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*Performing Lesbians: Constructing the Self, Constructing the Community*¹

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Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subject, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story. bell hooks²

I write this at the beginning of the twenty-first century: a time when gay men and lesbians continue to be discriminated against in the UK, when the battle for legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships still looms around the corner; when the proposal of a gay bishop has entirely split the international Anglican Church; and when Section 28 has only just this year been removed from the English statute books.³ I write this at a time, then, when the lesbian or gay subject is still struggling for their right to “be”.⁴ I also, however, write this at a time when, in theory, the notions of “self” and “community” are thoroughly – and I would argue, rightly – problematized.

The 1980s witnessed a flurry of various published anthologies that were primarily concerned with making visible the details of gay and lesbian lives. Such anthologies included *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories*, *The Coming Out Stories* and *The Lesbian Path*.⁵ Throughout the 1990s, there appeared to be a similar flurry of theatrical activity in Glasgow bearing a strong resemblance, in terms of aims and content, to these published anthologies. One difference between them, of course, was their medium of representation, and it is this difference that I aim to elucidate in this chapter.

Biography

In 1995, 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland), working with the charity Scottish Aids Monitor, devised *Talking Bollocks* – a show that might be considered a “community

autobiography”, drawing as it does on the life stories of its participants, gay men with little or no previous experience of theatre. The overwhelming success of this show prompted the company to devise a follow-up in 1998.⁶ At the same time, Natalie Wilson, co-director of the *Talking Bollocks* projects, decided that there should be a female equivalent, and with the gay and lesbian theatre company, mct, devised a “sister” show, *Fingerlicks*.⁷ As with the *Talking Bollocks* performances, *Fingerlicks* proved to be a huge hit, reaching almost capacity audiences and prompting mct to produce *Fingerlicks 2* in 1999.⁸ Finally, in 2000, 7:84 and mct combined forces to create *Just Pretending*, a project which appropriately involved both lesbians and gay men.⁹

All of these performances share certain characteristics, not least that their focus is on the experiences of being gay or lesbian, with those experiences drawn directly from the life experiences of the gay and lesbian performer-participants. One other shared feature of *Talking Bollocks*, *Fingerlicks*, and *Just Pretending* is that their genesis is to be found in the gay and lesbian arts festival, Glasgay.

Glasgay, launched in 1994, has become the UK’s largest such festival, and is now an annual fixture in Glasgow’s calendar.¹⁰ That this festival is held in Glasgow, and not London, or indeed Manchester, both of which have sizeable gay and lesbian “villages”, is worth noting. One effect of Glasgay is that it has placed the gay and lesbian subject firmly within various real and representational frames. As the adage states, “We’re here....” Wilson, commenting on the popularity of *Fingerlicks*, implicitly references the more typical absence of lesbian representation: “audiences were wanting to see more of this type of work, wanting to see their lives on stage”.¹¹

Of course, mct and 7:84 were not the first companies to represent gay men and lesbians in Scotland,¹² and the sheer variety of performances available in Glasgow, particularly following its hugely successful stint as European City of Culture in 1990, is noteworthy. Appreciating the diversity of cultural experiences, it is also to be acknowledged, however, that representations of gay and lesbian subjects within the theatrical frame remain infrequent events. The representation of “Scottish” gay men and lesbians is rarer still.¹³ Glasgay, even if only once a year, attempts to redress that balance. Throughout the two week festival, most major venues in the city play host to some event programmed as part of Glasgay, ranging from art exhibitions, to performance art, to music, to clubs, to poetry and literature readings. At the 2003 Glasgay, there were over 40 events, with artists invited from New York, Toronto, and South Africa. The programme included Diamanda Galás at the Scottish Concert Hall, a dramatisation of Louise Welsh’s crime thriller, *The Cutting Room*, at the Citizens Theatre, the Ballet Trockadero at the Theatre Royal, and Ursula Martinez’s *OAP* at the Centre of Contemporary Art.

Context

The highly visible backlash against the repeal of Section 28 in Scotland provides an illustrative example of the continuing prejudice against gay men and lesbians in Scotland. “Section 28” referred to Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1986, amended in 1988 with a new Section, 2a, which provided that “A local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of

homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”¹⁴ The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 enabled the Section to be repealed in Scotland in June 2000, but not before an impassioned “Keep the Clause” campaign was mounted by those opposed to its repeal. In a press release of October 1999, for example, headlined “No to gay lessons for Scottish school children”, the Christian Institute Scotland stated that “Some 70% of Scottish men believe that homosexual practice is wrong”, claiming to reproduce this statistic from a comprehensive 1994 study (the year before the first *Talking Bollocks* performance.)¹⁵

The intended repeal of Section 28 also prompted Stagecoach tycoon, Brian Souter, to stage a private “referendum”, polling Scottish people on whether they thought the Section should be retained. More than a million Scots voted to keep Section 28 (87% of those who voted), whilst approximately 166,000 desired its repeal. This private “referendum” was widely dismissed by Scottish Parliamentary representatives who pointed out that only one in three potential voters in Scotland even bothered to return their ballot. Whilst this may indeed be the case, the fact that one million people *had* bothered to make their opinion known, and that this opinion was in support of, rather than against, Section 28, is not an insignificant number.

In the same year, Mori Scotland interviewed a sample of adults for the *Sunday Herald*, to determine public attitudes towards homosexuality.¹⁶ 33% of those polled agreed with Cardinal Winning’s description of homosexual relationships as “a perversion”. 14% indicated that if schools were to be allowed to discuss homosexuality, they should “teach children that homosexuality is wrong, and should not be tolerated as a way of life”, while 24% responded that schools should “teach children that

homosexuality is wrong, but should be tolerated as a way of life”. According to these figures, more than one in three people, in Scotland, in the twenty-first century, continues to believe that “homosexuality is wrong”.¹⁷ Another poll, undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research in the Summer of 2000, reports similar findings: “39% of Scots think that homosexuality is ‘always wrong’.”¹⁸

While *Talking Bollocks* and *Fingerlicks* were performed prior to these polls, the attitudes represented by them are precisely the ingrained and everyday attitudes that the performance events were responding to. Within such an atmosphere of intolerance, the need for “community” and the insistence upon the gay or lesbian “self”’s right to be, becomes imperative rather than academic. It is this culture of homophobia that prompted so many shows to take as their foundation the “real stories” – the lived lives – of actual gay men and lesbians. Using their own voices, the performers have the means to talk back, to insist, and to challenge. Importantly, the voices heard here are voices of gay men and lesbians living in Scotland, and that cultural location is as recognized and as important as any sexual identity.

Like the earlier published anthologies these performances seek to represent the marginalized and often objectified gay men and lesbians, allowing them to be – or become – subjects. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to place one of these performances, *Fingerlicks* (1998), beside the published works in order to ask what difference (this) performance potentially makes to the representation of “lesbian” selves.

Different Stories

Anthologies of personal narratives written by lesbians implicitly challenge the assumption that a heterosexual identity is the only, or only legitimate, identity. These autobiographical narratives suggest other lives and other life-paths, providing a different model for a life than that of normative heterosexuality. At the same time, through figuring this “other” subject, they also reveal the presence of that dominant hetero-normative narrative. As Biddy Martin writes in relation to lesbian personal narratives:

Rendering lesbianism natural, self-evident, original, can have the effect of emptying traditional representations of their content, of contesting the only apparent self-evidence of “normal” (read heterosexual) life course.¹⁹

On a very simple level, the stories told extend the range of stories available. Being part of discourse they also extend the range of lives available to be lived. As Liz Stanley insists, stories are preoccupied with a “literary and political re-shaping of language and thus consciousness.”²⁰

The fact that the stories are told by self-identified lesbians is also politically crucial. These “lay” stories challenge the historical “expert’s story” of the dysfunctional, immature, not fully developed, inverted homosexual, or the alternative “clergy’s story” of sinful and unnatural behaviour. In Ken Plummer’s words, the “sexual stories of authority – given to us from on high by the men in black frocks and white coats – are fracturing in the face of *participant stories*.”²¹ Through their stories, then, the storytellers not only claim identities for themselves, but they may also attempt to rewrite what those identities mean. These stories are not guilty confessions, but are most typically celebrations – celebrations of being here, of presence. The act of writing enacts the writer, bringing her

in to existence, as matter. And her life story as something that also matters; that has a right to be read.²² The writer of the lesbian autobiographical narrative is a subject in her own story, rather than the medical or psychiatric object of interest. For Martin, the personal narratives

are responses to the at least implicit questions of what it means to be a lesbian, how lesbianism figures in a life, what it means to come out. In a stricter sense, they are accounts of the process of becoming conscious of oneself as a lesbian, about accepting and affirming that identity against enormous odds, including, of course, the authors' own resistance to the label.²³

Not only do such narratives debunk "expert knowledge", these stories and their tellers also provide possible role models, perhaps prompting further coming to voice. Stories, then, have an inspirational, educational, and consciousness-raising purpose and might indeed have real effects on the future lives or life-courses of their witnesses. This potential affect of the story is its "social role".²⁴

These stories work their way into changing lives, communities and cultures. Through and through, sexual story telling is a political process.²⁵

Importantly, the stories told are also stories that serve to strengthen the idea of the lesbian community. As Plummer writes, "Stories gather people around them", while for Bonnie Zimmerman, they are "instrumental in creating networks and community."²⁶ Plummer also identifies a dialectical movement between communities, politics, identities and stories, as communities and stories feed "upon and into the other."²⁷

This relationship between stories and the construction of selves and communities is one that needs to be recognized. Communities, as most often conceived, operate through a process of inclusion/exclusion. In order to have a community, there must be a

boundary separating those who belong from those who do not (and the former relies on the latter). Shared narratives are one process of erecting and maintaining a boundary. The repetition of the “proper narrative” becomes an identification badge for community members, and simultaneously a process through which the community is maintained. Deviations from the proper narrative threaten any community established on the grounds of an assumed sameness. As such, deviations are prohibited. Those telling the wrong story may well find themselves ejected or barred from the community, whilst those unable to tell the proper story will be excluded from the outset. It is against such a reductive and dangerous concept of community based on sameness that Diane Elam proposes a coalition politics based on a groundless solidarity,²⁸ and Biddy Martin figures a community as being *achieved* rather than assumed. Judith Butler’s critique of the “feminist community” is an apposite illustration, worth remembering: “Through what exclusions has the feminist [lesbian] subject been constructed, and how do those excluded domains return to haunt the ‘integrity’ and ‘unity’ of the feminist [lesbian] ‘we’.”²⁹

The “Proper Narrative”

Whilst the anthologies of personal narratives are not singularly “coming-out” stories, they are often so, representing that moment of coming-into “being a lesbian”. Plummer has identified common features of the coming-out story, which include “the use of some kind of causal language, sense of linear progression, [they] talk with unproblematic language and [they] feel they are ‘discovering a truth’.”³⁰ Or, in Martin’s terms,

many of the coming-out stories are tautological insofar as they describe a process of coming to know something that has always been true, a truth to which the author has returned. They also describe a linear progression from a past shrouded in confusion or lies to a present or future that represents a liberation from the past. Coming out is conceived, then, as both a return to one's true self and a desire and a movement beyond distortion and constraint, grounding identity and political unity in moral right and truth.³¹

Plummer similarly identifies in the coming-out story a sense of “self-consciousness”

about the “self”, about identity

which scans the past life for clues to one's sexual being. There is a sense of identity ... hidden from the surface awaiting clearer recognition, labelling, categorising.³²

Of course, the telling of stories about oneself is part of the construction of an identity for that self, rather than its mere presentation or recording. Barbara Ponse's empirical research, undertaken in the 1970s, led her to posit the existence of a “gay trajectory” within the lesbian community.³³ This operates much like a “narrative trajectory” – unfolding in time, complete with a beginning which leads to a middle which in turn leads to an end. Ponse has identified five recurring components of the trajectory, which can occur in any order. These include being aware of a difference from some assumed “norm”, which is subsequently identified as same-sex attraction, the identification of same-sex attraction as belonging to a “type” of person, the application of that label to the self, the seeking out of others who share that self-identification, and the experience of a same-sex relationship. It is through and within this narrative – what could now be called a performative narrative – that the “self” that “is” categorically lesbian comes into being. (Presumably those who identify as heterosexual have no need to be “self” conscious, and

therefore do not construct an equivalent “straight trajectory”).) For Ponse, this narrative is the “biographic norm of the community” and as such is the one most frequently told.³⁴

Reading through the anthologies, this narrative is indeed evident. If there are “auto/biographical norms” operating within the lesbian and gay “community”, which arguably construct such a community, then these already existent and dominant narratives are surely implicated in the construction of one’s own story – and in turn one’s “own” sense of identity. The frame in and through which the self is constituted is already there.

The gay and lesbian “auto/biographical norm” is itself not immune to or divorced from wider narrative imperatives. The notion of a “gay trajectory” aside, Plummer acknowledges that the coming-out stories

fit so well into the widely-held narratives of taking a journey, suffering and finding a home, [that] it is easy to see why they have become so pervasive. There is a fit; they sit well with what we already know.³⁵

For Plummer, then, the coming-out story is not specific in its formula, since it contains *generic* elements of modern stories:

There is always a *suffering* which gives the tension to the plot; this is followed through a crisis or turning point of *epiphany* where something has to be done – a silence broken; and this leads to a *transformation* – a surviving and maybe a surpassing.³⁶

The ways in which lesbians make sense of their experiences, and of whom they are, are influenced by the existence of such dominant patterns of story telling. Added to such general dominant models, within *autobiographical* storytelling there are also dominant models, themselves patterned on this novel form, with its linear progression

and its narrative drive to resolution. In summary, then, lesbian autobiographical narratives work between various models: the dominant model of autobiography, the dominant model of lesbian auto/biography, which may be oral in form, and the dominant model of narratives, *per se*.

Dominant narratives, of course, do not function in isolation from reality, but very much inform and affect, rather than simply represent, the lived. The dominant narrative of sexuality in the contemporary Western world is that one *has* a sexuality – and specifically a singular sexuality. It is precisely this dominant narrative that the stories in lesbian anthologies often seek to represent. Writers' representations of their lesbian sexuality are appeals for inclusion within this dominant narrative, rather than challenges to it.

These “generic” stories, conforming to and performing the dominant and/or lesbian “auto/biographical norm”, might well limit what stories can be told about “being” lesbian, or anything else. Each time this normative narrative of what it is to be lesbian is recited, which includes Ponse's key narrative components, the more difficult it becomes to imagine, propose, recite or live other lives. Further, there is no acknowledgment, by the writers, of their own involvement in the construction of their identity, through *their* use of discourses – including the “scientific”, “medical” or “genetic” discourses of “innate sexuality”. For Biddy Martin, “these narratives tend to erase the individual's and the group's active participation in their formation as social beings”³⁷ Experiences and their *interpretations* are figured as essences and incontrovertible evidence. In these stories the often confusing, lived experience of sex and sexuality, the contested boundaries and binaries, the contradictions, the contingencies, the contexts, are erased or

ignored in the name of the “truth” of sexual identity. In these *individual* stories there is then, ironically, too often a *sameness*.

Lesbians Performing

Recognising the potentials and limitations of published anthologies of personal narratives, I now want to turn to the performance, *Fingerlicks*. Aware of the lack of representations of lesbians in theatre, in general, and in Scotland, in particular, mct’s aim for the production was that it should “reach out” to lesbians. The intention was that it should function as the ground upon which to bring different women together, and to find ways for these women to use theatre to “work together and collaborate together and to discuss experiences and find common grounds and find the differences.” On a practical level, it was hoped that the participants would acquire new skills, enabling them to “put their life in front of an audience.”³⁸

Despite the difference in the medium, which may indeed *make* a huge difference, there are structural and thematic similarities between *Fingerlicks* and the aforementioned published anthologies. *Fingerlicks* is performed by eight performers, each of whom has at least one moment in the “spotlight” to enact her story (with other participants playing other roles as necessary). Each of the stories is “discrete”, being self-contained. No single story unfolds throughout the performance, unless one considers the composite picture that is composed by these individual stories as being a larger story. The lives recounted here are all about “being” a lesbian, and are all told from that perspective. For Wilson,

the uniqueness of the group is the diversity of the lesbians involved. The common denominator is that they all have little or no experience of drama and have come together to create a theatre piece. The women come from all walks of life and by being together on stage they create a microcosm of the spectrum of lesbian sexuality.³⁹

Features identified by Biddy Martin and Ken Plummer are uncannily present in some of the stories presented in *Fingerlicks*. Alba's story is illustrative, beginning as it does with a quote from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "To thine own self be true." Alba's narrative figures a journey in which Alba, supposedly on the path towards her self, endures much pain, including rape by her former husband. By the end, however, we are in no doubt that the outcome is worth the pain endured. Matching Plummer's "template", there is suffering, a turning point of epiphany, and a transformation, leading indeed to a surviving and a surpassing.

He raped me. There was no struggle, no shouting, no screaming, no crying. Because that was what he wanted. I knew he could take nothing else from me than he had done over the past 20 years. I was in control. I may have lost a relationship with two of my sons because I'm a lesbian. I may have lost all my material goods. I may be in conflict with my religion. But I've regained my self respect. I own all my triumphs, all my successes, all my mistakes. I've had more sex in the last 18 months than in the past 20 years and it's been fantastic. I know who I am. And to thine own self be true.⁴⁰

Alba's journey, narrated directly to the audience, is one that travels from despair to freedom, and the story appears to employ a very definite narrative trajectory. However, the route taken is less linear than circular, as Alba *returns* to what she believes she always was. This return is literally remarked in her text, through the repetition of the first and last line: "To thine own self be true." Alba's story, then, in line with Martin's insights, is less one of development than of *rediscovery*.

This narrative trajectory is equally evident in Caroline's story. Caroline begins by reflecting on herself as an eight year old going to visit her Aunty Bessy with her mum and dad. Aunty Bessy lived with Aunty Charlotte, "in a posh house, with a big garden, and a cat". Her mum said that the two aunties were just very good friends. Caroline remembers they both wore trousers, and the only other woman she knew who did that was Ivy Diddle. (Tellingly, this name had become a euphemism for lesbians in the place where Caroline lived. Her older sister had even told her that "Aunty Bessy and Aunty Charlotte are Ivy Diddles.") The narrative then tracks forward to Caroline, aged 18.

C: [*Miming being on phone.*] Right – I need to go. Bye. I was 18. I needed to be on the phone for hours. I had to know where we were going that weekend. Who fancied who. What to wear. And I wanted to be part of the group. I loved clothes. Makeup. I was a young woman and was feminine. And I liked it. [*A., a female friend, enters.*] Hi, I've started night-school for shorthand and typing, it's next door to a pub called Vintners – Clyde Street. Do you want to go for a drink?

A: Yeah, ok.

[*They walk, music and lights – "I am what I am" plays, as they enter "pub".*]

A: Is this a gay bar?

C: Well, there's plenty of men, but we're the only women.

A: No we're not. They're women over there.

C: They're women?

A: Caroline, this is a gay bar. *They* are lezzies.

C: Really? They look like men. I thought lezzies liked women?

A: Well, that one likes the look of you.

C: *I'm* not going to be like them.

[*She covers her mouth quickly as she realizes what she has just blurted out.*]

Mirroring Alba's story, Caroline, in spite of her supposed awareness of her attraction to women, gets married, has a child, and endures an unhappy and abusive marriage. She then meets a woman and her story ends with the declaration:

We've been in love for seven years now. My son and I live with Brenda. Same village, same avenue, same neighbours. Just a different life. And I know I never had a choice – I'm a lesbian. I always have been. I no longer feel any guilt or shame. I'm good. I'm happy. I'm happy about who I am. I've got a nice garden, I've got a posh house, I've got three cats. And Brenda and I, we're Ivy Diddles.

As with Alba, Caroline has made a journey, from a "wrong" choice to the only possible, therefore "right", choice. And just as Alba's story ends with the same line it began so too does Caroline's story tie beginning and end through the repeated motif of "Ivy Diddle". In both stories, traumatic difficulties are encountered and overcome, with the happy ending assured. Indeed, to become what they have always been is the only possible way that the happy ending can be achieved; otherwise they would be denying who they are.

In both these examples Martin's tautology – *coming to know something that has always been true* – is explicit. Caroline "had no choice" about being an "Ivy Diddle". In spite of her heterosexual marriage, she has returned to that which she always was. Similarly, Alba has also returned to her "true" self, which is her lesbian self. This return to a "truth" simultaneously suggests that the life previously lived, prior to this return, was an aberration, an untruth, an inauthentic life. Here then, we witness Martin's "movement beyond distortion" and towards "liberation", the inscription of the "moral right".

Both Alba's and Caroline's rendering of the past is typical of the coming-out story, as the past is sifted for clues that point to the present lesbian identity – clues which verify the authenticity and authority of that identity. In Alba's story, she fondly remembers herself as a school-girl, admiring other girl's bodies in the school-showers. In Caroline's story, the transformative forensic activity uncovers trips to the gay bar.

Well, I went to Vintners every week... Why? I wasn't sure. Yes, I was, I was attracted to women.

Caroline first states she did not know why she went to the gay bar, and then insists that she did know. Two Carolines are perceptible here, the Caroline of the past who denies acknowledging her sexuality, and the Caroline of the present who reclaims that sexuality, who rereads previous events from the place of the present; from the present, secure, lesbian identity. Whilst the Caroline of the past claims that she "wasn't sure", the Caroline of the present interprets that "unsureness" as "denial", and cancels it out by being absolutely sure now, about what she *really* felt or knew then. In this narrative, it is not that she was not a lesbian then. In fact, she was one, but could not admit it. This reinterpreted past is the proof of who she is now. She is who she evidently always was. Any gap between "was" and "is" becomes erased through this reinterpetive act and any tension between then and now is also negated through ascribing authority to the present Caroline. The Caroline standing in front of us is the one who definitively knows the truth about who she is and was. This is the real Caroline. Her past, which includes her heterosexual past, is brought into line with the present, serving to provide a solid ground for this present, a ground upon which this act of reinterpretation is itself enabled. The act

of remembering, then, contains within it a dialectical movement, as past and present become mutually dependent, supportive and regenerative. Such reinscription of course enables the production of a coherent narrative told by a unified narrator. The “proper narrative” is recited here; the lesbian community, constructed on the secure grounds of stable sexual identity, remains unthreatened. The separating wall between “us” and “them” similarly remains in place, unbreached.

Performing Lesbians

Acknowledging that some of the tales told in *Fingerlicks* mirror dominant narrative structures, I would be doing an extreme disservice to the production, its creators, and its audiences, if I failed to recognize that within *Fingerlicks* there are other sides to the story. Liz Stanley challenges Martin’s criticisms of lesbian coming-out anthologies by suggesting that though it is “easy to dismiss coming out stories for their lack of sophistication in theorising ‘self’ and its relationship to collectivities and identities” such criticism does not recognize that coming-out anthologies enable a dialogue. The readers of anthologies are *active* readers, and as such they contrast the stories read with their own experiences, rather than just consuming them unquestioningly. Readers “read between, above, and beyond the lines.”⁴¹

The criticism frequently made of personal narratives that Stanley takes to task here is that they unproblematically assume a referentiality between experience and the writing of that experience. For Stanley, criticisms such as this are, at the outset, misplaced, since the primary import of these anthologies is their “fundamentally *political* character [...]”⁴² Set within a context of intolerance, the political character of

Fingerlicks is of course primary. However, the performance does also play ambiguously, though strategically, with the referent. One reason that performers so frequently use personal material as a resource is that its assumed relationship to the “real” affords it a particular power. Believing that something really happened, invests it with a political urgency; as witnesses to this event that did really happen, we are implicated in it, must change the reality, must stop it happening again, etc. Such is the potential effect of an appeal to the real. However, one cannot, of course, ever represent the real. It is always a representation. And many performers, whilst activating the power of the autobiographical mode, simultaneously place the referent into a situation of instability, prompting us to question the status of what we see. Bobby Baker, for example, evidently plays herself as a persona, so is not, then, in fact playing herself;⁴³ Tim Miller makes it explicit that his autobiographical performances can be nowhere near to the lived mess of his experience.⁴⁴

Certain representational forms used in *Fingerlicks* prompt referential readings. A frequent mode of delivery is the direct address – seemingly unadorned, straight to audience. We appear to see before us Alba, who tells us her own story. Alba plays Alba, Caroline plays Caroline, Seg plays Seg. The assumption of referentiality is also encouraged by the minimal mise-en-scène. The stage is mostly bare, and the performers ostensibly appear to be wearing their own clothes – that is, they do not seem to be wearing costumes. (Of course, they are – that of the “everyday”.) Taken together, the effect suggests a denial of theatricality. (Which is, of course, a carefully stage-managed effect.) What we see appears to be “raw”, and there is perhaps a certain assumed correlation, or slip, between “raw” and “truthful” and the *real thing*. In an interesting

comparison, Jon Dovey arrives at a similar conclusion in his study of “first person media”, stating that:

the low grade video image has become *the* privileged form of TV ‘truth telling’, signifying authenticity and an indexical reproduction of the real world; indexical in the sense of presuming a direct and transparent correspondence between what is in front of the camera and its taped representation.⁴⁵

The fact that the performers are not professional actors also appears to provide some ground for the assumption that what they are sharing is therefore implicitly closer to the real and authentic, or in Dovey’s words, “amateurishness [is read as] a guarantee of truth.”⁴⁶

In tension with such assumptions, however, is the unavoidable fact that what we see before us is a *performance*, that the women are on a stage, at some distance from us, *performing*. The use of stage lighting and music make this even more evident. In contrast to the images consumed via the television monitor, the apparatus of the medium is here always apparent. We see it. Even without a lavish set, or costumes, the theatrical “frame” which separates us from the performers is always present. And what takes place within this frame are “enactments”. This is not a documentary, situated in supposedly real time. This is Caroline re-enacting her story, these are women playing other characters, including men. Finally, the very constructed nature of the stories, the presence of the narratives, the neat resolutions, the recurring motifs and repetition of key phrases, the carefully managed comic timing, make the status of these *stories* apparent. It is difficult, sitting in a theatre, to mistake a representation for the real. And it is evident, in the shaky, nervous voices of the non-professional performers, that this act of

representation is hard work. As Wilson states, the performers have “actually moulded and shaped one of their experiences into something creative.”⁴⁷

Astutely aware of the political potential afforded by theatre, *Fingerlicks* capitalizes on the shared space and time of the live theatrical experience through strategically incorporating what might be called “shared symbols”. These act as gelling agents for spectators, in the service of community construction. In the performance, the use of assumed shared signs include geographical or site related symbols, such as the Vintners bar, recalled by Caroline. As Glasgow’s first gay bar, which has since been demolished, Vintners is a powerful symbol not only of a local geography, but also local history. These symbols, then, are not just general lesbian symbols, but more importantly are culturally specific, and would only hold significance for a local population. Location and sexual identity become implicated in each other. This significance is made tangible in the live theatre event, as members of the audience reveal their connection to and with the local, through laughter, head nodding, whispering to companions, etc. The awareness of shared local knowledge potentially induces a powerful sense of community cohesion – a community that is bound both by geography and sexuality. On the other hand, this cohesive tactic carries an implicit risk, as it excludes those who do not share the knowledge. The focus on the local, as with the focus on sexuality, necessarily confronts its own limitations – the non-transferability of the symbols.

Other, more general, “symbols” include those taken from contemporary British popular culture. The story enacted by Lynne includes a re-enactment from the soap opera, *Brookside*, a programme that, in the late 1990s, had particular interest for many British lesbians.

P: At the age of 14, Lynne was confused and very glued to the box.

[*“Brookside” music plays. P and A come on stage together. Lynne watches them from the armchair.*]

A: Margaret, I’ve got something to tell you.

P: What is it Beth?

This “excerpt” from the soap culminates with “Beth” and “Margaret” indulging in a long, deep kiss. The clapping and cheering from the auditorium is immediate and sustained, causing the performers to take a pause before continuing with their stories. Such a response is presumably an indication of the recognition of the reference. Moreover, the fact that the two women who re-enact “*that* kiss”, live onstage, are self-identified lesbians rather than actresses acting as lesbians, probably added to the spectators’ pleasure.

Finally, another form of “symbol” used variously throughout the performance is that of the “expected scenario”, which, precisely because it *is* predictable in its content, again enables a sense of shared experiences and knowledge. Whether these scenarios are “true” and are based on actual events is irrelevant. Their status is as lesbian *folklore*, and like folk stories, they engender a sense of “the folk”, of community, whilst at the same time, perhaps assuming that community. At a live theatre event, one is *with* the folk, sharing the experience.

In *Fingerlicks*, the inscription of lesbian folklore occurs just after the participant, Seg, has come out to her parents. Prior to revealing her sexuality, she tells them that she no longer wants to train in Physical Education. Upon learning of her lesbianism, her mother asks her whether she is mad.

Throwing your life away like that. Is it this gay thing why you can't be a PE teacher?

Seg replies with one single word: "Hardly". For many who identify as lesbian, the "myth" of having a crush on the often assumed to be lesbian PE teacher is rife, and the mother's naivety here, alongside Seg's "knowing" answer, produces a wonderful comic moment. Providing you are in on the joke, of course.⁴⁸

Further countering Martin's criticism of published lesbian anthologies, Stanley refers to the wide diversity of "lesbian experience" displayed in them, demanding that attention should be paid to the specifics of each story, rather than merely identifying the more obvious similarities in the narratives. Such attention would reveal the "hints and more than hints of fractures and disagreements."⁴⁹ Similarly, though it is possible to critique *Fingerlicks* for its inscription of sexual essences and the centrality of sexuality as an organizing perspective, it is difficult to ignore the fact that there are eight different performers, with eight different lives, each performed in a different way. Though individual stories might contain moments of resolution, the presence of eight individual tales told in different modes results in an overall production that is neither seamless nor coherent. Alongside the narrative style of Alba's story there is the dramatic exposition of Caroline's story, punctured by Christabel singing her story, all of which are disrupted by short, comic, non-narrative interludes or sketches.

Similarly, while Alba's and Caroline's stories follow the predictable narrative trajectory, which leads the protagonist from silence to speech, from guilt to celebration, Lynne's story, by contrast, does not fulfill the demands of this convention. Admittedly,

her story does start off on the typical path, but it refuses to stay there as she refuses to provide a closure to her narrative.

The story begins with the following statement, told by another participant:

At the age of 11, Lynne began to wonder why she was different from her school friends.

Lynne's felt "difference" is inscribed immediately and she tries to make sense of her feelings by seeking references from the culture around her, confirming Plummer's insights into the "self-consciousness" of the gay or lesbian "self". Lynne finds the references she needs in the lesbian affair on *Brookside*, and in the "confessions" of Rikki Lake's guests. (This doubling of the confession – and its place in identity construction – is worth noting.) Advised by her older cousin to contact the Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, Lynne is told about their youth group. Being only 15, however, she has to get permission from her parents to attend, which obviously means that she has to "come out" to them.

[Mother and father are sitting in the two armchairs, as if watching Television. Lynne approaches them.]

Lynne: Mum, dad. Mum, dad, I want to ask you'se something.
[Both ignore her.] Mum! *[Dad turns TV off.]*

Mum: All right, what is it?

Lynne: It's just that I'm going to a youth group on Monday.

Mum: What kind of youth group?

Lynne: I can't tell you.

Mum: Well, where is it then?

Lynne: I can't tell you that either.

Mum: What do you mean, you can't tell us?

Lynne: I just can't.

Dad: Well, in that case you'll not be going.

Lynne: Oh for god's sake, it's a lesbian youth group!

[Father gets up, looks at her, and silently leaves the room. The mother then gets up and exits with this parting shot:]

Mum: What have you done to us?

[The scene ends with Lynne sitting down in one of the armchairs. She looks small, as she shrinks into the large seat. She sits with her hands by her sides, and her head down, forlorn, and still. The lights fade on her down-turned head, so that she is left sitting in darkness. The track, "She Screams in Silence", by Greenday, plays this scene out.]

Lynne's story does *not* end happily. But what is revealing and important about this story is that, as yet, there *is* no narrative ending. Instead, there is a pause. Lynne is the youngest participant in *Fingerlicks*. Unlike the other women, she does not yet have a secure lesbian present from which she can look back and reinterpret or rewrite her past. She does not have the benefit of hindsight, nor the reassurance that things will be all right. Here, there is no distance between the "bad" past and the "good" present. In life, her sexual story has not been resolved, and so she cannot provide a neat resolution here. Lynne's story appears to capture the moment of the present, and the uncertainty of the present, before it has become a narrated, past, event. And this present is *here*, in front of us – this *is* the teenager Lynne that we are witnessing. This is also, I would argue, the privileged moment of live theatre, and its aptness as an autobiographical medium.

Complicating this somewhat, and further fracturing the linearity of the performance, the fact that Lynne *is* here, in front of us, *telling* this story, *here and now*, perhaps does inscribe some sort of resolution. What she says and where she says it from are not quite in synch; what we hear and see are slightly different. This is, again, of course, the potential of theatre. Whilst her performance shows a young woman screaming in silence, that same performance *is* the scream made loud. That is, her involvement in this project is itself some sort of outcome. This is true of all the participants in *Fingerlicks*. The ultimate sign of the performers shift from guilt, or self-loathing, or rejection, or confusion, to acceptance, celebration and affirmation, is their presence in this production. And the production does not merely reflect, but actively enables the *practice* of this acceptance, celebration and affirmation. In this sense, it is performative.

Arguably, the performers in *Fingerlicks* are as affected through the telling of their stories as much as the spectators are affected through seeing them. Talking out demands an agency, and in the moment of performing, that agency is both experienced and perceived. Who knows what real effect Lynne's participation in *Fingerlicks* will have on the actual paths her life now takes?⁵⁰ Performances such as these do not merely report on experiences, but they may alter future experiences. So the future life becomes implicated by the reporting of the life already lived. Involvement in these productions necessarily becomes a part of the life-story, rather than merely commenting upon it. Although the lights come down on an isolated, rejected and abjected Lynne, her presence here bears witness to the fact that this is *not* where this story actually ends.⁵¹

Of course, one of the greatest differences between *Fingerlicks* and the published anthologies of lesbian experiences, is that the former is a collaborative process, involving the material presence of live bodies in shared space. The process of *Fingerlicks* was one that lasted six months, with the women working together on a weekly basis to collectively create the show. At the end of the piece, the eight women line up, side by side, and each one recites a single phrase from her story. These phrases, like the women saying them, stand alone, and although the words are spoken side by side, they do not automatically add up to any cohesive statement. Instead, the words are reminders of the diverse stories and experiences that have been shared. Lynne's phrase, for example, is "She screams in silence", and Caroline's is "We're Ivy Diddles". However, the very last phrase of *Fingerlicks* is spoken by all of the women, simultaneously:

Together. Fingerlicks.

This final line figures a community arrived at without imposing a sense of closure and resolution onto the production. Instead, what we are left with is an image of a group of women who have come together, for *this* project. This project, and in turn our witnessing of their stories, has only been possible through their shared participation. What is brought into focus at the end, then, is *the project, Fingerlicks*, and the shared experience of this, rather than a single, shared experience of "being" a lesbian. Perhaps this ending of *Fingerlicks* suggests, by example, the possibility of navigating a path between the powerful but potentially dangerous authority of individual experience and the *active creation* of communities. Here, at the end, *Fingerlicks* is the community.

And it is at the end of the night, in the theatre bar, or on the street outside the venue, or on the route home, that the tangible difference of live theatre makes its potential felt. For after the event the dialogue begins, as individual spectators speak their shared moments, differences, disagreements, aspirations and hopes to each other. This, then, is the potential dialogic quality of autobiography, as identified by Stanley.⁵² But more specifically, this is the dialogic opportunity particularly afforded and prompted by the collaborative nature of theatre, which demands, in most instances at least, an audience.⁵³

1. The research for this chapter was supported by the AHRB.
2. hooks, bell, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 43.
3. Section 28 (2a), instituted by Margaret Thatcher's Tory Government in 1988, was only finally repealed in England by the House of Lords in July 2003.
4. The fact that there *is* even a battle, an appointment of a gay bishop anywhere, and that Section 28 has finally been repealed does, however, show some kind of shift. Homosexuality is certainly no longer the hidden or silenced topic.
5. See Cruikshank, Margaret (ed.), *The Lesbian Path* (California: Angel Press, 1980), Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, *Inventing Ourselves, Lesbian Life Stories* (London: Routledge, 1989), Stanley, Julie Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe (eds), *The Coming Out Stories* (Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1980).
6. *Talking Bollocks*, The Citizens Theatre (Glasgow), 4 – 5 November 1995, *Talking Bollocks – Unzipped!*, Ramshorn Theatre (Glasgow), 1 – 4 November 1998.
7. *Fingerlicks*, The Arches (Glasgow), 4 – 8 November 1998.
8. *Fingerlicks 2*, The Ramshorn Theatre (Glasgow), 24 – 25 June 1999.
9. *Just Pretending*, Tron Theatre (Glasgow), 27 - 28 October 2000. 7:84 is one of Scotland's longest surviving "political" theatre companies, established in 1973 under the artistic direction of John McGrath. The original agenda of 7:84 was to produce theatre for working class people. At the time of writing, the Scottish Arts Council has announced that it is likely to withdraw the company's core funding in 2005, making the future of 7:84 uncertain. mct stands for "mollie's collar and tie", old euphemisms for gay

men and lesbians. The company was launched in 1996, with a very explicit gay and lesbian agenda. Artistic director, Christopher Deans, wanted to specifically address Scottish gay identity. mct was the first Scottish gay and lesbian theatre company, but its existence was short lived. Failing to secure sufficient funding from the Scottish Arts Council, in spite of encouraging press reviews for each of their projects (alongside some less favourable responses from various church representatives), Deans finally decided to disband the company in 2000. The “fate” of mct is not untypical. At the time of writing, there is no single theatre company in the UK with a lesbian and/or gay remit. Gay Sweatshop, the most well known such company, established in 1975, lost its Arts Council funding in 1997. I do not wish to propose that the lack of funding is the only reason for the absence of any such theatre company in the twenty-first century. It could, of course, be due to the fact that in 2003 there is no longer any perceived need for such a company. Indeed, engaging with the problematics of “identity”, the labels “gay” and “lesbian” are often replaced by performers with that of “queer”. See also my note below. A discussion preceding the one I am presenting here is, of course, what constitutes or defines “gay” or “lesbian” theatre?

10. As befits the cultural shift in perceptions of “identity”, Glasgay marketed itself in 2003 as a “multi-arts festival for multi-sexual people and their friends.”

11. Wilson, Natalie, in interview with the author (London 2001).

12. One company in Glasgow, whilst not identifying itself as a lesbian or gay theatre company, did consistently include gay or lesbian characters in its new writing. Clyde Unity Theatre operated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, producing shows such as *Mum*,

Dad, There's Something I've Got to Tell You (1986) *Killing Me Softly* (1987), *A Little Older* (1992), and *Accustomed to her Face* (1993).

13. I acknowledge, of course, that the idea of “Scottish” identity is as problematic as the idea of a lesbian or gay identity.

14. In 2000, Mrs Strain and the Christian Institute brought a lawsuit against Glasgow City Council, claiming that the Council had violated the Section by funding events “promoting” homosexuality. Such events included Glasgay and mct productions. The lawsuit was eventually dropped, following a hearing and an agreed settlement.

15. www.christian.org.uk/scotland/pressreleases/1999/october_29_1999.htm, consulted 17 November 2003. The study from which this statistic is taken is Johnson, A et al, *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* (London: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1994).

16. www.mori.com/polls/2000/sh000121.shtml. Consulted 16 November 2003.

17. The National Centre for Social Research states that the figures reported for Scotland are “almost identical to that found by the British Social Attitudes survey in England”.

www.natcen.ac.uk/news_ssa_pr2001.htm, consulted 16 November 2003.

18. www.natcen.ac.uk/news_ssa_pr2001.htm. The rhetoric of these polls is surprising. The statistic from the National Centre for Social Research actually reads “Just 39% of Scots think that homosexuality is ‘always wrong’.” That “just”, alongside the also frequently used “only”, is instructive. It is presumably a matter of perspective, but as one who would be considered to be in the “wrong” by 39% of the Scottish population, that 39% feels very intimidating, and not at all negligible. Where the *Sunday Herald* writes, in 2000, that “83% of Scots believe schools should teach gay tolerance”

(www.sundayherald.com/print6460, consulted 17 November 2003), Stephen Khan, the

Scottish editor of the *Observer*, focuses on the actual prejudicial attitudes, producing a less positive headline in 2003: “Ugly truth about Scottish intolerance”. “A government survey found 10 per cent of the population would prefer not to have a black or Asian parliamentary representative. [...] The report showed that even more Scots (18 per cent) believe it would be unacceptable to be represented in parliament by a homosexual, while 30 per cent said gay or lesbian primary teachers were unsuitable for the job.”

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/race/story/0,11255,1056400,00html>, consulted 17 November 2003.

19. Martin, Biddy, ‘Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]’, in Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (eds), *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 77 –103, p. 85.

20. Stanley, Liz, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 116.

21. Plummer, Ken, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 138.

22. It is worth noting that Wilson, who has worked with both the men in *Talking Bollocks* and the women in *Fingerlicks*, reports that one of the main differences between the two groups was the effort required to persuade the women that their stories did, indeed, matter, and that people would be interested in them. Interview with the author (London 2001).

23. Martin, ‘Lesbian Identity’, p. 83.

24. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 25.

25. Plummer, p. 144.

26. Plummer, p. 174; Zimmerman, Bonnie, 'The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives', in Estelle B. Freedman, Barbara C. Gap, Susan L. Johnson, Kathleen M. Weston (eds), *The Lesbian Issue – Essays from Signs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 251 – 70, p. 261.
27. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 87.
28. Elam, Diane, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. En Abyme* (London: Routledge, 1994).
29. Butler, Judith, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Questions of "Postmodernism"', in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992), 3 – 21, p. 14.
30. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 82.
31. Martin, 'Lesbian Identity', p. 88.
32. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 33.
33. Ponse, Barbara, *Identities in the Lesbian World: The Social Construction of Self* (London: Greenwood Press, 1978). Ponse's "gay trajectory", produced in 1978, reads from a 21st Century perspective as limited and old-fashioned. Not all people follow or tell this narrative, and our thoughts about what it is to "be" lesbian, gay, straight, and anything else, have become much more complex. That said, it is also important to acknowledge that this particular story still *does* get repeated, as is evidenced by this article.
34. Ponse, p. 125.
35. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 60.
36. Plummer, p. 54.

37. Martin, 'Lesbian Identity', p. 85.
38. Wilson, Natalie, in interview with the author (London, 2001).
39. Wilson, Natalie, cited in Press Release for *Fingerlicks*, 20 October 1998.
40. No published performance script of *Fingerlicks* exists. All citations are taken from my transcript of a documentary video recording of the performance (Arches, Glasgow, 5 November 1998), supplied by the director, Natalie Wilson.
41. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, p. 116.
42. Stanley, p. 119.
43. I have written about Baker's persona in 'Performing the Self', *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, 5:5 (2002), www.media-culture.org.au/0201/Heddon.html.
44. See my article 'Glory Box: Tim Miller's Autobiography of the Future' in *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol XIX, 3 (75), August 2003, pp. 243 – 256.
45. Dovey, Jon, *FREAKSHOW: First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 55.
46. Dovey, p. 62. There is only one review of *Fingerlicks*, and in this there is no comment on the non-professional status of the performers. Reviews of *Talking Bollocks*, however, specifically mark the relationship between "amateur" and "truthful". Colin Donald writes, for example, that "the fact that [*Talking Bollocks*] is delivered by brave amateurs gives it a directness, honesty and charm" (*The Scotsman*, 30 November 1996), whilst Minty Donald reflects that it is the "loud and proud confidence, a tell-it-like-it-is honesty, [that] is really what's at the heart of 7:84's performance" (*The Herald*, 16 May 1996).
47. Wilson, interview with the author (London, 2001).

48. Interestingly, in the only review of *Fingerlicks*, the reviewer, (a heterosexual male), comments on the humour of the piece, writing that it is “much, much funnier than *Talking Bollocks*.” This would suggest that certain “symbols” are shared beyond any so-called lesbian constituency. However, it does appear that the humour that Keith Bruce most responds to is that connected to the cultural setting, rather than the lesbian folklore: “One of the top gags involves our own (and I’m only telling you this because she is far too smart to sue) Carole Smillie” (*The Herald*, 5 November 1998). The use of “our”, in this instance, is an interesting signifier, assuming a shared locality rather than a shared sexuality.

49. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, p. 116.

50. The performers’ openness regarding their sexuality and their decisions to publicly talk about their real life experiences did cause something of a “backlash” in the press. As Robert Thomson reports in the *Herald*, December 4 1998, the production “had a Scottish Sunday newspaper printing prurient inaccuracies about ‘schoolgirl’ performers and offering personal details about the lives of the women in the show, including places of work and names of children. An English tabloid was prompted to pursue the company for a week, sending a photographer surreptitiously to the first night.” For Wilson, however, there is “no such thing as bad publicity.” Responding to the negative comments of Lynne’s participation in the project, Wilson comments in the *Scotland on Sunday* that the teenager “has every right to act in this production. By taking part she has gained confidence in herself as a lesbian and as a woman. When she first arrived she was shy and withdrawn. The change in her has been remarkable. It has been a joy to watch her

gain confidence and make friends. If our play achieves nothing except an awakening in this young girl then that is good enough for me” (October 25 1998).

51. This gap between the narrated events and the time of narration also serves to trouble any assumed referentiality or easy reflection between life and its representation.

52. Bobby Baker, during an interview with the author (London, 2001), has also commented on this potential of autobiography, a seemingly monologic form, to engender dialogue. Plagued by anxiety about appearing to be “self-indulgent”, Baker was relieved to learn that following her show, *Box Story* (2001), spectators tended to be swapping their own life stories, rather than commenting on the one they had just witnessed.

53. I realize that this is a somewhat idealistic conclusion. Whilst I may have been in the bar, arguing loudly about and for the “deconstructed self”, those who felt most alienated from the performance more than likely disappeared in to the night, unheard, unsolicited, unseen. The challenge for all autobiographical performance is to harness the dialogic potential afforded by the medium, using it in the service of difference rather than sameness.