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Introduction: Performing the Self: women's lives in historical perspective

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This special edition originated in the 19th Annual Conference of the Women's History Network: Performing the Self: women's lives in historical perspective, held on the 10-12th September 2010 at the University of Warwick. Attended by 120 delegates from five continents over three days the conference explored the myriad of ways that women performed selfhood in past societies. The topics ranged across time, from medieval performances of gender and race to representations of the closing of the Greenham Common peace camp in 2002, and across place, incorporating women from Europe, America, Asia, Australia and Africa. The concept of performance is central to a number of fields including anthropology, psychology, linguistics, politics and theatre studies. This multi-disciplinary focus was reflected in the attendance from scholars across a variety of branches of the humanities and social sciences, including literature, art history, theatre studies and sociology. Although performance may be a contested concept, the variety of meanings of the term, across the disciplines, invited participants to view numerous realities and to interpret them in multiple ways. This focus on interdisciplinarity was also mirrored in the plenary papers. Professor of Politics, Shirin Rai, provided a rich comparison of ceremony and performance in the Parliaments of the United Kingdom, India and South Africa; Professor of English and Women's Studies, Sidonie Smith, applied her theories of performance through autobiography to the writings of Hilary Clinton; and Professors of History, Carolyn Steedman and Penny Summerfield, both reflected on the different methodological approaches to finding (or not finding) selfhood in the past, looking at account books in the eighteenth century and oral histories of the twentieth century.

The papers chosen for the special edition reflect the major themes of the conference, illustrating its chronological, geographical and disciplinary spread. There are two key motifs concerning aspects of performance and the self that run across all the articles: firstly, ‘performing the public self’ which considers physical performances in politicised spaces and representational forms created for a public audience; and secondly, ‘performing the written self’ which focuses on the ways in which the written form has been central to performances of self and questions the relationship between representations and performance in texts. Throughout the special edition, the authors apply different methods of thinking about performance to understanding women’s lives in the past. They draw upon a multiplicity of diverse source material to explore issues of identity formation, representations and interpretations. The special edition concludes with an overview by Professor Penny Summerfield, reflecting on how the various contributors’ articles fit into and advance ideas around performativity and selfhood.

Performance is a key method by which both individual and collective identities are formed, framed and reiterated. This special edition considers the diverse public stages where women played out and shaped their identities.[1] For example, Hall considers the court room – a place of theatricality, witness, authority and contest. Berney further explores the legal context by considering deposition evidence from a young Chinese runaway seeking sanctuary. In comparison, Mercer focuses on the museum, a similar arena where memory, tradition and history meet, a space which recreates and re-enacts past historical events. Visitors share in a performance of a shared past and in so doing both describe and recreate it. Therefore performance does not merely focus on the actors or participants but also on the audience who may be oppressed by what they experience or alternatively be given political agency.

Erving Goffman defined performance as the 'activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.'[2] Thus these public stages have audiences as well as actors and participants all of whom help to define, construct and represent individual identities. Daily life, political and religious ceremonies and artistic presentations all consist of well-rehearsed routines, habits and rituals. These have been categorised by Schechner as 'restored behaviours' or the key processes of performing particular roles, actions that people practice and rehearse.[3] It is these 'restored behaviours' which are particularly valuable for historians to capture and to analyse. They help to understand the mutability of human identity and the social construction of the self. For example, Judith Butler has explored the ways in which the repetition of culturally normative gestures and performances generate a collective understanding of the gendered self.[4] Everyday life involves the continuous evolution of behaviours that individuals adjust to particular social, political and personal circumstances. Some adapt and conform but others resist. The papers in this collection often focus on women who rebelled against accepted social norms: the Victorian woman traveller seeking divorce; the married woman professional artist; or promoters of exercise for modern women.

Performance may therefore be politically empowering for women reacting to the social, political and cultural constraints of their immediate environment. Amelia Jones, a performance art historian, defined performance as the 'culture of narcissism' writing, 'the enacted body/self is explicitly political and social in that it opens out onto otherness and the world in general; in phenomenological terms, this body/self performs itself through its own particular social situation'.[5] Jones viewed performance as a useful analytical tool for understanding the connections between the personal and political role of women. Likewise the political philosopher, Chantal Mouffe, has argued for the importance of positioning the subject in cultural history distinguishing tradition, personal memory, cultural history and

traditionalism. Thus women are constructed as subjects through a series of pre-existing discourses and this framed their political actions.[6] The construction of personal identities in the public sphere has a long history as the essays in this special edition demonstrate ranging in time from the medieval period to the late twentieth century.

While the performances of selfhood are often associated with physical interactions on the 'stage of the world', the written form also offers an opportunity to perform selfhood. This can take the form of writing for a public audience, as is explored in Moore's discussion of Isabella Fyvie Mayo's novels, Devenish's analysis of political biographies and Titcombe's comparison of published accounts of the Greenham Common experience. Or, it can be found in private writings, such as Beattie-Smith's study of a travel diary and Simon-Martin's investigation of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's correspondence with her family and friends. Writing has frequently been viewed as a 'representational' form, reflecting the self but not constituting it. But increasingly theories of performativity challenge this interpretation.[7] Like in physical performances, the act of writing comes to comprise the self; the self is not a priori to the text, but 'becomes' as it is expressed in written form. Penny Summerfield highlights, through her work on oral history, the need for public discourses to allow people to articulate their experience. Where little or no public discourse exists, people found it difficult to construct a narrative, talking in a stilted, fact-giving style.[8] Even at the level of basic expression, people rely on metaphor and allusions to give voice to abstract concepts, such as emotion.[9] Wider social conventions and discourses offer the language, or cultural scripts, that people use to construct their identities and place limits on how those identities are formed.

It is the act of speaking or writing, where personal experiences are given voice through their incorporation into larger cultural scripts, that constitutes the self. As Judith Butler explains, performative speech acts are those that 'bring into being what they name'; in

the same way, the act of writing creates the author.[10] Moreover, most writing is created in a dialogic relationship with an intended audience, which acts on the text, informing its content and the manner in which the author will express her or himself. As Bossis and McPherson argue in the context of written correspondence, every letter is a collaboration between the writer and the reader, and so has to be understood as portraying more than the identity of one individual.[11] In this way, as Turner's exploration of medieval oral song demonstrates, traditional representation forms can be understood as a cultural performance, as well as a site for discussion and highlighting the performative nature of selfhood. As Simon Martin's article investigates, this action of the audience on the self also highlights the way that the self becomes fractured, with the creation of multiple selves for multiple audiences, demonstrating the relational nature of selfhood.

This fractured or multiple selfhood is increasingly important within feminist theory, replacing the focus on the unified self of the Enlightenment, and thought to better reflect the multiple subject positions of women's lives that have frequently been created in a dialogic relationship, demonstrated clearly in Moore's account of the life of Fyvie Mayo. Moreover, as women have historically been represented as the 'other' or 'different' from the [male] norm, deconstructing the unified nature of the 'norm' is seen to have liberatory potential. As Barbara Bolt argues, it is the 'representationalist mode of thinking that enables humans to express a will to fixity and mastery over the world'. The seeming stability of representation codifies and normalises experience. In contrast, a performative self is constructed in collaboration with difference, drawing on a Deleuzian concept of identity as an effect of difference, with nothing prior to difference itself.[12] As Hélène Cixous maintains, this focus on the self as relational and shifting, where the difference of the other becomes part of the self, allows for a selfhood that dissolves power relationships, rather than reinforcing them.[13] As Beattie-Smith's article in this edition explores, understanding writing as a performative

act uncovers the ways that women managed to maintain a sense of self, and even to develop authoritative voices, within structures where they held little formal power. It also allows for more complex understandings of power as difference becomes incorporated into selfhood, even as it defines the self, destabilising binary power relationships in favour of multiple, intersecting and unstable lines of power, and, in so doing, opening up more dynamic, more interesting selves.

Auto-biographies, letters, diaries and other forms of personal testimony form a significant portion of the source base used to explore the performance of the self in this collection. But the essays also demonstrate the diversity of texts, images and public records that may be fruitfully interrogated. An artist's signature at the corner of a painting, a display of women's uniforms in a museum over time, deposition evidence and even an analysis of the female body all provide opportunities to explore and describe women's contested identities in the public sphere. This rich diversity reflects recent cultural histories of the self in which historians analyse gendered identities via an eclectic range of material extending beyond the traditional personal narrative. Dror Warhman, for example, assesses costume, masquerades, medals and even apiary manuals to pinpoint the moment of the emergence of the 'modern' gendered self in eighteenth-century England.[14] The essays in this collection are equally innovative and ambitious and demonstrate the potential of such source material for understanding women's roles and identities in the past, as well as the usefulness of theories of performance in allowing such source material to speak.

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[1] For example: George Robb and Nancy Erber (eds) (1999) *Disorder in the Court: trials and sexual conflict at the turn of the century* (New York: New York University Press); Angus

McLaren (1997) *Trials of Masculinity: policing sexual boundaries 1870-1930* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

[2] E. Goffman (1959) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books), p. 22.

[3] Richard Schechner (2002) *Performance Studies: an introduction* (London: Routledge)

[4] J. Butler (1999) *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (London: Routledge).

[5] Amelia Jones (1998) *Body/Art Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 46-7.

[6] Chantal Mouffe (1993) *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso).

[7] Butler (1999) *Gender Trouble*, pp. 182-3; Barbara Bolt (2004) *Art Beyond Representation: the performative power of the image* (London: I.B. Tauris).

[8] P. Summerfield (2004) Culture and Composure: creating narratives of the gendered self in oral history interviews, *Cultural and Social History*, 1, pp. 65-93.

[9] L. Baxter (1992) Root Metaphors in Accounts of Developing Romantic Relationships, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 9, pp. 253-75; L. Pollock (2004) Anger and the Negotiation of Relationships in Early Modern England, *Historical Journal*, 47, p. 573.

[10] Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal (1994) Gender as Performance: an interview with Judith Butler, London, 1993, *Radical Philosophy*, 67, pp. 32-9.

[11] M. Bossis and K. McPherson (1986) Methodological Journeys through Correspondences, *Yale French Studies*, 71, pp. 63-75.

[12] Gilles Deleuze (1994) *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum).

[13] Sal Renshaw (2009) *The Subject of Love: Hélène Cixous and the feminine divine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

[14] Dror Wahrman (2006), *The Making of the Modern Self: identity and culture in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press).