Where's the fire? : celebration of inconsistent identity in "Ten true things"

| 著者（英） | Ayu Megumi |
|---------------------------------|
| 誌名 | Core |
| 号数 | 47 |
| 年 | 2019-03-10 |
| URL | http://doi.org/10.14988/pa.2020.0000000191 |
I. Introduction

“Ten True Things” is included in No One Belongs Here More Than You (2007), the debut collection of short stories by Miranda July, a writer, filmmaker and performance artist. This short piece exemplifies the long-standing theme of her work: celebration of performance and exploration of inconsistent identity including gender and sexuality. The identity of Dana, the narrator, is theatrically constructed and reconstructed in each interaction with other characters. The narrator gradually forms an intimate friendship with Ellen, the wife of Dana’s supervisor, wandering back and forth between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In the end of the story, the narrator finds her own singularity which is free from any normative categorizations of gender and sexuality.

In July’s works, the form of “role-playing,” a seemingly superficial performance, is fundamental in connecting her characters, which Ava Kofman describes as “the artifice of the performance in the service of intimacy.” Talking about her first feature film Me and You and Everyone We Know (2005) in an interview, July reveals her perspective on playing roles in everyday life. She describes Richard, one of the central characters, as “someone who is afraid to play a role (of father or lover) because it feels
fake to him.” However, the filmmaker herself makes an objection to it: “we must play roles, and believe in them enough to connect to each other through them. . . . Yes! It’s not real! But let’s pretend it is, let’s celebrate it and in doing so, let’s believe in the invention of us together” (Kushner). For July, then, the superficiality of performance is a hopeful possibility to generate a connection and intimacy between her characters. The idea of a fluid identity reconstructed through such accumulation of performances, which seems “fake,” thus takes on a crucial significance.

Intimate relationships in July’s work naturally involve sexuality; July considers it as quite “slippery” and encourages readers to realize its instability: “we are all reorienting ourselves all the time as far as orientation. It’ll kind of be whatever it needs to be in the moment” (Siddall). As Dana and Ellen, who are both aware of their heterosexuality, build the intimacy through bodily contact, July indicates that sexuality is not as coherent as any essentialist assumes; in “The Sister,” for example, an old man, who longs for a non-existent young sister of his friend, ends up having a sexual relationship with the very male friend. Similarly, in “Ten True Things,” July affirmatively describes the inconsistent ways of theatrical identity and the ambiguous self-awareness of gender and sexuality, while questioning the very idea of femininity.

II. Theatrical Construction of Identity

The characters’ identities in “Ten True Things” are constructed in the form of theater, which is to say, characters perform his/her identity to “a real or imagined audience” (Butler 2005: 66), identifying with the perspective or expectation of the
audience; like actors on stage, they express what they are on the presumption of being watched at all times. This theatrical construction of identity is similar to the way of “giving an account of oneself” that Judith Butler discusses: “It is an action in the direction of an other, as well as an action that requires an other, in which an other is presupposed” (2005: 81). The relationship between Dana and Rick, or Dana and Ellen, exactly follows this theatrical structure, which requires a performer and an audience. Whereas they give form to their identity in the sequence of watching or being watched, it cannot completely give account of themselves; their identity is only temporary and “reconstituted at every moment” (2005: 66).

From the beginning of the story, Rick identifies himself as an accountant without a qualification for it, even though the reason of his decision to become one is not explained in the narrative. Working as a secretary of him, the narrator begins to wonder why he pretends to be someone he is not, and she presumes that he performs his identity as an accountant for his wife, Ellen:

I think he told her he was an accountant on their first date. Then he got business cards made that said RICK MARASOVIC, ACCOUNTANT, 236-4954, and he handed her one. Then he got a phone, for the number, then a desk, for the phone, then an office, for the desk, and then me. So in a sense, we are both working for her. (133-34)

Rick sets up the role of an accountant in the first place, then gets the stage properties: business cards, the number, a phone, a desk, an office and a secretary, as if he is a theatrical producer who decides the theme of the play and casts the performers. With these “items” on stage, he performs his designed identity as an accountant. Dana
serves as a partner of role-playing and reflects what he wants to perform in the same way as a mirror.

Suggested by the later scene in which Dana associates Rick with her “large thighs” (140), she projects herself into Rick; she sees herself in Rick, the other “who may . . . ‘mirror’ one’s own constitution” (Butler 2005: 41). Therefore, seeing how Rick theatrically constructs his identity from the perspective of Dana reveals at the same time the structure of Dana’s self-construction. Dana, too, constantly reproduces and performs an identity “directed toward an object”—an audience—“which may or may not exist” (Butler 1993: 283); because of this theatricality, her identity is something unstable, which can transform through each interaction with others. In the process of becoming close to Ellen, Dana demonstrates how she has habitually reconstructed her identity: “I wanted to look at everything through her eyes. I do this before I bring someone new into my life; I try to get a sense of who I am” (136). Dana tries to conform herself to the perspective of the other; in other words, she identifies with the other in order to define herself. She repeatedly defines and gives account of herself with some “substitutable” (Butler 2005: 37) words; in relation to Rick, she sees herself as “the neck he breathes down” (133) and “his secretary” (133). Here, Dana only serves to complement Rick’s identity as an accountant, unstably switching the roles between a performer and an audience; as an audience, she pretends “it’s the sound of math” when Rick “spends all day e-mailing” (132), just like a servant in “The Emperor’s New Clothes” who pretends to be capable of seeing the clothes of the naked emperor; as a performer on Rick’s stage, on the other hand, she takes Ellen’s phone calls to the office as if Rick is actually busy working as an accountant. Before Rick,
Dana is merely his companion; one of “we,” who “are both working for” (134) Ellen.

In the relationship with Rick, the narrator assumes that there is a reality—what is called “the truth” (134)—beneath the superficiality of the stage he has prepared. He receives e-mails, but Dana detects that those e-mails have nothing to do with the job of an accountant: “I can tell when he’s gotten a good one, a sex one, because he gets all loose and casual with me, to counteract the raging of his heart” (133). Rick’s transparency of the theatrical construction of identity prompts Dana to conceive the idea of the binary of the real and the fake, the fantasy of the hidden truth which is what Eve Sedgwick describes as “the topos of depth or hiddenness, typically followed by a drama of exposure” (Sedgwick 2003: 8). It is in this sense that Dana refers to “the Indian-restaurant analogy” (140) as an example to explain the structure of how Rick and she manage the office and also her idea about the hidden truth:

Sag paneer? Very good choice. The waiter hands the order to the cook, the cook hands it to the busboy, the busboy runs down the block and orders sag paneer from the other Indian restaurant, the shoddy one, takeout. This is why the more expensive restaurants take longer to bring out the food. It’s all that running. In this case, I am the busboy, I am the one who hires the real accountant, I spare him indignity. (133)

Dana assumes it is the “secret true fact” (140) that she hires the “real” accountant for Rick, the “fake” one, and feels humiliated to complement his fictitious identity. The binary of the real and the fake is the key criteria of Dana’s judgment, and she hates to be confined into the realm of the fake. The notion of exposing the hidden truth of Rick opens up the way to connect to Ellen and brings forth a drama of “exposure,” which
has, at the end, the double meaning for Dana: not only about the truth of Rick but also about her own identity. Thus the relationship with Ellen becomes vital for the narrator.

III. Unnameable Intimacy Between Women

For Dana, the accounting office is the original stage where she performs her identity as the complement to Rick. Hence, Ellen is the key person who lives in the “real” world and might help Dana to escape from Rick’s stage. When Dana occasionally talks with Ellen on phone, however, the conversation between them inevitably goes through the intervention of Rick: Dana performs as his role-playing partner, and Ellen performs as his wife. Then Ellen injects some personal notes into the businesslike conversations, and it makes a space of deviation where the fixed roles can become variable:

Hi, is Rick in?
No, he’s not. Can I take a message?
Can you tell him to call me as soon as possible?
Where’s the fire?
What?
What’s the hurry?
I’m at loose ends.
Oh. I’ll tell him. (135)

Ellen’s defenseless attitude toward Dana holds some childish innocence and does not seem to hide anything. Her “honesty” (138), such as telling that she uses the “flower
“essences” for “[o]vercoming body shame” (134), becomes the clue to close the distance between them. Dana begins to feel that Ellen “seem[s] to have room for” (135) her; she recognizes Ellen as “the receiver” whom she “presume[s] to receive” (Butler 2005: 67) who she is. For the narrator, the relationship with Ellen is “a site where the relation to a possible reception takes form” (Butler 2005: 67); a site where she can construct and perform not other people’s identity but her own identity, which she supposes is her “true” self. It is a chance, in other words, to abandon her self-definition as a complement to the fictitious identity of Rick. Though Dana starts to take an interest in Ellen because she wants to know whether Ellen is deceived by Rick or is also “a liar” (134), the narrator gradually grows a desire to “build friendship” (138)—the relationship that they can foster only by themselves, not through the intervention of Rick—with Ellen.

Therefore, Dana attempts to suggest that she too has room for Ellen by identifying and sharing similarities with her:

I walked around the apartment, looking through the eyes of someone who had body shame and an interest in sewing. I moved some things around in the kitchen and threw my best sweater carelessly across my bed. I dusted the television but messed up the papers on my desk. (136)

Dana rearranges her apartment before Ellen arrives; this act is interpreted as her reconstruction and performance of who she is toward Ellen, the “imaginary” (Butler 1993: 283) audience whom she impersonates. This attempt of identification is made unilaterally by Dana at the beginning, but later also accepted by Ellen and it converts into a mutual quest:
[H]er eyes fell on my best sweater, which I had rethrown across the bed each day. She said, How cozy, and a feeling of coziness encircled us. When she saw my messy desk, she said she was the same way, and there was no dust on TV, and I was easy to love. (138)

After Ellen visits Dana’s apartment and finds it congenial, they start to seek “how we were the same and how we were different” (139), touching and comparing all of their body parts; the distance between them is physically reduced step by step and they increasingly feel that they are growing into one. It is worth noting that from the moment they meet for the first time in the real world, Dana begins to call themselves “we,” which means she identifies with Ellen as the person who is on the same stage—not just watching or watched but performing together.

Dana likens her relationship with Ellen to “oceans and rivers” (138), drawing a comparison of their body size. Beginning with the description that the “smaller” Ellen flows into the “larger” Dana to “become one” (138), their attempt of identifying with each other is represented with the symbolic images of liquid. One of the triggers of raising the intimacy between them is when Dana makes the “orange juice” (138) for Ellen:

I made orange juice from concentrate and showed her the trick of squeezing the juice of one real orange into it. It removes the taste of being frozen. She marveled at this, and I laughed and said, Life is easy. What I meant was, Life is easy with you here, and when you leave, it will be hard again. (138)

The contrast between the “not real” orange juice from concentrate and the “real” orange seems to indicate the binary of the real and the fake, which is also represented
in the form of liquid; Dana believes she can remove her persona and become the “true” self only in the relationship with Ellen. Subsequently, it is followed by the descriptions that Dana and Ellen return to pre-born state where “human shape” (140) is not fixed yet, using the expressions such as “embryo” (139) or “dark waters” (139) which might be an analogy for the amniotic fluid. When this identification of the two women is finally achieved for a moment, they are represented as “ink”:

We grew still and stared at each other. It seemed incredibly dangerous to look into each other’s eyes, but we were doing it. For how long can you behold another person? Before you have to think of yourself again, like dipping the brush back in for more ink. For a very long time; you didn’t need to get more ink, there was no reason to get anything else, because she was as good as me, she lived on earth like me, she suffered as I did. (139)

These metaphors present the image in which the boundary between two female bodies becomes blurred and they grow into one, while nurturing an undefined and unnameable intimacy. They attain the relationship between only two women into which Rick cannot intervene. As long as they can stare at each other, Dana is able to be immune to her self-definition as a complement to Rick. In that moment, she thinks that she does not perform any role; she seems to discover her “true” self. However, their identification does not last long; the solidarity between the two characters retains a fundamental flaw in its basis.

The image of women as liquid here indicates a clear kinship with the claim of Elizabeth Grosz: “insofar as they are women, they are represented and live themselves as seepage, liquidity” (Grosz 1994: 203). According to Grosz, “the metaphors of
uncontrollability, . . . the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body . . . are all common themes in literary and cultural representations of women” (1994: 203). Then those representations are associated with the concept of “[f]luids” which “have no definite borders” and “are unstable” (Young 1990: 192). Grosz also suggests that “[w]omen’s bodies and sexualities have been structured and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men’s but also attempt, not always or even usually entirely successfully, to position them in a relation of passive dependence and secondariness to men’s” (Grosz 1994: 202). That is to say, female bodies as liquidity and femininity as corporeality, which are seen in July’s story, have been historically positioned as “otherness” (1994: 203), the complement to male bodies as solidity and masculinity as rationality. Therefore, representing women’s identification as fluid is not enough to overcome “a certain heterosexual structuring of male desire” (1994: 202); whether it succeeds or not, the fluid identification of women is already caught within the framework of heterosexual norm.

It is inevitable, then, that the idea of solidity soon returns—“human shape” (140)—and Dana and Ellen fall apart again, although their fluid identification is achieved. “[O]range juice” (138), described as liquid before they touch one another, transforms into the solid “orange juice ice cubes” (139) after their identification collapses; it overlaps with the image of liquidity of female body in the process of identification and solidity of male body represented by Rick, with whom Dana associates her “large thighs” (140) when the identification ceases. As Dana sees herself as the role of “husbands” (141) in the presence of Ellen, Dana ends up projecting
herself into Rick; she cannot overcome the masculine perspective that shapes her self-awareness, which means that she performs the “fake” heterosexual relationship with Ellen. What she has thought as the “true” self turns out to be actually a performance, which she regards as “fake.” Ellen also cannot ignore the norm of heterosexuality to which she conforms and “the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts” (Butler 1993: 238)—Ellen asks Dana “Would you ever touch a woman?” (140), which declares Ellen herself will never touch a woman—and “polic[es]” and “sham[es]” (1993: 238) her own gender to regulate her sexuality and ends up breaking down the ambiguous intimacy between women, which can be considered as “lesbianism” (138) because of its uncertainty of whether it is sexual or not. Even Ellen, whom Dana thinks of “totally unafraid” in contrast to herself and compares to “the birds” (137) which implies “all the grace and freedom” (Kushner), cannot “run” (141) from the policed binaries that cling to normal or abnormal, proper or improper in the discourse of gender and sexuality.

Part of the reasons why Dana wants to discontinue her role as a complement to Rick, which she considers as “fake,” through the identification with Ellen is because Ellen does not seem to perform anything; it looks like “real” to Dana. However, Ellen is just “unself-conscious” (137) of what she performs; she too is caught within the self-defined identities. Unlike Rick, whose performance is a well-known fact between the two women, what Dana and Ellen perform—gender identity and heterosexuality—is difficult to see. Again, Dana’s belief in the binary of the real and the fake is disrupted. In July’s stories, a performance cannot be belittled even if it might be “fake.” In “The Swim Team,” for instance, the young narrator reminisces the days when she was a
swim coach as the liveliest moment in her life; she taught how to swim to three elderly people, who had never swum before, in a small town without a pool—they swam on the floor of a small apartment as if it turned into water. She was a “real” swim coach there because they earnestly believed and followed her; a performance which initially can be regarded as “fake” constitutes a believable “reality” in the end. Besides, as Dana and Ellen become “no longer interested in secret true facts, or the truth in any form” (140), whether the truth and the “true” self exist or not is not the core question in the story. Rather, the inconsistency of the characters’ ever-changing identity in the process of seeking for the solid forms of self is this story’s crucial insight, which is far from “a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times” (Butler 2005: 42).

IV. Sisterhood in the Sewing Class

Where Dana firstly gets to know Ellen outside her office is “a beginning sewing class” (131). In opposition to Dana’s expectation for the intimacy of the class, “like a quilting bee” (137), it is “in rows” and “hard to see all the faces” (136); it is just a collection of individuals without a common experience, which lacks a sense of community. On the last day of class, however, from the moment when all the women wear the robes that they have made, their “chill” (142)—the distance between each member—is lessened for a while. The narrator refers to women in the class as “we,” and with the robes, the atmosphere of intimacy begins to prevail: “We looked like a group of women who know each other very well. Women who wake up together in the
morning and stretch and put on their robes” (142). By wearing the robes, the intimacy in the group of sisterhood, where the identity as a woman is presupposed, is created, providing a feeling of unity or a sense of oneness. Except between Dana and Ellen, women “touch” one another: “Two women were tenderly dabbing at the chest of a third woman who had spilled punch on herself. A group of younger women were braiding each other’s hair” (142). What they perform here is the women’s solidarity through the “love or caring” (142) based on the stereotypical femininity; a word “softness” (137, 142), which is also used for a representation of Ellen, symbolizes it. However, just as the fluid identification between Dana and Ellen is collapsed—the two do not join the caring unity in the class—every attempt to “become one” between women is certainly disrupted in the story.

At the onset, Dana thinks that a couple of women in the class are untruthful because they are actually “good sewers” (131) despite taking the beginning class. Through the sisterhood in the class, women whose self-images do not correspond to the reality seemingly overcome their “low self-esteem” (131) and return to their “true” selves until they freeze at the sight of Sue, “the tiny Asian woman” (131):

Sue suddenly stepped out of the bathroom holding her robe in one hand, naked.
She had discovered she couldn’t put it on because it wasn’t really a robe, it was nothing. All the women paused and fell silent . . . (142)

As a result of misinterpreting teacher’s directions and doing “exact opposite of everything [she is] told” (132), Sue’s robe has turned into just a pink “wad of flannel” (143) at last. A series of her eccentric behaviors, such as “[b]obbinless and with great confidence” (137), makes her a “queer” character in the sewing class; Sedgwick uses
a word “troublant”—a property of causing trouble—as a definition of “queer” and also implies that the origin of “[t]he word ‘queer’ itself” is “across” (Sedgwick 1994: xii). Sue does not try to cover her body, “boldly walk[s] across the room” (143) and literally “discover[s]”—uncovers—the illusory nature of the oneness which the robes generate to “muffle the chill of the Adult Education Center” (142).

The superficiality of their intimacy, which has only the fact of “being” a woman in common, is exposed, and all the women gather around Sue’s miscreated robe like “fire” (143). The robe, which all the women except Sue wear, is compared to “a pink hive” and “a giant tulip bulb” (143); according to the fact that after copulation ends, male bees die and a hive is managed by only female worker bees and a queen bee, or the fact that a bulb reproduces asexually, the robe and its analogies can be regarded as a representation of femininity and the closed group consisting only of women. They attempt to connect to each other, considering “being” a woman as a common truth, a “given” (Butler 1990: 9) identity, but Sue exposes that femininity itself is “nothing” but fantasy. In fact, they can connect to one another not because they “are” women, but because they “perform” the role of women, which is also a theatrical act just as Butler suggests to think of gender as “an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative” (Butler 1990: 139). The reason why all the women “[can] not look away” from Sue’s miscreated robe—a miscreated femininity—but “kn[ow] better than touch it” (143) is because they surely know that it cannot be completely avoided to be involved with femininity in the course of connecting to others even though they realize with horror that the presupposition of their identity—the fantasy of “being” a woman—is lost. In this regard, however, the idea of femininity at the foundation of
the stage, where they perform the solidarity of women, becomes a mere performance on the stage; it is not the unchallengeable “real.”

Because of Sue, who pauses the performance of all the women, the moment in which they do not perform—in other words, the identity as a woman is lost—is produced. While the other women freeze and become awkwardly silent, Dana and Ellen meet their eyes:

Ellen and I quickly looked at each other. Our nakedness was recalled, like a seizure in the air. There was no apology in her eyes, no love or caring. But she saw me, I existed, and this lifted the beams off my shoulders. It takes so little.

(142-43)

For the first time, the relationship between Dana and Ellen transforms into something different from the theatrical structure with a performer and an audience. They just “see”—not consciously behold or stare—each other and recognize the other's existence. There is no need to perform; no need to expose “the truth” beneath the performance; no need to give account of themselves; they just “exist.” Adriana Cavarero argues that “we are beings who are, of necessity, exposed to one another in our vulnerability and singularity” (Butler 2005: 31), and this “exposure” is “a feature of [our] very corporeality” (2005: 33) that “cannot be narrated” (2005: 35) but the other can “witness” (2005: 80). The existence and individuality of Dana can be witnessed by Ellen without defining with the “substitutable” (2005: 37) words. In that moment, Dana no longer needs to bear “the beams” on her shoulders which represent all the roles and definitions to give account of herself; she can make sure that her singularity has already established only because she exists there, by her corporeality
which cannot be described. The discovery of her own singularity can be a liberation for Dana, who suffers from the inconsistency of her identity.

The story ends with the scene in which women in the sewing class stare at Sue’s robe steadily, without describing how they confront the instability of their identity after that moment. However, even if Dana and Ellen cannot get rid of heterosexual norm, or all the women return to perform femininity, or Dana gets back into performing her self-defined roles and continues to “[go] to work” (141) as usual, the story itself questions the fixity of normative categorizations of feminine or masculine, heterosexual or homosexual, and reveals the naturalization of such categories as performed acts. Moreover, July is able to demonstrate how much we rely on a lot of roles—the self-defined identities—to live our lives, and provide a possibility of departure from them. At the base of the story, or all the other works of July, there is the absolute affirmation of our inconsistent identity.

V. Conclusion: The Encounter with Stranger and the Role of Art

In “Ten True Things,” the narrator’s identity and behavior are highly contingent on her relations with others. Dana as the narrator insists on such interactive nature of the self:

I don’t believe in psychology, which says everything you do is because of yourself. That is so untrue. We are social animals, and everything we do is because of other people, because we love them, or because we don’t. (134)

Not only Dana keeps reconstructing herself in order to interact with others, but also
the comforts for her suffering due to the inconsistency of her identity—the invention of unnameable intimacy and the discovery of her own singularity—come inevitably from the interaction with an other, Ellen; there is July’s trustful eyes for the potential of life which is acquired only in the relationship with others. As Katrina Onstad observes that “her work is desperate to bring people together, forcing them into a kind of fellow feeling,” it is a common plot in July’s work that the characters become close to each other unexpectedly. This idea of unexpected encounter and its impact on identity defines July’s literary and other projects.

For example, July’s text-messaging application, Somebody, provides an experience of connecting to strangers. According to its website, the application is described as follows:

When you send your friend a message through Somebody, it goes—not to your friend—but to the Somebody user nearest your friend. This person (likely a stranger) delivers the message verbally, acting as your stand-in. (Somebody)

This application is July’s “antithesis of the utilitarian efficiency that tech promises,” which makes people “nervous” and “giddy” in bringing them together in the real world. With Somebody, July tries to create a lot of “open-ended narratives of people meeting each other” (Eler) as is the case in many of her fiction stories. The encounter of complete strangers who are never supposed to meet might make a difference in their life and identity; while July repetitively expresses this insight, July herself has an experience of a shift in her perspective through the encounter with strangers, about which she has written in It Chooses You (2011), her first essay.

It Chooses You is based on a July’s project, which she began when she got stuck
in making _The Future_ (2011), her second feature film: she interviewed people, who placed an advertisement in “PennySaver,” about their lives. Then July felt a strange connection to Joe, an eighty-one years old man, and eventually cast him in _The Future_. Through the encounter with Joe, she reconsidered her idea about life and discovered its similarity to the art she tried to make:

Maybe I had miscalculated what was left of my life. Maybe it wasn’t loose change. Or, actually, the whole thing was loose change, from start to finish—many, many little moments, each holiday, each Valentine, each year unbearably repetitive and yet somehow always new. You could never buy anything with it, you could never cash it in for something more valuable or more whole. . . . And because of this, this lack of inherent meaning or value, it was stunning. Like the most intricate, radical piece of art, the kind of art I was always trying to make. It dared to mean nothing and so demanded everything of you. (_It Chooses You_ 199)

The art July wanted to make was something like a mirror, which reflected everything of the audience, just as the story of Joe’s life—its insignificant but beautiful moments—encouraged July to realize her own perspective of life. This function of the art reminds us once again of the role that Sue plays in “Ten True Things.”

When Sue makes her robe which is subsequently revealed as “nothing,” a meaningless wad of flannel, the teacher of the sewing class addresses her that “Sue, you are such an artist” (132). Although her robe is meaningless in terms of usefulness, it can give other women the realization about what they perform. This is what July considers as the role of art: to question the belief which the audience takes for granted.
This question is often brought about by the stranger coming from outside their closed world; art, like a “fire,” too dreadful to touch, burns away their illusions of the inherent and consistent identity.

Works Cited


