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Tami Spry: The Force of (Co-)Performing

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Abstract

In this short article, we work with the notion of Tami Spry as *force*. There is a tension here: We have come to recognize, both through the writing of this article and through our many years of encountering both Tami herself and Tami's work as performer and writer, how we find ourselves needing to de-personalize and de-individualize: we are drawn into the beyond, the uncontainable, the “more-than,” of Tami and Tami's work. At the same time as this impulse to de-personalize and de-individualize, we recognize—and cherish—that Tami Spry's work could not happen without Tami Spry. We experience, and seek to convey here, our respect, our gratitude, our love, both for a person we are privileged to call our friend and for a body of work, whether performed, written or performed in writing, that is committed to the personal, the vulnerable, the intimate and the embodied.

Keywords

performance, performative writing, collaborative writing, affect

In this short article, we work with the notion of Tami Spry as *force*. There is a tension here: We have come to recognize, both through the writing of this article and through our many years of encountering both Tami herself and Tami's work as performer and writer, how we find ourselves needing to de-personalize and de-individualize: we are drawn into the beyond, the uncontainable, the “more-than” (Manning, 2016), of Tami and Tami's work. At the same time as this impulse to de-personalize and de-individualize, we recognize—and cherish—that Tami Spry's work could not happen without Tami Spry. We experience, and seek to convey here, our respect, our gratitude, our love, both for a person we are privileged to call our friend and for a body of work, whether performed, written or performed in writing, that is committed to the personal, the vulnerable, the intimate and the embodied.

However, Tami Spry's immense contribution both as writer and performer, the profound impact she and her work has had, and continues to have, both on us and on countless others is, we suggest, impossible to understand if we conceptualize “Tami” as bounded, humanist individual and “her” work as “produced” by “her.” Instead, we find we can only conceptualize Tami and Tami's work as inextricable—as Tami-and-Tami's-work—and want to work/write/live with the concept of Tami-and-Tami's-work as joyful, unstoppable, activist *force*. The forceful intensity of Tami's “affective presencing” always offers challenge to the boundaries and limitations of form. The relational energies unleashed by Tami's work take us beyond the constraining narrowness of thinking and working with the simply human. Encounters with Tami and her work unleash the ontological

indeterminacies of the always new, always fresh and always forceful animations of living with the research creative possibilities of the always not yet known.

We offer our thinking-feeling words in this article as dialogic and collaborative, drawing upon our histories of writing dialogically and collaboratively with Tami Spry and others, centered around the annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) each May, which has itself been such a force in our work and in our lives.

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Ken: I am seared by the memory of that group of four men and one woman who miraculously, serendipitously found each other, then came together to write (Gale et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Wyatt et al., 2011) . . .

Jonathan: . . . found each other here at this Congress in 2007, somehow. . .

K: Four men. Ron (Pelias), Larry (Russell), Jonathan and Ken. One woman. Tami. The searing releases the tearing.¹ The re-membering of the tense, joyful, visceral immediations of those times blew me away then and bringing them to the surface again does it again today.

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J: We five, writing, writing, writing, through the year, across the distances, east to west, north to south; words making their way between us, between the everyday of our lives, between the silences we leave; and, the following May, standing together beside each other, here in the presence of others, our words given breath and body.

K: Four men and one woman only says something about form. When Tami's name is mentioned, force is brought into the mix and the energy that is created by the presencing of that force is immense. It's not hyperbole for me to say that coming to ICQI time and time again and seeing, listening and then working with Tami changed my life. Without ever *telling* me, Tami *showed* me what to do. I still can't do it like Tami but it's always worth a try!

J: Tami showed me also. There was that first Tami moment, before The Five: the first ICQI in 2005, Ken and I traveling here, eyes open wide both at America and Americana—taking photos of ourselves on disposable cameras beside monster trucks, eating at diners, sipping wheat beers—and at this Congress, in awe of those we'd been reading since beginning our doctoral programme together the year before.

Tami, Claudio (Moreira) and I were placed together in a panel on “The Performativity of Loss” at 9.45am on Saturday. Tami performed “Paper and Skin.” I think I sat on the floor, or I felt like I did, looking up at her. You can imagine. She stood strong, holding her script lightly in her hands, she moved, she summoned us into her performance of grief:

The words are unmeshed in the blood and bones of the mother and child. Arms ache and disarm themselves with the visceral absence of the other. Writing doesn't help me put my arms back on, but it does help me to remember that I had arms, and then, to show me that the arms are still usable in a way I can't yet understand. (Spry, 2006, p. 342)

At one point, I remember, she let the pages of her script go, one by one, to drift—dipping, dropping—to the floor.

I had not witnessed scholarship like this before. I had not witnessed performance like this before.

K: Tami once wrote to and with those four guys and said,

It is all for putting words on a page

It is all for this.

All of this.

It is in assigning language to the swirl and chaos and euphoria and possibilities banging around in my guts and heart and head

when I feel as if my knees will buckle under the pressure under the plunder under that nauseating sickness of a high tide that spilled such pussy grabbing gore up onto the shores of our bodies personal, of our bodies collective, it is these bodies we now must sing of more than ever.

It is all for that. (Gale et al., 2017, pp. 16–17)

Yes, it is all for that!

J: It is. It is all for that. It's all for the heart-felt, blood-felt, Tami-force. All for her breathing of theory like air: in, out, shaping meaning as if out of nothing. It's all for the power of that Tami-imperceptible movement of an arm, a hand, a finger. You know the one. You can see her do it. You don't know how she does it but you can see her, feel her—that gesture there, yes, how she holds her hand, *thus*. Or how she lifts her head, *thus*; or how she holds her gaze, *thus*. How she roars her strength, *thus*. You don't know how she does it but you know it when you feel it. It's all for that. It's all for her Tami-ferocity, her rage at injustice, at her love. You know the one. You know the ones. She becomes more-than-one. It's her super-power. You don't know how she does it but you feel it. You feel Tami-ing when it happens. You know when you've been Tami-ed. Yes, it's all for that; it's all for its effects. It's all for what happens to us and in us as witnesses, as co-respondents, as co-authors, as readers, as friends, as students. It's all for all of that, and more.

K: Thanks, so much Tami, you showed me how to put my stuff out there in ways that helped me to cry, to bleed, to laugh and to know that it was OK.

J: Thank you, Tami. Thank you for the years, thank you for the friendship, thank you for being—as I've taught you we Brits say—“the dog's bollocks.”² Thank you for the conversation and the laughs, the beers and the wines; thank you for the Mojito education (I've learned from you it has to be “straight up, a little *dirty*”). And thank you for showing me, too, like Ken and like many, many others, how to put my stuff out there and to aspire to your subtle, bold, impassioned, “practiced vulnerability” (Spry, 2011, p. 167).

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Notes

1. Tearing as in *cry* not as in *rip*.
2. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dog-s-bollocks>

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Author Biographies

Ken Gale works in the Institute of Education in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business at the University of Plymouth in the UK and has published widely and presented at several international conferences on the philosophy of education, research methodologies and collaborative approaches to education practices. His current research involves the use of speculative and more than simply human approaches to theorizing and inquiry, in encounters with creative and relational space making and the in-formational play between discursively constructed and materially constituted aspects of pedagogy and research in contemporary education. His most recent book, *Writing and Immanence: Concept making and the reorientation of thought in pedagogy and inquiry*, was published by Routledge in January 2023.

Jonathan Wyatt is Professor of Qualitative Inquiry and co-director of the Center for Creative-Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh. His most recent book, co-edited with Keith Tudor, is *Qualitative Research Approaches for Psychotherapy*, published by Routledge in 2023.