

Dropping the Needle on the Record: Intermedial Contingency and Spalding Gray's Early Talk Performances

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Spalding Gray's autobiographical monologues exemplified the affective immediacy of virtuosic first-person storytelling during the 1980s and 1990s, and helped establish a distinct theatrical genre of autobiographical performance. Even though they were most frequently encountered in their film or video adaptations, Gray's performances suggested the apparent authenticity with which an authorial voice speaking directly to an audience, free of technological or even representational apparatus, can be imbued. Although he was a key figure among a cohort of downtown solo performers in New York who were gaining widespread media exposure at the time, Gray's reputation eventually reached beyond even the mainstream marketing of the avant-garde.^[1] Retroactively recast in the popular imagination as simply an author and actor, without the avant-garde asterisk, Gray went on to play the role of quintessential New York theatre world hyphenate as a mainstream character actor, offbeat celebrity raconteur, and hip comic memoirist. However, despite the traditional literary and theatrical associations attached to Gray's monologue genre, which I include in the category of extemporaneous live works that I call "talk performance," I find that it was entwined with media forms and formats at its very roots.^[2] Gray's earliest talk performances were dependent on media technologies not only for composition and circulation, but they also made use of the physical presence of media to generate the performances in the moment and, counterintuitively, to resist the pull of mediation.

My argument developed from research in Gray's professional archive, in particular audio and video documentation of his works at various points in their processes of development.^[3] These resources provide evidence that media presences occasioned and influenced Gray's talk performance practice from the start, and that as Gray shifted the media relationships that generated his performances and the media venues within which they circulated, the nature of the performances themselves changed as well. In order to understand the processes of media interaction that defined Gray's work over time, and to connect those processes to other, seemingly remote, media phenomena, I draw on theories and terminology related to media from several fields. In particular, I have found more recent scholarship on the problems and possibilities of performance and other cross-media relationships in the context of the cultural saturation with digital and internet technologies surprisingly applicable to Gray's integration of analogue and print media formats within his extemporaneous performances.

The term I use to describe the dependence of Gray's performances on his live interactions with fixed media sources, "intermedial contingency," recycles Fluxus artist Dick Higgins's 1965 "intermedia," which he coined to speak productively about work that belongs to no single established art category, but emerges at points of overlap between existing categories.^[4] I find that this usage is also informed by the way the term has more recently been taken up in theatre and performance scholarship concerned with

digital media and performance. In the 2006 collection *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, editors Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt ground their understanding of theatrical intermediality in the “presence of other media within theatre productions,” writing that “...intermediality is associated with the blurring of generic boundaries ... and a self-conscious reflexivity that displays the devices of performance.”^[5] Kattenbelt later writes that theatre offers a “performative situation” (a term he attributes to Umberto Eco) “... in which the other media are not just recordings on their own, but at the same time and above all theatrical signs.”^[6] Similarly, in their 2012 book *Multimedia Performance*, Rosemary Klich and Edward Scheer define intermedial performance in terms of the interaction between media components: “Intermedial theatre subsumes media, uniting both live and mediated elements within the frame of performance ... In intermedial performance, the realms of the live and the mediated develop reciprocity and are framed as complementary and symbiotic elements of the performance whole.”^[7] I argue that Gray’s extemporaneity was triggered by, responsive to, and dependent upon his interaction with another media presence on stage, both procedurally for himself as a performer and as a means of making the spontaneity and variability of his performances legible to his audiences.

This argument depends on recent media theory to explain how new media have impacted the communication ecology through the concepts of remediation and mediatization. The former, closely associated with the work of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, describes the processes by which media reproduce, obscure, and define one another, while the latter identifies communicative structures’ saturation and constitution by media and processes of mediation even before other media enter the picture.^[8] Further, I draw on terminology developed by linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs to generically describe the processes by which the meanings of verbal performances are actively produced through the interaction between a performance and its circumstance -- “contextualization,” in their terms. They then label the process by which a performance can be prepared for removal to another, more stable, context in order to be studied, replicated, circulated and, tellingly, read as text, while still remaining reasonably intact and coherent, as a process of “entextualization.”^[9]

This article recuperates early performances of Gray’s that have not circulated widely in order to offer an account of the development of his signature autobiographical monologues that turns out to be quite different from the one supported by his late-career and posthumous reputation as a masterful, if troubled, comic raconteur. I track Gray’s monologue format from its beginnings as an element of *Three Places in Rhode Island*, the trilogy of performances that became the foundational work of the renowned experimental theatre company The Wooster Group (TWG). I then turn to the generative strategies he used in two pivotal, though not widely known, early pieces, *India and After (America)* (1979) and *The Great Crossing* (1980), to show that they were developed in relation to the physical presence of fixed media objects, specifically non-dramatic texts and technologies for audio playback, with which Gray interacted and to which he responded extemporaneously in performance.

In this, I build on theatre scholar Teemu Paavolainen’s argument for labeling onstage objects as such, rather than as “props” or “sets,” in order to free them from the inert and purely representational connotations the theatrical terms have accrued, and instead to emphasize the material presence and practical functions of the objects in question.^[10] As physical mechanisms for accessing linear, unchanging content, Gray’s media objects differentiate themselves from and subject themselves to the instability of live performance. Rather than memorizing and reciting a composed text as in traditional theatrical performance, in which the actor becomes the playback mechanism, Gray emphasized the contingency of his live presence through his spontaneous interactions with media objects that stored, and

from which he could retrieve, the fixed content of his performances. Gray structured his performances through these acts of retrieval: *playing* and *stopping* the record, *reading* (or listening to another performer read) a text that he brought onstage. In this way he kept his performances always contingent upon the occasion and demonstrably different from the media objects to which he related.

Gray's eventual celebrity was based on his apparent virtuosity as a storyteller, but his earliest experiments with extemporaneous talk were rooted in the intermedial contingency described above. While his explicitly intermedial works emphasized the shifting and negotiated nature of his live performances, the better known adaptations of his later monologues to film and book formats were made possible by their increasingly streamlined, repeatable, and narratively unified source performances. Over time, Gray's monologues became less procedurally tied to the occasion of performance by excising their reliance upon his interactions with external media. Though he eventually gained a significant measure of fame and professional success for these entertaining and influential later works, this article looks at Gray's original approach in his early talk performances. Though he newly generated and (re)constructed his performances for his audience each night in such a way that his "personal history would disappear on a breath," I found that media played a surprising role in that process.[\[11\]](#)

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the film version of *Swimming to Cambodia*, directed by Jonathan Demme in 1987, to a popular understanding of Gray and his performance practice. The monologue was the direct result of a small role Gray played in the 1984 Roland Joffé film *The Killing Fields*, about the American bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War and the subsequent genocide perpetrated there by the Khmer Rouge. The film used Thailand as a stand-in for Cambodia, and Gray's monologue centered on his experiences there while making the film and, in the original version, the aftermath of those experiences once filming had concluded. Gray initially presented *Swimming to Cambodia* in two parts, which premiered in early 1984, and required audiences to see the entire work over the course of two nights. The first part portrayed Gray's awakening, during the shoot, to American military imperialism, and suggested an uneasy corollary between the war in Southeast Asia and adventure-seeking Western artists returning to the region to make a film about that war.

However, the second part presented a more complex and less morally satisfying picture of Gray's struggle to integrate his new political awareness into his life at home. It focused on the tension he felt between his newfound social conscience, which urged him toward a life of service advocating for the Cambodian refugee community, and his professional ambitions to take advantage of the career opportunities his first major film role offered and move toward the comfortable life he imagined a Hollywood career could provide. The two-part version of the monologue ultimately ended with Gray in LA, driving between auditions, while still wrestling with his indecision about whether he should return to the East Coast and devote himself to humanitarian work, or accept that the situation of humanity is beyond repair, that there was nothing he could do about it, and so might as well stay in Hollywood to enjoy the decadent end of civilization as best he could.[\[12\]](#)

Three years later, Jonathan Demme's 85-minute film adaptation of the live monologue offered a much more streamlined version, focusing almost exclusively on Gray's political and personal awakening in the first half of the original. This more narratively unified, less ambiguous revision circulated widely and established the elements of Gray's signature style for a new mass audience, including other artists who took up the autobiographical monologue form. These include the personal disclosure found in documentary theatre pieces and staged memoirs ranging from David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* (1998) to

Elaine Stritch at Liberty (2001), which have collectively come to be known in more traditional theatre circles as “one-person shows,” the self-reflexive reportage heard on public radio programs such as *This American Life*, the extemporaneous delivery of *The Moth* and other live storytelling shows, and especially the wholesale uptake of Gray’s table, microphone, water glass, and notebook in the theatrical monologues of his most apparent stylistic progeny, the monologist Mike Daisey, not to mention the surprisingly robust roster of solo performances *about* Gray that have emerged since his death.^[13] Even Gray’s own subsequent monologues adhered closely to the template of Demme’s *Swimming to Cambodia* film, maintaining a stable authorial voice, satisfyingly coherent narratives, and trim running times in line with the movie, making them more easily available to publication and film adaptations.^[14]



Figure 1. Gray in the film version of *Swimming to Cambodia*, dir. Jonathan Demme, Cinecom Pictures, 1987.

In contrast, Gray’s use of fixed media objects to emphasize the contingency of live performance and trigger extemporaneous fragmentation in some of his earliest works designated and emphasized the performance event as something other than either authored text or recorded media. Gray was developing a means of generating a performance through live, real time interactions between himself and the onstage media object – a record player, a book, or a personal journal in the cases discussed below. Each unique performance iteration relied upon Gray interacting with, and responding to, the object and its inscribed or recorded contents by reading a fragment of text aloud or dropping the turntable’s needle on the record, for example, and then building on his own personal associations with that bit of content as he encountered it. In time, this process would consolidate into a genre of autobiographical solo performances that has become associated with the very impulses Gray’s early performances seemed to criticize or sublimate: privileging the recalled past over present experience, constructing an apparently authentic authorial voice, and shaping memory into linear narrative.

I argue that in making use of the difference between what he was doing onstage and the recorded or inscribed objects with which he interacted, Gray was dealing with the media environment in which his work developed by both introducing and holding off the possibility of the mediated circulation to which it

would eventually succumb. His later monologues, while still showcasing his newly polished virtuosic extemporaneity, were able to scrub the material presence of media from his performances in order to arrive at a more set and settled product, primed for media adaptation. The more media interference in the work, in other words, the more tied to the original idiosyncratic performance event it would be. And the more seamlessly extemporaneous, the more available to media reproduction and circulation the work became.

The eventual availability of Gray's talk performances for adaptation to other media fundamentally relies upon a process by which the situational dependence that defined the early performances discussed here and that knit them to their occasion could be removed from the performance situation with enough contextual material intact to make his monologue legible both in terms of the narrative content it sought to deliver, and in terms of its origins in live performance. Linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, seeking to self-reflexively examine how ethnographic researchers like themselves approach cross-cultural verbal performances (storytelling and other forms of marked public address), articulated a taxonomy to define the stages of this process. Bauman and Briggs identify performance as a negotiated and relational process that provides a situationally dependent "special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood."^[15] They refer to the process by which a talk performance and its situational support structure can be understood in terms of their mutually constitutive interrelationship as a process of "contextualization," that is the active integration of the ongoing participatory exchange between audience and performer with the linguistic content of the performance.

In order to subject performances to analysis and comparative study, though, and by extension in the case of Gray, in order to enable circulation and the accrual of value within a wider political economy, Bauman and Briggs contend that the contextualized performance must be decontextualized, or made portable, and then recontextualized elsewhere under more stable conditions controlled by the researcher, the book publisher, the film producer, etc. They refer to the process that prepares a talk performance, which they call discourse, for re- and de-contextualization as, simply, entextualization: "the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit - a *text* - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting."^[16] They argue that this extraction becomes the first step in a process that transforms a fundamentally responsive and changeable contextualized performance into a fixed, authoritative text, decentered from the occasion of its original utterance, and recentered in a standardized, replicable, and circulatable format. "Control over decentering and recentering is ... one of the processes by which texts are endowed with authority, which in turn places formal and functional constraints on how they may be further recentered: An authoritative text, by definition, is one that is maximally protected from compromising transformation."^[17] Certainly this could be a description of Gray's transition from intermedial talk performer, dialogically generating and sequencing his performances in front of a new audience each night, to the authorial figure he became, for whom spoken words and authored text became more or less interchangeable methods of delivering set content across multiple media platforms.

This meant that he moved, in the course of his career, from his initial experiments with what media theorists J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin have called "hypermediacy," in which a medium draws attention to itself in order to distinguish its processes of mediation from other media, to an ultimately successful example of what they term "transparent immediacy," or the apparent disappearance of a medium through its own total integration within another medium. Both are examples, situated at either end of a spectrum, of the now inevitable processes of entwinement between and across media that Bolter and Grusin labeled "remediation."^[18] This capacity for media to distinguish themselves and disappear

within, against, and in relation to one another is a product of a more total cultural *mediatization*, which media scholar Andreas Hepp identifies as the sustained and ongoing environmental presence of media and processes of mediation that structures cultural formations, logics, and interactions even in absence of any specific instance of mediation. Hepp writes:

While mediation is suited to describing the general characteristics of any process of media communication, mediatization describes and theorizes something rather different, something that is *based on* the mediation of media communication: *mediatization seeks to capture the nature of the interrelationship between historical changes in media communication and other transformational processes.* [19]

Hence the presence of media became a structuring logic in Gray's work even before the possibility of the work's mediation had been introduced, while media presences also functioned as the force in resistance to which his iconoclastic performance format initially defined itself.

By meeting Gray at an early and foundational moment, this article positions him quite differently than do understandings of his persona and his career primarily based on the media adaptations of his later performances that circulated widely following the film adaptation of *Swimming to Cambodia*. Scholarly considerations of Gray's career tend to either focus approvingly on him as a deceptively strategic performer who used the persona of a self-involved neurotic to uncover "universal" truths about the human condition, or else they critique what the authors see as Gray's narcissistic privileging of his own experience in contrast to his shallow or facile treatment of the complex dynamics of power and representation in his monologues. The two most sustained studies of Gray's work occupy these poles, with William W. Demastes's posthumous celebration of Gray's work, *Spalding Gray's America* (2008), evincing the former, and Michael Peterson's earlier *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (1997) consolidating the latter attitude around Gray as one of the chief representatives of monologic solo performance in the 1980s and 1990s.

The cross-media adaptations of his monologues to film, video, and text, and the new performances that followed those media adaptations came to rely on a spectacularized sense of Gray's masterful skills as storyteller. Peterson commented that "the table, notebook, and water glass of most of Spalding Gray's performances ... constitute[s] and legitimate[s] the presence of the solo performer in a manner more subtle than but perhaps as effective as more obvious design elements. Such physical elements of the monologic apparatus can emphasize the heroic aspect of the performance..." [20] This presentation of his work as heroically authoritative authenticated the assumption that it had been strategically planned out, highly structured, and probably fully written out in advance of his performance, an assumption that became more and more true over time.

According to the alternate narrative I emphasize here, however, Gray actually first employed carefully arranged circumstances to newly generate his material in an ever-shifting performative present to which he subjected himself, rather than controlled. As he took more ownership of the media he used to structure his performances, he began to strip away the depersonalized intervening media that kept those performances anchored to the present in favor of material more closely enmeshed with the content of his monologues. In the examples discussed below, for instance, he moved from using random dictionary entries to structure *India and After* to a linear reading of his own travel diary in *The Great Crossing*. I

argue that this would ultimately lead to the ostensibly immediate form for which he became known, in which no external media presence was apparent, while also leading him away from the extemporaneous contingency his early use of media sources enabled. The implications of the apparent paradox that the recontextualization of his performances in other media depended on the removal of contextualizing media from the performances themselves would eventually come to a pivotal head for Gray in the middle of a performance of his little-known monologue, *The Great Crossing*.

The Wooster Group and *Three Places in Rhode Island*

Gray came to his performance work via Richard Schechner's influential experimental theatre company, The Performance Group (TPG), which he joined in 1971 along with his on-again-off-again partner Elizabeth LeCompte. LeCompte quickly became Schechner's assistant director and was frequently put in charge of rehearsals in his absence. Taking advantage of the access to TPG's theatre, The Performing Garage, granted by such an absence, LeCompte and Gray formed a small sub-cadre of TPG members and began experimenting with structured improvisations. These improvisations came to obliquely focus on Gray's childhood memories and associations, which LeCompte as director shaped into an impressionistic, mostly movement-based performance called *Sakonnet Point* (1975), after a place where Gray's family spent their summers in his home state of Rhode Island. This formed the first of a trio of works they would go on to make together over the next four years, all based in Gray's memory and personal history, which came to be known as *Three Places in Rhode Island*, or the *Rhode Island Trilogy*. These performances are now understood as the inaugural work of what became The Wooster Group, the successor to TPG, which continues its work in The Performing Garage under LeCompte's direction and is often considered the most influential contemporary experimental theatre company in the U.S. [21]

The shared origins, and surprising similarities, of what became Gray's and LeCompte's signature styles can be identified in two structuring forces that emerged in TWG's early work. The first was the use of physical objects and furniture, the table in particular, as structural through lines with scriptive powers of their own around which performances could be built and connected to one another. [22] The second shared strategy involved integrating external fixed media presences -- written text, recorded audio, or video -- into performances as dramatic content and intermedial counterbalance to theatre as a live and ephemeral medium.

As early in the Trilogy as the imagistic, mostly wordless *Sakonnet Point*, the physical objects Gray and LeCompte introduced substituted for the usual textual foundation upon which performances are built. The process of creation involved the company responding improvisationally to objects Gray found in the garbage or in The Performing Garage, and the work grew out of the material possibilities and limitations which that space and those objects introduced, without a script or pre-conceived form. The set pieces and found objects became the raw material out of which the performance was built through the associational responses of Gray and his fellow performers. Actions and objects and the relationship between them were woven together into a structure that drew on individual identity and memory, but represented no reality but the present and no people but those in the room. [23]

Gray and LeCompte made similar use of live citation in the present of material imprinted in the past for the second segment of the Trilogy, *Rumstick Road* (1977), which was built around audio Gray had recorded of interviews he had conducted with members of his family about his mother's suicide a decade earlier. The historical anecdotes and documentary materials that made up *Rumstick Road* were not

dramatically unified or psychologically resolved within the frame of the performance. Instead, they were "gone through," as one might go through old letters or photographs, generating a fragmented and entirely new experience for audience and performers. The recordings of Gray's past interviews with his family members took the place of a dramatic text, on the basis of which Gray and his colleagues transmuted personal associations into performed actions developed over the course of their rehearsal process, treating the recordings as "found" material often in spite of its personal significance for Gray.

Having gained some distance on his personal material through mediation, Gray was able to privilege his role as a responsive performer. In 1978's *Nayatt School*, recorded material was again onstage, but even more distant from Gray's present than the familial tapes of *Rumstick Road*. In this case, the performance employed an LP recording of the original New York production of T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, which Gray used to illustrate and notate his own history with the play. In particular, he associated the play's main character, Celia Coplestone, who suffers a psychological crisis, seeks salvation in religion, and ultimately martyrs herself, with his mentally ill, religious mother and her suicide. Though ostensibly autobiographical, his material relationship to the play in the piece was equally temporal and kinesthetic. It was to the recording, and even more to the physical record, that he related.

Gray responded in the moment to chance intersections with the fixed object as he dropped the needle at different points on the record, commenting dialogically while the snippets played for the audience. After introducing the record itself as a physical object, he reviewed Elliot's background and biography and his own history with the play, which he had once performed in a Catholic convent in upstate New York, while spinning off childhood memories of his mother whose connection to the play was not initially clear. Skipping around to different scenes on the record, he summarized what had happened, what was happening, and what was going to happen in the play, while also isolating idiosyncratic aspects of the recording: the sound of laughter, the inflection of certain lines' delivery, the play's subtly surreal cyclical construction, declaring that "the more I listen to it, the more it starts to break down in terms of meaning."[\[24\]](#)



Figure 2. Spalding Gray in The Wooster Group's *Nayatt School* (1978). Directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. Photo: © Clem Fiori. Courtesy of The Wooster Group.

As Gray began to work out his relationship to onstage recorded media, he also relied upon offstage media capture and playback for the development of his approach, and on media metaphors in order to conceptualize and articulate what he was trying to do. In a 1997 conversation with Richard Schechner, he recalled his first attempts at monologuing in rehearsal, “Elizabeth LeCompte would tape them, transcribe them, and say, ‘Here let’s do it again like this.’ And that’s when I began to realize that what I was speaking was text, and could be used as a text.”^[25] A February 1978 recording provides a glimpse into his performance technique emerging in rehearsal through improvisational interactions with the record, interspersed with dialogic interactions with LeCompte. Gray grew frustrated with trying to listen to, summarize, and speak over the record all at once, and bristled at LeCompte’s suggestion that he should be able to respond immediately to each drop of the needle. He compared the difficulty in finding something generative every time he dropped the needle to the well-honed skills jazz improvisation requires: “...jazz musicians do that and they play all night before they get warm, we’re talking about a very short space of time, that’s the problem...”^[26] However, by the time they were performing the piece on tour in Amsterdam that fall, Gray had become capable of skipping through the record with alacrity and coordinating his summary with bits of information about his own life, weaving together a unique performance at the intersection of the recorded and the live.^[27]

Despite his own use of jazz improvisation as a musical corollary for what he was attempting, it is perhaps more relevant to note that at the same time in 1978 as Gray was stopping and starting a turntable to play snippets of *The Cocktail Party* in Soho, early hip-hop artists dozens of blocks north in the Bronx were similarly using turntables to cue up and repeat break beats at house parties and block parties, creating

contingent, responsive, unchoreographed performances out of the material intersection between DJ, vinyl albums, and audience.^[28] Whether the source was a dance record or modernist drama, the live events in both cases emerged from the interaction between the fixed media object and the responsive, improvisatory present of performance.

India and After (America)

Eventually, the mediated separation between past experiences and the performative present that Gray had developed in the Trilogy made it possible for him to detach a new set of independent talk performances from the larger theatrical apparatus of TWG, substituting a dialogic relationship with media for LeCompte's direction and the TWG company. He later told theatre scholar David Savran: "...the monologues never would have come into being had not the Group been my first supportive audience, at the table, in *Nayatt*. And then it was a matter of shrinking the table down to a desk."^[29] In the post-Wooster Group solo performances he began presenting in the spring of 1979, Gray established the working process he would employ some version of for the rest of his career: reliance on memory rather than memorization, and on the conditions of the present moment to call up the past.

Building on the use of pre-recorded audio in *Rumstick Road* and *Nayatt School*, his early talk pieces extended the fixed media presence to include onstage texts to which he could respond extemporaneously in performance, often using those sources to prompt or sequence a unique arrangement of narrative units. In particular, two of the most idiosyncratic of these early independent works, *India and After (America)* (1979) and *The Great Crossing* (1980), integrally relied upon the physical co-presence of pre-existing text within the piece. These texts – journal entries, newspaper articles, book passages, dictionary definitions – served to structure the everyday content of Gray's experiences from outside of his authorial position, and to present each performance as a unique, collaborative experience shared by Gray and his audience.

In February of 1976, LeCompte and Gray had traveled to India as actors in the Performance Group's production of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Traveling with LeCompte and on his own in India after the tour had ended, Gray had a very hard time psychologically, succumbing to self-doubt, anxiety, and an unquenchable longing for idealized experiences.^[30] What he called his "lost will" would continue for more than a year after his return to America, manifesting in various illnesses and depressive episodes. Gray responded by seeking out a range of therapies and self-improvement strategies, both in New York and on a cross-country retreat to Santa Cruz. He also made some impulsive and risky choices, including signing up to perform in pornographic films for a time, and refusing to give his name to the police after walking out on a check at a Las Vegas steakhouse, which landed him in jail for a week.

Three years later, he returned to that year for one of his first post-Wooster Group performances, which he came to call *India and After (America)*. Dealing for the first time with his recent life rather than his childhood and young adult years, Gray turned again to external media as a way to both fragment and knit together his still-fresh memories in performance. The presence of fixed media served to distinguish the action of remembering and relating his recent experiences from a textually stabilized recounting of the same events. Though Gray's talk performance, in his own estimation and in popular reception, would eventually come to seem merely an entertaining way to deliver autobiographical material, there is much evidence that Gray was initially at least as concerned with the performance event as a delimited site where a performance could be constructed and disseminated all at once as he was with spinning a good

yarn. In an early notebook entry he wrote of his idea for what he was then calling “Speaking Memory”: “I want to put myself in a meditative non rehearsal state and try to allow the presence of the audience to influence the quality and subject matter of my memory... set up a space for myself and be there[,] work out a memory structure in which I begin with one memory....”[\[31\]](#)

Gray began relating the memories that would become *India and After* in much the way he had imagined “Speaking Memory.” At home in his loft with only a few others present and the tape recorder running, he began with one memory, of the plane from New York to Amsterdam on the way to India.[\[32\]](#) However, he found himself dissatisfied with what turned out to be a mostly linear account of such recent experiences and he became interested in resisting the drift toward narrative unity. He told Savran some years later that it was the fidelity of his account that he wanted to try to interrupt: “I was too close to the material. It came out like a travelogue. I didn’t know how to fragment it by chance. All the other pieces had been fragmented by memory.”[\[33\]](#) He cast around for a structural device that would help create the distance he felt he needed between his psychological source material and the instance of performance, as the “found” recordings in *Rumstick Road* and *Nayatt School* had done. The solution he hit on was to employ a de-personalized intervening text to structure the piece from outside of his authorial consciousness.

His first attempt at introducing an external fixed element against which the action of remembering and telling could be defined came that summer of 1979, while he was in residence at Connecticut College. Gray performed his new, then untitled, work about his travels in India as an in-progress presentation for students at the college. He identified the genesis of the piece as a period when he was traveling in Kashmir after the end of The Performance Group’s tour of *Mother Courage*. In later performances, he would refer to this as the critical moment when he “lost his will.” He explained,

I found myself in Kashmir with only one book and that was, by accident, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, which I had read before. And this book, because I was in an isolated mountain village, I was able to give a lot of concentration to it automatically. There was no work, there was a relationship suddenly with Virginia Woolf, which saved me from some of this terrific culture shock and somehow touched me down with some of my own culture and past. So what I’ve done is that I’ve cut out some sections from this book and I’m going to experiment with reading them in and out of my talk, so that there will also be some readings from passages of that book.[\[34\]](#)

Gray’s intention seems to have been to use Woolf’s book much as he had the recording of *The Cocktail Party* in *Nayatt School*, as a source of mediated cultural fragments through which he could explain his own experience. In this case, Woolf’s introspective, quasi-autobiographical novel, focused on parental relationships and problems of memory and perception, was to create a parallel mental plane that Gray could treat as a kind of home base as he recounted the foreign-seeming settings and circumstances through which he traveled.

However, in the end, *To the Lighthouse* does not appear to have offered Gray the structural counterpoint he was after. His use of the passages dropped away after he read just two selections early on, leaving him to complete the narrative in the same linear fashion he had previously. In this telling, Gray found himself increasingly alienated by his foreign surroundings in India during the tour and unable to make sense of his experiences as he continued to travel afterward. Eventually he found himself far off the usual tourist

path in Ladakh, at the Tibetan border, where he was troubled to find that he felt so anxious and conflicted in the midst of what seemed to him an entirely harmonious culture. At this point Gray fled, apparently toward the comfortingly familiar angst of the West, but he found that his indecision, disorientation, and profound sense of alienation only persisted once back in familiar surroundings.

To the Lighthouse turned out to be too enmeshed with the piece's narrative content to mimic the strange displacement he experienced both at home and abroad. Gray instead cast around for a structuring device that would remain outside of the work, aesthetically and thematically indifferent, and would act upon his telling to constrain its structure and estrange its contents in a way that would actually reflect the seeming randomness of the experiences themselves. The reconfigured final template for *India and After*, which he would continue performing for a number of years, included a second onstage performer (usually Meghan Ellenberger) who read prompt words and their definitions at random from a large dictionary and then arbitrarily assigned time limits to Gray's anecdotes. In response to each word, Gray would call up some part of an incident from his time in India and the year after, and try to tell it before Ellenberger rang a bell indicating the end of his allotted time, whether he had finished the story or not.



Figure 3. Screenshot of Gray and Meghan Ellenberger in a 1980 archival video documenting *India and After (America)* in performance. A far cry from both the iconic staging and the media aesthetics of the 1987 *Swimming to Cambodia* film. VHS, Spalding Gray Papers, GRS071, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.[\[35\]](#)

Drawing on an extensive, though still limited, palate of anecdotes, not all of which he got to every night, Gray's associations could be direct or oblique. Some connections seemed obvious, like a memory of disciples of the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh at his ashram in India rushing to the spot where his chair had just been in response to the word "unseat," or "co-signer" triggering the story of LeCompte bonding him out of the Las Vegas jail. Other responses were humorously counterintuitive; in one performance, "Protestantism" triggered an explicit story from a pornographic film shoot. At times Gray even resisted storytelling in favor of literal-minded enactment: the word "dumb," with the definition "without speech," prompted him to stammer and then go silent for a full minute, an action with no apparent relation to the past. Some of his associations and memories proved more poetic than personal: "ivory white" caused him to recall a Hindu religious story about the god Krishna revealing his divinity to his mother; "mitten" made him think of Kashmiri shepherds he had met who claimed they had never heard of New York or

even Delhi, while on another night this same story was called up by the word “triangulate.”^[36]

Reflecting the dictionary’s rigid order and stability in the face of its non-linear uses, Gray actually told the snippets of his stories in more or less the same way every time, down to the phrasing of individual sentences. But the structure of the performance broke up the sequence and flow of the narrative, creating odd juxtapositions and points of entry, cutting off or starting stories at what would ordinarily be a mid-point, and often altogether eliding narrative segments that might otherwise be of import. This structure served to highlight the act of remembering in order to materialize the performative instance as distinct from the narrative content of the memories themselves.

The usual understanding of this approach, affirmed by Gray and his observers both, is that the fragmentation produced by the random structure reflected the fragmentation of his psychological breakdown.^[37] However, Gray had also inadvertently hit on a way to complicate the Westerner-transformed-by-travel-in-the-non-Western-world narrative that the linear telling invited. By procedurally scrambling the sequence of events he also scrambled the too-easy causal or metaphorical links by which he otherwise connected his mental disturbance to his travels in India, or even one incident to the next. By giving up structural control, Gray was able to displace the task of making sense of his experiences from an all-knowing authorial position onto a shared process in the performative present. And by privileging his idiosyncratic telling over an imperative to accurately communicate what happened, Gray thwarted the narrative expectations of both literary and dramatic form. This foregrounded the mental labor involved in extemporaneously calling up narrative fragments rather than assuming the authorial responsibility to curate and organize the work in advance.

Though Gray still drew on personal memory, structurally *India and After* more closely mirrored burgeoning experiments with sampling and other media collage techniques occurring elsewhere at that same time, including The Wooster Group’s continued intermedial experimentation in Gray’s absence. Rather than obscuring his presence in the live performance, though, Gray’s use of the logic of recorded media to structure the piece emphasized what he was doing in the moment: responding, relating, strategically recounting. Ironically, it was the use of these contingent intermedial strategies that made this work particularly unavailable to the kind of wholesale mediatization that would be key in popularizing his later performances.

The Great Crossing

While Gray used apparently neutral external media to distinguish the recalled past from the moment of performance in *India and After (America)*, he employed a more personal textual source in order to deal with an even more immediate past in his little-known monologue *The Great Crossing* (1980). In its earliest versions, much of the performance consisted of verbatim readings from his private journal, detailing a trip across the country he took with his new girlfriend Renee in order to tour his monologues on the West Coast. This was in fact the very tour on which he began performing *The Great Crossing*, so the journal entries were just weeks old. At the same time, he also used public textual detritus collected along the way (newspaper articles, a new age magazine) to approximate the physical and cultural environments he passed through. And in at least some instances, he brought the piece’s narrative up to the very moment of performance, as if challenging himself to do away entirely with the traditional division between authoring the work and presenting it publicly.

Like nearly all of Gray's work, *The Great Crossing* depended on some deliberate separation of his past experience from his telling in the present. But no other work brought the two into such close, even overlapping, proximity. As he read his travel diary, he verbally footnoted what he had written, explaining and commenting on his ostensibly private thoughts. In this way, the raw material of his daily jottings were structured by his extemporaneous comments on that material in the moment of performance, a hybrid perhaps of the "found" personal media in *Rumstick Road* and the intermedial improvisation with *The Cocktail Party* in *Nayatt School*.

As archival recordings of his West Coast tour suggest, Gray was caught between two creative strategies and what they might mean for his artistic future. The more narratively coherent strategy he found himself moving toward held the promise of positioning his still-new talk performance format, which was just beginning to gain traction on tour outside of New York City, into something repeatable and commodifiable that could serve his popularity and provide financial support. The strategy of media contingency generating extemporaneous discovery in performance that that he had been using meant that on some level he was re-making the work each night, keeping him nimbly responsive and present in the moment, but deliberately leaving no trace.

Gray prefaced the reading from his diary with a straightforward reading of a different, very public source text: two newspaper articles he had encountered on his trip. The first described a shift in nuclear policy under President Carter from a strategy of mutually assured destruction to the capability for sustained, low-level nuclear war to act as a deterrent throughout an engagement. This was followed immediately by an article about a woman in Phoenix who had seen the face of Jesus in a tortilla. Gray delivered both in the same calm and measured tone, as if setting a baseline for the presence of performed text in the piece, no matter the source. After the newspaper readings had introduced the disparate and seemingly random sources he would draw on, Gray began his own story by emphasizing the incidental composition of his performance, explaining that, "It could start anywhere, but I'm choosing June 24th at Schiphol Airport, a place of great anxiety for me..." He then launched into three stories of fraught departures from Amsterdam – the first cribbed from *India and After* and the most recent immediately preceding his "Great Crossing" in late June of 1980.[\[38\]](#)

Back in New York, Gray and his girlfriend Renee set off on a cross-country trip. As their journey began, Gray introduced the other, more personal, textual source around which the performance would be structured – his diary entries from the road. He explained the conceptual motivation for this in terms of building in a space between a past actor who had experienced the things described, but had no control over their presentation, and the present performer who could narrate and comment upon, but would not be held responsible for, that past actor's deeds:[\[39\]](#)

The thing that I've been working from is this diary here, now the idea was that I was trying to find at least two of the - at least two Spalding Grays – and trick him, the perverse Spalding Gray who is here in front of you tonight would trick the private Spalding Gray who kept a diary not thinking he was going to read it but thought that he would speak openly about the situation and therefore be able to censor things ... [\[40\]](#)(Gray, "*The Great Crossing*; S.F ...")

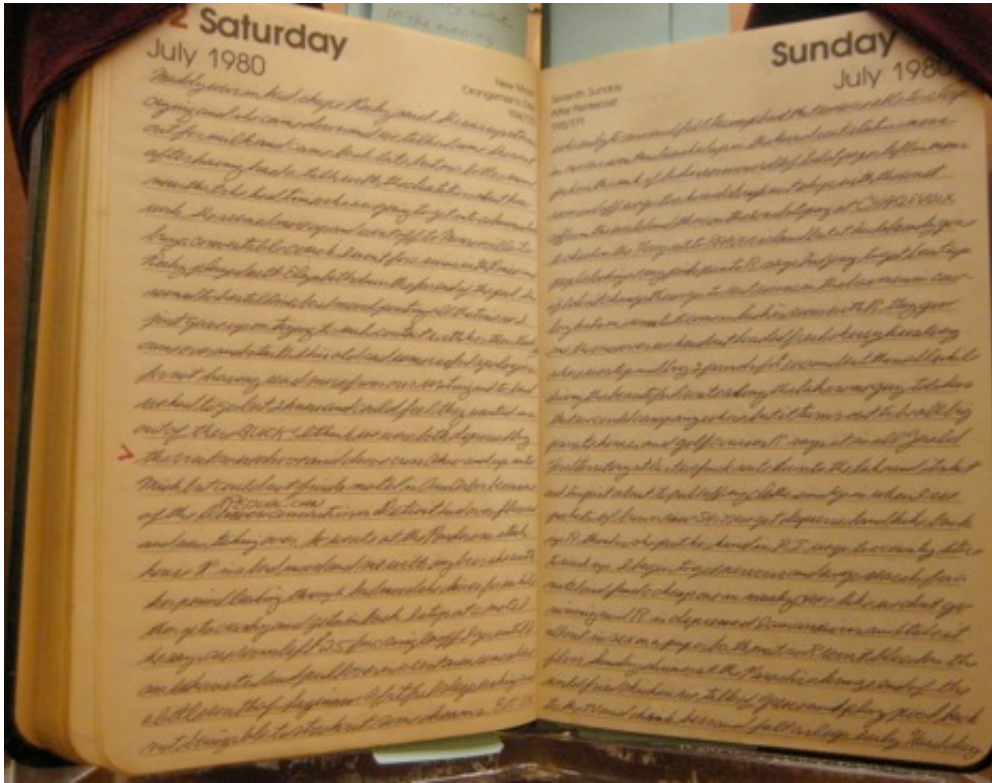


Figure 4. Gray’s journal entries for July 12-13, 1980. The passages he read onstage during *The Great Crossing* can be found starting on July 9th and running through the month of July, 1980. He did not always confine his reading to his own writing, he sometimes also read the information printed in the journal itself, such as “New Moon, Orangemen’s Day” on the 12th. Journal: 1980, Spalding Gray Papers, C35.4, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

The diary represented both the most immediate record of these past experiences and the earliest impulse toward transforming them into narrative material. Rather than the random needle drops of *Nayatt School* or the rules-based structure of *India and After*, here Gray was moving in a linear fashion with pre-determined material, relying on his own impulses to determine when he would switch registers from text to extemporaneous talk. When he felt the impulse to reflect or comment, he would stop and verbally footnote what he read in the moment, before returning to the structured text. As there is no video document of *The Great Crossing* available, I cannot say if that switch was visible, but it was certainly audible in the shift from his perfunctory, seemingly disinterested delivery of the diary entries, undifferentiated from his reading of the newspaper articles and other found texts, to the enlivened, engaged commentary that reflected the voice, by turns ironic, curious, and anxious, which would come to be identified with Gray’s onstage persona.

Paradoxically, it was Gray’s inscribed past consciousness that he posited as uncontrollably confessional, and his extemporaneous presence as a performer that could stabilize and edit what the journal’s text revealed. Here the media presence served mostly to distinguish his “private” past self from the “perverse” self in the present who commented upon the past self’s actions, bonding him in his physical presence more to the performance event than the often problematic adventures the diary revealed. Indeed,

the entries proved truly personal: petty, ponderous, emotional, graphically sexual, and mundane. The journal showed Gray to be motivated, and hindered, by both selfishness and self-consciousness, and to be much more immediately concerned with his own creature comforts and internal monologue than his later ironic travelogues would usually suggest, preoccupied as they were with the unusual characters he met along the way.

It became clear that Gray was wrestling with his form, wondering if he could continue performing monologues in the way he had been over the previous year or so, as contingent intermedial procedures, or if he would eventually have to commit to a more conventional dramatic literary model. The contradiction between the ambition and economic necessity to reach a larger engaged audience and the personal and creative impetus to process his experiences almost as they occurred, came to a head in an apparently authentic moment of mid-performance crisis on the Seattle stop of his tour. Caught between his extemporaneous impulses and the apparent pressure to present something entertaining and replicable, he stumbled over the very premise of his monologue format, and where he should take it next, telling his audience:

You can only tell the same stories so many times; I can't stand it anymore. Tonight's stories are all new, I haven't dealt with them at all, I feel they are best at their freshest, and I am really at the point where I really don't know what to do with that problem, since I am in the position where I am trying to make a living from doing what I do and I think I can't do it. Because it means setting them, and making them into routines and acting and being a stand-up comedian or what have you.[\[41\]](#)

In this moment of crisis, he saw clearly that in beginning to make his talk performances more available to repetition and wider circulation, he was also letting go of some of the extemporaneity and discovery that keeping his performances anchored in the present had enabled. The loss that Gray recognized was the slipping away of an idiosyncratic format that resisted easy distinctions between inscription and enaction. Without a media presence to intervene in the flow of his narrative and differentiate Gray in the present from Gray in the past, Gray himself became more like one of his media sources as a performer, capable of starting at the beginning and playing through to the end in more or less the same way every time.

While Gray's crisis during the Seattle performance was a petulant complaint about having to dramatically reenact an experience no longer personally useful to him, it was *also* an expression of deep frustration that the unique character of his talk pieces as contingent, situational, intermedial, emergent phenomena might be lost in the course of his creative and professional development. In light of his eventual success, it is easy to dismiss this early dilemma as an independent artist merely anxious about "selling out," but focusing on this early work also complicates the status he acquired in subsequent years as a popular storyteller situated within established genres: part comic raconteur, part literary author. Since his death in 2004, publication and archival projects have only further cemented his literary status; meanwhile, the genre of autobiographical monologue the mass media adaptations of his performances helped establish is now so common it no longer registers as procedurally or conceptually audacious by any measure.[\[42\]](#)

The Great Crossing did not go forward in its original form following the West Coast performances and Gray's crisis in Seattle.[\[43\]](#) Instead, a new, more replicable approach emerged in its aftermath. Gray premiered a new monologue at Dance Theatre Workshop in New York later that year called *Nobody*

Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk, which re-configured the events of *The Great Crossing* as unbroken past tense narration, without the presence of the diary entries.^[44] This transition from the ephemeral, contingent, and intermedial format of *The Great Crossing* to the set narrative of *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk*, which was eventually published in Gray's first monologue collection, best represents the change in Gray's approach from the extemporaneously generated, conceptual and situational early performances to the replicable and circulatable, recognizably dramatic form that his monologues would ultimately take.^[45]

Later versions of the monologue presented an even more tightly controlled narrative, with elements added to the physical setting that came very close to what would become the official-looking set of *Swimming to Cambodia*: his habitual table and chair, with a map hung behind it, and a pointer on his desk. That monologue would follow a few years after this one, enabled by a mainstream film role and leading to opportunities for publication and film adaptations. Even later on, text and other external media still remained an occasional part of his monologues. *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* retained the twin newspaper articles that opened the piece and even continued to add printed media found on the trip -- a placemat from a steak house in South Dakota, a news clipping about end times survivalists in Oregon, an article from the new age *Good Times* newspaper about UFOs on Mount Shasta.^[46] Early versions of *Swimming to Cambodia*, too, ended with an extended reading from a stack of philosophical books Gray had turned to for guidance after a difficult return from Thailand.^[47] But the intermedial contingency that had initially defined his talk performance practice no longer obtained. Although he was able to preserve the spectacularity of his skills as an extemporaneous performer across media, his performances were no longer tethered to the collective present of the performance event. Despite the wide circulation that Gray's mediated work in film, video, and text enabled, the possibilities it had originally presented for a formally, procedurally, and conceptually daring alternative to the familiar tropes of literary and dramatic narrative and authorship were sidelined in favor of the artistic success and formal influence he ultimately achieved.

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^[1] During the 1980s, Gray was often associated with a number of iconic artists also making solo performances in downtown Manhattan, many of them crossing paths at the venue PS 122, including Laurie Anderson, Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, and Eric Bogosian. All were known for using the minimal material of their bodies and voices (and, in Anderson's case, even more pronounced live interactions with media technologies than Gray's) to create work that could be aesthetically challenging and politically provocative, but that also became quite popular and circulated widely on tour, in publications, and as audio and video recordings or broadcasts.

^[2] I use the term "talk performance" as a critical category by which I identify uses of extemporaneous talk as a material and a process, rather than simply a tool to convey narrative content. By framing talk, and not artistic discipline, as the defining aspect of Gray's performances in my broader, ongoing research, I connect them to the performance work of other artists from different disciplinary backgrounds

who I identify with the category by their use of extemporaneous talk as a central part of their practices, in particular the poet David Antin and the dance artist and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer.

[3] My research was enabled by a Dissertation Research Fellowship I received from the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin, where Gray's archive is held, and benefitted from the aid of the Theatre and Performance Curator, Helen Baer, during my initial visit to the HRC, and later Eric Colleary on a follow-up visit, both generously responding to several inquiries.

[4] In his 1965 essay (reprinted in 2001 with a further commentary he added in 1981 and an appendix by his daughter, the art historian Hannah Higgins), Higgins proposed that intermedia does not just mean the inclusion of more than one media, but that something new emerges between existing categories, with its own set of rules. For Higgins, it is not enough to merely remove a disciplinary element that appears particularly stultifying, like a play's script, because the unscripted play will just default to imitating a scripted one in the absence of further disruption. Another element must be introduced to ensure the intermedial object or event remains in-between. Dick Higgins and Hannah Higgins, "Intermedia," *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (February 1, 2001): 49–54.

[5] Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 11.

[6] Chiel Kattenbelt, "Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage Of Intermediality," Chapple and Kattenbelt, 37.

[7] Rosemary Klich and Edward Scheer, *Multimedia Performance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 71.

[8] J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Andreas Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization*, trans. Keith Tribe (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012.)

[9] Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 19 (1990): 59-88.

[10] In his study of performer-object interaction, *Theatre/Ecology/Cognition*, Paavolainen uses the broad term "object," rather than the more specialized terms "props" or "set," to speak about non-human or animal presences in theatrical performance. This leaves open questions of agency in the interactions between onstage performers and objects, which he sees as mutually constitutive through the object's "affordances" (a term he borrows from psychologist James J. Gibson,) or intended interfaces, on the one hand, and the actions of the performer on the other. Teemu Paavolainen, *Theatre/Ecology/Cognition: Theorizing Performer-Object Interaction in Grotowski, Kantor, and Meyerhold*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13-16.

[11] Spalding Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*. (New York: Vintage, 1986), xii.

[12] Spalding Gray, "Swimming to Cambodia; Part 1; 1/31/84," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C4766, Harry Ransom Center.

[13] These include *Blues for a Gray Sun* (Nilaja Sun, 2004), *A Spalding Gray Matter* (Michael Brandt, 2005), *Swimming to Spalding* (Lian Amaris, 2009), and *Who Killed Spalding Gray?* (Daniel MacIvor, 2017) to cite only examples that include his name in their titles.

[14] All four of the monologues Gray made after *Swimming to Cambodia* were published in mass-market editions intended for literary consumption, not theatrical production: *Monster in a Box* (1992), *Gray's Anatomy* (1993), *It's a Slippery Slope* (1997), and *Morning, Noon and Night* (2000). Two of these were also adapted to film themselves: *Monster in a Box* (1992) was directed by Nick Broomfield, and *Gray's Anatomy* (1997) by Steven Soderbergh.

[15] Bauman and Briggs, 73.

[16] Bauman and Briggs, 73, original emphasis.

[17] Bauman and Briggs, 77.

[18] Bolter and Grusin, 54.

[19] Hepp, 38, original emphasis.

[20] Michael Peterson, *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 5.

[21] David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 3-5.

[22] Gray's table, which, along with his habitual notebook, water glass, and flannel shirt, defined his post-Wooster Group performances, persists to this day in TWG's work as a long, forward-facing table, often installed at the same level as the floor of the stage, where actors sit when not "acting" and from which text is often read aloud.

[23] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 57-59.

[24] Spalding Gray, "BSE II Oct. 23 (Mickery 1978); Intro and Celia (Mickery 1978); Nayatt Oct. 1978," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5155, Harry Ransom Center.

[25] Richard Schechner, "My Art in Life: Interviewing Spalding Gray," *TDR: The Drama Review* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 162.

[26] Spalding Gray, "Intro CP - Spalding's Improv Feb. 8 '78; Nayatt; Cocktail Party II; Nayatt 1978," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5198 Harry Ransom Center.

[27] Gray, "BSE II Oct. 23 (Mickery 1978); Intro and Celia (Mickery 1978); Nayatt Oct. 1978."

[28] In his history of hip-hop, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, Jeff Chang offers an account of DJ Kool Herc discovering this method through audience observation at rent parties in the Bronx in the mid-1970s. Jeff

Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2005), 77-85.

[29] Savran, *Breaking the Rule*, 106.

[30] He would, in fact, become particularly associated with what he eventually termed, in *Swimming to Cambodia*, his search for the “perfect moment” while traveling. A version of this search is described in preliminary terms in this work, along with the crippling indecision and self-doubt that accompanied it.

[31] Spalding Gray, Journal: 1978-1979, Spalding Gray Papers, Series I, Subseries C: Notebooks, 1964-2003, undated, C35.1, Harry Ransom Center.

[32] Spalding Gray, “India and After,” audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C4927, Harry Ransom Center.

[33] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 73.

[34] Spalding Gray, “India and After (Ct. College)” 1979, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C4929, Harry Ransom Center.

[35] My thanks to Kathleen Russo, Gray’s widow, for permission to use images of items in the Spalding Gray collection at the HRC on behalf of Gray’s estate.

[36] Gray, “India and After,” 1980.

[37] Gray told Savran that he sought out the new structure because the linear telling “didn’t work the way my mind was working at the time I was going through it.” And Savran said the final format “puts the spectator in a position similar to that of the monologue’s distressed subject.” Savran, 73. Similarly, William Demastes wrote that *India and After* “duplicated on stage what was going on in Gray’s head during his breakdown in India and after.” *Spalding Gray’s America* (Milwaukee: Limelight Editions, 2008), 69.

[38] Spalding Gray, “*The Great Crossing*; S.F.; Last Performance; September 13,” 1980, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5007, Harry Ransom Center.

[39] In many ways this anticipates an argument that David P. Terry would make about the split between the past actor and the confessional performer in Gray's much later monologues. “Once Blind, Now Seeing: Problematics of Confessional Performance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 26, no. 3 (July 2006): 209–28.

[40] Gray, “*The Great Crossing*; S.F.; Last Performance; September 13.”

[41] Gray, “*The Great Crossing*; S.F.; Last Performance; September 13.”

[42] It is tempting to wonder if the crisis in Seattle about the necessity of setting his monologues in order to succeed professionally might provide some insight into whether pressures to continue producing and

performing monologues even after the process was no longer useful to him could have contributed to Gray's suicide in 2004, especially given his ongoing obsession with his mother's suicide and his anxiety about replicating it himself. However, I hesitate to see Gray's death in fatalistic terms despite the theme of suicide that ran through his life. For one, I think it is a stretch to imagine that because Gray talked about fear of suicide as a topic in 1977, or balked publically at professional pressures in 1980, that his despair and evident decision to take his own life in 2004 was somehow inevitable, or that his personal and professional successes in the intervening years are somehow rendered irrelevant. But also, as neurologist Oliver Sacks suggested in his 2015 *New Yorker* article about his evaluations of Gray before his death, the various circumstances of Gray's life and death -- the long shadow cast by his mother's suicide, his reliance on his monologues as quasi-therapeutic processes, and the head injury he suffered in a car accident that made it difficult to write or perform and contributed to a debilitating depression in the last few years of his life -- seem too intertwined with one another to draw out any conclusive causal links. ("The Catastrophe: Spalding Gray's Brain Injury," *The New Yorker*, 27 April, 2015.) Instead, I am interested in continuing to track Gray's posthumous circulation as a media phenomenon. I argue that Gray's estate has tended to frame Gray's legacy in literary terms, instigating several posthumous publishing projects, including an edited volume of his journals and what exists of his unfinished last monologue, *Life Interrupted*. (*The Journals of Spalding Gray* [New York: Knopf, 2011]; *Life Interrupted: The Unfinished Monologue* [New York: Crown, 2005].) On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, performing artists influenced and impacted by Gray's work have created an entire genre of autobiographical solo performances that make use of his physical setting and his stylistic approach, as well as a more idiosyncratic, small but significant subgenre of performance works that deal explicitly with Gray's life, death, and work as their main topic. (See note 13.)

[43] My understanding of the transition from *The Great Crossing* to *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* is based on my archival research at the Harry Ransom Center, where Gray's papers are held. However, in his survey of alternative theatre, *Beyond the Boundaries*, theatre scholar Theodore Shank makes a brief reference to this same work being performed in San Francisco under the title *Points of Interest (America)*. I have not seen other evidence that Gray used that title, which would suggest an interesting serialized relationship with *India and After (America)*, but it is possible he used it at some point before or after he was calling it *The Great Crossing*. Theodore Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 178.

[44] Spalding Gray, "Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk; DTW 11/22/80," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5093, Harry Ransom Center.

[45] Gray, *Sex and Death...*, 117-149.

[46] Spalding Gray, "Nobody Wanted To Sit Behind A Desk," 1982, Betamax, Spalding Gray Papers, GRS103-104, Harry Ransom Center.

[47] Spalding Gray, "Swimming to Cambodia; Part 1; 1/31/84," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C4766, Harry Ransom Center.



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