Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 320 pp.

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In the 2018 Marvel comic *West Coast Avengers*, written by Kelly Thompson with art by Stefano Caselli, the antihero Quentin Quire signs a contract to turn the team's adventures into a reality show; after each battle or misunderstanding, our characters face cameras to tell viewers (i.e. comic book readers) how they truly feel. In the book-length prose poem *Nature Poem* (2016), Tommie Pico—a self-described Kumeyaay queer NDN (his spelling)—describes his own difficulties seeing himself as a poet and performing his poems: "Onstage I'm a mess / of tremor and sweat. . . . My throat is full of survivors." And in the same year that *Nature Poem* appeared, journalists told a very successful—but very guarded—politician that she ought to cast aside formalities and display her real self: "To really sway uncommitted voters," explained one sage, "Clinton needs to be more personal in how she communicates."

Christopher Grobe's persuasive, clear, and only occasionally frustrating study suggests that the comics, the poem, and the campaign illustrate the same phenomenon, the same set of contradictory expectations, which (according to Grobe) characterize the half-century leading up to our own time. To be true to ourselves, according to these expectations, we must disclose those selves to others, in ways that appear to reject, or disclaim, artifice. But those disclosures, those presentations, must (since they are forms of communication) themselves involve artifice. They also show that we change over time: once you see or hear who I really am, and how my secrets shaped me, the secrets are out, and I may have moved on. Moreover, my selfhood involves you. I get to discover myself only onstage, before a figurative or else a literal audience; otherwise, how will I ever know who I am?

Such questions arise in—indeed, helped create—performance studies, a robust field championed by Peggy Phelan and others in the 1990s, defined alongside and against the more conventional study of stage drama. Despite recent attention to poetry readings, performance studies as a scholarly field has had only limited contact with the history and theory of print-based, book-based poetry, of the kinds written by Wallace Stevens and Terrance Hayes (for example). Nor has performance studies interacted often with the (mostly British) academic critique of reality TV. Grobe's central insight is that the same set of expectation—which Grobe named "confessional performance"—unites them all: the same dynamic of continual, as-if-in-real-time, as-if-unscripted self-revelation—with all its potential for queer and feminist politics (when is the personal political? how?), and all its contradictions. The self is a script, but the self cannot be

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written down; the self requires an audience but appears as prior to any audience. And that dynamic occurs, successively, in the 1960s and 1970s verse of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton; in the feminist performance artists of the 1970s, such as Eleanor Antin; in the 1970s and 1980s storytelling of Spalding Gray; and in the most influential early reality TV (especially MTV's *The Real World*, first broadcast in 1992).

"Confessional poetry" (so Grobe declares) "was from the start a performance genre," influenced by the live readings that Lowell undertook in the 1950s, by Plath's background in elocution, and by Sexton's "Stanislavskian . . . immersion in the scene[s] that she's reliving" (45, 76-77). Conversely, commercially televised nonfiction has directors, and narrative arcs, and showrunners' decisions, too. In each case, we, the audience, know that someone is using technical skill to present a person as real, unmediated, authentic, perhaps shameful, or formerly ashamed. In each case the performance encourages us to act as if we did not know (and to listen like a therapist). And this kind of performance consists in our seeing it not as somehow unmade, or unperformed, nor as any kind of narrative apart from its hearers or instantiations, but instead as a special kind of performance: one whose technique is always failing, "a spectacle of crumbling artifice," a "persona falling away" (vii).

This insight really does seem like Grobe's alone. Irregular rhyme and fractured patterns in Lowell; departures from print and reliance on spoken word; attempts to "dramatize. . . . a struggle against fixity and stagnation" (29), in Lowell as in standup comedians like Lenny Bruce; and star turns, asides, time facing the camera, in *West Coast Avengers* (or *The Real World*, or *The Office*) exemplify Grobe's argument equally.

The newly authentic—and soon discarded—selves that arise in this kind of art (art founded on confessional performance) must continually furnish, and flee, the evidence that shows who and what they have been, along with evidence of their artifice. No wonder Lowell's own later poetry fills up so often with quotations, documents, detritus, "old tins, dead vermin, ashes, eggshells, youth." No wonder "the artists who mainstreamed confessional monologue in the 1980s," as Grobe says, "have a strange relationship to written-out texts," which they disclaimed but also published (139). Confessional performances, moreover—as Grobe demonstrates—go well with documents and documentation, written or other records that are not the same thing as the poem, or the life, or the self, but that demonstrate its authenticity: "life is performance, performance is life—and documentation. . . . joins the two together" (113).

This kind of argument has the welcome quality of a scientific hypothesis: we can test it out on contemporaneous figures, performances, and even whole art forms (like comics) not mentioned in Grobe's own work. James K. Baxter's epochal late sonnets

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(accompanied by diaries, and with a vexed relation to print); meta-memoirs like Lauren Slater's; and more recent standup artists from Margaret Cho to Hannah Gadsby all participate in the confessional performances Grobe sees, and most of them come with supporting documentation (Gadsby is now writing a book). You might even say—though Grobe does not—that the whole modern structure of queer identity, with its emphasis on coming out, revealing the formerly hidden, according to well-defined narrative processes, presents queer adults with the same dilemma that Gray and Lowell identified in their own work: Does confessional performance come to an end? Once you're out, what next? Who are you now?

Grobe builds not only on earlier performance studies but also on Erving Goffman's *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), whose full implications for literary life have yet to be explored. And of course that's not all Grobe does: as you would expect from a quality monograph, archival research (especially as regards Antin and Gray) reveals the changed minds, the minutiae, and the stressful decisions behind individual works. But that's Grobe's thesis; and he seems mostly right.

Mostly: because while he's careful not to make outlandish claims about causality, he does imply that Lowell and Sexton might be the origin for this confessional self: that *Life Studies* and *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (and perhaps also *The Dream Songs* and *Ariel*) represent the origin of the focus on realness, right now, and on the real as a series of "breakthroughs" or disruptions, that led—50-odd years on—to *Jersey Shore*. He probably has identified a real lineage. Gray had in fact been reading a lot of Lowell (145). Both Sexton and Eleanor Antin "drew on realist acting theory" (125). And modern reality TV, with its "people playing themselves," would not be recognizable as such (and could not be parodied as it has been) without its "direct-to-camera monologues," which probably could not exist without figures like Gray (187, 193). None of these versions of the self are merely fake or false; but none result in fixed objects, only in always-obsolescent events in time that produce, and disclaim, their art.

The lineage he identifies, however, might go back farther than he implies. Grobe mentions Augustine and Rousseau and Wordsworth, but insists that late twentieth-century Americans believed "that they were witnessing something new" (3). Maybe so, but what if they were wrong? There is an alternative-universe version of Grobe's book, less scholarly than essayistic, that tracks the same phenomenon he describes—the self as performance, as artifice constantly falling away to reveal something raw and new—over centuries, if not millennia. Take John Donne's "The Triple Fool" (early 1600s), or Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850):

> I sometimes hold it half a sin
> To put in words the grief I feel;

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For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,
Like coarsest clothes against the cold;
But that large grief which these enfold
Is given in outline and no more.

To say such things in such quatrains is to turn to a not-yet-invented movie camera, to disclaim the very mask through which one speaks. The great chain of confession that leads forward from Lowell's heyday into the present could (if we stop looking for explicit, acknowledged-by-name influence) go a lot farther back as well.

And that great chain can show us how to break our own chains, or how to help others break theirs—how we have been (or need not be) what Grobe calls "method actors of the self" (213). Grobe concludes not with poetry, nor with new digital media (where new confessional performances pop up daily on Tumblr) but with Emma Sulkowicz, the undergraduate who carried a mattress around Columbia University a few years ago in order to critique the university's—and the country's—response to sexual assault. That mattress calls back (as Grobe notes) to the still-unfulfilled potential of 1970s feminist consciousness-raising, which at its worst followed tacit, predictable scripts, but at its best showed participants how their lives, and our lives, had been proceeding within frames, according to unwritten rules, and how future choices might break those frames, how "this way of grief / is shared, unnecessary and political," to quote Adrienne Rich. It is the kind of discovery that underpins—indeed, that gave rise to—#MeToo.

My other trouble with this superb study is really a problem with scholarly books now, in general. Poets and poems, performances and television shows get their moments in Grobe's spotlight because they have had moments in other spotlights: because they make plausible pivot points in a larger culture that includes poets and poetry, gallery artists and standup comedians, MTV and MSNBC. If it's not influential, it's not included; if it's not important, according to subsequent artists or critics, if it has not shaped culture, it doesn't get a look in. That's how most historians need to proceed. But for literary critics and scholars, it's optional. Did Grobe find, in his archives, many blind alleys, often-ignored writers or speakers, potentialities for confessional performance to

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become what it never has been? Can he (or can you, dear scholar, dear reader) help us find more?

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