the artist presents an unmade, unkempt bed with a rug and a small bedside table, the entire scene littered with common bedroom items like slippers as well as dirty underwear and nylons, used condoms, empty alcohol bottles, and cigarette butts [Fig. 3.1]. The bed, a basic box frame in light-colored wood topped by a full-sized mattress, is haphazardly made up in rumpled white sheets, through which the striped ticking of the mattress shows. Four pillows, stacked in pairs, sit at the head, while a beige duvet and another white sheet tangle together to lie diagonally across the bed. In the bottom corner, a white towel with pale yellow stripes drapes over the edge, with a dangling pair of nylons and a pair of discarded underwear on top. On one side of the bed — often out of sight in installation photographs — two suitcases stand, fixed together with rope, chains, and a padlock [Fig. 3.2]. The

taller suitcase is a newer model, black with wheels on one end, while the smaller suitcase is older, a brown, hard-sided case with brightly-colored tiled decoration on one side. On the other side of the bed, a dark blue rug lies parallel abutting the bed frame with a small, dark brown side table near the head. While each installation differs in its precise composition, the objects littering the rug repeat in each iteration: folded newspapers, empty Absolut vodka bottles, empty Marlboro Light cigarette boxes, crumpled tissues, a tube of KY lubricant, pairs of underwear with blood on the gussets, open packages of Duracell batteries, a half-empty bottle of Orangina, a worn-in pair of tartan slippers, opened blister packs of pills, open condom packages and used condoms, loose change, a curled-up belt, a small pair of scissors, opened tampons, a hand mirror, ID photographs of Emin, prescription boxes for Persona, an anti-depressant, and Cilest, a hormonal contraception, crumpled banknotes, a stuffed toy dog. Similarly, the side table holds roughly the same objects in each iteration: a candle in a blue candle holder, a stack of Polaroid photographs and an open box of Polaroid film, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, condoms, a cigarette box, and opened blister packs of pills.

Listing the elements of the installation, as I have done, emphasizes their forensic quality, the slippage between the bed as art work and the bed as crime scene. Inspired by a time of emotional and mental difficulty in which she had languished in bed for several days in depression, Emin stages the bed as an index of her bodily and emotional state, the sheets tugged and rumpled to suggest her tossing and turning body, detritus littered near the bed to imply the apathetic sweep of her hand, reaching for a bottle kept near or depositing the end of a cigarette without care. Yet, the evidence of Emin's bed — and of her body — is not easily read. Each object demands interpretation; truth is not a

transparent slip on their surfaces, but a matter of conjuring, of bringing together the visible, tangible evidence with the connotations it evokes, signs and signifiers that do not necessarily adhere with ease. In offering a psychoanalytic reading of *My Bed*, for instance, Mandy Merck focuses, in one section, on the installation as a site of erotic warfare. Here, she suggests that blood staining the sheets and strewn underwear “can be read to represent the dangers sex still represents for women: virginity undone, reputation lost, desire supplanted by disgust. At the very least, Emin’s bloodied bed suggests a battlefield, the ‘amor militis’ celebrated in the Renaissance.”²²³ This reading allows Merck to develop an approach to Emin’s work that focuses on the artist’s textile- and text-based interpretations of rape and trauma. Yet nowhere in the article does Merck mention menstruation, which I would argue is perhaps a more obvious way of reading blood staining the sheets and underwear of a cisgender woman in her thirties. I bring up this example not to disprove or even disagree with Merck’s reading so much as to draw our attention to the vacillations of interpretation.

As Merck and I both suggest, while all bodies produce waste and excess, and while bodily evidence might be used in solving crimes involving anybody — and any body — excess and waste made visible and visceral hold a particular significance for people whose bodies are coded as non-normative or inferior. For instance, the detritus of Emin’s bed conjures not just depression, but also sexual assault, crimes in which bodily fluids such as semen, blood, and saliva take on particular significance. Indeed, the analysis of rape kits — tools for collecting and storing evidence in cases of sexual assault — provides significant support to the prosecution of sexual assault cases, likely compounded by a general cultural lack of trust in the testimony of rape survivors, who are most often

²²³ Merck, “Bedtime,” 258.

women. In the United States, in some districts a majority of rape kits go untested for a variety of reasons, conjuring an image of many such collections of bodily evidence left to stagnate for lack of interpretation.²²⁴ Here, Emin's body is a privileged one, her evidence subject to interpretation and judgment over and over.

Narratively offered as Emin's own bed laid in by her own body, the work is replete with bodily traces, strewn with objects stained with the secretions of her body and the bodies of those with whom she interacts: blood, snot, semen, sweat, and saliva. Between showings, the objects — fragile now, twenty years on — are carefully gathered and placed into specimen bags, acts of difficult conservation. Decay, of course, is a problem of both conservators and forensic scientists, battling against the crumbling of organic matter. Each time *My Bed* is installed, its component elements delicately removed from sealed bags and envelopes, it testifies to the march of time. The latex of a condom crumbles, whisper-thin and torn, blood turns black and dry, and the liquid remnants in a bottle of Orangina resemble "diseased piss."²²⁵ The curators and installers responsible for each repeated re-presentation of *My Bed* must contend with the deterioration of its component parts, as they indeed must for any art object.

Further, the handling and re-handling of the work over nearly two decades, multiple exhibitions, and sales to two major collectors — initially to Charles Saatchi in 2000 for £150,000, then to Christian Duerkheim in 2014 for £2.54 million — continually

²²⁴ Terrorism United States. Congress. House. Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee on Crime, "Rape Kit Backlogs: Failing the Test of Providing Justice to Sexual Assault Survivors : Hearing before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, Second Session, May 20, 2010." (2010), <http://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo1670>.

²²⁵ Jonathan Jones, "Tracey Emin Makes Her Own Crumpled Bed and Lies in It, on Merseyside," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2016, sec. Art and design, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/16/tracey-emin-artist-1998-installation-my-bed-tate-liverpool-merseyside>.

reinscribes the indexical connection between Emin and the work, as in most cases Emin performs the installation of the work herself. Thus her body leaves its traces each time she precisely arranges the sheets and composes the layers of detritus. Further, though, Emin's involvement in the work's installation also resists the emotional distance between art object and creator. In its earlier iterations, for instance, Emin recalled a sense of emotional distress at the thought of re-making her bed. When the arrangement was disturbed by performance artists Yuan Chai and Jian Jun Xi, who jumped, rolled, and had a pillow fight on the bed during its installation at the Tate, and by Christine de Ville, a British housewife who sprayed the bed with a stain remover, the Tate called Emin in to fix the installation. Of that process, she states:

I was really upset because I had to do it all again and that wasn't part of the deal. The deal was that I had to install it once. The first time I'd enjoyed doing it, the second time I was crying because I didn't *want* to have to do my bed again. It was quite emotionally horrendous for me because that is my bed, the stuff on it is real and I was having to go through it all again, live through it all again.²²⁶

Here, Emin expresses the affective quality of these objects — their ability to brush against her and stick, to leave lasting impressions, and to carry with them memories and histories.

With more distance from its initial instantiation, though, the recreation of the piece takes on a more exuberant quality. In a piece covering the installation of *My Bed* for exhibition at the Tate Liverpool in 2016, Jonathan Jones describes Emin's process of staging the perfectly rumbled mess:

Tracey Emin throws her knickers on to the bed. She's not quite satisfied, so she retrieves them and has another go. It takes five increasingly athletic throws and a lot of laughing until the pale blue underwear is in just the

²²⁶ Original emphasis. Rebecca Fortnum and Tracey Emin, "Tracey Emin," in *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words* (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 60.

right state of casual abandon. For this is no ordinary bed. It is THE bed.²²⁷

A photo accompanying the article captures Emin, dressed in a utilitarian tee-shirt, skirt, and running shoes, in the moment of release after an underhand toss, hand open and body canted, weight on her back foot, like an inverse of the Roman discus thrower, coiled energy released [Fig. 3.3]. The rumpled, incomplete bed takes up most of the foreground while in the background two more people — museum employees, Emin’s assistants, or members of the press — laugh. Emin’s repeated underwear tossing, here, takes on a carnivalesque quality, the seriousness of the discus thrower eclipsed, perhaps, by the image of a rigged ring toss and attempts to win a goldfish. Jones’s fly-on-the-wall description of the installation offers a sense of the affective oscillation between attraction and disgust invoked by the work; he captures the humor and revulsion at dirty condom packets and band-aids — which are “rank, a lot dirtier and nastier than it can appear once the bed is artfully arranged and tastefully lit” — as well as the way this very reminder of the passage of time entices the viewer.²²⁸ As he states, the decay adds to the meaning of the work, turning it into “a Proustian time machine... [that] gets ever more atmospheric, resonant and mysterious [over time].”²²⁹ The absurdity of carefully preserving each object of detritus, made precious by its attentive storage and meticulous display, only adds to the sense of excess, an indulgence in seriousness that nonetheless tips into affective significance. A work at once haphazard and composed in its crime-scene spill, its suggestive connection to everyday life and to the artist’s body as not simply a vehicle for creation but also a fleshy, secreting, organic form, *My Bed* requires viewers to contemplate not just the slow disintegration of artistic media, but the fundamental

²²⁷ Jones, “Tracey Emin Makes Her Own Crumpled Bed and Lies in It, on Merseyside.”

²²⁸ Jones.

²²⁹ Jones.

volatility of evidence itself.

Emin's bed, rumpled, untidy, and decaying, revels in the precariousness endemic to all objects of evidence. In this way, it turns our attention to both the volubility of the human body and the instability of absolute notions of truth, dependent as they are on proof that both requires interpretation and resists fixity. Within the narrative offered by the piece, as a work inspired by Emin's own biographical experience and made and remade by her own hands and actions, the objects and materials that make up *My Bed* stand in for the body — for Emin's body — in multiple ways. While some art critics have addressed the relative truth or construction of this narrative, I wish to address the way the attachment of *My Bed* to Emin's body operates within the apparatus of interpretation. Framed as indexical traces, how are the elements of Emin's work constituted as evidence? When Emin orchestrates the installation of the work, each wrinkled fabric or crumpled tissue bears the expressive index of her artistic hand, in much the same way Jackson Pollock's gestural lines stand as a record of his physical presence. Some features connect to Emin through memory as well as touch, such as the grotesque doll-like toy brought back to her by a boyfriend on an alcohol run.²³⁰ Others purport to connect intimately via the waste products of Emin's own body — blood staining her underwear, sweat discoloring the bed sheets, snot in the crumpled tissues. The messy evidence here points to an understanding of the body as cultural and physical, as limned with meanings that render the concept of *the* singular body, objective and manifestly readable, as a fiction complicated and belied by the actual processes of interpretation.

In this I turn to Elizabeth Grosz, who in her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* argues for an understanding “of embodied subjectivity, of *psychical*

²³⁰ Jones.

corporeality” that “render mastery and exteriority [to the object of the body or bodies] undesirable.”²³¹ Grosz stresses the need for a bodily model in which the body is neither “the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined” but “hovers perilously and undecidedly” at the pivot points between such binaries.²³² Bodies, therefore, have both generality and specificity: in order to talk about bodies, we must mean the social frameworks that determine bodies as sexed, gendered, raced, classed, aged, and abled; the experiential and corporeal phenomena of physical, fleshed assemblages of nerves, muscles, fat, bone, and fluids that move through space and time; and the psychological and emotional experiences and memories that determine, affect, and delineate individual consciousness. The constitution of bodily evidence, traces of fluids and tissues captured in collection vessels and on slides, analyzed for DNA and chemical content, stand in for those social, corporeal, and psychological bodies in ways both abundant and inadequate. In their abject, affective presence, bodily traces provoke responses of both disgust and empathy; they carry with them connotations of our darkest fears and our greatest rallying points. Yet, in their flimsy, volatile organic lives, they in themselves cannot approach or contain the vast sense of subjectivity apprehended by the body for which they stand.

Thus to identify Emin’s material as *bodily* evidence, I emphasize that, within the narrative offered, is it not only shed from her specific body during a specific time, but that it also exists within a social framework in which it stands for a more generalized gendered and (non)raced body — that of a young white woman — and more generalized medical-social conditions, such as depression. At the same time, it carries with it

²³¹ Original emphasis. Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, *Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 22–23.

²³² Grosz, 23.

connotations, meanings, and resonances that exist in the interplay between the bodily evidence as substance, its position within an artwork and art museum, and its encounter with many and varied viewers and critics. While her works provoke critical responses of disgust, her whiteness nonetheless inures her to the racial stereotypes of “unruly” Black female bodies, for instance. Her body — and her words — appear again and again in connection with her evidence, through interviews, press appearances, and re-installations of the work. This privilege of ownership, as Saidiya Hartman attests in *Lose Your Mother*, is a privilege of whiteness, forcefully removed from women of color. The body, here, is and is not Emin’s, singular, and white women’s, generally.

The excess in Emin’s work lives in a space of conflict between the visceral, overwhelming, and affective experiences of the body and the analysis and organization as their traces are transformed into evidence. *My Bed* incorporates waste and the accumulated detritus suggesting depression, addiction, and sexual assault, preserving and displaying it rather than disposing of it or concealing its presence, as polite society might request. The emotional exhaustion of depression clings to the work, its empty bottles and overflowing ashtrays evidence not necessarily of hedonism so much as dejection. These objects invoke feelings of disgust, a visceral response to the products we are more used to removing from our presence, the fluids and substances that prove the fundamental volatility of our corporeality. Leaking from orifices and pores, these substances remind us of the permeable borders of our bodies. The items in *My Bed* are, as architectural historian Gülsüm Baydar states, “objects of excess, which the clean body needs to get rid of in order to maintain a sense of ‘I,’” borrowing from Kristeva’s concept of the abject.²³³ As Saidiya Hartman’s writing attests, too, coding the abject is not simply an act of bodily

²³³ Baydar, “Bedrooms in Excess,” 32.

integrity, but one of power, articulated within Emin's work as a specifically gendered operation. If this scene is to work as evidence, we must — as I have done — school our senses, arrange disorder into organized lists, seek to describe textural, sensory details in words, and, rather than ignore our affective responses, carefully attune our analytic minds to the potential meanings of such responses. In making evidence, we do not erase excess so much as delineate its borders, code it and compare it to other known information.

Yet, these delineations and codings are fraught with assumptions around identity, perhaps even more so for bodily evidence than other forms, attached as it is to notions of subjectivity. For instance, through Emin's public persona and within the many readings of her work, the excess in her work is coded feminine. It is not simply that the objects bear evidence to a female-identified body, but that excess itself — of material, of emotion, of waste, of self-revelation — is co-constituent of denigrated feminine identity. The number of puns found in the press surrounding the work regarding airing of dirty laundry alone suggest the colloquial understanding of the scene of a messy, waste-strewn bedroom to be embarrassing, a secret to be hidden.²³⁴ By laying bare her waste products, her embarrassing excess, Emin seems to *bare all*. The close connection between Emin's work and her own experiences, between Emin-the-artist and Emin-the-public-persona, too, invites both scrutiny and engagement, as viewers, art critics, and art historians respond to her art, her public behavior, and her personal history as an entangled web. Within my greater project, I question the assumed and transparent connection between autobiography and confession, as I argue that attempts to “prove” the authenticity of artistic confessions miss the point entirely — the interest, for me, resides in the way these

²³⁴ Mandy Merck delineates a number of these, including the very literal answers to the question “Would you show your bed to the public?” asked by the Independent on Sunday, in which many respondents seemed more concerned about the relative morality of messiness versus cleanliness. Merck, “Bedtime.”

artistic projects allow us to question the very way we construct and understand truth. The bodily traces here, conserved and displayed, read and analyzed, lingered on and denigrated, become evidence under our analytic eyes; they are not self-evident. Media scholar Christine Fanthome, in a move she shares with other authors, states: “Since confession is integral to Emin’s work, an overview of the key events of her life that feature in her work is essential in order to attempt to identify and evaluate the nature and objective of her disclosures.”²³⁵ To such declarations, I ask: is it, indeed, necessary, or is such a biographical move another attempt to authenticate something about which authenticity is far from the most interesting concern?

In this, I align myself with Jennifer Doyle, who argues that the force of Emin’s work resides not precisely in its autobiographical drive, nor in the seeming shamelessness with which she interprets her own experiences, but in its staging as melodrama, a genre that is fundamentally intersubjective. The tension and attraction between staged, edited, performed drama and “real” life draw together in her work, which “seems to offer itself up as an ‘unedited’ incorporation of the remains of a messy sex life, as a fantasy of a (nearly) unmediated encounter with the artist herself — again, less precisely as an ‘artist’ than as a woman. In doing so, however, it sets the stage for a fantasy encounter — between her, and you, and me.”²³⁶ This melodramatic staging is not simply an act of self-regurgitation, but an intersubjective encounter in which the presence of Emin — as artist, as woman — matters, but insofar as it allows a space for response and identification that is already self-aware, already part of a melodramatic schema about feminine excess and emotion. Doyle writes of her own response with attention to the work’s place in historical

²³⁵ Fanthome, “Articulating Authenticity through Artifice,” 226.

²³⁶ Jennifer Doyle, “The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin’s Bad-Sex Aesthetics,” in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 112.

narratives of “feminine sexual abjection” and its affective pull:

My impulse to take my own response to Emin’s work as its content, is no less scripted, no less banal than the stories and states that Emin depicts. I am compelled, somewhat counterintuitively, by Emin’s work insofar as it enacts a series of immediately recognizable, cliched performances of feminine sexual abjection. I recognize myself in these cliches. And, worse, I find myself caught in the cliché of a woman’s response to a woman’s work — in which I identify with it, in which I refuse emotional distance and linger in affective proximity.²³⁷

Even this account brings with it a little bit of embarrassment — a postmodern feminist approach to talking about expressions of female experience that seem at once cliched and moving, affective for their very banality, as though offering a self-inoculation against their stale familiarity. Yet, as Doyle argues, this response touches on a key feature of Emin’s work, one which more closely approaches the reasons behind all the furor that rises in response to it. Doyle states that “Emin stages her work as a failure of objectification” in which “the disinterested appropriation of it as ‘art object’ [is] impossible without flirting with the very conservative models of artistic genius and expression that Emin lampoons, or acknowledging the disavowals of libidinal, economic, affective and emotional interest that underpin the business of art consumption.”²³⁸ Thus, Emin’s staging of her work as intersubjective confessional encounter, as an engagement that requests and requires visceral and emotional responses by engaging with deeply-set, even cliched, narratives of female abjection, challenges critical approaches to art that seek the object-as-object or the artist-as-genius alike. As a scene replete with traces seemingly eager to become evidence, therefore, it presents viewers with a space to grapple with the concurrent and necessary demands of interpretation: the simultaneous recognition and schooling of affect. This work tells us that evidence cannot be produced

²³⁷ Doyle, 117.

²³⁸ Doyle, 118.

through disinterested automation alone, for its meaning and purpose are inextricably bound with emotional response and empathy, with the coexistent disruption and recognition of our own and others' subjectivity.

Similarly concerned with questions of intersubjectivity, a number of participatory confessional projects emerging in recent decades engage with questions of authorship and relationality by asking viewers both to provide their own confessions and immerse themselves in those of other visitors. In 2012, Candy Chang installed the first iteration of her project *Confessions* in the Cosmopolitan's P3 Studio gallery located in the Las Vegas strip. Here, visitors could step into a red-curtained booth, pick up a felt-tip pen and a small, wooden plaque, and write a confession. Chang then hung the anonymous confessions on wooden pegs arranged in grids on the walls of the gallery, allowing visitors to peruse them, and selected a few to replicate in large-scale paintings [Fig. 3.4.]. In this work, Chang brings together formal elements inspired by a number of practices: the wooden plaques, for instance, resemble *ema*, plaques on which Shinto worshipers write prayers or wishes to leave at shrines, and Chang identifies both Catholic confessional practice and the popular Postsecret initiative, in which individuals send handmade postcards with secrets written on them to founder Frank Warren, as influences. The booths, however, resemble voting booths more than confessionals, standing in a row of five cubicles with half-length curtains to provide cover, with a shelf on the inside for writing the confession and a slot with pictorial instructions indicating to the visitor how to write on and deposit their confession plaque [Figs. 3.5-3.6]. This formal slippage suggests at once the role of confession rituals in public, civic life and a conception of the act of voting as not just civic duty, but also personal expression. However, as with voting,

the acts of confession here are constrained by formal bounds, the small plaques demanding short and to-the-point statements, their arrangement in grids on the gallery wall, hung half-a-dozen or more deep, emphasizing their anonymity and interchangeability. Across the plaques, the only formal elements that differentiate one from another are the specificities of handwriting: the jut or curl of an individual script, the awkward spacing of a quickly-written statement on a blank space, the informal punctuation, replete with ampersands and ellipses. Chang emphasizes the visual qualities of visitors' confessions by choosing a few to blow up into hand-painted canvases, carefully replicating the composition and line of her subject's writing. Chang's work, I will argue, narrows confession rituals to transactional moments by lingering primarily in the space of pleasure offered by receiving a confession. The emphasis on reading, searching for clues, and interpreting — and the joy and pleasure of doing so — is further heightened by the focus on specificities of handwriting as the primary marks that differentiate one confession from another. Finally, in choosing to enlarge certain confession plaques into large-scale canvases, Chang performs an act of both original gesture and copy, engaging with concepts of truth, evidence, and individuality.

Invited to flip through the plaques, which hold both physical and spiritual weight, visitors experience the installation across a number of senses [Fig. 3.7]. The heft of the wooden plaques, the slight grain to their surfaces and edges, the soft clacking they make against one another, the tangle of their red strings or the fumble to replace them on their pegs all heighten the sense that each confession is at once a discrete object, individual and weighty, and one of many to be perused, stacked, hidden, and revealed. An ambient sound composition by Oliver Blank fills the aural space with sounds intended to “[set] the

tone for a moment of peace and perspective,” including woodwind instruments, wind chimes, dripping water, low whispers, and a slight mechanical susurrus.²³⁹ However, in the formal composition of the work, Chang subsumes those sensory details by heightening the visual quality and content of the text itself. In the gallery space, text abounds. The booth curtains invite visitors to “Write a confession,” while each plaque is duly labeled as “A confession.” The instructions to *write* a confession, the blocky felt-tip pens offered, and the small size of the plaques all constrain the output, resulting in confessions that come in short phrases, rarely more than a sentence each, and are text- rather than image-based, featuring only a few symbols such as smiling or frowning faces or hearts. The statements offered are predominantly short and focus on communicating a single action or emotion.

Most of the formal qualities, therefore, make the experience more about the act of viewing than the act of writing; while visitors might indeed inhabit both positions, writing their own confession before or after perusing those on display in the gallery, the brevity, anonymity, and quantity of the confessions suggest an engagement that relies on viewers to interpret the words before them, drawing conclusions from the barest clues. The visual assemblage of references — Shinto shrines, Catholic confessional booths, voting cubicles — renders the participatory force of the work somewhat muddled. Though the mish-mash does point to the ubiquity of confession rituals as well as colloquial understandings of their transformative power through the melding of different religious practices with an undertone of civic duty, it ultimately offers confessions as disembodied transactions. Step into a booth, write a confession, push it through the slot;

²³⁹ Oliver Blank, “Confessional Music,” *Oliver Blank* (blog), July 19, 2012, <http://mroliverblank.com/confessional-music/>.

come out of the booth, flip through those confessions left before you. The sensory and relational qualities of confession are subsumed, made secondary to the content of the texts. The location of the original installation, in the Las Vegas strip, no doubt compounds the feeling of voyeurism and consumption. The P3 gallery, located in the Cosmopolitan Hotel, exists as just one more stop amongst casinos, restaurants, other hotels, and stores both high-end and cheap. Vegas, a place of secrets, may be a safe place to offer up, anonymously, those things too scandalous, embarrassing, scary, or damaging to otherwise reveal.

The short format required by the size of the plaques produces confessions that are pared down, minimal. They vary widely in the sentiment, act, emotion, or fear offered, covering love gone awry (“I’m still in love with my best friend whose wedding I’ll be attending in two weeks. I love my girlfriend, but I’m afraid I love my friend more...”); difficult family relationships (“My mother doesn’t love me but I still love her and myself...”); consumption and addiction (“I eat too much cheese”; “Told the doctor I’m anxious just so he’d give me the really good drugs.”); and fear of death (“I’m scared I’ll die alone.”; “I’m in the military & I’m scared to die.”; “I don’t know what I am doing and I’m running out of time.”). These short statements, bite-sized and consumable, allow visitors to flip through and engage with many at once, perhaps engaging in the same sort of categorization I’ve briefly sketched here. The plaques, hanging a few deep off of pegs arranged in a grid formation, resemble not just the proliferation of *ema* at Shinto shrines, but also consumable objects neatly arranged, as though the wall of the gallery was transposed from an aisle at Target.

Narrowing confession rituals into a stylized, transactional experience, Chang thus

makes use of a conventional understanding of confession as relating to discrete secrets. Like the popular PostSecret, part of the fun of engaging with *Confessions* is the proliferation of secrets, the voyeurism inherent in allowing oneself to be shocked, the affirmation of identification, and the pleasure of sharing someone else's secrets with friends. In this, the exhibition engages, perhaps above all, in what Foucault called "pleasure in the truth of pleasure," the entanglement between power, pleasure, and truth upon which the confession resides: "the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open."²⁴⁰ The pleasure, here, is one of the myriad offered by Las Vegas, one inherent in the slogan "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas": that of secrets let out, discovered, shared, read, without the negative ramifications possible were the same secrets to be revealed within the course of one's everyday life. The sense of nominal anonymity and secrecy within the Catholic confession lingers, yet without the attendant sense of continual self-inspection or penance. Chang's installation distills the pleasures of confession through extraction and proliferation, lingering in an abstracted moment of exchange in which the written confession works as a conduit for pleasure. As the plaques circulate, browsed and handled and maneuvered, they offer multiple viewers the thrill of discovery while carrying with them the affective trace of the moment of their making, the confessing participant's own gratification at safely revealing a secret bound by the index of handwriting.

The composition of the work resists individuation, abstracting the confession from the body through containment and repetition. Thus, only the handwriting of individual

²⁴⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 71.

participants offers particularity and connection to the gesturing, sensory body. Like other forms of bodily evidence, handwriting has the potential to stand in for individuals. As with the analysis of other bodily evidences, advances in digital technologies for analyzing the particularities of individual handwriting traits allow handwriting to operate as an increasingly trustworthy form of evidence. While plagued by attempts to link handwriting features to moral character traits, graphology through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has developed as a pattern- and comparison-based science, aimed not at ferreting out the morality of a writer but in detecting forgeries and confirming identities of writers. The use of handwriting analysis within the legal system depends on two foundations: that the methods used to analyze handwriting can be validated through experimentation and statistical analysis, and that handwriting is individual.²⁴¹ The latter foundational assumption, confirmed through studies that compare both the handwriting of different writers and multiple writing samples from the same writer, tells us that writing is distinctive both in terms of person and time; or as one study states, the assumption that “[no] two people write the same way and no one person writes exactly the same way twice.”²⁴²

Forensic technologies such as handwriting identification, in which mathematical and statistical formulas are used to compare unique markers in handwriting samples, and

²⁴¹ The 1999 11th Circuit Court case *United States v. Paul* ruled that handwriting analysis was admissible as expert testimony, building on the 1993 Supreme Court case *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, that determined the standard for admitting expert testimony in court cases. In order to be allowed as an expert opinion, a technique of analysis must be established within the relevant scientific community through testing, peer review, and analysis of acceptable error rates. Sargur N. Srihari et al., “Individuality of Handwriting” (Center of Excellence for Document Analysis and Recognition, 2001), National Criminal Justice Reference System, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/190133.pdf>.

²⁴² Lisa M. Hanson, “Development of Individual Handwriting Characteristics in ~1800 Students: Statistical Analysis and Likelihood Ratios That Emerge Over an Extended Period of Time” (MN Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, 2016), 1, National Criminal Justice Reference System, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/250165.pdf>.

the analysis of handwriting movements (kinematic analysis), in which medical studies into motor control are applied to the static trace of handwriting or signatures, allow forensic handwriting experts to address both parts of that assumption. Forensic document examiner Heidi Harralson argues that these technologies, along with empirical studies regarding their reliability and confirming the foundational assumptions regarding individual handwriting have helped establish the scientific credibility of handwriting analysis despite being “one of the first forensic disciplines to come under criticism by the legal and scientific communities.”²⁴³ As with other areas of forensic analysis, the scientific reliability of handwriting analysis depends not only on advances in technology, but in the training and practice of document examiners, population-based studies upon which to develop norms, and the development of databases for comparison, all of which are formed within structures of power. For instance, Harralson argues that new developments in handwriting analysis must find new ways of approaching what is termed “graphic maturity,” or the level of skill and fluency in writing, in a contemporary moment in which “schools are cutting back on handwriting training due to funding problems, large classroom sizes, and competing curriculum needs.”²⁴⁴ Class-based assumptions around handwriting might ignore or misclassify segments of the population if new models, studies, and databases are not developed.

The rigor of forensic handwriting analysis has also had to overcome criticism informed by the fantasy of hidden narratives and identities within handwriting, suggested in fictional texts such as the Sherlock Holmes stories. In “The Reigate Squires,” a story published in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, the detective determines the murder to

²⁴³ Heidi H. Harralson, *Developments in Handwriting and Signature Identification in the Digital Age* (Waltham, MA: Anderson Publishing, 2013), 2.

²⁴⁴ Harralson, 12.

have been committed by a pair of men, father and son, primarily through analysis of the handwriting on a scrap of paper clutched in the murder victim's hand.²⁴⁵ Noticing uneven gaps between words and differences in particular letters, he quickly realizes the text was written by two individuals, and further analysis of specific similarities suggests a familial relationship. Holmes declares to Watson, "I am sure that you cannot fail to be delighted with the traces of heredity shown in the p's and in the tails of the g's," suggesting not just the appearance of a passed-down trait but also the delight in discovering and making meaning of it, Foucault's "pleasure in the truth of pleasure."²⁴⁶ While his method of analysis lacks the rigor of comparison and attention to probability used by today's handwriting analysts, the suggestion that handwriting, like DNA, contains within it the secrets of one's history bolsters its use, here, as a confessional mechanism.

The confessions offered by visitors to Chang's installation, handwritten and handled, suggest a primary importance of gesture in the transformative act and perception of authenticity of confession. As Foucault argues, a key component of confession is its ability to transform the confessing subject; it "exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation."²⁴⁷ In Chapter One, I describe this as the "confessional promise." As I have argued here, Chang's work distills the ongoing habit of individual self-examination into the moment of expression, of writing the confession and sharing it publicly. The choice of handwriting, over typed

²⁴⁵ In his study of handwriting, Holmes is well in line with his time, as the first European scientific studies of handwriting appear in the late nineteenth century, specifically, the work of Abbé Jean-Hippolyte Michon, who coined the term and first began to publish on graphology in the 1870s, and his student, Jules Crepieux-Jamin, who further developed an interpretive approach to handwriting analysis. Heinz M. Graumann, "History and Principles of Graphology," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic; Topeka, Kan.* 47, no. 3 (May 1, 1983): 242–250.

²⁴⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger, 1st ed, vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 581.

²⁴⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 62.

or transcribed confessions, emphasizes not just the temporal nature of the confession — written in a specific way at a specific time — but also works as bodily evidence in tracing the writer’s movement. In this way, handwriting acts as an index, as a record of touch and gesture. As with Rosenberg’s reading of action painting, the confessional handwriting in Chang’s piece affirms the act of writing and of giving up one’s secrets, aesthetically and temporally one and the same, as transformative. While many confessional projects, including others under examination in this dissertation, make use of a variety of formats for recording and transmitting confessions, handwriting, particularly, relates to the writer as bodily evidence.

Specifically, as Jacques Derrida argues, as an index it also operates through absence, through its imprint formed in the wake of the moving hand, through the assumed absence of the intended audience, and, significantly for its function as evidence, through its meaning and physical presence standing in for the absent writer. Sonja Neef, commenting on handwriting and the digital, calls the necessity of absence in writing the “*belatedness of touch*,” meaning that takes form in the lifting away of the hand, in the persistence of handwriting for future readers.²⁴⁸ In this, she builds on Derrida, who argues that in order for marks to function as writing, they must remain readable “in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of readers.”²⁴⁹ It is not simply that the eventual reader is not present at the moment of writing, but that in order to function, writing must be readable beyond the absence or death of any intended or imagined audience. Further, and more importantly for our purposes, writing persists

²⁴⁸ Original emphasis. Sonja Neef, *Imprint and Trace Handwriting in the Age of Technology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 38.

²⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7.

beyond and *stands in for* the presence of the author. Derrida extrapolates that writing

must continue to ‘act’ and be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written ‘in his name.’²⁵⁰

Thus, writing has built into its structure the absence of the writer, as it does — and must — continue to function without and beyond the writer’s life and attention. It is “a mark that subsists,” and as such, is capable of not just existence outside of its author, but of standing in for that author.²⁵¹ Some marks, such as the signature, attest to the presence of their authors in the moment of their making and take the place of their absent authors in all other moments. Further, the signature, simultaneously singular — belonging to an individual, attesting to the presence of that person at a specific time — and infinitely repeatable — able to be used across multiple documents and required to be near-identical in all iterations — reaffirms that writing is not simply made up of *readable* marks, but *iterable* marks.

Derrida uses the terms collectively, stating that writing must be “structurally readable — iterable —” and thus identifying repeatability as a key structural quality of writing. Neef extrapolates on the concept of iterability in considering what she identifies as a binary logic around handwriting: “it is always unique and at the same time it nevertheless repeats the ideal type of readable imprint. To sum up: [handwriting] is simultaneously an iterable imprint and a singular trace: singular iterability, iterable

²⁵⁰ Derrida, 8.

²⁵¹ Derrida, 9.

singularity.”²⁵² Our understanding of handwriting relies on a duality of functions: that handwriting works to impart a readable and iterable text but also is singular in each instance, written by an individual at a particular time. Common understanding of handwriting demands that both be true. As Neef suggests, we do not typically consider mechanized forms of creating text such as typewriting or stone inscription nor markings made by pen and hand that do not seek to form words to function as handwriting.

However, as Neef argues, and as this project attests, questions of repetition, imprint, and mechanization are bound up with, rather than easily separable from, handwriting. She studies a number of techniques and technologies that bind together repetition with singularity, imprint with trace, and mechanization with manual operation such as Thomas Jefferson’s dual pen “polygraph” device, carbon paper, writing on screens in classrooms and sports announcing, tattooing, and graffiti. In this, she considers the ways handwriting lingers in and across practices more often considered mechanical or digital and those that expand our understanding of handwriting’s time and place. Chang’s installation, which combines the small, handwritten plaques with large-scale hand-drawn reproductions, plays with this same entanglement.

During the span of the exhibition, Chang selects some of the confession plaques to reproduce on four-foot-square red canvases, then hangs the resultant paintings in the gallery space next to the displayed plaques. Blowing up the small confession plaques to large-scale canvases using projection, Chang meticulously replicates not just the content of the written statement, but also the particularities of each participant’s handwriting and the spacing of their text. In this way, she renders the marks themselves as formal elements. Painted in negative, so the once-black text shows up bright white on vibrant red

²⁵² Neef, *Imprint and Trace Handwriting in the Age of Technology*, 77.

backgrounds, the saturated, blocky marks characteristic of blunt felt-tip pens take on a softly rounded quality. This act of magnification draws on a number of art historical practices and precedents, from the use of cartoons to meticulously plan frescoes to Franz Kline's large-scale abstract expressionist works that closely follow the composition of preparatory drawings. In this case, Chang carefully plots outlines that are then filled in, the final product mimicking the gestural quality of the original handwriting, similar to Kline's attentively planned paintings that nonetheless appear spontaneous. Like Kline's work, too, Chang's paintings are completed by hand, with paintbrush and paint.

In this act of duplication, Chang teases at boundaries between repeated imprint and singular trace; in working with handwriting, particularly, Chang's paintings also play with the assumption of individuality carried by handwriting. Her paintings, while clearly not attempting forgery given the scale difference, nonetheless do linger in the particularities of each person's hand, the small tells that differentiate one writer from another. For instance, in "I'm in love with a stripper," the bottom cross-bar on the capital letter *I* has a distinctive curve, and the bottom curves on the lower-case *w* are uneven. This specificity, referring back to an original whose indexical gesture it duplicates, thus calls attention to the evidentiary nature of handwriting, which marks an individual writer and instance. Glancing between handwritten plaque and replicated painting, the viewer might act as forensic expert or art connoisseur. In both cases, close visual study of particularities — of handwriting or brushwork — and comparison to a collection of samples allows an expert to ascribe authenticity. Both, too, depend on an understanding of signature style as iterable and temporal, as particular to individuals and different every time. Authenticity, in these cases, is dependent on evidence significantly similar but not

identical to comparative samples. Too near and the work reveals itself as an attempt to replicate a style through mimesis of its definitive characteristics, but lacking the differentiation that results from temporal specificity — from a pen or brush handled in a specific way at a specific time. Evidence, as this suggests, is not infinitely repeatable, the identical tangle of DNA contained in every drop of blood suggested by popular fiction. Rather, it belongs to and stands in not just for a person but a moment.

The compositions also emphasize the at-times awkward spacing of the handwritten texts, further attesting to their temporal quality. While some are neatly centered, in others the lines meander off to one side or crowd together. In a painting that states “Your name is / tatoed [sic] on my / ass,” the text is neatly centered, written in block capitals without punctuation. In another, the beginning of the confession — “I don’t know” — stands on a line to itself, spaced to the far right with empty red ground to its left; the rest of the statement — “what I am doing and I’m / running out of time” — crowds together below it, as though the statement *I don’t know* stands by itself, its own declaration [Fig. 3.8]. Examination of the original plaque reveals that spacing to be part of Chang’s interpretation; on the plaque, the writer began and then scribbled out the first words before beginning again with “I don’t know” [Fig. 3.9]. In choosing to leave out the redacted portion, Chang renders the confession more clean and neat, but still captures the hesitation of that initial false start in the space of the gap. Derrida argues that spacing is one of the minimal determinations of whether a mark can be considered writing; spacing separates individual textual elements (letters, words, sentences), but also separates writing “from all forms of present reference,” a rupture from both the context of its

making and any imagined future.²⁵³ This spacing, he argues, “is not the simple negativity of a lacuna but rather the emergence of the mark.”²⁵⁴ It is in the arrangement and composition of elements, of individual strokes of pen or brush, that meaning arises. Spacing, one factor in Derrida’s *différance*, relates elements to one another even as it introduces a temporalization, a postponement. Not “the simple negativity of a lacuna,” spacing is at once active and passive, a requirement for the functioning of writing and, indeed, for the signification of all signs.

In drifting back into the work of Derrida, I do not intend to suggest that *Confessions* requires its viewers to engage directly with questions of semiotics so much as it allows viewers the pleasure of lingering in the space of interpretation while continually deferring the fixed, sustainable truth promised by popular concepts of evidence. In Derrida’s *différance* is folded the idea of deferral or detour, of “the temporal or temporalizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will,’ or carries desire or will out in a way that annuls or tempers their effect.”²⁵⁵ In the actual practice of handwriting analysis, unlike its popular depictions, probability models and comparison using both human vision and technological analysis brings us closer to determinations of authorship, but contends along the way with variability and irregularity, managed through the accumulation of comparative samples. Within the gallery space of *Confessions*, the pleasure of interpretation, of reading secrets laid bare, is never rewarded with the promise of evidence — that those traces our bodies leave behind carry with them truths of our individuality, to be discerned by careful analysis —

²⁵³ Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 9.

²⁵⁴ Derrida, 10.

²⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Differance,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 283, <http://projectlamar.com/media/Derrida-Differance.pdf>.

precisely because the comparisons available are *too* removed from the body. Here, though the plaques bear the bodily evidence of handwriting, they are abstracted and regularized, offered for consumption, and function less as individual confessions, to construct personal identity, than as universal, as a way to “help us see we are not alone in our quirks, experiences, and struggles as we try to lead fulfilling lives.”²⁵⁶

While Chang’s *Confessions* asks very directly for participants to give a confession, a similarly-constructed participatory project by Nadia Myre has visitors engage with a confessional process through more abstract representation. The *Scar Project*, run from 2005-2013, asked participants to think about scars they might have — physical or emotional – and then create visual representations by drawing, cutting, slashing, and stitching their scars onto small, square canvases. Scars, here, are broadly determined, encompassing not only physical manifestations of injury and healing but also emotional, psychological, and historical moments, senses, and themes, trials and traumas ongoing and discrete. Each participant also created a written document to correspond to the scar canvas, which could narrate the scar’s existence, becoming, meaning, or the participant’s own emotional process with defining and coming to terms with the scar. The *Scar Project* offered participants a loose framework: a blank square canvas, an assortment of thread, twine, marking and cutting implements, and a sheet of paper with only the title of the project, in French and English, a space for the date, and a space for the identification number. Thus, the works produced vary widely in their execution. The *Scar Project*, I argue, attests to the lingering yet elusive presence of evidence of felt experience and makes use of strategies of data collection, archiving, and trend analysis in order to

²⁵⁶ Exhibition wall text. Candy Chang, “Confessions,” *Confessions* (blog), accessed April 25, 2017, <http://confessions.candychang.com/>.

consider at once their possibilities and limitations.

By creating their scar canvases, participants make visible both the rupture and the knitting-together of self and skin, producing a tangible form for a network of events and emotions which may exist only or partially in memory; in writing their accompanying documents, they make legible those visual forms. Thus, the scar-stories exist as representations of personal identity, as mechanisms of truth-telling, and as ways of producing social selves. The project, for Myre, is “about recognizing, naming and sharing [our scars/stories] – listening, and in so doing bringing compassion and love to each other and ourselves.”²⁵⁷ Amanda Jane Graham, both a participant in the project and an art critic, affirms this, calling the project “a space for catharsis.”²⁵⁸ This sense of communality is emphasized, as with Chang’s project, by the display of completed canvases within the participant space, which included art galleries, First Nations community centers, museums, prisons, youth centers, retirement homes, and universities. Myre collected and stored the scar canvases and their corresponding documents, each identified with a number, and selected from that collection those to be exhibited in each showing. Each exhibition, therefore, offered a new constellation of scars, putting their mostly anonymous participants into new configurations and conversations. Offered in grids on gallery walls or piled into stacks across exhibition spaces, the displayed scars emphasize the ongoing proliferation of confessions offered, suggesting that each is one of many [Figs. 3.10-3.11].

²⁵⁷ Nadia Myre, “The Scar Project,” ArtMur, accessed April 29, 2014, <http://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/the-scar-project-2/>.

²⁵⁸ Amanda Jane Graham, “Participatory Art, Engaged Scholarship: The Embedded Critic in Nadia Myre’s Scar Project,” in *Collaborative Futures: Critical Reflections on Publicly Active Graduate Education*, ed. Amanda Gilvin, Georgia M. Roberts, and Craig Martin (Syracuse, New York: The Graduate School Press, Syracuse University, 2012), 389.

As Myre's facilitation of the *Scar Project* envisions dual processes for the creation of the scar-stories, it offers parallel ways of not only expressing scars, but constituting them as evidence through the domains of narrative confession and visual metaphor. Here, this legitimization of evidence resides not in the vested authority of one who hears a confession, but in the creative process itself, in producing objects which make visible memories of trauma and ways of surviving. "This is my emotional scar, that I suffered when I was 10 years old," states the text accompanying one scar, no. 000124 [Figs. 3.12-3.13]. In this canvas, a branching gash through the center is stitched over by an intertwined network of threads. Three different types of string and a heavier twine puncture the surface, crisscrossing and knotting with each other, creating a densely worked map of straight and sinuous lines. Though they draw together the sides of the gaps and slits, empty space remains behind and between the stitches, revealing the wall beyond. The fibers, which vary in color and texture, overlap and knot together, frayed ends dangling, suggesting their concerted and collected efforts to knit together the sundered canvas. A length of heavier twine winds through the stitches, not so much bringing together the fractured surface as penetrating its holes to loop and knot them together. Unlike its canvas, through which stitches wind and twist, the narrative offered proceeds straightforwardly. The scar originates from the participant's mother's stroke, "which changed my life and my family's," an act of sudden, unexpected biological change stated quite plainly. "Many things in my life have stemmed from this, both positive and negative, but almost everything leads back to it," the text further states, indicating the omnipresence of this event in the rest of the participant's life, a lingering scar not quite healed. Finally, "I did the best I could, much like my stitching job on this

canvas. But as much as I've tried to stitch everything together, both on this canvas, and in life, it will never be the same," writes the participant, clearly linking the two objects and experiences. This narrative suggests an awareness which is not spontaneously produced at the moment of inscription but rather consists of an ongoing negotiation.

Other texts proceed less linearly and narratively; that for canvas no. 000161 [Figs. 3.14-3.15] states simply: "I leave on this canvas my inflicted moral scars: the times I have betrayed, cheated, and lied." Others still make use of metaphor to suggest cumulative experiences and affective moments, such as the text accompanying no. 00186 [Figs. 3.16-3.17], the canvas depicting an excised figure twinned with its negative space. Here, the participant has written, "My scar is that my shadow is more myself than I am. It doesn't have to impress anyone, nor does it have to dress up to hide from its own insecurities." Some offer up philosophical poetics, as in the case of scar 000376, which states, in part, "the human question is the scar of the species. Who am I... Where am I going... Where do I come from... What meaning... For whom... Why?... To be or..." (French original; English translation mine) [Figs. 3.18-3.19]. These differing approaches speak to both the versatile nature of the project's instructions and the mobile and shifting nature of the knowledge gained from felt experience. Indeed, the coupling of text and image and the varying approaches to textual expression suggest what Foucault terms the "tactical polyvalence of discourses"; that is, "a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies."²⁵⁹ Confession is not a cohesive enactment of a fixed hierarchical power, but exists within fluctuating and discontinuous discourses in spheres including the verbal, textual, visual, and embodied practice.

As with the works by Emin and Chang, Myre makes use of bodily evidence in order

²⁵⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 100.

to produce and encourage interpretative experiences. Like bodily fluids and handwriting, scars also have an indexical quality, existing as traces of moments of injury or violence against the integrity of the body's flesh. Like bodily fluids, scars change over time, evidence of not just the instant of injury but the days, months, and years of healing that result in knitted-together flesh, the two processes of wounding and mending working together to produce disruptions in the surface of the skin. Like DNA, scars can offer proof of identity, serving as identifying features for aged or decomposing bodies. However, unlike the other instances of bodily evidence examined here, scars are by definition integrated into the body, not detachable from it. Scars do not endure long past the death and decomposition of the flesh; scars are not the discarded traces of experience but the felt remainders of it. As such, scars are not just bodily evidence but also part of bodily knowledge. As temporal, fleshy artifacts that change and recompose themselves over time, scars both cause and represent experiences of pain and healing, and thus the sensory, intuitive, phenomenological knowledge of both the biological workings of the body and the psycho-social movement of the body through cultural space are written into their lines and crevasses.

The choice to elicit depictions of scars, specifically, rather than memories more generally, also suggests an embodied physicality to both memory and truth. Indeed, the production of truth through confession has long been linked to the marking and manipulation of the body; in her book *Torture and Truth*, Page duBois charts the use of the ancient Greek term *basanos* to show the connections between truth, confession, torture, and the body/mind binary. *Basanos* refers to both the touchstone used to authenticate the purity of gold and the act of torture. This conflation, duBois reveals,

shows how the marking of the body, through torture, produces the truth of a witness statement or confession like the marking of a touchstone shows the truth of a precious metal.²⁶⁰ Foucault calls the connected processes of torture and confession “the dark twins,” asserting that confession is “driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body.”²⁶¹ However, as confession became naturalized throughout all aspects of modern life, it became

so deeply ingrained in us that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation.²⁶²

The truth, a latent wound waiting to leave its mark on the surface of the skin, is at once freed from the internal mire and fixed in position on the surface through its rendering within the logic of the confession.

In confession, as in the cases of DNA and handwriting analysis, bodily evidence depends upon interpretation in order to produce truth legibly. In scientific and legal systems, as I have shown, this interpretation is increasingly aided by digital and mechanized processes. Scars, though, are entangled within experiences of bodily knowledge that are not easily captured by technological or archival means. Scars can change not just the surface texture of the body, but alter sensory abilities and awareness through increased sensitivity or numbness, act as signs of a lived history, and mark individuals as part of a group, as is the case with many types of purposeful, active scarification as well as forceful, violent marking such as the branding of enslaved or

²⁶⁰ duBois, *Torture and Truth*, 7.

²⁶¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

²⁶² Foucault, 60.

imprisoned people. As part of the body image — what Elizabeth Grosz defines as “the condition of the subject’s access to spatiality,” or a way of schematizing the connections between mind, body, and space — scars attest to the “radical inseparability of biological from psychical elements,” in how we experience and understand our bodies as always at once physical and social, sensory and cerebral.²⁶³ This entangled nature of the body and thus the ways we experience the world and form knowledge through that experience eludes apprehension by scientific apparatus or archive.

Like Chang’s work, the *Scar Project* offers the two-fold experience of participation through providing one’s own confession and through consuming those of others. Unlike *Confessions*, however, the *Scar Project* privileges sensory and tactile experience over reading and the written word. In their amassed presence, the canvases retain a textural materiality which calls to the senses, suggesting an empathetic engagement in which viewers might imagine their own hands slashing and stitching the canvases, feeling the roughness of the twine and the resistance of the fabric. Compiled into binders which allow a close, narrative-style reading of the texts, the pages retain an element of physicality and immediacy just as gestural as the punctured and sutured canvases. While some documents are typed, the majority are handwritten, expressing the particularities of each participant’s hand, the loops and corrections, ascenders and descenders as personal as each slash and knot, as with Chang’s *Confessions*. However, the method of display, which prioritizes the canvases as the primary material and visually disconnects each canvas from its document, emphasizes an engagement that is tactile and embodied. Graham argues that each scar-story is “a performance of a moment sealed to the

²⁶³ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 85.

participant's memory, and perhaps her body as well."²⁶⁴ The hand-wrought aspect of the canvases and texts index this performance, their punctures and blots, stitches and sentences each bearing a visceral remainder of their creation. The enacted performance, its traces preserved, allows a new physicality to an experience, feeling, or moment which previously existed only in the embodied flesh and memory of the individual participant.

While the surfacing of truth through confessional performance allows a self-initiated process of defining subjectivity, the scar-stories do not operate definitively as objects to these confessed subjects. The newly-created physical presence, in both the created scar-story objects of canvas and paper and the traces of the creators' making in their gestural materiality, allows the scar-stories to act as objects of distributed agency. Here, as with Chang's *Confessions* project, the moment of action carries transformative potential while also conjuring a physical trace that did not previously exist. The confessing agent created in taking pen to paper and needle to canvas remains, allowing the participants to extend their agency beyond their physical presence, enacting and re-enacting their confessions for each viewer. Though created together, in display the texts and canvases become fragmented, their connections maintained only by the numbers assigned to each pair. These numbers form the archival connection of each pair, for the works remain anonymous and unsigned, which allows for the process of the project to be both individual and collective in creation and exhibition. The focus on scars, the proscribed materials and processes, and the repetition of the project in multiple sites suggest, as Anne Ellegood states in the exhibition catalog for the group show *Hide*, "a type of ritual that calls attention to the specificities of each person's experience while it

²⁶⁴ Nadia Myre and Amanda Jane Graham, *Nadia Myre: The Scar Project* (Rochester, NY: Nadia Myre, 2010), np.

simultaneously underscores that which is shared or common to most people.”²⁶⁵ In this way, the *Scar Project* negotiates the space between the specificity of lived experience and its use as forms of evidence for articulating broader truths.

The bodily knowledge represented in the scar-stories encompasses a number of ways of perceiving, knowing, and understanding that rely upon intuition, memory, ephemeral materiality, movement, and gesture. My reading here is informed by the concepts offered by a number of scholars, including Gayatri Gopinath’s “materiality of the everyday,” Phillip Brian Harper’s “the evidence of felt intuition,” a way of seeing and knowing arising particularly from queer experience, Heather Love’s “feeling backwards” as a way to incorporate the affect of historical memory, melancholy, anger and loss, Juana María Rodríguez’s insistence on gesture as a way of understanding cultural practices of survival, and José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of ephemera as an alternative mode of textuality and narrative.²⁶⁶ Here, I’ll borrow specifically from Muñoz in order to consider scars as ephemeral traces that at once engender and encompass forms of bodily knowledge and challenge the limits of the archive. For Muñoz, ephemera operate within structures of feeling — “tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being ‘solid’” — as they offer the remainders of things that have

²⁶⁵ Anne Ellegood, “Nadia Myre: Scarscapes,” in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen E. Ash-Milby, 1st ed, NMAI Editions (Washington [D.C.]: NMAI Editions, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2009), 54.

²⁶⁶ Phillip Brian Harper, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 4 (September 1, 2000): 641–57; Gopinath, “Archive, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions”; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007); Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (NYU Press, 2014); José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): 5–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>.

happened.²⁶⁷ Ephemera “[include] traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived.”²⁶⁸ In this way, ephemera are both persistent and elusive: they remain, but in fragments, thoughts, emotions, and bodily memories. Myre’s project emphasizes the nature of scars as left-over ephemera of lived experience through the call for representations of physical or emotional scars; participants are thus able to create physical, tangible representations of the psychological and emotional traces that linger long after a particular or ongoing experience. Thus, her project also engages with practices of archiving and collection. In the realm of evidence, analysis and interpretation cannot focus solely on a single sample; rather, they depend on sets of data, amassed and accumulated archives of evidence through which experts generate norms and make comparisons. Whose evidence is included in those archives, therefore, has bearing on our ability to interpret the evidence brought before us. Muñoz argues, like Hartman, that paying attention to ephemera, waste, and other left-over traces has particular importance for histories of minoritarian subjects. Opening up the realm of evidence to include felt experience and to consider the many modes of interpretation that one might bring to bear on bodily evidence demands a negotiation of the boundaries of data, the archive, and the concept of scientific or academic rigor. Taking ephemera seriously requires an approach that recognizes the protocols and conventions around interpretation and how they relate to the political underpinnings of our social, scientific, and academic worlds.

Yet, the works created here do not simply celebrate the ephemeral, they in fact

²⁶⁷ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 10.

²⁶⁸ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence.”

translate it into data. The negotiation between experience and evidence in the *Scar Project* asserts the importance of ephemeral traces while also seeking to produce permanent representations, an archival paradox. Just as attention to bodily waste requires analysts to transmute its abject qualities into categorizable data, transforming ephemera into evidence also requires some degree of fixity. Thus, the appeal of embodied knowledge, at once fleeting, instantaneous, and mutable, yet enduring in its traces and impressions, operates as the inverted double of the concept of evidence as stable, verifiable, quantifiable, and yet always susceptible to decay and reinterpretation. Perhaps even more so than other forms of bodily evidence, scars bring our attention to the ways in which evidence is created out of not just physical traces but embodied experience, and what is lost, subsumed, or ignored in the process. The knotted, messy, tangible representations produced in the *Scar Project*, infinitely variable and both solid as fixed, stackable, hangable objects, and remainders of a confluence of fleeting moments, attest to the fundamental struggle of interpretation. Evidence, here, is produced, literally through the handcrafted workings of individual participants, and discursively through the accumulation of data as the piles and piles of canvases grow, are displayed, and are read, yet in both instances the production of evidence is continual and ongoing, is susceptible to loss and misinterpretation, and is dependent on both impassive distance and empathetic connection.

Collected together, the works created in *Scar Project* do constitute an archive, a set of data. The structure of Myre's project allows her to examine the objects created not just as particular products of specific individuals, but to analyze trends within them. Myre describes the project, for her, as "a study in symbology as well as an emotional census of

how we describe our wounds.”²⁶⁹ Indeed, the project is only one of many within her oeuvre that explore the aesthetics of scars, including the *Scarscapes* series (2010), a beadwork project which abstracts common visual themes of the *Scar Project*. Here, Myre acts not only as a facilitator and archivist but also as scientist, treating the scar-stories as data to be mined, organized, and analyzed. In this stage of investigation and inquiry, she shifts the project from the realm of discipline — confessions which are produced by individual subjects — to the realm of biopolitics. As Foucault explicates, while confession operates within individual bodies, the truths produced feed into a biopolitical regime which “deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem.”²⁷⁰ Biopolitics is the realm of censuses, scientific studies, population control, legislation, and insurance; it deals not with individual bodies but with the mass. The interpretation of bodily evidence exists within both discipline and biopolitics. The development of rigorous scientific interpretation of bodily evidence both depends upon and enhances broad, population-based data collection, while the application of specific instances of evidence bear consequences on an individual level.

Despite the many, varied locations of Myre’s facilitated workshops, the resulting scar-stories bear no identifying features other than their numbers and dates, therefore disallowing the viewer — or perhaps Myre herself, as the canvases grew more numerous and workshops more frequent — from connecting individual canvases with particular places. This also works as a sort of double-blind study, offering up anonymity in order to

²⁶⁹ Nadia Myre, “Scar Project, Archive,” accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.oboro.net/en/activity/scar-project-archive>.

²⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures as the Collège de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 1997), 245.

avoid preconceptions about the nature of the scars offered, another instance where Myre adopts a scientific approach. However, in a double-blind approach the experimenters nonetheless record *somewhere* the delineations of their test subjects, and thus who exists in a test versus control group is revealed at some point in order to apply the findings to future use. While some of that information might be available to Myre herself, the viewers, as analysts, do not ever have access to it; they cannot confirm their own suppositions. Though often informed by individual experiences with power relationships, the objects, therefore, may not stand in for particular dispossessed groups; they are metonymic of no specific category or political coalition, symbolic of no singular historical struggle. In collecting and analyzing the scar-stories, therefore, she engages with a particular biopolitical strategy while denying it the purpose of collecting and categorizing certain groups of people.

As any attempt to construct a census or survey inclusive of multiple gender, sexual, and racial identities, social classes, or abilities shows, the delineation of ways of identifying into particular and discrete categories can rarely accommodate both diverse, multiple, and sometimes contradictory ways of existing and the needs for significant data sets. This may result in misrepresentation, confusion, or incomplete data as individuals are sorted (or sort themselves) into categories not made to accommodate their actual lived experience. However, the limits of categorical labels do not only result in individual discomfort at being mis-apprehended, but also in very material consequences on particular peoples. Delineations of levels of ability, for instance, determine who is and is not eligible for disability-based social welfare, determinations of categorical gender result in violence against trans people, and definitions of genetically hereditary identity regulate

who has access to band or tribe membership. Myre's larger body of work frequently engages her own experience as Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg with notions of belonging within the context of historical conflict between First Nations Peoples and the white settler colonial government of Canada. In this context, for instance, acceptance of some government regulations around biological inheritance and blood and marriage relationships under laws like the Indian Act (1876-present) allows individuals to gain access to band membership, but also requires a denial of other modes of belonging, such as matrilineal family bonds, and a simplification of often-complex family histories.²⁷¹ Thus a negotiation of techniques of evidence accumulation, categorization, interpretation, and policy implementation requires not just a critical eye but perhaps some ambivalence or resistance to its mechanisms.

In the *Scar Project*, anonymity, lack of specific context, and the drive to discover universal forms seemingly deny viewers an understanding of participants' situated experience, disallowing readings informed by the specificities of each participant's memory, history, and experience. However, by structuring the project in this way, Myre does not allow the scar-stories to act only as representative of specific dispossessed groups and therefore run the risk of permitting viewers a contextual distance from each piece. Myre facilitated workshops and exhibitions in gallery, museum, and academic spaces as well as spaces not typically associated with art-making or display, such as prisons, community centers, and retirement homes. In many cases, such as at the Sydney Biennale, workshops were ongoing alongside the exhibition of completed scar-stories, so that participant and viewer converged. Claire Bishop argues that one pitfall of

²⁷¹ For additional information regarding the interpretation of the Indian Act in Myre's work, see: Shannon Flaherty, "Disrupted Translations: Legibility and Identity in the Works of Nadia Myre," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 11, no. 3 (20150901): 329–45.

participatory art is to reinforce the binary between marginalized public and empowered intellectuals in which “the aesthetic is found to be the preserve of the elite, while the ‘real people’ are found to prefer the popular, the realist, the hands-on.”²⁷² However, the *Scar Project* is not consciousness raising for racism against First Nations peoples, for youth poverty, for injustices in the carceral system; all of these inequalities feed its production, form its scars, but as a whole the project cannot be essentialized into a drive for ‘awareness.’ As such, it resists allowing viewers to encounter the scar-stories as evidence of injustices against *them*, against an *other*. By leaving the objects of her study anonymous, collecting them in a single, accumulating mass rather than categorizing and archiving their origins, and by drawing from them conclusions which speak to the universal rather than the demographic, to human experience rather than political populations, Myre negotiates the power of biopolitical categorization in order to emphasize empathy and communality.

Existing within the intersecting and entangled threads of power and resistance produces ruptures and fragments; even as disciplinary operations such as confession seek to constitute categorized, defined subjects, the tangles of other power strategies and their accompanying resistances “[produce] cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.”²⁷³ Foucault, here, reveals that even as power professes to discipline, inscribe, and arrange individual bodies, resistances can reveal how power relationships actually demand a fracturing of the sense of self by creating, in turn, new, shifting divergences.

²⁷² Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 38.

²⁷³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 96.

Slashed diagonally across the canvas, the scar on no. 000196 resists knitting-together by the heavy twine criss-crossing its surface [Fig. 3.20-3.21]. A braided lock of hair overlays the scar, echoing its form and following its path and yet divergent from it. Perhaps more than any other, the text of this scar expresses survival within systemic inequality as a form of resistance, stating: “born into a political position / of constantly trying to survive / paths come / we choose / either right or wrong or neither / we try to learn / we try to heal / whats been torn & / ripped to shreds.” The emergent form of the braid, representing the participant’s family, has “kept me breathing, beating / **above** being alive.” The visualization of the scar, therefore, does not represent either a shift in perspective allowing the participant to embody new ways of being nor a utopian imaginary but instead becomes a part of a lived, experiential process of survival which recognizes the violence effected by asymmetrical power relationships and identifies resistances within family bonds.

These three projects vacillate between the specificity of individual experience and the relationality of shared affect by providing sites of interpretation through bodily evidence. Emin’s *My Bed*, while minutely occupied with the detritus and emotion of her own constructed artistic life, pushes affectively — and abjectly — at its viewers, inspiring in some a connection formed through a particular type of feminine experience. Chang’s *Confessions* and Myre’s *Scar Project* both ask visitors to lay bare a personal truth and to bear witness to those of others, providing spaces deliberately focused on relational engagement through anonymity. I identify this relational quality as a key feature to confessional art; in these cases, though, the use of bodily evidence as forensic proof, as indexical trace, and as felt experience points at once to the imperfect transfer of

knowledge in relational experiences and, nonetheless, its necessity in systems of interpretation and justice. Confession always works as an act of translation, of rendering a myriad of psychological, physical, and social experiences into representation, and thus something is always lost. When considering bodily evidence, therefore, so often used as the lingering remains of human activity, we must turn our attention to that which escapes, decays, sinks into the gaps, or leaves only affective traces. As artworks, these projects do persist, carefully stored and conserved; however, even the transformation of emotion and experience into tangible work of art that is then archived and preserved cannot capture the abundance of information within the experiences behind the confessions or the acts of making the works. In this way, bodily evidence speaks to its own lack, to the absence it marks and by which it is defined. However, these works, in their insistence on relation and attempts to approach notions of universality, show our capability — our necessity — for imaginatively attempting to fill that absence. In recognizing our inability to know fully the experiences of those we encounter, we face an opportunity to shape our concepts of justice through empathy, a sense of communal harm, and sociality based on an understanding of our own subjectivity as mutable and relational rather than fixed and discrete.

Chapter Four: Relational Orientations

In his book *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in WWII*, Alan Bérubé describes a shift in the way the concept of “coming out” was understood by gay men and women around the Second World War:

The meaning of the phrase ‘coming out’ itself expanded as the war began to change gay life. In the 1930s ‘to come out’ or ‘to be brought out’ had meant to have one’s first homosexual experience with another person. But by 1941 gay men and women were using ‘coming out’ to mean that they had found gay friends and the gay life, and were saying that circumstances in their lives, not just their first sexual partner, had brought them out. A person could come out to others part way by ‘dropping hairpins’ to hint that one was ‘queer’ rather than ‘normal’ — the most common words used both by gay people and the general public in the war years. But when one felt safe or daring enough, one could come out all the way by pulling out every last pin and ‘letting one’s hair down,’ a phrase that by World War II already had migrated into popular slang from gay culture.²⁷⁴

As Bérubé articulates, the concept of “coming out” shifted from an embodied experience that might involve only two people to a process of finding and building community. Interestingly, neither quite fits into a more commonly accepted post-Stonewall definition of “coming out,” which generally relies on declarative statements rather than actions, particularly to make queerness visible to cisgender, heterosexual individuals. The metaphor of “dropping hairpins” and “letting one’s hair down” further suggests the way coming out, in this framework, might rely on hints, actions, and other strategies readable to a knowing audience but not necessarily require any verbal declaration of identity.

Historian George Chauncey similarly notes that the mid-century understanding of “coming out” played on the heterosexual rituals of debutante balls, and therefore did not mean “*coming out of* what we call the ‘gay closet’ but rather of *coming out into* what they called ‘homosexual society’ or the ‘gay world,’ a world neither so small, nor so isolated,

²⁷⁴ Allan Bérubé, John D’Emilio, and Estelle B Freedman, *Coming out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 6.

nor, often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies.”²⁷⁵ Coming out, whether at public events like the Baltimore “frolic of the pansies” ball reported in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in spring 1931 that Chauncey cites, or, more commonly, simply as a member of a local queer community, was specifically envisioned as a movement into the queer world, a way of relating to and existing amongst others. Chauncey notes that it wasn’t until the 1970s that “coming out” began most commonly to refer to verbal disclosure to straight friends and family, the definition that most frequently appears today. In this, the act of “coming out” changes both audiences and directions. From coming out *into* the welcome of a shared community to coming out *of* a place hiding, to the critical reception of the straight world, the act does not only change in context, in changes in orientation.

In describing orientation as a phenomenological concept, Sara Ahmed writes, “orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward.”²⁷⁶ Thus, critically considering the term “sexual orientation” allows us to think not only of an internal identity but of a continual, ongoing direction toward and away from certain objects, others, and paths. This might mean not only objects of desire, but ways of forming community, of inhabiting space, of dreaming futures. These orientations to objects are, of course, not freely and equally offered; rather, as Ahmed articulates, dominant culture orients us straightly, in a straight line, and thus the “queer subject

²⁷⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 7.

²⁷⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant.”²⁷⁷

Thinking queerly about the phenomenological process of orientation, Ahmed points us toward encounters with objects, spaces, gatherings, and communities that disorient, interrupt straight lines, and see the slant-ways possibilities that queer bodies create by reshaping the space given to us.

In our contemporary moment, we colloquially consider the confession of “coming out” to be verbal, often in specific though not singular instances. We might come out to our parents, to our friends, to our coworkers, to new crushes. This cultural understanding relies on a number of assumptions around orientation. First, that desire is an orientation towards objects and others, rather than (or more important than) an experience first and foremost about one’s own body. Second, that desire might be oriented towards those understood to be “other” than you in sex and/or gender, or those understood to be the “same” as you, or both. Third, that sexual orientation is both something that one “has” and something that one “is”; the direction of one’s desire determines one’s identity as heterosexual or not. This third assumption relies on the confessional logic that Foucault explicates in which the work of producing the truth about oneself relies on revealing one’s orientations — the objects and others towards which one moves, that one desires, embraces, abjures, or evades. Finally, it assumes that revealing one’s orientations, thus making one’s identity legible, is desired, good, and productive. While, as Foucault argues, the impetus to confess across a number of relationships arises through “a subtle network of discourses,” through which confession is at once voluntary and enforced, the expected result of a confession of sexual orientation has shifted alongside slow changes

²⁷⁷ Ahmed, 21.

in gay rights rhetoric and legal status in the western world.²⁷⁸ The language of gay rights arising in the 1970s created a new convergence of the confession of sexual orientation with coming out as a celebratory claiming of identity to the audience of the straight world.

Throughout this dissertation I treat confession as a near-ubiquitous mechanism operating within power networks through and across a number of institutions, individuals, and relationships. In this chapter, though, I would like to return to the origin of Michel Foucault's conception of confession as a form of truth-telling specifically concerned with sexuality. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, he argues that the confession is "the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex" through religion, pedagogy, medicine, psychoanalysis, justice, and punishment.²⁷⁹ The development in the nineteenth century of this "*scientia sexualis*," the system of producing truth, meaning, categorization, and pathologizing around sexuality through the prolific ritual of the confession, produced the sexual subject: a person whose very being was constituted through the interpretation of their desires, acts, pleasures, and aversions. Thus, the normal and the deviant, the heterosexual and the homosexual emerge. While it is true, therefore, that confessional demands work across all Western subjects, they do not do so equally, or in the same moments, through the same methods, or with the same consequences in all contexts. We might think, for instance, of the way confession indelibly blushes pink, feminine, the domain of women and their affiliation with emotions. In this case, "confessional" becomes derogatory, as with Tracey Emin's *My Bed* in Chapter Four, and inaccessible to men, who are taught to suppress emotions, as I

²⁷⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 72.

²⁷⁹ Foucault, 63.

will consider in this chapter. Or, we might think also of the paramount demand to “come out” for queer and trans folks, to be open, to live our truths, to tell — again and again, for coming out is never a singular instance — who we are, as a prerequisite for merely living our lives, a demand rarely placed on straight, cisgender people.

In this chapter, I bring together two works of video art that orient us in different ways around the concept of “coming out.” The 2014 video *#Blackmendment* by photographer and video artist Shikeith Cathey, who goes by Shikeith, offers interviews with young Black men. Framed around feelings, relationships with other Black men, and dreams, the questions he poses ask the interviewees to express their emotions and consider some of the ways that expression is stymied or discouraged by society, by loved ones, or by their peers. The work has a psychoanalytic flair, delving into memory, fear, and the subconscious, allowing Shikeith and, by extension, the viewer, to act as analyst. Embodying their vulnerability, Shikeith’s subjects settle into the position of openness and exposure required of confession yet frequently denied to them as Black men. However, each interviewee faces away from the camera, disallowing visual access to the expressions of his face. While, superficially, this might seem an act of anonymity, similar to the partition of a confessional booth or the backlighting used to obscure witnesses appearing on true crime television, I argue that it is instead both a refusal of and a demand for visibility. In turning away, these men at once deny the viewer’s consuming gaze and demand, nonetheless, that the viewer *see* them, in all their emotional vulnerability.

While the men in *#Blackmendment* speak, their confessions sometimes composed and other times halting, for her 2008 video work *Ingeminated Battology*, performance

and video artist Jenny Keane silences herself. Depicting a split-screen view of her own moving mouth, the video shows her in an act of fractured, interrupted confession, marked significantly by the liquid presence of black ink in her mouth. Here, the work closely frames the organ of articulation, yet presents nonsense, just the wagging of her tongue and kissing of her lips, made monstrous by the wash of ink. Keane's work I read in the context of her own identity, as a queer white Irish woman, and of its display in Ireland, to argue that it contends with the problem of language and the feminine in a country where Catholicism limits both. Like *#Blackmendment*, the mouth in *Ingeminated Battology* makes demands on us to recognize the involuntary and relational responses of our bodies. I argue that this work finds pleasure in silence, the abject, and the shameful, inviting us to embrace rather than reject those things that are marked — and that mark us — with weakness.

I read both of these works in their early twenty-first century contexts, a few decades removed from Foucault's writing *Vol. 1*. In so doing, I argue that the mainstream, predominant message in the regions within my scope — Ireland and the United States, here, and the United Kingdom and Canada elsewhere — regarding queerness and confession has shifted the site of shame away from queer desires themselves and onto the closet itself. This is not a fundamental shift in the nature of confession; rather, it is simply a change in the cultural forces that demand and interpret confession. Nonetheless, the change in the transformative potential of the “coming out” confession has significant consequences; to articulate one's queer sexuality is less and less seen as a statement of shame, that is, of one's shameful desires and actions, and more frequently affirmed as a way to *overcome* shame, that is, the shame of keeping one's “true” self secret. Foucault

suggests that sexuality, in the development of the *scientia sexualis*, “became an object of great suspicion”; the knowing glances and coded phrases that mark discussion around “suspected” queer folks certainly have not abated, even if the wink-nudge accompanying them is perhaps now more knowing than fearful.²⁸⁰ The prevalence of coming-out pressures nonetheless run up against other narratives and norms around expression, shame, gender, and sexuality that differ across contexts. In this chapter, those contexts include concepts of Black masculinity in the United States and of Catholic womanhood in Ireland; in both, the heady promises of coming out test boundaries of gender, of family, of appropriate behavior.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that confession is, inherently, relational. Confessions are created by both speaker and listener, in the relationship between them. In this, the confessions I’ve examined thus far implicate us as viewers and listeners in the confessional promise of transformation, they demand that we interrogate our positions in relationship to authority, and they make us intimately aware of our bodies’ permeable borders. They do things to us, ask things of us, and relate us to one another. In Sara Ahmed’s words, confessions orient us to ourselves — our desires, hopes, and histories — and to one another. In this chapter, I ask a little more specificity of that relational act. How can confessions not simply work on any listener they encounter, but build community? How can confession orient us to our folks, to those like us? What if I refuse to orient myself to these works straightly, as a heterosexual viewer might, but instead insist quite firmly on the queer pull I feel for them? I bring us to the confession of coming out to see what it would mean to read such articulations not as coming out *of* the closet into the straight world, but as coming out *into* queer community, as coming out *through*

²⁸⁰ Foucault, 69.

the touch of a lover, as coming out *towards* new ways of inhabiting space and being in the world. Rather than suggesting that they implicate us all, I read these works as building on in-group knowledge and feeling to declare queer relationality.

Thus, I read these works sweetly, queerly, with attention to their dropped hairpins. Neither work definitively declares itself queer, neither comes out for its audience. Nonetheless, the confession of coming out lingers in their words and gestures. *#Blackmendream* and *Ingeminated Battology* both consider what it means to be caught in confessional culture as gendered, raced, and sexualized bodies. The subjects of each claim power through their refusals: the refusal to show their faces, the refusal to speak. Perhaps more importantly, though, is the way each claims, irreverently, sweetly, perversely, directions and objects that society suggests we should be far more eager to avoid. In reading these works using Ahmed's concept of orientation, I attest that they seek disorienting directions, that they turn queerly, and that they suggest ways of moving, gathering, and coming out that avoid straight lines. The paths these works trod begin at the place suggested by coming out rituals, but take us farther afield, to look at their demands from afar and askance. In their contexts, visual strategies, and affective disorientations they differ, significantly, and thus I treat them within this chapter as two separate, divergent directions. In *#Blackmendream*, the subjects speak, show their bodies, and inhabit vulnerability. This is not precisely the vulnerability of precariousness under the institutional power, though that is never far away, but the vulnerability of expressing unqualified emotion, of inviting intimacy, of engendering trust. Keane's monstrous mouth in *Ingeminated Battology*, silent but grotesquely intimate, requests that we linger in shame as a site of pleasure, rather than cast it off through transformative confession or

see in it only discomfort. The confessions offered inflect queerly, marked by those hints — those hairpins — that within their distinct contexts brush up against the queer without necessarily declaring it, such as soft-spokenness and expression of emotion within *#Blackmendream* and monstrosity and orality in *Ingeminated Battology*. In reading these works queerly, with loving attention to their contours, with a knowing glance at the hairpins they drop, with desire for the queer pleasures they offer, I assert both my personal affective connection to them and the worthiness of the experiences in vulnerability and shame suggested by them. I feel their relational tug, and you might too. Confession and its attendant vulnerabilities and shames are all, fundamentally, relational, experienced both *between* and *within* people; however, your orientation to the bodies, words, and gestures offered by these works might be distant rather than intimate, cold rather than fond, indifferent rather than moved. By lingering in the relational spaces of vulnerability and shame, these works ask us to attend more closely to ways of orienting queerly together, of moving, lingering, inhabiting, and relating outside of straight lines.

For his 2014 video *#Blackmendream*, artist Shikeith interviewed eleven Black men, in their twenties and thirties, about their experiences becoming Black men, feeling and expressing emotions, and relating to other Black men in their lives. His questions mimic the form of psychoanalysis, relating to childhood experiences, emotions, and dreams. The interviews are not presented intact, but instead fragmented, their responses grouped by question. Shikeith edits the responses to include only a selection of two to five per question, so that each interviewee appears multiple times throughout the video but not every interviewee appears after every question. Shot in black and white, the interviews take place in anonymous white-walled rooms, marked by occasional windows, white-

washed wooded chairs, or simple, metal-framed beds. Significantly, each interviewee faces away from the camera, presenting to viewers not their faces, with the expressions and eye contact that might convey particular emotions while they speak, but their backs, either bare or clothed in white tee shirts. The camera's framing varies across the interviews; in some, viewers see the shoulders, neck, and back of the head of the interviewee, while in others a wider shot shows the man nude, seated on a bed or a chair, so that the expanse of his back and the rise of his upper thigh are visible as well. In most cases, the soft lighting allows the viewer to pick out the movement of muscles in the men's backs and shoulders, the contours of their haircuts, and the textures of their skin. In only one case is the lighting so bright that the interviewee becomes a silhouette, a flat black shape with a crisp outline, presented against a white wall. This presentation does not, precisely, provide anonymity, as the men retain distinctive haircuts, characteristic gestures, and their unaltered voices. Rather, the turning away focuses and controls the gaze of the viewer, disallowing access to the face and its expression.

For instance, when asked what makes him angry, one man pauses for a long moment [Fig. 4.1]. Viewers, without access to his face, must read his moment of contemplation and composure through the minute movements of his body, the subtle lifting of his shoulders, clad in a white tee-shirt, the dipping of his chin evident in his neck's curvature. Shikeith crops his body closely, so that we only see above his shoulder blades. In the background a white wall and an illuminated window, through which light shines but no exterior is visible, frame his form. The cool black and white tones of the video register the contrast between the dark skin of his neck, the darker black of his close-cropped hair, and the white of his shirt and the walls behind him, but also lovingly

illuminate his body. The deepest tones — in the dips behind his earlobes, the contoured hair at the nape of his neck — offer a counterpoint to the gleaming brightness of his shirt and the highlight that plays across the shifting muscles of his lower neck. In the absence of expression or ornate decoration, our eyes find in these soft tonal details richness. In the long moment of silence before he answers, the sound of rain falling outside the window occludes his breathing; our only evidence of the deep breath he must take before speaking lives in the shift upward, almost infinitesimally, of his shoulders. Finally, he says that what makes him angry is “people not respecting other people’s humanity or space. I think that’s at the root of any oppression or even just rudeness.” Here, he makes a claim for recognition, for respect for his own humanity, body, space. That claim, paired with the relative stillness of his body, readable through just the smallest of gestures, abjures the idea that humanity might only be recognized through the face and the claims to individuality it offers. The solid fact of his human body is here, and he does not need to appeal emotionally to an audience for that recognition.

Shikeith frames the content of the video with, first, a recorded interview with James Baldwin and, at the end, a quoted passage from Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*. In this way, he places his work and the words of his participants into a broad and well-respected history of literature on the subject of Black (sometimes queer) masculinity in America. The brief snippet with Baldwin comes from an interview in 1968 hosted by R.H. Darden for Pacifica Radio. In the full interview, the interviewer’s approach is clearly defensive, suggesting that Baldwin’s own writing has contributed to the racial conflict of 1968.²⁸¹ In the extract used by Shikeith, Baldwin effaces his own power of expression and

²⁸¹ James Baldwin, Baldwin and Darden. | Pacifica Radio Archives, interview by RH Darden, April 1, 1968, <https://archive.org/details/BaldwinAndDarden1968>.

rhetorically gestures to those anonymous men who will follow him on screen by saying: “Rage is happening. That’s what’s happening. It’s been happening for a very long time. People make a mistake and they think that the opinions of James Baldwin, you know, because one’s heard of him, are more relevant than the opinions of some black cat that you never have heard of and wouldn’t speak to if you did see him. Ralph Ellison told you a long time ago, long before I did, what it was like to be an invisible man.” This asserts the importance of listening to everyday expressions of emotion — rage, pain, happiness, sorrow — and not simply when channeled through artistic expression. Shikeith models this, by both minimizing his own actual voice in the video and by artistically framing the words of his interviewees through his aesthetic choices. Baldwin ends his interview citing Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*, which later appears itself in the form of a long quotation on screen at the end of the video. The words comprise the first paragraph of Ellison’s prologue:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me.²⁸²

Shikeith’s project is undeniably aimed at *visibility*, at capturing and representing the “[men] of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids” as not only in possession of a mind but as feeling, as emotive, expressive, and vulnerable. The project, too, aimed to reach beyond the filmed subjects. Presented at a number of exhibitions and film festivals, including at MoMA, The Philadelphia Art Museum, Morehouse College, the Black Lives

²⁸² Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1952), 1.

Through the Arts film festival in Cambridge, MA and CinemAfrica in Stockholm, showings often included a conversation with the artist afterward and an invitation to audience members to respond to the questions in the work using the title as social media hashtag. Shikeith identifies this as a “social-practice method to encourage other black men to see and experience themselves in states of togetherness, tenderness, transformation, and self-reflection.”²⁸³ In this way, the work speaks primarily in-group, orienting itself to other Black men who might see themselves on the screen.

The first question Shikeith asks the interviewees is, “When did you become a Black man?” and the second, “When did you become a man?” Masculinity and Blackness, here, are immediately framed as *becoming*, not as innate, and the answers suggest that that becoming is not dependent on imposed social markers like reaching a specific age. For instance, one man states that he technically became a man when he left home at eighteen, but that he marks as more important learning to take care of himself. The answers given to both questions, too, suggest that masculinity and Blackness are less about outward action and more about internal awareness. The first interviewee states that he became a Black man when he felt “comfortable in my skin,” and the second articulates a “certain awakening.” By beginning with a question about *Black* masculinity, Shikeith both identifies the way Blackness “marks” masculinity and, importantly, centers his inquiry around that inflection. As scholar of Black diaspora cultural studies Rinaldo Walcott states, the addition of “Black” to masculinity “immediately signals [masculinity’s] constructedness and therefore its history and histories. The additive ‘Black’ already begins to tell a story about masculinity.”²⁸⁴ By beginning where he does, Shikeith affirms

²⁸³ Shikeith Cathey, “Shikeith - #Blackmendream,” Shikeith, n.d., <http://www.shikeith.com>.

²⁸⁴ Rinaldo Walcott, *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies* (London,

both the intersection between race and gender that is a truth of Black men's lives and signals his interest in "telling a story" about masculinity, in considering its construction, delving into the moments where it shores itself up, and imagining how Black men might dream new ways of engaging masculinity.

For the interviewees, Black masculinity carries gravity. The first interviewee says, "I think it's a privilege to be a Black man but you have to kinda earn it," suggesting that it takes some work — particularly internal, emotional work, as he connects it with being comfortable in his own skin. The second, too, says that he only became a Black man when he "realized the weight that comes along with it," an awareness catalyzed by recent public protests and movements against the killing of Black men and women by white citizens and police officers. This awakening prompted him to think about how he had "always tried to fit in and be normal and downplay parts of me," a possible allusion to queer identity made more concrete by other participants. For instance, another states that he only became a man — "an honest man, which is the more important part" — upon coming out. The outward profession of sexual identity, here, is necessary to his masculinity and his ability to move through the world as a whole person. As he says, "I was finally owning who I was supposed to be....I think if you're not operating from a place where you're being yourself fully, you're not whole."

Including this answer early on in the video, Shikeith signals the way the confession ritual of coming out has, in the Western world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particular resonances and demands for queer subjects. The transformation offered is vast: "who I was supposed to be," "whole," "an honest man." While until recently in most contexts, the confession of homosexuality promised redemption only in

Ontario, Canada: Insomniac Press, 2016), 216.

a religious sense, as an affirmation of shame, regret, and desire to change, in a contemporary context, broadly, the site of shame has been refigured. As I will further discuss in relation to Keane's *Ingeminated Battology* later in this chapter, the heady promises of coming out locate shame in staying closeted: at a time when coming out and claiming an identity promises wholeness, refusing to proclaim oneself signals guilt and betrayal of oneself and loved ones. Further, by offering up this articulation of the obligation and hope of coming out, and reiterating it throughout as interviewees discuss the difficulty of being seen as different or hiding parts of themselves, Shikeith signals the ways coming out rituals might simultaneously be demanded by wider society and discouraged for Black men, particularly, who might not have been raised to consider queerness a viable part of Black masculinity. Significantly, too, through this framing Shikeith positions his film in conversation with a prevalent popular narrative around Black male same-sex sexuality: the down low.

The down low refers to Black men who do not identify as gay, queer, or bisexual having sex with men. While the term has a broader history beginning in the early 1990s referring to secrecy, particularly around sex — to keep something on the down low is to keep it secret — its particular resonance around Black men who have sex with men (MSM) emerged in the early 2000s. As communication studies scholar C. Riley Snorton argues, popular culture representations of the down low belong to a broader group of figures and discourses that represent “black masculinity as dangerous, prone to trickery, promiscuous, and contaminated while also framing white masculinity as less susceptible to such problems.”²⁸⁵ As it entered the popular and news media spheres in the early

²⁸⁵ C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the down Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 9.

2000s, the down low was indelibly connected to the risk of HIV/AIDS, particularly for Black women who, in this framing, were at increased risk of infection from male partners who engaged in secret — and presumably unprotected — sexual contact with other men. In considering representations of the down low across media, Snorton articulates it as part of a broader strategy through which “black sexualities are characterized by hypervisibility and confinement and subject to regulation and surveillance,” using the metaphor of the “glass closet.”²⁸⁶ Post-modern interpretations of the closet, formatively defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, emphasize its contingent, ongoing nature — its ability to be everywhere and nowhere. Sedgwick reads the closet as “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence — not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”²⁸⁷ The closet is not flung open with one declarative statement; neither is it maintained by a single act of silence. Rather, it is constituted again and again, more or less opaquely, across conversations, interactions, relationships, and representations. Snorton builds on this conceptualization to argue that “blackness transforms the closet from a space of concealment — however partial or contingent — to a site of confinement and display” due to the strategies of panoptic surveillance to which Black sexualities are subject.²⁸⁸ For Snorton, the discourse of the down low is particularly significant in that any analysis of its presumptive secrecy — on talk shows, TV and print news media, melodrama, or music — relies on revealing and fixing truths, not just through televised confessions on *Oprah* or *Law and Order*:

²⁸⁶ Snorton, 5.

²⁸⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Nachdr., A Centennial Book (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr, 2005), 3.

²⁸⁸ Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know*, 23.

SVU, two of Snorton's examples, but through biopolitical strategies of surveillance, analysis, and containment, strategies that already operate to define and confine the bodies and lives of Black people. Black sexuality in America, Snorton argues, has long been mediated and defined through surveillance, from the forceful control — and destruction — of procreation and kinship structures by slave owners, to the pathologizing of Black matriarchal family structures in the Moynihan Report of 1965, to numerous political, popular culture, and news media depictions that construe Black men as animalistic sexual aggressors. The glass closet, the combination of confinement and display that characterizes public debate on the down low, is therefore just one of many strategies of viewing and control.

In some ways, *#Blackmendment* operates, visually and rhetorically, within the logic of the glass closet. As Snorton argues, glass as a material mediates much of our understanding of representation, through the glass of computer, phone, and television screens, of mirrors, and — though he does not mention the glass that allows us to *create* images, but those that allow us to *represent* them — also of the lenses of all cameras, digital or analog. Peering through layers of glass in lens and screen, we viewers observe Shikeith's subjects in their bright-walled rooms, occasionally offered a sense of further viewership possibilities through the inclusion of a window, and the subjects do not gaze back. The position within the glass closet is not hopelessly passive, though. Snorton argues for an understanding of agency, stating, “while glass closets, stabilized by biopower and sutured together by institutional and social modes of regulation, may be a condition of black sexual representation, they are not spaces in which their inhabitants

lack the capacity to act.”²⁸⁹ In Snorton’s reading, the confessions demanded by the glass closet cyclically inform one another. Being on the down low — keeping one’s sexual relationships with other men a secret — and coming out as gay, bisexual, or queer operate within the same logic of surveillance, viewing, and secrets.

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, “coming out” has not and does not always necessitate verbal statements. In his analysis of Black gay southern oral histories, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, E. Patrick Johnson also suggests that “coming out” as a declarative statement incorrectly or insufficiently describes the way many of his subjects communicate knowledge about their gay identities:

‘Coming out’ is not always the best phrase to describe what people do when they acknowledge that they have same-sex attraction. In general, ‘putting one’s business in the street’ is something frowned upon in many black communities, including the communities in which many of the narrators grew up and currently live. As noted in the Introduction, most southerners avoid discussing topics such as sexuality in a direct manner. Thus, many of the men in *Sweet Tea* have not ‘come out’—as it were—to their families, even though, by their own acknowledgment, their family members ‘know.’²⁹⁰

Here, he suggests that hints and actions — up to and including bringing a male partner to family events — communicate plenty, even in instances where verbal declarations of sexual identity may not be considered appropriate. “Knowing,” nonetheless, is possible for those able — and willing — to read the hints. Sara Ahmed, too, discusses the ways “outness” also requires contending with a world oriented not just toward straightness but toward whiteness. As she writes, “Not all queers can be ‘out’ in their deviation. For queers of other colors, being ‘out’ already means something different, given that what is

²⁸⁹ Snorton, 34.

²⁹⁰ E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: Univ of North Carolina Press, 2008), 108.

‘out and about’ is oriented around whiteness.”²⁹¹ Thinking about the closet, she suggests, returns us to the space of the home and that, “for some queers, at least, homes are already rather queer spaces, and they are full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires.”²⁹² That potential for interiority, domesticity, and homeyness to exude queer deviance reflects in the interviews, staged in interior spaces marked by beds, tables, and chairs — the furniture of domestic gathering and intimacy.

In reading *#Blackmendmentream* alongside the concept of the glass closet, though, I do not intend to suggest that the video simply replicates its demands. Rather, while the logic of the glass closet defines the expression of emotion and sexuality available — and, frequently, disallowed — to the participants throughout their lives, I argue that taking up the apparatus of surveillance and visibility and turning their backs, the men critique the social norms upon which that logic relies. Their bare bodies, seated in quiet domestic spaces, suggest multiple ways of knowing that aren’t predicated on “outness.” I read the aesthetic qualities of Shikeith’s staging and editing alongside the content of the men’s confessions to consider the ways in which the dreams suggested by the video elude both to the hypervisibility of the glass closet and the seemingly transformative demands of coming out. Not precisely resistive of either, the work nonetheless dwells in a place of simultaneous refusal and vulnerability in order to consider ways of being that require ongoing work. Further, I read this work queerly, looking into the closet, not to assert the identity of all the participants, only a few of whom declare a sexual identity, but because of the ways in which the negotiation of emotion and vulnerability in which they engage is ineradicably caught up with queerness. They discuss feeling isolated amongst Black male

²⁹¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 175.

²⁹² Ahmed, 176.

peers, marked by the physicality of their bodies, the emotions they express, the academic educations they've pursued. Performance studies scholar Bryant Keith Alexander, in considering the ways various markers of identity and decorum for Black men shift depending on contextual environment, offers a succinct argument of the connection between difference and queerness by staging a chorus:

(A “stereotypical” Black brother) “Listen to the way he talks.” Faggot.

“You don't have a girlfriend?” Faggot.

“What do you mean no basketball.” Faggot.

“You're a teacher?” Faggot.²⁹³

Here, the version of himself that Alexander offers is read, over and again, as queer, not through any affirmative declaration of his own sexual or romantic desires or an articulation of his identity, but through the presence or absence of social markers bound up with Blackness and masculinity: education, demonstrative heterosexual coupling, sports. Some of the interviewees discuss the negative coding of particular markers of the education system for Black men; one struggled to fit in with Black peers as a child because he “talked white” and another continues to feel like the “odd ball out” amongst Black male peers who did not share his educational experiences at an historically Black university. One of the interviewees in *#Blackmendream* reiterates the negative connotations of emotional expression, stating, “men are taught to be these rocks, these stone walls — especially as a Black man — our concept of masculinity, as men, we're not expected to have emotion, it's something disparaging if you're emotional.” Later, he states that one of the hardest things about being male is “That we're discouraged in terms

²⁹³ Bryant Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*, Crossroads in Qualitative Inquiry (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 75.

of showing emotion. If you're too happy, an everyday male is perceived as effeminate or gay. If you're sad, that's seen as a weakness. I think expression is really limited." The expression of emotion is thus coded negatively: disparaging, effeminate, gay, a weakness. The moves made by the Black men who dream in Shikeith's video, therefore, read queerly: all that talk of all those emotions, all that education leaving its mark in their bodies and voices, all that sexual invitation present in turning one's back.

To turn away, to present one's back, carries with it in dominant culture a suggestion of availability to anal sex, as we might surmise from art historical readings of tautly muscled nudes, from loving queer treatises on the pleasures of male buttocks, and from the myriad homophobic "jokes" regarding not turning around in the presence of other men, particularly in nude spaces like locker rooms or showers. Here, my own orientation is primarily aesthetic, as my lines of desire don't point towards the male. In the expanses of their sometimes-nude bodies, the men, I see, may certainly operate as objects of desire, inviting a viewer's gaze to take in the shifting of muscle under a broad span of shoulder, the pleasurable softness to a rounded belly or thigh, the care taken with a cleanly-trimmed hairline or deft twist of braids. From my position, I feel the complicated affiliation of what it means to be offered up as objects of the gaze, to embody the "to-be-looked-at-ness" endemic to women.²⁹⁴ Yet, of course, my own gaze is situated in whiteness, a position historically and continuously oriented in a power relationship to Blackness in which Black masculinity is a threat to white femininity. The direction of my gaze, therefore, moves along the line of whiteness.

While many of the spaces in which the men are interviewed are relatively

²⁹⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 62.

unmarked, showing blank white walls and, at most, a bare white chair or occluded window, some of the others offer a hint of domesticity: a cozy breakfast table, a bed with its white sheets slightly rumpled by the man sitting upon it, a clear vase of wilting daisies on a windowsill [Figs. 4.2-4.4]. Associated with the suggestion of private, domestic spaces, the men are again feminized, offered the conventional framework that figures them passive. But, of course, the discussions in which they engage suggest not a denial of that feminization but a desire to reconsider the binary associations of feminine/masculine, passive/active, vulnerable/strong, emotive/stoic altogether. For instance, one interviewee, seated on a chair, shoulders rolled slightly forward, asserts that he has been depressed, in part because of the ideas of masculinity prevalent in his environment: “If you’re not into sports or if you do not have sex with women on a regular basis or treat them like they’re hoes, or if you have some kind of upstanding ground for yourself or you’re ambitious, then you’re looked down upon. Misery loves company and there are a lot of people who are miserable here.” [Fig. 4.5]. His voice, boldly confident at other moments throughout the video, alters here, taking on a biting tone that suggests to the viewer his displeasure in those expectations. The articulation of the treatment of women within this environment — “treat them like they’re hoes” — carries with it a hint of critique at the misogyny present, through his hyperbolic tone edged with acerbity. Presented nude and shown from the thigh up, seated on a wooden chair with two rungs across its back, his body does invite the gaze, giving viewers a chance to consider the mid-tones of his skin, contrasting gently with the pale paint on the chair, the way the chair back mimics the rise and breadth of his body, both angled slightly so that one thigh is visible, one shoulder turned toward the viewer, the broadness of his shoulders and fullness of his midsection, the way he

takes up space. Yet, here, the way his bitter tone accompanies a shaking head and shoulders that curve in first then shrug and straighten, resists the easy consumption of his body as simply an object of looking.

In turning away, Shikeith's interviewees refuse, too, the capturing of their faces by institutional apparatuses. The choice to present the subjects facing away interrupts conventions of interviewing and confession, in which a subject's expressions or eye contact offer evidence toward the reading of the confession. In portraits, in photo IDs, in mugshots, the face offers truth, confirmation of identity, the fixing of a particular human body — its assemblage of bones, muscles, and skin — to the subject-under-the-state that is a person. As Shawn Michelle Smith argues, the development of photography in nineteenth-century America ushered in a new way of envisioning middle class American identity. Scientific and commercial photographic strategies converged to “[produce] a model of subjectivity in which exterior appearance was imagined to reflect interior essence,” an essence linked to social hierarchies of race, gender, and class.²⁹⁵ In this process, the individual photographic portrait, those taken for private remembrance or public circulation alike, participated in a visual photographic archive that also sought to identify, typify, and control the bodies allowed inclusion into postbellum American nationalism. Thus, projects such as WEB DuBois's photographic albums of Black Americans at the 1900 Paris Exposition “provided an opportunity for African Americans to visualize complex racial and national identifications...[while remaining] confined within a white-dominated system of social surveillance.”²⁹⁶ Writing on the role of documentary to the State, art historian John Tagg articulates the “relations of viewing”

²⁹⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

²⁹⁶ Smith, 159.

imbued in documentary to be slightly different from those disciplinary strategies of the mugshot. As he states, “[t]o be captured by this machinery was to be captured in the imaginary of the benevolent, impartial, paternal State, but to be captured in the act of compassionate looking: an act of decency and the act of a citizen, a civic subject called to duty.”²⁹⁷ Documentary — particularly the documentary films and photographs of the New Deal era of which Tagg writes — suggests this possibility for “compassionate looking,” for seeing and being seen as a *civic* subject, the vital constitution of subjectivity in the modern era. This is not to say that all documentary photographs or films present their subjects compassionately, but that the act of capturing carries with it a potential for empathy and, at the very least, an assertion that these subjects are worthy: of being looked at, of being seen, of being nestled into history. Shikeith picks up on this documentary promise, presenting his subjects as deeply and fundamentally worthy. Yet, in his strategic use and negotiation of documentary and confessional convention, he suggests an ambivalence toward the easy accession of these subjects into the framework of the State, in its many institutional forms of political, legal, and physical governance. Being seen as complex, vulnerable, emotive, and loving — as *human* — by the State would have direct material consequences for Black men who are continually construed as threats to social stability by the State through policing, incarceration, and social welfare. Indeed, awareness of that reality limns the work as a whole, cropping up in references to Black Americans murdered by police or private citizens, including Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown, and Jordan Davis. Yet, focusing the questions on both the subjects’ own internal states — What makes you happy, sad, angry? — and their

²⁹⁷ John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 93.

relationships with other Black men — How would you describe your relationship with other black males in your youth? In your adulthood? — suggests an interest in interceding at a social level, in minute instances of interpersonal power between family members and peers, and in considering the way those moments are informed by a wider social context.

The aesthetic choice of turned backs, too, references perhaps one of the most disseminated nineteenth-century images of violence against Black masculinity, *The Scourged Back*. This 1863 photograph, reproduced as a carte de visite and translated into a wood engraving for *Harper's Weekly*, depicts a formerly enslaved Black man seated with his back to the camera, angled slightly with his face in profile and one hand on his hip. Undressed to the waist, the man — identified on the carte de visite as “Peter” and in *Harper's Weekly* as “Gordon” — exposes to the camera his bare back, covered with thick, raised scars from the whip of an overseer or slave owner. The image circulated widely in pro-Union and abolitionist circles during the latter half of the Civil War, offering visceral visual evidence of the cruelty of the institution of slavery. Yet, as Cassandra Jackson argues in *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body*, the transmutation of the singular, specific experience of this particular man into an allegory for the brutality of an entire institution serves to reaffirm the subject as an object of white desire and control. As she argues, “While the illusion of realism usurps the voice of the slave by offering his body as readable proof, the image’s sensationalism offers that same body to viewers, encouraging them to appropriate the subject’s pain.”²⁹⁸ In reproductions of the image, the man’s own testimony is not only secondary to the image, but seemingly

²⁹⁸ Cassandra Jackson, *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body*, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies ; 27 (New York: Routledge, 2011), 20.

malleable in its facts; his name and history differ in the carte de visite and *Harper's* reproductions. As Jackson argues, the depiction reiterates existing racialized fantasies of the sexualized Black male body as it “elicites desire for the suffering black male body, unveiling it in a way that both validates and is validated by the power inequities between the viewer and the seen.”²⁹⁹ In offering a visual reference to this work, *#Blackmendream* at once recognizes the visual history of depictions of Black male vulnerability to individual and institutional violence and reclaims the position of individual experience in interpreting and placing that vulnerability in a wider context. Unlike the subject of *The Scourged Back*, whose words were forcefully erased by the white institutions that reproduced his image, the subjects of *#Blackmendream* speak, profusely. In offering their backs, sometimes clothed and other times fully or partially nude, the men make claims to their own agency and, I argue, take pleasure — however tentative — in the queer, embodied, relational possibilities offered by the deliberate enactment of vulnerability.

For turning away is not merely an act of refusal; it is also an act of vulnerability. To offer one's back, to give up one's spatial awareness of the situation, to allow and invite a gaze one cannot return, requires giving in to exposure, to trust, to apprehension. I read this work primarily as a negotiation of vulnerability: the delicate and sublime vulnerability of making oneself soft for a lover; the heady and terrifying vulnerability of laying bare one's feelings; the painful and, at times, fatal vulnerability of minority peoples under institutional powers. In recent years, theorists across disciplines, including law, moral and political theory, feminist theory, bioethics, and social policy, have invoked concepts of vulnerability to consider the relationship between subjects, care, and responsibility. In summing up the literature on the subject in their edited collection on

²⁹⁹ Jackson, 29.

vulnerability and ethics, Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds argue that these theorists, broadly, take one of two positions.³⁰⁰ In one position, vulnerability is a universal capacity to suffer that defines both our bodies, porous, soft, and organic as they are, and our relations with others. These theories tend to offer a counterpoint to concepts of the autonomous, independent subject by understanding human subjectivity as dependent and relational. In the other position, authors use vulnerability to consider the contingent susceptibility of particular groups to harm from other groups. This model considers capacity, power, and agency within specific contexts of social and political relations. Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds then go on to suggest a new taxonomy that might help conceptualize different sources and forms of vulnerability that build on the arguments of both positions. In their taxonomy, vulnerability is, broadly, either inherent — the universal vulnerabilities of corporeality and relationality — or situational — vulnerabilities that are context specific. These two positions are less mutually exclusive than two ends of a spectrum; all vulnerability is experienced corporeally, and vulnerability to which we are all susceptible might also be exacerbated or defined by social context. Vulnerabilities are also either dispositional — that is, potential or probable — or occurrent — happening materially in the moment. Through this taxonomy, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds aim to provide a more precise method of analyzing vulnerability to understand the duties and responsibilities of responding to those vulnerabilities.

In picking up the idea of vulnerability, the editors of the collection *Vulnerability in*

³⁰⁰ Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, “Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–9.

Resistance, Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, figure it not as a condition or a call for care, as do Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, nor precisely as an emotional state, as does hooks. Rather, they build on these conceptualizations of vulnerability as both individual and collective, universal and specific, felt in emotions, material contexts, and bodies, and ask what we might learn by figuring vulnerability as a resource for resistance. As they argue, “[in] thinking vulnerability and resistance together, we hope to develop a different conception of embodiment and sociality within fields of contemporary power, one that engages object worlds, including both built and destroyed environments, as well as social forms of interdependency and individual or collective agency.”³⁰¹ Here, vulnerability is not the opposite of resistance, but a part of it. In her own contribution, Butler builds on this hope by arguing that reading vulnerability in resistance allows us to understand it as part of agency rather than simply powerlessness. Vulnerability, she argues, is not a disposition but “a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way.”³⁰² In understanding vulnerability as a relation rather than a condition, she questions the dichotomy between active State force and the passive vulnerable subject, because it risks pathologizing those deemed part of “vulnerable populations.” In considering the way vulnerability might operate *in* resistance, rather than as a condition to be overcome *by* resistance, she looks at practices such as nonviolent resistance. Here she sees the strategic use of “mobiliz[ing] vulnerability for the purposes of asserting existence, claiming the right to public space, equality, and opposing violent police, security, and military

³⁰¹ Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, “Introduction,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

³⁰² Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 25.

actions.”³⁰³ That is, by asserting, claiming, embodying their vulnerability to, amongst other things, tear gas, arrest, beating, imprisonment, shooting, starvation, and murder, activists also claim their right to exist, to have equal and fair treatment, and to oppose violence.

In considering ways of understanding and moving away from models of patriarchal masculinity for Black men, feminist theorist bell hooks points out that the repression of vulnerability is a survival strategy for Black people in a white-supremacist culture. This strategy, though, has serious consequences for emotional well-being and connection. She states:

When this survival strategy links with the overall cultural devaluation of vulnerability it makes sense that so many black folks have wrongly interpreted invulnerability as a sign of emotional strength. Maintaining this survival strategy when we no longer have to fear extreme violence at the hands of racist whites has damaged our emotional and intimate bonds. The inability to be vulnerable means that we are unable to feel. If we cannot feel we cannot truly emotionally connect with one another. We cannot know love.³⁰⁴

Here, hooks speaks to one of the vulnerabilities to which I attend, that of allowing another to see, know, and understand one’s own weaknesses, fears, desires, or dreams. It is the vulnerability of the caught breath while waiting for response, of fear of rejection, betrayal, disgust. As hooks argues, emotional connection requires that vulnerability. At the beginning of *#Blackmendment*, between Baldwin’s words and the first question, an epigraph appears on screen: “This work expresses my, and our apprehension to be.” The word *apprehension* here carries with it a sense of knowing and fearing, of unease over an impending future, of awareness of one’s own vulnerability. Apprehension carries with it the whole breadth of future possibilities: things might go wrong, but then again, they

³⁰³ Butler, 26.

³⁰⁴ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 115.

might not. At some moments, *#Blackmendream* engages the desire for and difficulty of developing love that hooks articulates, and which comes with apprehension. When asked “What makes you sad?” the interviewees express the sadness of that lack. For instance, one says that he’d like to have “a boyfriend with no gray area,” a relationship that’s real, and another says that being alone makes him sad, “or feeling alone, or feeling like there’s no one in the world who really cares. Even if you have friends around you, it’s hard to know if they really care. You just want one person to really get you and like you.” Their desires for love and care are figured both personally, using the pronoun *I*, and through the collective *you*, articulating both a real, immediate, personal feeling and a sense that the need for emotional intimacy is universal.

As quoted above, Shikeith envisions his project as one that engenders “states of togetherness, tenderness, transformation, and self-reflection.”³⁰⁵ To consider this emphasis on tenderness and self-reflection and its relationship to vulnerability, I turn to African American studies scholar Kevin Quashie, whose concept of “quiet” allows for an analysis focused on Black interiority. Quiet, as Quashie conceptualizes it, is a way to consider Black expressiveness not as it relates to publicness and resistance, but as a representation of a person’s interior — “the broad scope of her inner life.”³⁰⁶ Concerned that most ways of understanding Black expressiveness in individual countenance and gesture, in the arts, or in popular culture construe it as inextricably related to resistance and protest, Quashie seeks to consider expression that is more about the sensibility of one’s interior. The interior, as he argues, is “expansive, voluptuous, creative, impulsive,

³⁰⁵ Cathey, “Shikeith - #Blackmendream.”

³⁰⁶ Kevin Everod Quashie, “The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet,” *African American Review* 43, no. 2/3 (2009): 334.

dangerous, and not subject to one's control," and it escapes definitive characterization.³⁰⁷ In deeming the expression of this elusive interior "quiet," though, Quashie urges us to consider places where Black expression turns vulnerable, intimate, inward-looking, even soft. Quiet is at once "sublime — inexpressible, thunderous, full of awe," and representative of an essential human dignity, expressed through moments of contemplative vulnerability. While Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay seek vulnerability *in* resistance, Quashie articulates the need for quiet that is not primarily concerned with resistance but with the depths of one's inner life and the way those depths, personal and individual though they may be, connect us.

I bring together these readings of vulnerability to see the ways in which space for the kinds of emotional, connective, loving vulnerability described by hooks might also connect to the situational, occurrent vulnerabilities of Black (queer) men and, in so doing, might suggest ways of reconsidering the definitions of masculinity and community that inflect and inform the experiences of both. I read this work, therefore, as a process of reclaiming vulnerability not only as a site of danger and risk, but as a fruitful and regenerative space. Ahmed argues that turning might be a crucial way of reading agency and the development of social norms. "Depending on which way one turns," she writes, "different worlds might even come into view. If such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the very shape of such direction."³⁰⁸ The subjects of *#Blackmendment* express vulnerability in turning, opening up, exposing their backs, daring to trust and to hope, despite not just the mockery that might result from evidence of such softness, but the attendant risks of vulnerability writ large, the physical and emotional harm of racist

³⁰⁷ Quashie, 334.

³⁰⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.

institutional power against vulnerable people. In experiencing, radically, the emotional vulnerability of thinking through and expressing feelings, of asserting hopes, of dreaming in expansive and public ways, they might also enact ways of resisting the enforced vulnerability that is the domain and tool of political, legal, and policing institutions. These are not small dreams. One man, framed off-center so that his body, nude from the waist up and softly illuminated so that his dark skin offers a counterpoint to the brilliant lightness of the window on the left hand side of the frame, suggests, succinctly, the fullness of such dreams [Fig. 4.4]. Asked what makes him happy, he takes a short pause, light gleaming on his bare shoulders, and says, “The possibility of an equal love.” Bookended by moments of stillness, his statement carries a symbolic weight. On the windowsill, a clutch of small flowers, daisies perhaps, stand in a vase. Some droop limply, but a few turn their heads upward, toward the sky. This small inclusion of nature, with its suggestion of death, rebirth, romance, and mourning, punctuates his hope. “The possibility of an *equal* love,” he says, not just a hope for love but for parity, egalitarianism. The word suggests a desire for a specific instance of love, of partnership, fairness, balance, but also resonates with the drive for civic equality, for love that is recognized and found worthy by legal institutions. An equal love, too, suggests a pulling together, responsibility shared, care given and gained. By its nature, an equal love refutes the myth of self-sufficiency but instead asserts interdependence. On the seeming dichotomy between vulnerability and autonomy, Catriona Mackenzie argues that reading both as relational will allow us to reconsider concepts of self-determination, choice, and agency by recognizing the ways in which autonomy depends not just on social circumstance but also on interpersonal recognition. As she states:

To lead a self-determining life requires not just having the capacities and opportunities to do so but also regarding oneself, and being recognized by others, as having the social status of an autonomous agent. Because this status dimension of autonomy is constituted intersubjectively in social relations of recognition, it is vulnerable to others' failures, or refusals, to grant us appropriate recognition in a range of different spheres: for example, in our interpersonal relations; at work and in the institutions of civil society; and as citizens who are both protected by and subject to the institutions of the state.³⁰⁹

Vulnerability to the failure or refusal of recognition in one's interpersonal relationships is a risk from which we cannot escape. Yet, it carries with it the promise nestled at its heart: that someone will meet our softness with care, with affirmation, love, assurance, support, criticality, and equality. It is that promise, that possibility, that affirms the cruelty inherent in forcefully and socially denying individuals the opportunity to risk a little expression, a little openness, a little vulnerability through narrow definitions of masculinity.

This vulnerability works in opposition to the enforcement of aggressive Black masculinity across a number of spheres. Bryant Keith Alexander articulates the "Good Man-Bad Man" duality as a performative dilemma rooted in notions of passing and claiming power. The "Good Man" Alexander might embody in predominately white academic spaces — polite, literate in Ivory Tower language and norms, "a sometimes-cultural representative and resident exotic other" — shifts into "Bad Man" in predominately Black cultural communities adjacent to, but separate from, the university, where he might be "Read as odd. Read as strange. Read as queer."³¹⁰ The "Good Man" construed in those spaces, on the other hand, is more likely to embrace active,

³⁰⁹ Catriona Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability," in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44.

³¹⁰ Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 75.

heterosexually virile, “phallogentric” practices “forged out of resistance against White institutional practices.”³¹¹ That “Good Man,” in turn, crosses the hyphen into “Bad Man” when presented outside the context of his peers, when utilized, for instance, to demand recognition within white-dominated institutions.³¹² Yet, the power gained from that “Bad Man” performance is “a referent or coercive power” based not only in stereotypes of Black masculinity, but in all the material and relational consequences of such stereotypes.³¹³ One of the interviewees in *#Blackmendment* reiterates the strategic use or denial of stereotypes demanded of Black men as they move through different spaces. He says that, “Society doesn’t really value us as human. We’re perceived as a threat even at a young age. So you learn to do this dance where you hide parts of yourself to seem as less threatening as possible....On the adverse within your own community, some of those attributes you try to hide to fit in the mainstream, they’re glorified.” This negotiation he articulates as a “dance” and later as a “mask,” emphasizing the performance required. Alexander, too, turns to performance very deliberately to find ways of denying those stereotypes and instead reconstructing a new sense of self-identification; I argue that in turning to vulnerability, Shikeith and his subjects, too, delve for these new ways and senses, different from those enforced upon them.

A number of the participants articulate unease with the modes of masculinity presented to them in childhood, from Black male peers and adults. When asked “How would you describe your relationship with other black males in your youth?” participants universally express a sense of distance and difference, answering, for instance, that they

³¹¹ Alexander, 75.

³¹² The example Alexander gives is only gaining attention from a “White-girl” service worker upon exploding in anger and demanding service, when she ignored previous, and more “polite” inquiries. Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*.

³¹³ Alexander, 86.

“didn’t understand me” or, in another case, that he “spent a lot of time at the library by myself reading.” One interviewee describes his relationship with his father, who had been abused by his own father, was an alcoholic, and abused his mother, as “conflicted” and states that he always had more female friends than male. Another, on the contrary, had a number of black men in his life with whom he got along, including his father, his brothers, and his neighborhood peers, but that he nonetheless “was always trying to hide certain parts of myself to try to gain their acceptance.” Some hope is offered by the peers of their adulthood, though, with whom interviewees express better and more empowering relationships. However, just as interaction with Black peers in childhood meant, for most of the interviewees, concealment of certain parts of themselves, so too does the desire to be seen carry with it risks that others might refuse to look. One respondent states that “when other people don’t see me, when they choose not to, try to erase parts of me or ignore parts of me, that makes me sad.” In embodying vulnerability, therefore, there is still no guarantee that others will see, accept, and acknowledge you.

The video ends on dreams. The title of the work, *#Blackmendream*, suggests that everything has been building to this culmination, that the articulation of emotions, fears, and experiences are all part of the process of dreaming. In considering the relationship between dreams and the political, legal scholar Elena Loizidou argues that dreams “not just through their symbolism, but also in the way we recollect them and recount them to others — give us the chance to recompose ourselves, even in the dream that is a nightmare. This very recomposition is an *act* of freedom.”³¹⁴ Loizidou pays serious attention to dreams, not in the sense of their oft-attendant “hopes,” but as subconscious

³¹⁴ Elena Loizidou, “Dreams and the Political Subject,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 124.

expressions of the self, of desires, wishes, and struggles. Reading dreams thusly is to read them confessionally. Here, though, I do not propose to delve into the subconscious of each participant to produce the meaning of his dreams so much as to consider what his narrativizing, both in the ways each individual recounts those dreams and in the way Shikeith arranges them, might tell us about connections between vulnerability, dreaming, and political subjectivity.

Near the end of the video, Shikeith asks interviewees to describe a repetitive happy dream they've had. They interpret the prompt differently, articulating dreams that leave them with a sensory, embodied feeling, others that give them satisfaction in their life and choices, and still others that are daydreams, conscious rather than unconscious imaginings. One relates a dream in which he crawls through a portal in his bedroom wall and into a "weird, Narnia-type place" and keeps crawling without destination. This escape, which seems unsettling when described, nonetheless gives him a calm feeling within the dream. Another dreams about "flying and being weightless," experiencing calm wash over his body when in the air. Weightlessness might be read quite literally here; his body bears more bulk than any of the other participants, full and soft with a fleshiness not typically valued in our society. He laughs a little after his statement, self-aware; yet, the dream of flying should not be read simply as an articulation of discomfort with the world's fatphobic expectations. Rather, as Loizidou argues, building on Gaston Bachelard, dreams of flying might also be related "to the desire of the soul to ascend, to unburden itself from the formal restrictions" of the material world.³¹⁵ In his reflexive laugh, he shows that he knows the obvious interpretation, but goes on to suggest a sense of peacefulness imbued by the dream, one at odds with some of his earlier answers, such

³¹⁵ Loizidou, 140.

as the statement that he frequently experiences depression due to his environment and the aggressive models of masculinity he encounters. Still another has a dream about seeing his deceased father and asking him questions, only to have his father simply smile and nod in return. “I think it’s a happy dream,” he says, “because I think it sort of symbolizes that he didn’t have anything he wanted to say, that he felt he had done his job as a father, and that there was no unfinished business. He’s okay and he feels like I’m okay.” Here, the happiness of the dream is not just in the momentary feeling it provides while asleep, but a sense of achievement in his life and approval from his father.

A number of the dreams include not just familial approval but broader, publicly recognizable success. One man has happy dreams about being a leader — a soldier, politician, father — which pleases him in his dream even if he’s not sure he’s up for it in real life. He repeats more than once his uncertainty with his own leadership abilities, saying “It makes me happy in my dream, but in real life it kind of just makes me — am I really like that, or is it just the dreams, you know?.... Those thoughts make me happy, but it’s also something that makes me afraid of it.” Here, the dream offers not only the sought-after position, but a freedom from doubts. Another relates a daydream he uses to pump himself up, especially when running in the morning: “I’m performing on a stage at a sold-out arena, best at what I do, best vocally, best physically, best dancer, people are so entranced by my every move, by my every word....I give them this feeling that nothing else matters, nothing else exists.” In these cases, the interviewees find pleasure in achieving success within the current social system, in feeling the recognition of others’ approval and admiration. However, the dreams other participants offer suggest more unease. As the focus on dreams attests, confession is not merely a backward-looking

mechanism, but can involved future-looking projections, similarly shown in Chapter Two with Pauline Cummins's *Good Confessions*. Here, the dreams occupy the liminal space between hope and the subconscious, with an uneasy relationship to the future.

To conclude the interviews, Shikeith asks his subjects to tell him about a repetitive nightmare they have. The responses attest to ongoing trauma: a nightmare about his mother being sent to prison; a strange, otherworldly encounter with the white students he knew in high school; a lack of agency when faced with his father's threats of violence and murder. The final nightmare related, though, is less the result of an unconscious mind and more a repetitive, intrusive thought. The interviewee, the same man hoping for an equal love, articulates this intrusive thought with hesitancy, pauses punctuating phrases and slight shifts of his shoulders betraying his discomfort. He says:

In order for me to achieve my dreams, I have to destroy myself first. My body, or my heart, or my emotional state has to crumble. Before I can reach greatness. That I have to subjugate every piece of myself for the greater creative in me. Exploit my being, my skin, my love, my mind, molest it to a point that I basically destroy any previous resemblance of myself in order to achieve the greatness that I think I deserve.

At first, this seems like an extension of the "great artist" myth, in which the artist stands alone in society. With the weight of all the previous statements of the video behind it, though, this answer, given with apprehensive hesitancy, builds on the experiences all the men express about feeling alone as children and not being allowed to express emotion. Here, though, the subjugation of "every piece of myself" comes not in order to maintain masculinity, but to achieve greatness. The fear is not simply about losing touch with oneself, but about becoming a colonizer: destroying, subjugating, exploiting, molesting not others, but himself. This nightmarish thought, lurking at the back of his mind to pop up intrusively, suggests the dread of not just strategically performing Blackness in ways

that are legible to whiteness, not just assimilating into whiteness, but so fully conforming to the logic of white supremacy that it pervades the relationship to one's own self, turning the drive for greatness into a colonizing force. This fear is not merely a bogeyman in the dark, but a pressing and ongoing concern. To be vulnerable to a system that subjugates you is also to be at risk of seduction to its logic. The solitude of the men, too, recorded alone in quiet, bare rooms, reflect this fear of individual destruction. Without a support network, achieving dreams becomes a hardscrabble process, breaking down the physical and emotional resources of the individual body without regeneration.

Since the interviewee made his earlier statements on happiness, the sun has shifted, leaving him in much darker shadows [Fig. 4.6]. Light hits his left shoulder, illuminating his upper arm, but his head tilts down and to the right, away from the light. Beyond the window the outline of a curled iron grating is visible, a pretty barrier but a barrier nonetheless. Against the boldness of the shifting sun, the flowers in their vase seem more wilted, paltry compared to the leaves just visible in the distance beyond the grating. The video closes on this image, Shikeith's voice expressing his thanks and the sound of bodies and objects shifting as the screen goes to black. Ending here, Shikeith suggests at once the need for and the danger of dreaming. Dreaming, daring to be vulnerable, braving emotional expression cannot be aimed at accepting the current system. bell hooks states that any suggestion regarding the fate of Black men in American that "does not speak about the need for them to radicalize their consciousness to challenge patriarchy if they are to survive and flourish colludes with the existing system in keeping black men in their place, psychologically locked down, locked out."³¹⁶ At the end of the video, it is clear that that psychological imprisonment is still close to hand, in the grated windows made

³¹⁶ hooks, *We Real Cool*, xi.

visible by the setting sun, in the turned-away face of the man responding, in his fear of self-colonization. His vulnerability in the moment, in vocalizing this preoccupying thought, connects intimately to the situational vulnerabilities of being a Black man in America. To dream, therefore, does not make one immune to the subjugations of the world; however, nor does it simply offer momentary respite. Rather, to dream, to slip into vulnerability by daring to dwell in emotions, might also reaffirm the need for affective relationality, felt in the body, in imagining alternate ways of personal and political orientation. If “coming out” to the straight world orients us as queer subjects under straight laws, dreaming might allow us paths that diverge from the straight, gathering spaces that build and affirm our communities, and embodiments that live vulnerably.

While *#Blackmendream* suggests relationality through the embodiment and verbal expression of vulnerability, Jenny Keane’s *Ingeminated Battology* demands it through discomfort and abjection. Presenting a mirrored video diptych of the artist’s own ink-filled mouth, the work shows two images of her mouth moving first in tandem then, gradually, independently as she manipulates and contorts her lips, occasionally revealing black-stained teeth and her wet, inky tongue [Figs. 4.7-4.8]. At times, the wideness of the mouth, the broad spread of her teeth, a murky grey under the lustre of the ink, suggest a menacing smile. The twin muscles of her tongues emerge, veins and taste buds transformed into physiological horrors, to lick, touch, and explore like newly-sentient creatures. The void of her mouth seems to gape, the wet, slick pool of ink threatening to erupt, to spill from her lips, to invade and infect. The mirrored halves suggest a monstrous twinning, a mitotic duplication in process. In order to choreograph the movements of her mouth and tongue, Keane filmed herself speaking to a camera,

confessing her thoughts, secrets, and sins, then examined the resultant moving images not for their spoken content but for the gestural qualities of individual words and phrases. Fragmenting her speech into words and syllables, she re-formed her confession into a series of choreographed, slow movements filmed in tight close-up. Keane removed all sound from the video, presenting a silence devoid not only of her voice, presumably speaking garbled gibberish as she stretches and attenuates the maneuvers of speech, but lacking even the noises of her physical, moving body, such as the smacking of her lips or the wet gush of saliva and ink. Thus, in both creation and reception the work disrupts and distorts the visual-aural connection between speaking and speech, interceding in the process of confession by disallowing either its full articulation by Keane, as the confessing subject, or its endorsement by the viewer, who stands to receive her confession.

Without sound, the visuality of the work physically invades the bodies of viewers. The work's silence requires me to consider what diegetic sounds might have been erased, to contemplate my familiarity with the liquid sounds of the moving human mouth. My own breathing becomes hers; my swallowing, the swallowing she cannot do; the quiet smack of my parting mouth fills in where hers is silent. Voracious and probing, the tongue reaches out, seemingly eager to lick viewers, to spill its ink. As with *#Blackmendment*, the compositional choices emphasize looking as a relational act. The turning away of the men in *#Blackmendment* asserts both their refusal to allow certain acts of looking and their embodiment of vulnerability, of opening themselves to the risks inherent in the comprehension of the other. They are to-be-looked-at and yet not-quite-consumable; they inspire empathy not through supplication but declaration. In

Ingeminated Battology, the mouth's refusal is in the absence of articulation, the forceful silence. Looking, here, inspires not empathy but revulsion, a disgust I argue relates to the sense of ourselves as permeable — indeed, as vulnerable. Yet it is not merely disgust I feel. For its affiliation with the queerly monstrous, its lascivious licking, I read *Ingeminated Battology* as a perverse interrogation of the imperative to come out. Neither inert nor neatly declarative, the mouth takes some pleasure in its filth, its abjection, its shame, its ability to provoke. The draw I feel toward the inky, waggling tongue reminds me that there is joy in refusing to be consumed, to be easily swallowed, to be sweet; it reminds me of the queer delights to be found in communities built on refusal to choose straight lines and clean pleasures.

The most obvious refusal of this work is the refusal to utter a confession at all. While in *#Blackmendream*, relationality comes at least partially through verbal expression, in *Ingeminated Battology* that expression is — voluntarily — rejected. In pairing these works, therefore, I wish to grapple with the seeming scholarly contradiction of desiring, firstly, to complicate the contemporary imperative for confession, particularly for queer subjects through coming out, as an ultimate good, and, secondly, to recognize that that imperative *nonetheless* both carries cultural weight and is differently available to individuals based on intersections of sexuality, race, gender, and class. Speaking and silence are never merely a matter of complying with or resisting imperatives to confess, but rather of negotiating across and within discursive strategies and demands of apprehending and accounting civic subjects. When approaching the question of the silent, queer, white female body, aural silence becomes necessarily implicated with silence of discourse, both written and spoken, and the problem of invisibility. The figuring of the

female subject in language has troubled a number of feminist authors. Simone de Beauvoir suggests that rather than being two equal opposites, men are considered the Subject and women the Other; Luce Irigaray goes further to argue that language can never encompass the feminine body, so she is not an Other but a lack, an absence; and Judith Butler sums them both up to state that such ongoing disagreement “establishes the need for a radical rethinking of the categories of identity within the context of relations of radical gender asymmetry.”³¹⁷ If established language does not provide a way of speaking as a woman, as a subject inhabiting a female gender, what ways of speaking are available to women attempting to assert both that asymmetry and their own subjectivity?

Butler also cautions against totalizing projects which seek to establish a particular shared nature of womanhood, arguing that reproducing the singular logic which defines women as one, whether the Other, a lack, or something else entirely, can also “operate to effect other relations of racial, class, and heterosexist subordination.”³¹⁸ The intersection of woman and queer, for instance, must additionally face the discourses and silences around queer female sexuality, which entangle, too, with those around racial difference, around class-based power relations, around negotiations of self which dominant discourse might other in an infinite number of ways. With *#Blackmendment*, I attended to the ways Blackness, masculinity, and, occasionally, class intersect to produce norms and restrictions on modes of expression. For Keane’s video, I address the intersections of woman with queer with white with Irish with Catholic, discourses that might be more or less visible to different viewers in different sites, in order to focus on the question of the visibility and vocalicity of the queer, white, female body.

³¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11.

³¹⁸ Butler, 13.

Butler speaks of the “matrix of intelligibility” as a set of concepts, imperatives, and understandings within which we perform our genders, construct our sexualities, and understand the genders and sexualities of others. As Shikeith and his participants demonstrate, the contours of this matrix vary across sites; the same performative resonates differently when asserted in varying surroundings and contexts. This matrix must include strategies of power both official — such as legal rights and prohibitions — and unofficial — such as stigma and shame. Ahmed’s concept of orientation, too, helps us understand that within this matrix, the repetition of actions shapes space and bodies within it. As she writes, “Our body takes the shape of this repetition; *we get stuck in certain alignments as an effect of this work.*”³¹⁹ Stigma and shame, as repetitive social functions, operate to “straighten” us back into line. Unlike the male homosexual subject, treated so extensively by Foucault and others, the female homosexual has not, in Western legal tradition, been defined as prohibited under law to any consistent or wide-spread degree. Terry Castle argues that this lack of proscription comes not from indifference, but out of morbid paranoia. “Behind such silence,” she states, “one can often detect an anxiety too severe to allow for direct articulation.”³²⁰ Silence, in Castle’s description, speaks loudly. Examining film, media, and literary texts, Castle envisions the figure of the “apparitional lesbian,” a ghostly threat which haunts the cultural imagination. In some cases, she is literally ghostly or monstrous, a flickering phantom permeating the genres of horror and gothic literature, her desire for her own gender conflating with her uncertain embodiment to produce a figure not-quite-human. In others, she is apparitional in her inability to articulate, to be heard, seen, or understood. And yet, such a figure is founded

³¹⁹ Original emphasis. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 92.

³²⁰ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian : Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 6.

on a paradox, for ghosts nevertheless *do* appear, do speak, and to “become an apparition was also to become endlessly capable of ‘appearing.’ And once there, the specter, like a living being, was not so easily gotten rid of.”³²¹

In its inky uncanniness, Keane’s mouth becomes more monstrous than spectral; still, though, in the figure of the monstrous feminine mouth, the intangible, incorporeal, and the solidly gruesome are not so easily separated. The open, screaming mouth, for instance, operates as an expression of fear, the primal, guttural response to encountering the horrific. And yet, in the open mouth, and even more so the open, silent mouth, resides a void, a lack of substance. This lack art historian Jane Blocker connects to the feminine, which “becomes that very emptiness at its core, the absent but constantly invoked body to which aesthetics emphatically gestures.”³²² Absent but constantly invoked; invisible but constantly appearing; the feminine and the queer feminine are, in intersecting but multitudinous ways, at once constantly brought forth, made to appear, and effaced, forgotten. The mouth, too, works as a tissue between the mind and the body. In its cavernous inwardness, the orifice of the mouth opens between outside and in, its vulnerable mucous membranes and muscled, swallowing esophagus able both to absorb and consume, and to eject and emit. The site of speech, of reason and logic, it is also capable of primal screams of fear, pleasure, and pain. By taking in ink, working it in her mouth but never allowing either her moving lips nor the thick, black ink to form words, Keane internalizes, absorbs, and consumes that tool of discourse and yet leaves it unformed. Contained in the female body, shapeless words stay nebulous, their indeterminacy indicative of the struggle to embody language which construes women as

³²¹ Castle, 63.

³²² Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost : Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 20.

other, as absence, and queer women as impossible specters.

The horrific nature of the specter resides in her uncertain presence: in the gothic tradition, her not-not-aliveness, her un-dead quality; in Castle's more figurative interpretation, her marginal status in law and language, her inability to be spoken of. Silence, therefore, accompanies the queer woman. For artist and writer Salomé Voegelin, silence turns the body inside out, the very experience of being in silence transforming the body from something solid and recognizable to something distorted and unfamiliar. Silence, she says, "enters me and pulls on me, inside out, stretching my nervous system through layers of skin, hooking my inner flesh to the very outskirts of my body."³²³ The sense of hearing does not restrict itself to the surface of the eardrum; rather, every bodily surface, inner and outer, becomes implicated in the experience of the listening sensation. The messy, fleshy, fragile tissues of the body, ever at risk of rending, tearing, cutting, are, Voegelin says, stretched and hooked as the listening subject becomes aware of the fragility of her own belonging in the sonic and social environment. Voegelin might just as easily, indeed, say that silence brings with it the abject, that messy, liminal horror which brings us into abrupt, painful awareness of our own mortality. In Keane's work, the silent, working mouth, an ink-filled void, works on us just the same, making us ever aware of the internal fragility of our viewing bodies. Inspiring a visceral sympathetic response, the video conjures the taste of ink, viscous and slimy, coating the tongue, the teeth, the glottis. The feeling produced is not pain, precisely, but the unpleasant awareness of the permeable borders of our bodies. For philosopher Julia Kristeva, the most abject are those things which violate borders: "what disturbs identity, system, order.

³²³ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence : Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 86.

What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”³²⁴ Abjection, here, also brings us to the amorphous spaces of identity, by coming in messy, fluid, infectious contact with the process of confession.

The use of the confessional form is not incidental; rather, in engaging in the process of confession, Keane implicates her work in an historical continuum in which the confession is inextricably linked to queer subjectivity. Part of the same generation, Keane and Shikeith both make works in a contemporary context in which the confession of queerness is not, as in Foucault’s context, a pathology, but rather is figured as liberatory. The growing message of the early twenty-first century in the English-speaking world to which this dissertation attends argues that coming out, stating your truth, living your pride, is the best and truest way of being queer. As both works attest, that argument sometimes comes in conflict with prevailing narratives around Black masculinity or Irish Catholicism, and, further, is co-opted, simplified, and commodified across a number of sites. The *being* of being queer is wrapped up in its articulation; confession today finds its footholds in the coming-out narrative, in the Pride parade, in a whole host of consumer products designed to make us pay to be visible, to be vocal, to be proud. Silence, in this construction of queerness, is invisibility, is shame, both of which can take on multiple political meanings. For Keane, the work started from a desire to find ways to speak and articulate while struggling with the legacy of a childhood stutter, with the pressures of resolving Irish Catholicism with queer identity, and with a concern with the possibilities of language in feminist practice; she says that the idea “that language is something you can never possess if you’re feminine, that it’s other to you, [has] always been something

³²⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

I'm drawn to.”³²⁵ Behind the camera, Keane, as an artist and a queer woman, might struggle with any number of local, personal, particular silences: social, religious, or familial pressures, the physical difficulty of a stutter, or uncertainty about when and where to speak about identity, but the dis-articulation of the piece stems from more systemic silences.

If confession seemingly promises the liberation of self, a transformative unburdening, it does so by asserting that the unconfessed self is inherently flawed, in need of transformation. The repentant sinner who kneels in a confessional booth, the suffering patient who recounts symptoms to a doctor, the contrite criminal who offers testimony to judge and jury: all tell how their souls, bodies, minds, and actions are broken and in need of repair. Material to be confessed includes “whatever is most difficult to tell,” as though one’s sins and symptoms, crimes and desires are to be wrung out of the body, drawn forth with difficulty, and the impetus to conceal them broken.³²⁶ As *#Blackmendment* suggests, though, that articulation requires a vulnerability that connotes differently across contexts; further, I argue confession rests upon both the affective qualities of shame and the power-laden stigmas which produce shame. Confessional acts, even those seemingly inspired by internal imperative, are trials, acts of overcoming; they burst forth from the body and allow us to affirm and define our sense of self. If shame is the relational affect in which we become aware of the judgment of someone external to ourselves, then confession brings forth that shame in order to seek, request, or demand that judgment and, in so doing, attempts to transform that shame into a sense of identity. The sinner becomes absolved, the patient cured, the criminal judged. We see this logic in

³²⁵ Jenny Keane, In conversation with the author, May 27, 2011.

³²⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

popular culture depictions of the down low, which, in contrast to voluntary coming out, transforms the men involved into something shameful by revealing secrets they sought to conceal. As Snorton argues, the hypersurveillance of the glass closet demands the visibility of secrets and the transformation of specific acts of sexual conduct (sexual contact between Black men) into one of many stereotyped figures: a self-hating gay man, a criminal infecting women with HIV, a monster.

Ingeminated Battology, with its silenced confession, complicates this transformative effect, whether forced or voluntary. In the power relationships inscribed in and by the confession, silence is never unmarked. Silence, employed as withholding, might be considered both a strategy to reassert power and one to resist, if only momentarily, the demands of the confessional authority. Silence, too, figures gaps in information, creates lacunae, spaces for tacitly accepted production; as Foucault states, "...silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance."³²⁷ The deployment of silence in the realm of confession, therefore, cannot be said always to facilitate the same strategies. In order to illuminate that complication, I would like to touch briefly upon another work by Keane, intimately related to *Ingeminated Battology*, which makes even more apparent the originary connection between shame and confession. In *Black & Purple* (2008), Keane appears once more in a close-up, mirrored shot; this time, however, her full face and shoulders are visible, mirrored on the horizontal axis, Narcissus and (her) reflection [Fig. 4.9].³²⁸ In the top screen, Keane's face appears reddened and discolored, as though bruised across her cheek, while in the bottom screen she appears to wait patiently, mouth

³²⁷ Foucault, 101.

³²⁸ To watch video in full, see: Jenny Keane, "Black & Purple," Jenny Keane, accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.jenny-keane.com/black--purple.html>.

closed and eyes barely blinking, with the word “DENY” scrawled across her cheek in black marker. As the videos progress, Keane licks her fingers and rubs her cheek, the inscribed word gradually appearing, in the top video, and disappearing, in the bottom, as the ink seems to move between her tongue and her cheek, a constant process of saying/unsaying, writing/unwriting. In the middle moments of the video, Keane’s tongue and cheek are equally stained, “DENY” hazy and indistinct. Denial, here — of self, of identity, of desires — is ritually washed away and consumed only to reappear, to emerge from the mouth to be inscribed on the skin. The act of confession, of affirming rather than denying, is never singular and static, but requires re-performance. One does not “come out” a single time, but again and again, in one’s speech and dress and gestures, in the lovers one takes and those one denies, in political action and apathy. Confession, furthermore, does not effect a clean slate. As we see from both Catherine Opie’s work in the Introduction and Nadia Myre’s *Scar Project* in Chapter 3, that which one confesses, brings forth from the soul and the guts, marks and mars, leaves its scar and asserts its presence, transformed but not erased.

Keane’s *Ingeminated Battology* might be said to linger in those middle moments, in the commingling of shame and confession. The ink, which in *Black & Purple* bruises her cheek and colors her tongue, in *Ingeminated Battology* fills her mouth, threatening alternately to spill forth or be swallowed. Her confession, here, seems on the verge of its culmination and yet is thwarted, again and once more, by the meaningless repetitions of her mouth and by the silenced soundtrack. The title of the piece doubly refers to acts of repetition, a battery of words with little distinct meaning. What she brings forth seems, paradoxically, strangely contained; the ink never escapes her lips, never disappears down

her throat. Even as it permeates her mouth, coating her tongue and staining her teeth, it remains within the borders of her lips. The silence, too, is bounded: by Keane's own choice to eliminate the diegetic sounds, by the temporal limits of the video, and by the environmental noises which accompany each viewing.

So, how do we hear the silent confession of Keane's *Ingeminated Battology*? As a mechanical silence, born of her use of technology? As a repressive silence, the artist inhabiting the seemingly inescapable position of the mute, invisible (queer) woman? As a withholding, a refusal to articulate and thus an attempt to claim power? In order to begin to answer, an exploration of what limits exist, if any, to the reach of compulsory confession is required. In examining Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expresses skepticism toward Foucault's purpose in addressing what he calls the "repressive hypothesis." His exploration of confession stems from and bolsters an argument that rather than repressing, inhibiting, and ignoring those sexualities which are constructed to exist outside of the norm, our modern era has and continues to create a proliferation of discourse around such sexual desires, practices, and identities. Sedgwick argues that, rather than working outside of it, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* "might better be described as propagating the repression hypothesis ever more broadly by means of displacement, multiplication, and hypostatization."³²⁹ The unrealized potential she sees in his project revolves around imaginative forms of thought not structured by the repressive hypothesis in the first place. Suggesting that shifting the focus from repression and liberation to hegemony and subversion only reinscribes a binary, and that "it is only the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity and change."³³⁰

³²⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 11.

³³⁰ Sedgwick, 13.

Sedgwick offers a number of readings around shame and queer performativity which begin to address such middle ranges.

With Sedgwick's criticism in mind, I wish to revisit Foucault's discussion of silence, in order to determine if some of the "middle ranges of agency" in which Sedgwick is interested might assert themselves in the articulation of silence. Firstly, Foucault's repressive hypothesis relies on the assertion that power is neither monolithic or monodirectional; rather, power is invested in and emanates from all points and therefore no resistance can be exterior to power. Foucault speaks of a plurality of resistances: "resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial."³³¹ Claiming the right to be silent might be any one of these. Therefore, silence must not be thought of as only repressed discourse or withheld discourse; indeed we must conceive of a multiplicity of discourses used with various strategic intentions. To hear power in silence is to recognize this plurality of discourses. Here, we might also consider Butler's imperative that we see vulnerability as part of agency rather than in conflict with it, as something that might be a resource for resistance rather than something to overcome. Sedgwick, in questioning Foucault's implementation of the repressive hypothesis, pushes us to imagine silences which are not precisely resistive strategies, interventions which might proliferate discourse, make vocal previously unheard voices or refuse to speak expected narratives.

For example, in her analysis of Denis Diderot's novella *La Religieuse*, Sedgwick suggests a use of silence that does not operate within a binary of ignorance/knowledge or vulnerability/power, but which instead suggests "a plethora of *ignorances*....[which] are

³³¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 96.

produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth.”³³² The epistolary narration of Diderot’s novella charts the experiences of Suzanne Simonin, a young novitiate committed to a convent against her will. In her letters, Suzanne describes her sexual and sadistic encounters with three successive Mothers Superior, and her reporting of their actions to her confessors. Suzanne is not particularly silent, as the novella consists of her words, her reflections and thoughts; yet silences lurk in Suzanne’s professed ignorance as she refuses, again and again, to give name to her actions. This silence is “precious to the men of the church hierarchy, not because it insulates her from sensations of which they disapprove...but because it allows her to be such a tympanically responsive transmitter of the convent’s doings to them and of the paternal law back to the convent.”³³³ In this way, Suzanne’s confessions greatly benefit those in power rather than impelling a transformation within her; her silent ignorance allows the confession to pass through her, a transmitter rather than a subject. However, her silent ignorances also enable her continued sexual experiences, her orgasmic pleasures, and complicate the boundary of what we might term “the sexual.” Silence, here, is not specifically a *resistance*, and certainly not one that allows Suzanne to escape the bounds of eighteenth-century feminine imprisonment, but instead acts as one of many discourses of intertwined ignorance and knowledge. Suzanne inhabits a privileged unknowing, Sedgwick argues, a position usually maintained only by the compelling confessor who seeks to root out the truth. Adherence to particular loci of silence, to points of unknowing, means that Suzanne’s ashamed confession never quite materializes, the words she speaks, and those she does not, instead expanding the range

³³² Emphasis original. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot’s The Nun,” in *Tendencies*, 1995, 25.

³³³ Sedgwick, 38.

of possible ignorances and knowledges.

The silence of *Ingeminated Battology* might be said to operate in the same proliferation of knowledges and ignorances as Diderot's nun; however, the silence in the video affirms knowledges not-quite-captured and not-quite-legitimized by the confessional regime rather than ignorances. The knowledges depicted share an affinity with shame in the simultaneous repulsion and fascination inspired by viewing and listening. Shame, Sedgwick asserts, attaches to "the place where the *question* of identity arises most originally and most relationally," the place — or moment — where the self is at once individuated and interpersonal.³³⁴ Interpreting the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick suggests shame's physical, visceral ability both to place us intimately in our own bodies, aware of our presence, and flood us with painful identification with others. In this way, the experience of watching Keane's ink-filled mouth, which penetrates the viewer's own mouth with a visceral, textural taste, affectively suffusing the tongue, the throat, the empty void of the mouth, might also conjure the relational experience of shame. Like the abject, like silence, shame inverts our bodies, our senses of self; "shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove."³³⁵ Pride, dignity, self-display: these qualities we associate with being visible, being vocal, with marching in the streets and claiming our identities, cannot, therefore, be separated from shame. They caress each other, mold tight to the skin, cover — and color — our gestures. In Sedgwick's interpretation, shame is not something to be overcome, something which

³³⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

³³⁵ Sedgwick, 38.

might be transformed through the confession ritual, but an affective quality which lurks in each confession, lingering through and beyond the ritual in order to coat the skin, to stain the tongue.

Taking up Sedgwick's call to "detach the therapeutic and individualistic view of shame — in which shame is something to 'work through' or 'move beyond' — from the project of analyzing it as an affective structure," David Halperin and Valerie Traub, in their volume *Gay Shame*, collect a number of essays which interrogate and reveal shame in and amongst queer identities.³³⁶ Originating out of a conference at the University of Michigan, the essays within approach the question of shame and its relation to silencing and marginalization. What identities, they ask, are made shameful by Gay Pride? What practices, desires, and bodies? To bring shame to light, to vocality, is not to suggest that queer lives should be lived as shameful, but to ask, simply, "[can] we do things with shame that gay pride does not or cannot offer us?"³³⁷ A focus on shame, too, allows resistance to the commodification of pride. In an era when Pride comes sponsored by Absolut, when it can be displayed with the right rainbow-emblazoned tee-shirt, when Pride parades become displays of civic and commercial involvement, "Gay Shame represents an effort to construct a new grassroots queer collectivity founded on principles of resistance to normalization."³³⁸ Even stepping outside of the binary of resistance/normalization, as Sedgwick might have us do, dragging shame forth, letting its presence linger even in silence, might complicate the identity commodification of Pride.

While their summary of the proceedings and formative questions of the conference can, occasionally, lapse into a reductive shame/pride binary, I introduce their concept of

³³⁶ David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23.

³³⁷ Halperin and Traub, 4.

³³⁸ Halperin and Traub, 9.

queer shame in order to nuance my use of confession further. The constructed understanding of confession as a ritual which, to quote Foucault once more, “produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it,” suggests that shame is properly left behind upon the conclusion of a successful confession.³³⁹ By asserting, rather, that shame always haunts the confession, that shame leaves its mark, is not to claim that queer identities are, or should be, stigmatized, punished, or subjected to disgrace or guilt, but to point out that shame is constituted and required by confession, that certain shames are requested to speak and others made silent, and that allowing the stain of shame to surface, to revel in its affective presence, might offer one of those “middle ranges of agency” which do not fall precisely into hegemony or resistance.

In 2012, *Ingeminated Battology* was included in the exhibition *Mirror Machine* organized by the Bluewall Gallery in Cavan, Ireland. While other digital video pieces by Keane were included in the exhibition space at the gallery, *Ingeminated Battology* was projected onto the front window of a vacant shop on Ashe Street in Cavan [Fig. 4.10]. In this display, the video also suggests ambiguous readings of commerce and commodification. I suggested earlier that the paradoxically filled void of her mouth, symbolic of the empty shop it opens into and the fear, dejection, and disgust around the recession which caused such sights to be familiar, combine to create an even greater horror. Additionally, though, in plastering the shop window with this monster, the work complicates the commodification of pride and commercialization of identity. Her tongues, her mouth, her teeth are offered on display, but neither as stationary, inert objects nor an idealized aspirational lifestyle. Rather, they wallow gloriously, abjectly, in shame; they suggest shame’s lasting presence and its pleasures; they dare the viewer to

³³⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 62.

indulge in the affective potentiality of shame.

Across the empty expanse of glass, her moving mouth took on the proportions of a gigantic monster, its wagging tongue a searching, sentient creature from the deep. A number of scholars have written on the relationship between images of the monstrous, particularly in horror films, and fearful, bigoted imaginings of the Other.³⁴⁰ For instance, popular culture scholar Patrick Gonder argues that images of monstrous, fragmented and jigsawed bodies in “body rebellion” films of the 1950s relate to contemporaneous discussions and anxieties around genetics, DNA, and the relationship between “undesirable” traits and “undesirable” people, including people of color, immigrants, homosexuals, communists, and the mentally ill. Films that depict bodies cut up and stitched back together, fragmented body parts going awry, and human-animal hybrids thus represent “a xenophobic dream-wish” in which protagonists, often scientists, attempt to excise and expel rebellious and monstrous traits from the body (politic).³⁴¹ The kinds of imagery Keane uses falls into this category of “body rebellion,” and suggests a queer, affective alliance with all those figures made monstrous in popular culture.

In the Irish context, too, the emergence of Keane’s tongue from the dark, sloshing pit of her mouth also suggests the landscape of Irish boglands and the strange and sometime unsettling objects they occasionally produce, from centuries-old chunks of preserved butter to human bodies both ancient and modern. Bogland, which covers much of the western and central portions of the island, have long provided and continue to

³⁴⁰ For instance, see the following as a small selection: Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Barbara Anne Gurr, *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Patrick Gonder, “Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle: Genetics and Race in Horror Films of the 1950s,” *The Velvet Light Trap - A Critical Journal of Film and Television; Madison, Wis, Etc.*, Fall 2003, 33–44.

³⁴¹ Gonder, “Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle,” 39.

provide an important source of heating and cooking fuel in the form of cut and dried peat. Yet, the bog's unsteady surfaces and watery depths also mean danger to those who might venture out unknowing, and the acidic water, lack of oxygen, and low temperature preserve dead organic matter, occasionally resulting in the emergence of mummified bodies from their depths. Discovered by farmers cutting peat, these bodies often evidence preservation of the skin and soft tissues, while the leeching of minerals from the bones and into the water-logged body means that, when accidentally exhumed, the bodies have a full, fleshy, soft, and pliable appearance and texture, almost like the floppy, probing fleshiness of the tongue itself.³⁴² While certainly many bodies are the result of accidental death, a misstep in a treacherous landscape, a number of Bronze and Iron Age bodies, showing evidence of lethal blows, stabbings, hangings, or beheadings, remain popularly victims of ancient ritual or punishment, cast out of society. The othering of bog bodies continues to the modern era, with some archaeologists interpreting nineteenth-century bodies as suicides, disallowed from burial in hallowed ground under Catholic dogma and thus interred in the bog instead, and the knowledge that some bogs, particularly those near the Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland border, may be the final resting place of individuals "disappeared" by sectarian forces during the Troubles of the late twentieth century.³⁴³ In these interpretations, archaeologist Melanie Giles suggests, the bogs offer "appropriate liminal spaces...in which to inter the troubled or dangerous dead."³⁴⁴ As a liminal space with a connection to an ancient, pre-colonial Ireland, too, the bog allows a connection to a sense of Irishness "uncorrupted" by either English influence or Catholic

³⁴² Niels Lynnerup, "Bog Bodies," *The Anatomical Record* 298, no. 6 (2015): 1008, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ar.23138>.

³⁴³ Melanie Giles, "Iron Age Bog Bodies of North-Western Europe. Representing the Dead," *Archaeological Dialogues* 16, no. 1 (June 2009): 76–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203809002815>.

³⁴⁴ Giles, 77.

dogma. Cultural studies scholar Susannah Bower argues that early twenty-first century popular discourse on queerness in Ireland identifies it not as a foreign contaminant, as did much of the dominant discourse of the twentieth century, but as part of an essentially Irish sexual permissiveness that existed before the Catholic church barged in and imposed its restrictions. This line of argument settles on the “idea of an essentially healthy Irish sexual identity interfered with by the foreign contamination of Catholicism,” a sort of new Celtic revival celebrating the sexual freedom of the past, a past we can still find held in the earth and water of the bog.³⁴⁵ Keane’s cadaverous, wagging tongue, emerging out of the boggy wetness of her mouth, dark like peat-soaked water, suggests an affinity with these spaces and their liminal, dangerous spaces, prone to so many readings.

Whether allowed to swell and expand, spreading across the window-glass of the store front, or contained in the small, intimate computer screen, so close to the viewer’s own body, Keane’s mouth, her reaching tongue, gestures and calls to the viewer even as the glistening, pervading ink repulses and repels. One might read this muscled tongue, textural and slick and veined, as a phallic stand-in, the lesbian’s paltry offering for penetration. But this reading, this insistence on the centrality and singularity of penetration to sex, ignores the truth of the wetly licking mouth, of its caresses, its smacking, devouring kisses. Like the turned backs of Shekeith’s subject, the wet darkness of her mouth suggests anality, the revulsion and delight of sodomitical pleasures. The ink, here, threatens not to erupt, to ejaculate, but to spill from the lips, viscous, to drip and leak and make messy. Its infectious, threatening presence might just as well be a tantalizing, libidinous call to savor all those pleasures made shameful by both normative

³⁴⁵ Susannah Bowyer, “Queer Patriots,” *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 6 (November 1, 2010): 812, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2010.502734>.

society and gay pride. The work's pleasure might be, in part, in the refusal to confide, to confess, but it also dwells in the ability to compel revulsion, to force a responsive looking, to construct carefully an abject, shameful presence which demands affective engagement. As Sedgwick asserts, shame and exhibitionism interline the same glove, move within the same mouth. Keane's mouth is inverted, is that of an invert, and it finds pleasure in its own shameful state: a filled void, a tongue that reaches and searches outside of its bounds, lips that kiss themselves. In the doubling of her lips, one, too, might see Freud's narcissistic object choice, the homosexual mouth ever striving for its twin. While this conception of queer identity as primarily infantile, unformed, has been summarily dismissed by most of contemporary queer theory, Keane's flirtation with its imagery suggests an irreverent glee, an egocentric joy at the pleasures of her own body that nonetheless requires of the viewer, if not the artist, a relational affiliation. She takes on the image of the monstrous, of the abnormal and perverse, with pleasurable glee, with wetly gleaming smiles and lascivious kisses. She sticks her tongue out, waggles it about, and blows raspberries at the medico-sexual regime which Foucault so deliberately describes.

Her lips kissing together, too, conjures the psychoanalytic lesbian writings of Luce Irigaray, who takes Freud's narcissistic object choice and turns it into two feminine mouths speaking, touching, lusting together: "Kiss me. Two lips kissing two lips: openness is ours again... When you kiss me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears. Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means we are never finished. If our pleasure consists of moving, of being moved, endlessly."³⁴⁶ Here, we return to moving, to being moved, to the disorientation of queerness as Ahmed describes it. Disorientation

³⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 210.

refers to the dizziness of finding oneself outside of what is expected, to stepping away from the “straight line,” to refusing to follow a path. In being disoriented, we inhabit space differently, oddly, queerly; our desires toward or away from certain objects “can ‘move’ us and hence affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others.”³⁴⁷ The slick, repetitive caress of her tongue compels me, draws me in, reminds me of not just the bodily actions of queer sex but the messy work of building queer community. Ahmed suggests that by rethinking lesbian desire as “a space for action,” we “can explore the way in which lesbian desire is shaped by contact with others, and the way that desire enables points of connection that are discontinuous with the straight line.”³⁴⁸ Thinking about desire as action incorporates the ways sexual and social contact inflect on the body, the ways intimacy and proximity shape the space our bodies fill. Queer community, too, requires reorienting our bodies in relation to others by finding the slantwise lines amongst the straight paths. With desire, intimacy, and contact helping us forge those lines, relational connection may be felt deeply, lustfully, fondly, uncomfortably, humorously, unflinchingly in our queer bodies. Presenting a mobile, unpredictable image at once forcefully, even unpleasantly, relational and profoundly, intimately internal, *Ingeminated Battology* asks that its viewers attune their listening ear to the pervasive powers in silence, to the ignorances and knowledges which weave through the shifting spaces of silent discourses. With a playful waggle at its queer viewers, the work allows us to let the bitter taste of shame fill our mouths and, rather than eject it, spit it out to be discarded, lets us savor it, allow it to linger and leave its stain on our tongues, on our kisses, on our bodies.

³⁴⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 101.

³⁴⁸ Ahmed, 102.

The hairpins dropped by these works suggest cheeky grins, knowing glances, and cautious dreams that all point to embodied, relational, persistent ways of being queer. As they suggest, the imperative to confess one's sexuality, seemingly so pressing today, inflects differently across races, genders, and religions. Further, though, they rethink the paradigm of the verbal "coming out," borrowing from historical and marginalized concepts of what it means to be "out" to offer ambiguous and sometimes contradictory confessions. Offering individual bodies in solitude, they nonetheless suggest desires for intimacy and contact. In this way, they enact, as Ahmed states about lesbian desire, "the 'coming out' story as a story of 'coming to,' of arriving near other bodies, as a contact that makes a story and opens up other ways of facing the world."³⁴⁹ The ways of facing the world shown here — with a vulnerable turning-away, with a probing, emphatic mouth — also turn towards earlier ways of understanding what it means to "come out": to be embraced and experience queer pleasure, to live within the messy social bonds of a queer community. I assert here and throughout this dissertation that confession is always and ultimately relational, that it works with, on, and through the bodies, emotions, and identities of all involved. However, as this chapter makes more clear than others, the particularities of individual experience and the power dynamics of social, political, and economic contexts mean, first, that "relational" does not necessarily mean identificatory and, second, that relational experiences are also always inflected by the subject positions of the agents involved. As a viewer, a writer, an art historian, my reading of these pieces is necessarily bound up in my own identity, my own experiences. The tantalizing, affective, desirous pull I feel toward Keane's monstrous mouth is, as I well know from presenting on this work publicly at a number of conferences, not universally shared. As a

³⁴⁹ Ahmed, 105.

white, queer woman with Irish heritage, I also feel some identification with Keane herself, with whom I had a number of lively conversations in person and via email when first researching her work. I feel a closeness that inflects my reading of this work and, simultaneously, an urgency to affirm that closeness, to make it clear in my language. At the same time, in pairing it with Shikeith's work, I contend with the fact that while *Ingeminated Battology* feels intimately personal to me, *#Blackmendream* has an identificatory distance from me. I do not share the experiences expressed nor do I have an insider's knowledge into their formation; further, though, in considering concepts of Black masculinity, I must contend with my complicity in white supremacy, in which the presumption of white women's innocence stands as a dangerous foil to the construction of Black male sexuality. Thus, I have tried to read his work with generosity but also distance, recognizing my real fondness for the piece and my inability to know or understand its affective quality for Black audiences.

In this way, my role as these artworks' confessor, drawing out their secrets and interpreting their utterances, is as relational, as contingent, as any other confessors' role. I began this dissertation, in the introduction, by arguing that art history is specially and particularly well-suited to help us understand the workings of confession. Artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have explored the relationship between artist, object, and viewer, developing new forms of art that bring into sharper relief the ways those three positions both depend upon one another for meaning and continually blur and meld together. Contemporary art brings to confession a specialized knowledge in the ways encounters with objects and with others produce affective experiences; the way these encounters, in Ahmed's terms, orient us; the way these

encounters touch and move our bodies, pull on our desires; the way these encounters incline, compel, seduce, and oblige us into relationships, communities, and new ways of understanding our alliances with individuals near and far. When we viewers and art historians stand in as confessors, we thus must recognize the ways our confessing subjects, artworks of all media, make demands upon us, pull us close, implicate us. We must, too, recognize that no confessor exists unmarked and without context; we all, rather, belong to communities, are oriented in specific ways, carry with us particular histories. In pairing these works together and affirming their queer ambiguities, I wish to recognize the way queerness intersects with race, class, gender, and religion and produces, here, specific in-group knowledges. These works speak, albeit quietly or even silently, but not to everyone.

Conclusions: And yet, what now?

Researching in an archive can be a lonely experience. The hushed quiet of the hermetic space, filled only with the low susurrus of turning pages, the scratch of pencils, the whirl of laptops, has a way of suffusing your body and making your blood pound too loudly in your ears. The slow shuffle, box by box, through the leftover details of lives distant from you acts, as Jacques Derrida suggests, as a reminder of your own mortality. And, as scholars in affect theory, queer theory, and performance studies alike have explicated to us, so much escapes the archives — or indeed is never considered relevant to its scope in the first place. The minutiae of dry documents suggest their lack: not only of the many lives undocumented, but of the living, feeling, touching subjects whose encounters and experiences can never be encapsulated in text or photograph.

I visited few archives for this dissertation, as of the artists treated within, only the subject of this conclusion — British performance artist Adrian Howells — is deceased. The rest hold their own archives, still lively and incomplete. A number of Howells's documents are now held in the University of Glasgow's Scottish Theatre Archive, a connection solidified after he underwent a three-year Creative Fellowship in the Department of Theatre Studies there. The papers are only partially cataloged. Since his death in 2014, a number of the more personal and more inconsequential items in his effects — such as the haphazardly but comprehensively-kept receipts documented by scholar Stephen Greer — as well as items containing the names of participants in his one-on-one performances have been removed and held aside as sensitive information.³⁵⁰ The Howells holdings do not seem a popular research destination, for, indeed, some of that

³⁵⁰ Dominic Johnson and Adrian Howells, "Held: An Interview with Adrian Howells," in *It's All Allowed: The Performances of Adrian Howells*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson, Intellect Live (London, UK : Bristol, UK: Live Art Development Agency ; Intellect, 2016), 260.

redaction happened in preparation for my own visit in 2016. Thus, the papers now available to outside researchers — those I was able to access — primarily include documentation, notes, and promotional ephemera related to his performances. Mostly staged as one-on-one encounters between the artist and a single participant, Howells’s performances were rarely documented directly through photography or video, and therefore much of visual “documentation” is, rather, staged promotional photographs or imagery from practice runs during which he perfected his sets, props, and gestural scripts. Clippings and print-outs from paper and online newspapers include an array of reviews of his work over the decade of the early 2000s. In working my way through the boxes in the Howells holdings, I was struck — in that visceral sense — by the insufficiency of these papers. Both to describe his works, which are at once exceedingly simple in concept and exceptionally profound in execution, and to communicate what must have been the deeply tactile, affective, sensory experience of participating in his work. Of course, the archive is never quite sufficient to communicate feeling, to capture the ephemeral, gestural, or sensory qualities of any given context. However, as performance studies scholar Dominic Johnson notes of Howells’s work, “what remains...seems *particularly* negligible in its materiality, because the substance of each encounter is categorically singular, intimate, fleeting, and undocumented.”³⁵¹

For, while Howells worked as a performance artist on the stage in works such as *An Audience with Adrienne* (2006), his most influential body of work involved one-on-one performance. In these, Howells engaged in loosely-scripted encounters with a single audience member at a time, often in locations outside of the public sphere. His work consistently returns to the question of confession: in *An Audience with Adrienne*, Howells

³⁵¹ Original emphasis. Johnson and Howells, 99.

performs as his drag alter ego, Adrienne, while reciting embarrassing anecdotes about his life, while in others, still as Adrienne, he invites participants to share their secrets or “dirty laundry” while he washes their hair or cleans their clothing. However, his performances gradually moved away from Adrienne and into Adrian, away from chatting and into silence. To bring us to the end of our consideration of confession as relational and embodied, I turn to a quiet, immersive, and deeply intimate work Howells performed towards the end of his career, *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding* (2010-11).

The foundation of *The Pleasure of Being* is care for the body. In the thirty-minute work, participants undressed and entered a bath prepared with warm water and oils. Howells would then wash the participant’s body before helping them out, wrapping them in a towel or a bathrobe, and holding them while feeding them chocolates [Fig. 5.1]. In the guidelines presented to each participant prior to the performance, Howells states, “For 30 minutes I would like to deeply nurture and nourish you. I hope you will feel able to surrender yourself to this experience of total care.”³⁵² While this “experience of total care” has boundaries — in the guidelines, Howells notes that he will not touch breasts or genitalia, nor ask the participant to touch him, and the performances were limited to thirty minutes with only a select number of spots available during any one festival or event — he also emphasizes that his scripting is not sacrosanct. In the guidelines, he notes that participants may choose to speak at any time or may stay silent and, in capital letters, implores them to indicate if they find anything uncomfortable: “PLEASE DO NOT FEEL YOU HAVE TO BE POLITE AND GO ALONG WITH EVERYTHING I AM

³⁵² Johnson and Howells, 270.

DOING.”³⁵³ With this instruction, he asserts his interest in the ephemeral, individual, embodied experience of each participant. While the framework he designs for each performance results from research and thoughtful experimentation, the sets and scripts are not designed precisely to induce a particular feeling in his participants, but to open space for feeling itself.

Howells came to *The Pleasure of Being* after completing similar care-oriented works. In *Held* (2006-7), for instance, he constructed a three-part experience in a studio made up to look like a residential flat. He and a participant would begin by sitting at a table and holding hands, drinking tea and chatting about hand-holding rituals, then listen to music together sitting on a couch, then finally curl together in bed with Howells spooning the participant. As with *The Pleasure of Being*, the domestic setting gives *Held* a familial intimacy. In both, acts of sitting together and acts of caring might be reminiscent of multiple relationships, from parent and child to romantic partners to old friends. After *Held*, he invoked the symbolic qualities of washing with *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2008-11), in which he kneels at the feet of his seated participant, washes, dries, oils, and, finally, kisses their feet [Fig. 5.2]. The act of foot-washing and, indeed, the sole/soul pun in the title, all point to a number of different religious resonances, carried further by his choice to occasionally situate the work within religious spaces such as a prayer room or a Catholic church and, later, to take the performance on tour to Israel where he washed the feet of both Israelis and Palestinians.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Johnson and Howells, 271.

³⁵⁴ Kathleen Gough comprehensively examines the religious symbolism of Foot Washing for the Sole in her contribution to *It's All Allowed*. Kathleen M Gough, “Sole History: The Grammar of the Feet in Foot Washing for the Sole,” in *It's All Allowed: The Performances of Adrian Howells*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson, Intellect Live (London, UK : Bristol, UK: Live Art Development Agency ; Intellect, 2016), 300–304.

While speaking and listening are both integral elements to these earlier works, each of which involve questions about the participant's feelings and past experiences, for *The Pleasure of Being* and some of his later works, Howells sought to experiment with silent confession. In a lecture given at Central St Martins in 2013, he describes the possibilities of silence:

I'd become interested in the idea of "bodily confession" — literally that two bodies have the capacity to hold a conversation with each other through physical proximity and touch, and that confession might not be dependent upon the oricular (spoken) and auricular (heard) in order to experience and validate it and that indeed more might ironically and possibly be "said" or revealed through silence than could ever be communicated by using words. And that "bodily confession" necessitated a different way of listening.³⁵⁵

When stripped of speaking or listening, Howells argues, the confession still communicates through the body. As I've argued through this dissertation, confession is, inherently and inextricably, embodied and relational. We feel it *in* our bodies through our own transformations and, perhaps more importantly, we feel it *through* and *between* shared bodies in space. The deliberate creation of artistic space for exploration brought Howells to that conclusion and lends weight to my own argument that it is through art, and through art history, that we can more fully understand the resonances and risks of confession. In many ways, the past few decades of artistic experimentation and art historical examination into the affective qualities of art-making and viewing, the social lives of artworks, the role of artworks in sociality itself, and the role of aesthetics in an increasingly technological society come together in Howells's work. In that same lecture, he described his work as "a direct response to the fact that I passionately believe we live in unloving, inhumane, brutal and brutalizing times...and that as human beings it is an

³⁵⁵ Adrian Howells, "Talk at Central St Martins - Thursday 13th June 2013," June 13, 2013, 2, STA AHC 2/2/16, Scottish Theatre Archive, University of Glasgow.

integral part of our condition to crave and need intimacy, touch and connection with other human beings.”³⁵⁶ His works offer up not just a momentary reprieve from these circumstances but a deeper understanding of our need for connection in trying times. But, once we understand this fundamental part of confession, through this moment in art history we find ourselves, what do we do with it?

Working in the archive of Howells’s life and work was a difficult task. The descriptions of his performances felt disappointingly paltry, as, indeed, the vast majority of the performances he completed in his life are undocumented in an archival sense. That summer, I was far from home and living through the all-too-familiar academic dispersal of friends as we parted for the summer or for good to research, write, and complete our degrees. I’d never been to Glasgow and I wanted to be a tourist; I was frustrated; I was lonely. And, of course, his work itself is difficult: it asks much of us, as viewers, participants, art historians. In describing her own near-experience with Howells’s *Held* in 2007, art critic Jennifer Doyle speaks of the fears that held her back from making her appointment: “I was afraid of what might happen, of how it might make me feel. I think too I was equally put off by its artificiality — not that my own feelings would be inauthentic but that they would be delivered within a temporary architecture of intimacy. What happens at the end of the appointment?”³⁵⁷ Here, we see Doyle shy away from the vulnerability required to participate in Howells’s performances. It is not merely the vulnerability of experiencing feelings in the presence of the artist, but of being refused a mutual experience of relationality with another person. As Shikeith’s *#Blackmendment* taught us, living in vulnerability requires facing unknowable consequences; confessing

³⁵⁶ Howells, 1.

³⁵⁷ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 3.

always comes with the risk of social refusal. Participants in Howells's works do not face his explicit judgment, but they do face the constructed artificiality of the artworks themselves.

That artificiality, that arrangement within the composed sphere of art — within the quiet ritual of internal confession — is what allows his work to *work*. The delineated roles and limitations of each performance allow them to be momentary gestures freed from the responsibilities and consequences of ongoing intimate relationships. Yet, that artificiality also draws our attention to its own lack, to its fleetingness, to its insufficiency. His work brings our eyes, or perhaps more rightly our bodies, our nerves, to our hollowed and lonely places, to the parts of us that don't feel the tenderness of touch and care often enough. Reading about his work, so many steps removed from the actual touch of his hand against a participant's body, I felt the ache of that lack. Further, though, as I continued to read about *The Pleasure of Being*, I felt his striving toward not simply providing care, but reaching for reciprocity. Of the decision to bathe participants, he described thinking about how “we so rarely offer acts of total care to each other and how these acts can mutually tenderize and nurture us and help us become better functioning human beings. And in this sense the act of bathing is a gift exchange for both the bather and the bathed.”³⁵⁸ The mutuality suggested here — of care, of responsibility, of communal good — operates through a tender touch. Predicated not on a pre-existing relationship, the obligation to be cared for and to care and the necessity to recognize mutual interdependence arise through the risk of vulnerability inherent in both the structured aesthetic experiences created by Howells and their resonances in the wider world.

³⁵⁸ Howells, “Talk at Central St Martins - Thursday 13th June 2013,” 6.

On March 15th or 16th, 2014, Howells took his own life. Writing an ethics of care through the contemporary art of a man who battled depression and, ultimately, succumbed to it, seems inherently fraught. The definitive text on Howells's work, a book published posthumously and filled with essays from his friends and colleagues, *It's All Allowed: The Performances of Adrian Howells* (2016), grapples deeply with this complication. His friend Nic Green writes that Howells's "departure raised many shadow-questions," including "...what are the personal effects of vulnerability in performance and how can these be attended to and cared for?"³⁵⁹ As an art historical problem, negotiating the biography of an artist always requires decisions; in this case, the depression Howells experienced appeared as content within his work and thus the two are linked, inextricably. To make sense of his suicide, it might be tempting, in fact, to read it along a continuum of his work, as another, final, confession. In his own reading of another artist who experienced depression and suicide, José Esteban Muñoz suggests the concept of "death art" as a way to consider the queerness of failure, the queerness of refusing to adhere to straight time and value. Of the suicide of choreographer and performer Fred Herko, he writes that, rather than morphing Herko into a messy queer stereotype, "we need to think of Herko's life and body as becoming particular, to imagine the artist striving for another way..."³⁶⁰ Here, Herko's death is as particular, as singular, as his performances were; as a continuum, they communicate ways of being outside of the straight norm.

To ignore Howells's death would do a disservice to the analysis of his work, which

³⁵⁹ Johnson and Howells, "Held: An Interview with Adrian Howells," 304.

³⁶⁰ Muñoz's words on the queer timeliness of death take on their own complicated valences, too, in light of his own early death in 2013 at age 46. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 155.

was deeply informed by his sensitivity, his depression, and his loneliness. As Deirdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson state, “Howells’ insistence on stating and owning his depression and suicidal experiences as matters of fact, as facts of life — and now, of death — make any marginalisation of those facts inauthentic.”³⁶¹ However, from his death, his life, and his work I suggest we attempt to carry with us a complex dichotomy. As so many participants attested, Howells’s careful, caring, sensitive nature made his performances *work*. What might have failed or slipped into creepiness in the hands of another performer instead invoked quietly transformative experiences. There are many factors at play here, of course, from Howells’s own deliberate preparation and staging of each performance to the cultural desexualization of the soft pudginess of queer bodies like his to the framework of recognized cultural institutions like the Edinburgh Fringe Festival placing his performances firmly within the realm of “art” and outside of the realm of “creepy strangers.” Kathleen Gough states that Howells held an ineffable gift such that “compassion expanded in the room when he was in it.”³⁶² In a draft description for *The Pleasure of Being*, his presence and persona are touted as the key element of the work: “This is not a work that can be set up and walked away from — it is Adrian’s wonderful energy that makes it what it is.”³⁶³ His works demand a recognition of his singularity: of his affect and composure, of his thought process, of his care. If we follow Muñoz’s suggestion to think of his “life and body as becoming particular,” then his death, too, becomes singular, his unique sensitivity driving both work and death.

³⁶¹ Dierdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson, “Adrian Howells: A Working Biography and Survey,” in *It’s All Allowed: The Performances of Adrian Howells*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson, Intellect Live (London, UK ; Bristol, UK: Live Art Development Agency ; Intellect, 2016), 93.

³⁶² Gough, “Sole History: The Grammar of the Feet in Foot Washing for the Sole,” 206.

³⁶³ Adrian Howells, “Unpublished Description of ‘The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding,’” n.d., 1/10/3/2, Scottish Theatre Archive, University of Glasgow.

And yet — to read his life, his work, and, indeed, his death as wholly singular does them disservice, too. I've argued that some confessional works, particularly those that deal with difficult or unsavory confessions such as those by Gillian Wearing and Phil Collins, discussed in Chapter 1, or by Coco Fusco and Vanessa Place, in Chapter 2, implicate us as viewers in the crimes, ineptitudes, and sexual pleasures confessed. If the act of confession is inherently relational, is implicitly about the restitution of the confessing subject into society, as I have argued, then Howells's work implicates us with the good as well as the bad. If we viewers, readers, listeners, participants are asked through the works of Wearing, Collins, Fusco, and Place to consider our own capability for selfishness, harm, and pain, then Howells's works tell us we are also capable of accepting and, indeed, of giving great care. To exalt his work as exceptional denies the way it calls to us well outside of the boundaries of each individual performance to charge us with the task of caring. As an individual, Howells was uniquely capable of creating deeply affective experiences; and yet, the knowledge we must carry away with us is that we are too. Rather than read his death as particular to his own struggles, I suggest that we see it, too, as deeply and painfully ordinary. Depression, isolation, loneliness, death: these are the risks of our refusal to care both personally and communally. These, also, are the risks of leaping into vulnerability. These are always the risks. And yet — his work persists, in the archive and well outside of it, and so too does its charge: to care, to live vulnerably, to connect through and between our bodies, despite the risks, despite our skepticism, despite our fears.

Figures



Fig. 0.1

Matt Damon portraying Brett Kavanaugh, Saturday Night Live cold open. "Saturday Night Live." *Adam Driver and Kanye West*. New York: NBC, September 29, 2018. Author's video still



Fig. 0.2
Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1994, Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches
Opie, Catherine, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson. *Catherine Opie: American
Photographer*. New York, N.Y: Guggenheim Museum: Available through
D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2008.



Fig. 0.3
Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994, Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches
Opie, Catherine, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson. *Catherine Opie: American
Photographer*. New York, N.Y: Guggenheim Museum: Available through
D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2008.



Fig. 1.1
Phil Collins, video still from *Hero* (2002), single-channel video, 45 minutes
Collins, Phil, and Milton Keynes Gallery. *Yeah.....You, Baby You*. Hove: Shady Lane, 2005.



Fig. 1.2

Installation view showing booths for *Confess All...* (1994), *Trauma* (2000), and *Secrets and Lies* (2009) Gillian Wearing, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2012

Fowler, Catherine. "Once More with Feeling: Performing the Self in the Work of Gillian Wearing, Kutluğ Ataman and Phil Collins." *MIRAJ, Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2013): 10–24.



Fig. 1.3
Gillian Wearing, video still from *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994), single-channel video, 30 minutes
Author's video still.



Fig. 1.4
Gillian Wearing, video still from *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994), single-channel video, 30 minutes
Author's video still.



Fig. 1.5
Gillian Wearing, video still from *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994), single-channel video, 30 minutes
Author's video still.



Fig. 1.6
Gillian Wearing, video still from *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994), single-channel video, 30 minutes
Author's video still.



Fig. 1.7
Gillian Wearing, video still from *Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994), single-channel video, 30 minutes
Author's video still.

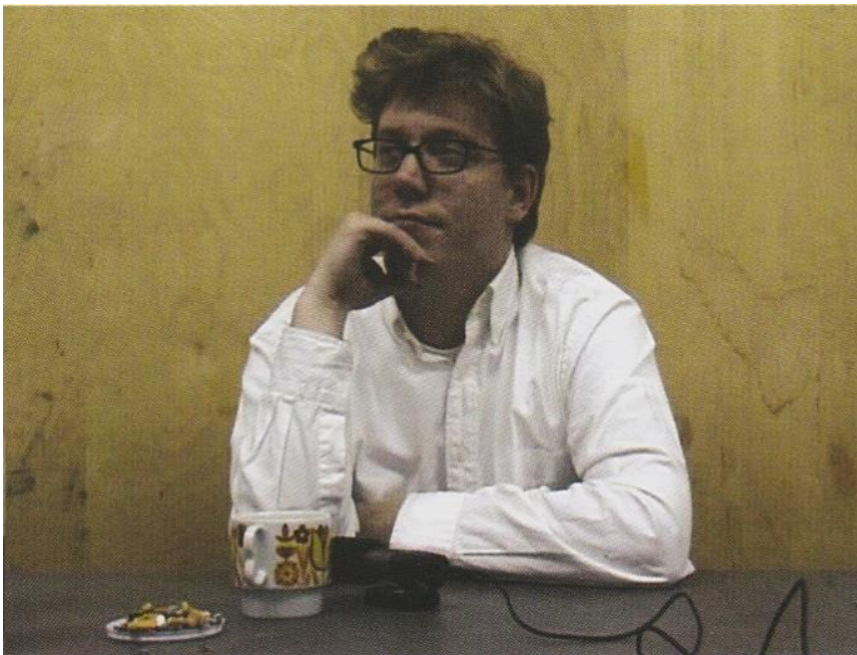


Fig. 1.8
Phil Collins, video still from *Hero* (2002), single-channel video, 45 minutes
Collins, Phil, and Milton Keynes Gallery. *Yeah.....You, Baby You*. Hove: Shady Lane, 2005.



Fig. 1.9
Phil Collins, video still from *Hero* (2002), single-channel video, 45 minutes
Collins, Phil, and Milton Keynes Gallery. *Yeah.....You, Baby You*. Hove: Shady Lane, 2005.



Fig. 1.10
Phil Collins, *Enduring Freedom #14* (2001-2), photograph
Collins, Phil, and Milton Keynes Gallery. *Yeah.....You, Baby You*. Hove: Shady Lane,
2005.



Fig. 1.11
Phil Collins, *Enduring Freedom #19* (2001-2), photograph
Collins, Phil, and Milton Keynes Gallery. *Yeah.....You, Baby You*. Hove: Shady Lane,
2005.



Fig. 2.1
Coco Fusco, video still from *Operation Atropos*, 2006, digital video
Author's video still.



Fig. 2.2
Coco Fusco, video still from *Operation Atropos*, 2006, digital video
Author's video still.

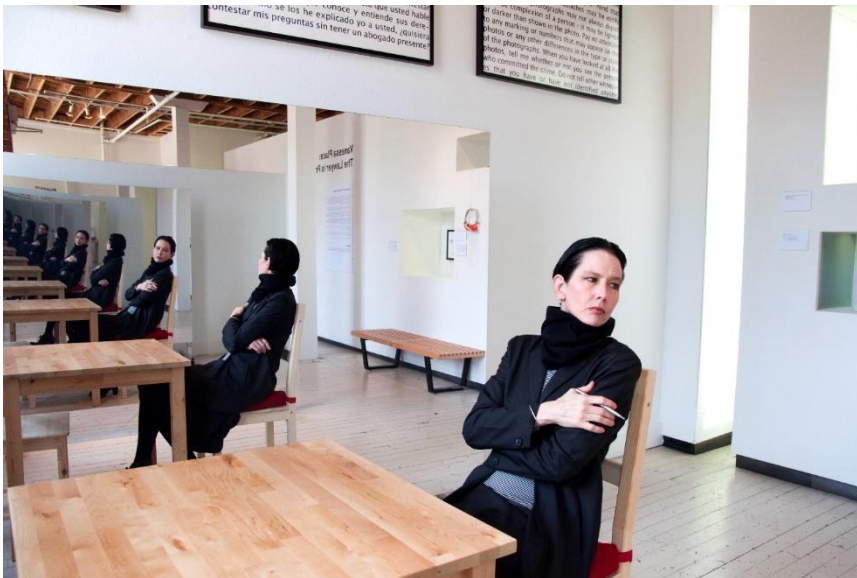


Fig. 2.3
Vanessa Place, promotional image for *The Lawyer is Present*, April 12-14, 2013,
Performance, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art
Bradley, As told to Paige K. "Vanessa Place on Her Work with Rape Jokes."
artforum.com. Accessed January 30, 2018. <https://www.artforum.com/words/id=67539>.



Fig. 2.4

Vanessa Place, performance photograph from *The Lawyer is Present*, April 12-14, 2013, Performance, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art
Place, Vanessa. “Artist Vanessa Place Wants You to Confess for The Lawyer Is Present.” *Westword*, April 11, 2013. <http://www.westword.com/arts/artist-vanessa-place-wants-you-to-confess-for-the-lawyer-is-present-5788895>.



Fig. 2.5

Pauline Cummins, installation shot of *Good Confessions*, 1997, video installation in Our Lady of Lourdes church in Dublin, Ireland, showing a viewer sitting on the parishioner's side

Fire Station Artists Studios. *Inner Art*. Dublin: Fire Station Artists' Studios, 2000.

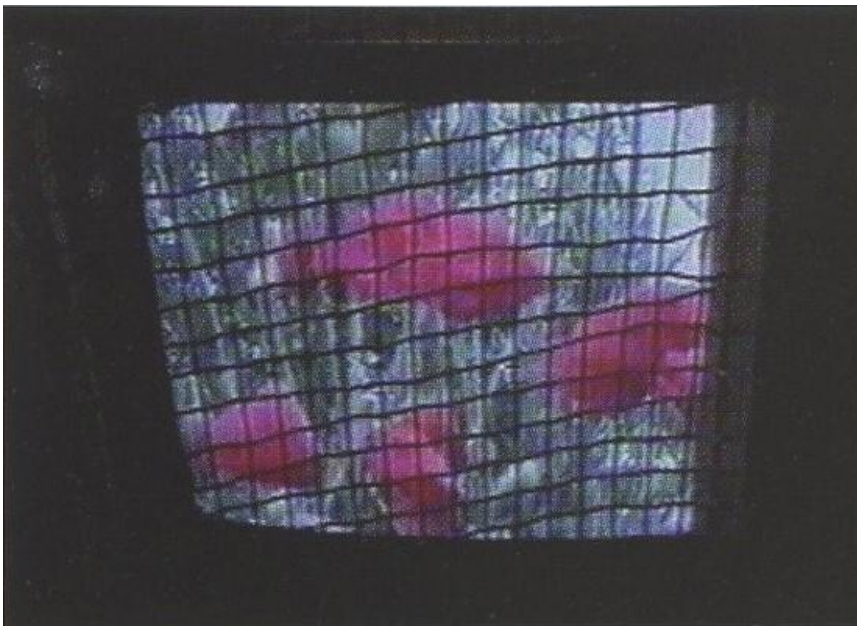


Fig. 2.6

Pauline Cummins, installation shot of *Good Confessions*, 1997, video installation in Our Lady of Lourdes church in Dublin, Ireland, showing the video through the confessional grate

Fire Station Artists Studios. *Inner Art*. Dublin: Fire Station Artists' Studios, 2000.



Fig. 3.1

Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998), installation view, Tate Britain, Turner Prize exhibition 1999

Brown, Neal. *Tracey Emin*. Modern Artists. London : New York: Tate ; Distributed in the US and Canada by Harry NAbrams, 2006.



Fig. 3.2
Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998), installation view, Tate Britain, Turner Prize exhibition
1999
Emin, Tracey. *Tracey Emin: Works 1963-2006*. New York: Rizzoli, 2006.



Fig. 3.3

Tracey Emin composes *My Bed*, 2016, Tate Liverpool

Jones, Jonathan. "Tracey Emin Makes Her Own Crumpled Bed and Lies in It, on Merseyside." *The Guardian*, September 16, 2016, sec. Art and design.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/16/tracey-emin-artist-1998-installation-my-bed-tate-liverpool-merseyside>.



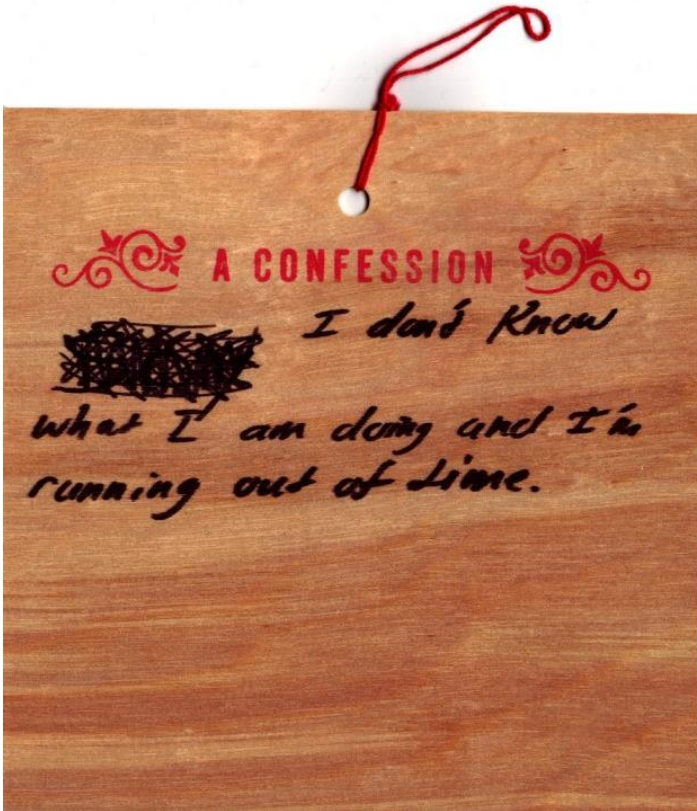
Fig. 3.4
Candy Chang, *Confessions* (2012), installation view, Cosmopolitan's P3 Studio, Las Vegas
Chang, Candy. "Candy Chang » Confessions." Accessed April 25, 2017.
<http://candychang.com/work/confessions/>.



Figs. 3.5-3.6
Candy Chang, *Confessions* (2012), Confession booth exterior and interior,
Cosmopolitan's P3 Studio, Las Vegas
Chang, Candy. "Candy Chang » Confessions." Accessed April 25, 2017.
<http://candychang.com/work/confessions/>.



Fig. 3.7
Candy Chang, *Confessions* (2012), installation view, Cosmopolitan's P3 Studio, Las Vegas
Chang, Candy. "Candy Chang » Confessions." Accessed April 25, 2017.
<http://candychang.com/work/confessions/>.



Figs. 3.8-3.9
Candy Chang, *Confessions* (2012), installation view and confession plaque,
Cosmopolitan's P3 Studio, Las Vegas
Chang, Candy. "Candy Chang » Confessions." Accessed April 25, 2017.
<http://candychang.com/work/confessions/>.



Fig. 3.10
Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-13), installation view, 18th Sydney Biennale, 2012
Myre, Nadia. "Scar Project, Archive." Accessed April 6, 2014.
<http://www.oboro.net/en/activity/scar-project-archive>.

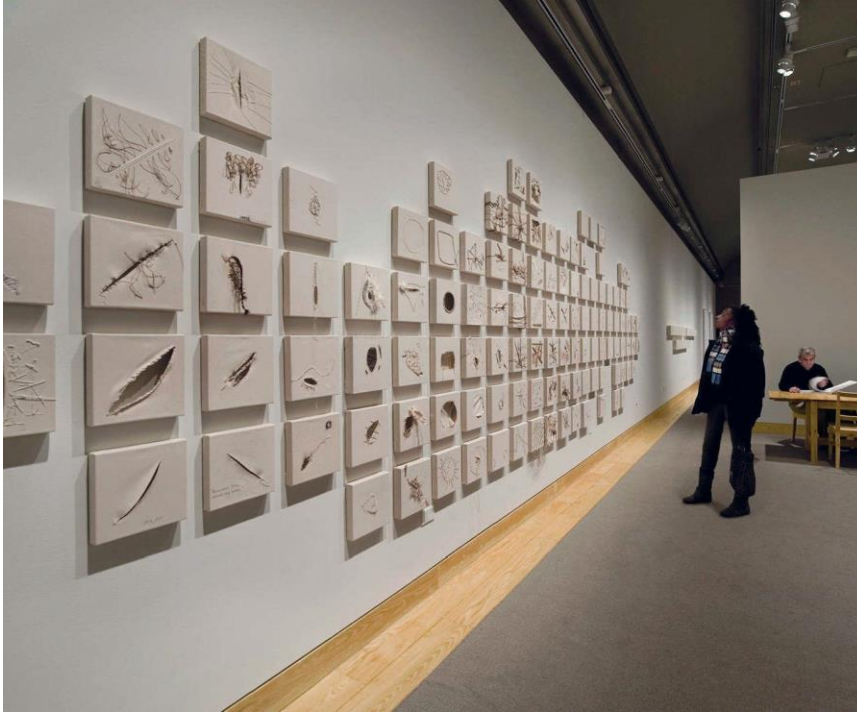


Fig. 3.11
Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-13), installation view, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2010
Sanders, Beverly. "Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor." *American Craft*, September 2010, 32–33.



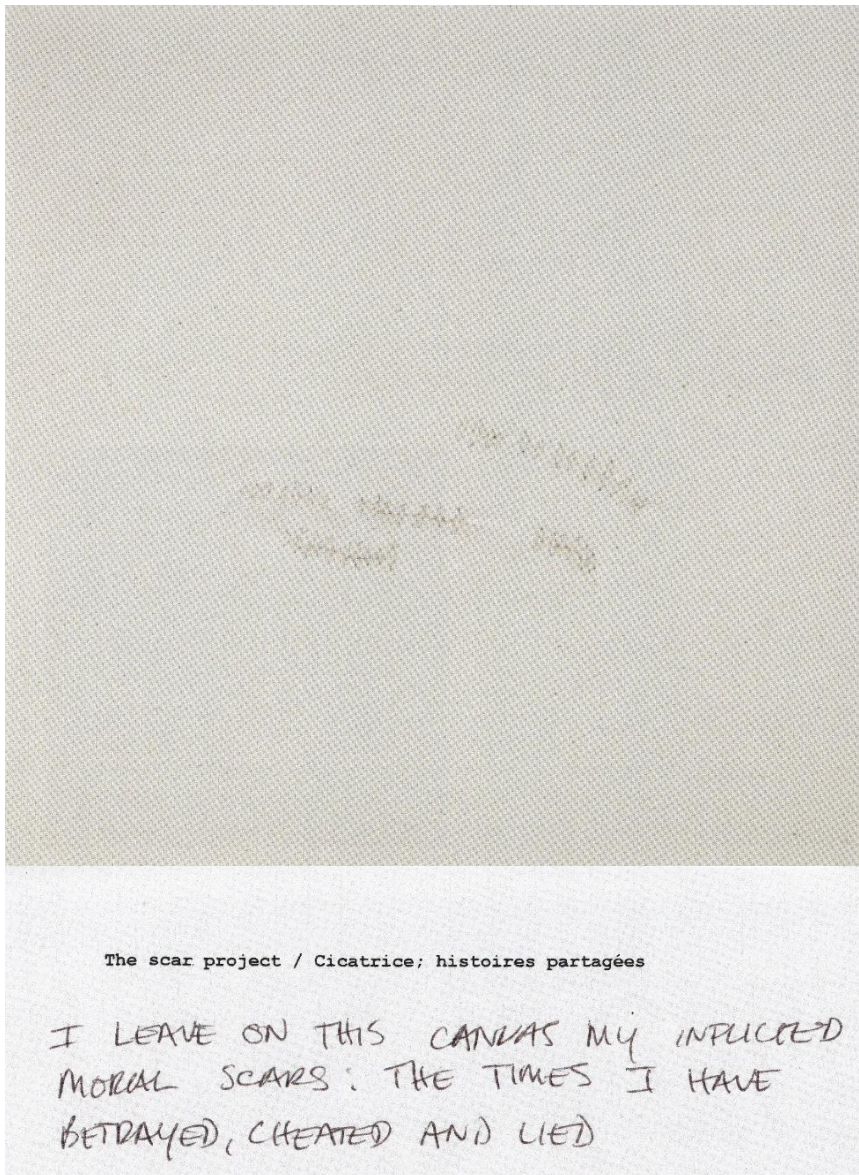
The scar project / Cicatrice: histoires partagées

This is my emotional scar, that I ~~the~~ suffered when I was 10 years old. That year my mother suffered a stroke, which changed my life and my family's. Though she survived, we all have to live with complications this has brought. Many things in my life have ~~stemmed~~ ^{stemmed} from this, both positive and negative, but almost everything leads back to it. And though I try to patch up my life there will always be marks and things that don't quite fit together. I was forced to grow up faster than a lot of children have to, but I did the best I could, much like my stitching job on this canvas. But as much as I've tried to stitch everything together, both on this canvas, and in life, ~~change~~ it will never be the same.

Figs. 3.12-3.13

Canvas and text 000124, from Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-2013)

Myre, Nadia, and Amanda Jane Graham. *Nadia Myre: The Scar Project*. Rochester, NY: Nadia Myre, 2010.



Figs. 3.14-3.15

Canvas and text 000161, from Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-2013)

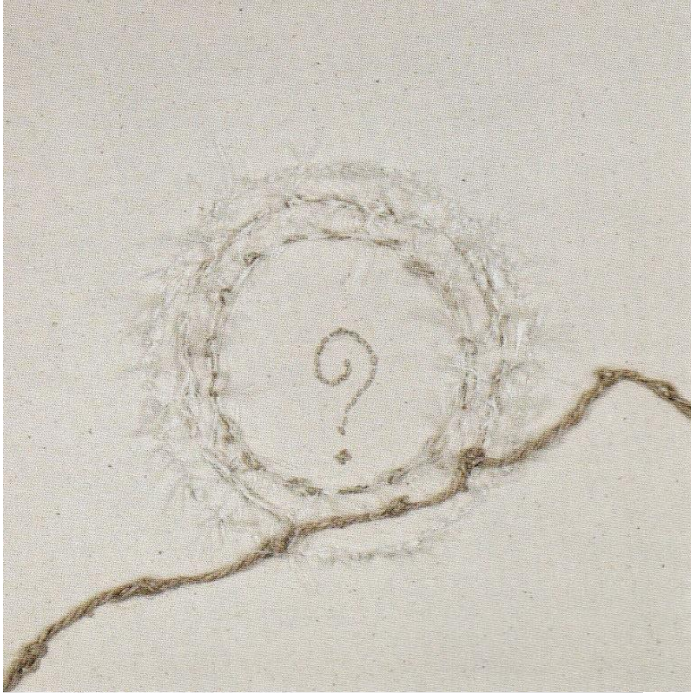
Myre, Nadia, and Amanda Jane Graham. *Nadia Myre: The Scar Project*. Rochester, NY: Nadia Myre, 2010.



Figs. 3.16-3.17

Canvas and text 000186, from Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-2013)

Myre, Nadia, and Amanda Jane Graham. *Nadia Myre: The Scar Project*. Rochester, NY: Nadia Myre, 2010.



The scar project / Cicatrice; histoires partagées

la question est au centre de l'oeuf -
la "Question" humaine est la cicatrice
de l'Espèce.

- Qui suis-je... Où vais-je... D'où je viens...
Quel sens... Pour qui... Pourquoi?...
To be or...

la création poétique et l'expression artistique
sans toutes ses formes, sont le vecteur
transcendant des chemins moueux de la douleur -
le ? couché → ∞ éproue la forme de
l'embryon humain !

(...) Ce qui ne se desine que
s'immente entre deux os
d'un organe embryonnaire...

Francis Rey
Poète

Daas et pour la Beauté des choses.

Date Avril 2008

de toile 000 376

P.S. "L'imaginaire est une cicatrice"
Hubert Aquin -

Figs. 3.18-3.19

Canvas and text 000376, from Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-2013)

Myre, Nadia, and Amanda Jane Graham. *Nadia Myre: The Scar Project*. Rochester, NY:

Nadia Myre, 2010.



The scar project / Cicatrice; histoires partagées

~~born into a political position~~
~~of constantly trying to survive~~
 paths come
 we choose
 either right or wrong or neither
 we try to learn
 we try to heal
 whats been torn &
 ripped to shreds
~~somebody @ another~~
~~and @ another~~
 my scar rises
 UP!
 Above
 Formed into a Braid
 that represents my bond
 with my mother, daughter & July 12, '06
 grandmother
 # de toile 000196
 the braid
 THAT Braid has kept me breathing, beating
 —> Above < being Alive

Figs. 3.20-3.21

Canvas and text 000196, from Nadia Myre, *Scar Project* (2005-2013)

Myre, Nadia, and Amanda Jane Graham. *Nadia Myre: The Scar Project*. Rochester, NY:

Nadia Myre, 2010.



Fig. 4.1
Shikeith, *#Blackmendment*, 2014, Single-channel video, 44 min. Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.2
Shikeith, *#Blackmendment*, 2014, Single-channel video, 44 min. Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.3
Shikeith, *#Blackmendream*, 2014, Single-channel video, 44 min. Video still.
Author's video still.

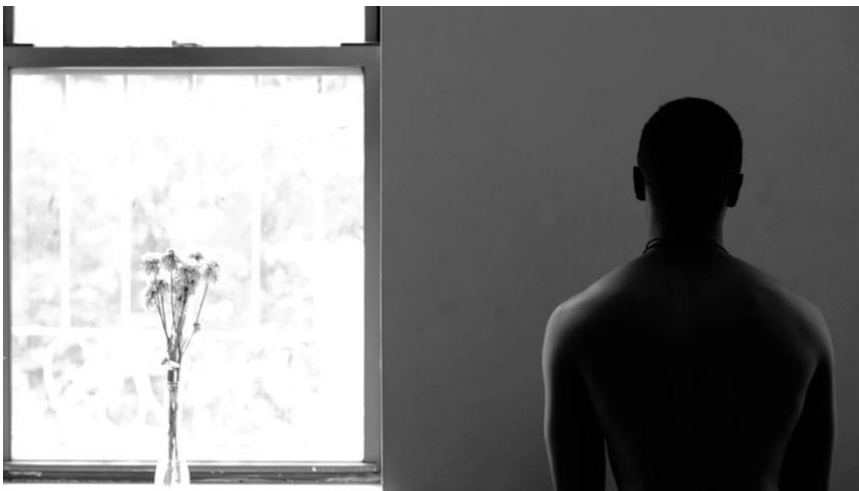


Fig. 4.4
Shikeith, *#Blackmendream*, 2014, Single-channel video, 44 min. Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.5
Shikeith, *#Blackmendment*, 2014, Single-channel video, 44 min. Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4. 6
Shikeith, *#Blackmendment*, 2014, Single-channel video, 44 min. Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.7
Jenny Keane, *Ingeminated Battology*, 2008, Double channel video installation, 8:28 mins (looped). Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.8
Jenny Keane, *Ingeminated Battology*, 2008, Double channel video installation, 8:28 mins (looped). Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.9
Jenny Keane, *Black and Purple*, 2008, Double channel video installation, 7:06 mins
(looped). Video still.
Author's video still.



Fig. 4.10

Jenny Keane, *Ingeminated Battology*, 2008, Double channel video installation, 8:28 mins (looped).

Installation shot, *Mirror Machine* exhibition, Cavan, Ireland, 2012.

O'Connor, Laura. "Mirror Machine Exhibition, Bluewall Gallery," March 13, 2012.

<http://lauraconnorart.blogspot.com/2012/03/mirror-machine-exhibition-bluewall.html>.



Fig. 5.1

Adrian Howells, *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*, 2010-11, one-on-one performance, 30 minutes

Performance photograph, The Arches at Point Hotel, Edinburgh, 2011

Ensall, Jonny. "The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding." *The List*, August 26, 2011. <https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/37152-the-pleasure-of-being-washing-feeding-holding/>.



Fig. 5.2

Adrian Howells, *Foot Washing for the Sole*, 2008-11, one-on-one performance.

Performance photograph by Hisham Suliman. "Adrian Howells Collection - Collection."

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