

*“Why won’t you help me ... shave my head?”
Critical autoethnography and understanding affective
response to an act of critical vulnerability in solo performance*

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Abstract: In my current arts-based research practice, I explore the aesthetics of critical vulnerability as it relates to my solo performance “How not to Make Love to a Woman,” a critical autoethnography and solo performance piece about leaving an abusive marriage. The initial research question revolved around an examination of how aesthetic choices contribute to affective responses. As the performance and the research both transformed, I became less interested in aesthetic choices and more about descriptive accounts of what occurs between spectator and performer in the moment of critical intimacy where the audience is invited to shave the performer’s head. Through this examination I have come to understand some of the ways the affective spectator responses to these moments of spectator-performer interactions can result in the kinds of subtle attitudinal shifts that contribute to increased possibilities for community dialogue about the subject of domestic violence.

Keywords: autoethnography, solo performance, vulnerability, domestic violence, affect, performativity

Introduction

As I prepared this piece for its various locations, I developed objectives rooted in my interpretation of Susan Sontag’s call for an “erotics of performance.” She suggest, in her essay “Against Interpretation” that an erotics (rather than an hermeneutics) of performance should be theorized as a step toward reducing the emphasis on intellectual interpretations of art in order to open up modes of discussing artistic practices that might incorporate an awareness of the ways affective responses help to determine our understanding of art

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and performance. She calls for alternative ways of engaging with art that call upon epistemologies not linked to the Cartesian split of mind and body. She urges the reader to find ways for descriptive methods, rather than prescriptive methods, to be incorporated into a possible erotics of art.

Using descriptive methods of audience responses as the methodological basis for inquiry has been a challenge when trying to provide quantitative results. The percentage of audience members who have offered responses either in post-show discussions or in surveys has been relatively small. However, following the logic of sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos' epistemologies of the Global South, I posit that quantitatively-driven studies around this particular topic might, in addition to being unfeasible, negate the value of individual responses to theatre that has the potential for sparking productive dialogue about difficult topics such as the topic of my performance piece. In his essay, de Sousa Santos reminds scholars that a privileging of the logic of the dominant scale, which assumes that quantitatively measurable results matter more than subtle results, can risk losing sight of more nuanced analyses and the potential for subtle shifts to be considered of value.

For the purposes of this study, I will be privileging audience responses as expressed in terms of emotional, somatic or affective responses. This includes descriptions of visceral responses, responses that tap into an individual's previous emotional history, descriptions of emotions or sensations experienced during the performance, and post-show reflections that examine or explore the ways a person's intellectual response was shaped by the felt experience of being in the audience.

I distinguish this solo performance from other work (including some of my previous solo performances) by a few important definitions. Ethnography, broadly defined means the writing of culture. It follows that autoethnography consists of the writing of one's own culture. I distinguish this from autobiography in the sense that culture consists of built, shared and assumed narratives. The process requires not merely the telling of one story, but a look at the way stories have patterns and an underlying logic to them. Autoethnography, therefore, is the examination of the narratives that have built the way I understand myself and my culture. Critical autoethnography demands that the scholar pose questions of these narratives in order to come to a deeper understanding of how and why those narratives have shaped the lived experience. In practice, autoethnography should result in new insights or disruptions about assumed causal relationships between key events in a person's life. For me, this resulted in new insights and disruptions about how I ended up in an abusive marriage.

Pre-Show Voiceover excerpt #1

I was raised to believe that sex was a temptation of the devil and that unless it occurred within the confines of marriage it was evil. But I wasn't born with that opinion. One of the experiences that happened to me as a child was the experience I had with a neighbor. He was always happy to allow the neighbor kids to play in his yard. And we all did. We climbed trees, roller skated, and just generally ran around doing what little neighborhood kids do, I suppose. And once in a while, he would ask if I wanted to rest and sit on his lap. I did. I always liked sitting on laps when I was a kid. When I was very young I would sit on my mother's lap and try to synchronize our breathing. It was like a meditation and it felt calming, very peaceful. He would let me sit on his lap, right there in his driveway, in front of everyone, in plain sight. And he would situate himself in such a way that he could put his hand in my crotch without being seen by anyone. He would ask me if I wanted him to “tickle” me. I said OK. And he would put his hand in my panties and fondle my little girl labia. But here's the thing. I actually enjoyed it. I enjoyed having my labia touched. The tickling sensation was actually quite pleasing. He was very gentle and I thought it was a fun little secret. (Even though I don't ever remember him saying to me what we were doing needed to be kept a secret.) I wondered why he felt he had to offer me candy afterward. I liked his touch a lot better than the candy. So you can imagine how confused I was when, after telling my best friend, and after that best friend told her mom, that he denied everything when he was confronted. I wasn't mad at him. I was mad at my friend for betraying my secret. I remember being so confused at why my friend's mother was so mad at him and why he was so adamant that it didn't happen. I hated being called a liar.

The development process

“How not to Make Love to a Woman” was developed as part of an ongoing effort to address issues of domestic violence in the world around me. The piece was developed as a way to grapple with questions I had regarding my failed marriage. I was eager to understand how I found myself in a situation of abuse, an emotional space I never imagined I would occupy. The performance was originally envisioned as a darkly comic piece of stand-up comedy. An early workshop production resulted in some audience members commenting “I didn't know if I was supposed to laugh or cry.”

Around the same time I was developing this piece, I was also working on a documentary film about the lives of women who have also recovered, or are still recovering, from domestic abuse. Segments of the performance piece were included in the film to offer creative and dynamic counterpoints to the stark and emotionally bare stories of the women interviewed. This film was further workshopped in a graduate seminar on visual ethnography where difficult questions about the ethics of presenting these stories together were posed. Some colleagues commented that the creative approach of my solo performance undermined the stories of the women interviewed. Others commented that the women interviewed were exposing themselves in a way that leaves them vulnerable. I left the seminar feeling that I needed to pose deeper questions to myself about this piece and this process before I could consider the process complete.

I brought the solo performance piece into a workshop on critical and postcolonial autoethnography and began a process of unpacking the creative piece I had written to determine answers to the following questions: "Is this ethnography? Is this critical? If so, what makes it so? And what does it do as such?" What resulted was a series of critical reflections that questioned the ways my own life experience resulted in repeated patterns and narratives. This helped me understand a little more about the questions I posed ten years prior with the original piece of stand-up comedy. I say "understand" not in the sense that I found answers, but in the sense that I exposed deeper questions I had ignored most of my life.

This process involved digging into my own assumptions and narratives to expose vulnerabilities in myself. These vulnerabilities I then staged as a "critical vulnerabilities."¹ But the crucial part of this is exposing these vulnerabilities for a directed purpose. It is not enough to claim vulnerability as part of some self-congratulatory egocentric need for attention and sympathy. In fact, I question those motives harshly. That kind of self-indulgence will most likely result in alienating the audience most in need of engaging with the material. My autoethnography is a process that reduces the emphasis on merely telling my story, but emphasizes the need to reflect on my story and question it in order to gain new insights. I felt the need to understand through performance

¹ I first heard this term in a call for proposals for a special journal issue on "Risky Aesthetics" in which performed vulnerability elicits some kind of attitudinal shift. I later learned the term is used in military discourse to describe the opportunities in which an enemy might have spaces that, if penetrated, would result in certain victory for the attacker. The tension between these two meanings can be productive if we consider the very real possibilities implied in true vulnerability.

the ways vulnerability engages the potential for dynamic interchange between performer and spectator. I deliberately proposed a performed critical vulnerability intended to elicit an affective response in the spectators.

I felt strongly that, if I were to perform this piece for audiences that might include people who had survived domestic abuse (and statistically, this is almost guaranteed in any room with an audience of more than a dozen people), then I needed to expose myself and leave myself vulnerable in a way that allowed spectators to recognize and appreciate their own vulnerabilities. In order to stimulate a healthy dialogue among and between individual audience members, I felt it was important for them to see and feel in a visceral, somatic mode, that another human being before them was willingly placing herself in a precarious position. My proposal is that my story alone is not enough to create that spark which can result in productive dialogue. The vulnerability needs to be felt.

Pre-Show Voiceover Excerpt #2

The socialization of sexuality by way of scare tactics seems to be at the root of so many forms of suffering, be they insecurities about one's own place in the world or a fear that what is natural and normal is a dirty, evil, sin. Now I look back and I see how it can be construed that what my neighbor did was wrong because an adult with power over a child should never abuse that power. But I don't ever remember feeling like he had control over me, or authority, or power. I remember feeling like it was absolutely my choice to sit on his lap or not. I am troubled when I try to view that act in terms of whether it was "abuse" or not. When children do those things to each other we say they are "playing doctor" and laugh it off as normal/ natural curiosity and exploration. But at what age is the dividing line between normal/natural curiosity and an abuse of power dynamics?

I thought of that incident later in life. I was confused and refused to admit that it had anything to do with my current relationship to intimacy. I insisted that I had not felt traumatized by the incident. And I felt as if my close friends were asking me to invent a trauma so I could feel victimized and subsequently recover. I felt very much like my situation was different, that if I never felt trauma then I should not be forced to feel traumatized by the event. I still feel this way. And perhaps that means I still have something to learn. Freud would have a field day with me, would he not? But I also believe that social forces ask us far too often to feel victimized. I would rather find the ways I can allow myself to feel empowered rather than feel victimized.

The Opening Moments

The main act of critical vulnerability occurs when the onscreen directions ask for audience volunteers to shave my head in order for the rest of the performance to continue. As the performance space opens, spectators enter to see a nude female body (mine) on the ground with the words "shame," "guilt," "victim," and "survivor" written across her body. This image is contrasted with a light-hearted musical soundtrack and a somewhat sardonic voiceover speaking of a series of incidents in my past that may have contributed to the result that I found myself in the position of victim. In the middle of these stories told over the soundtrack, words projected onscreen counter the narratives with critical questions and demand that the audience help me shave my head. For me, as the performer, this head-shaving is a necessary ritual for cleansing and healing. For many audience members, participating in this head-shaving felt like they were continuing the violation of the prostrate female body. The audience becomes implicated in a complex series of questions about what to do when faced with parallel circumstances in life.

What I learned later, after viewing footage of one performance and speaking with audience members after another one, is that people who did not know me were unwilling to perform the very act I was asking them to perform upon me, even though I insisted I needed my head to be shaved in order to continue with the performance. Only people who were acquainted with me and my personal style and the fact that I love having my head shaved were willing to engage in this act. I knew this might be a potential challenge with the performance so in all cases I had a plan on hand to begin the process if no one from the audience offered to begin the task.

Some audience members told me they felt it reinscribed histories of oppression wherein female bodies are violated, as in the case with Jewish women in Nazi Germany who had degrading words written on their naked bodies before their heads were shaved. Others expressed a desire to understand how constructed notions of female beauty were linked to hair and whether or not the performed act was in an attempt to disrupt or reject those notions. One of my collaborators, in preparation for the performance in Brazil asked "don't you think you are implicating the audience with this gesture?" Yes, as a matter of fact I am. In this community, as in many others, domestic violence and violence against women are taboo topics. A direct and overt approach to dialogue often results in literal and proverbial doors slamming in one's face. I believe that this critical vulnerability can offer smaller, more palatable entries into dialogue for this topic, which has proven to be so difficult to approach.

In addition to this staged moment of vulnerability, I have also developed an aesthetic that supports this performative act. I have trained with some incredibly virtuosic performers in my life, from the members of the double edge theatre in Massachusetts to members of the Odin Teatret in Denmark. I have a deep respect for the intensity and dedication that these artists have shown as both performers and as teachers. However, I have come to the realization that for my purposes in this particular performance piece, a slightly “rough around the edges” aesthetic becomes important for connection with the audience.

My intention is to encourage audience members who may have some personal connections to this work to sense from the opening moment of critical vulnerability that there is a space opened that allows for mutual vulnerabilities to be recognized. I do not wish to equate my experience with the experiences of others who may have been deeply traumatized by sexual abuse or domestic violence. However, I do believe that an individual audience member, at whatever point on his or her journey s/he might be, will have a more positive response to the show if they can recognize, in a way that is felt as a somatic response, that a person with vulnerabilities and imperfections can still find personal joy, success, or transformation.

The Four Settings

I will now examine the responses from four distinct groups of spectators and how the work of the piece can be shaped for future performances based on the responses received in these four settings. The first setting was an invited dress rehearsal performed for graduate faculty and fellow doctoral students of performance wherein the head shaving was simulated by an act of hair brushing. The second setting was the performance at an academic conference performed in an intimate setting, seating only about 15 spectators, made up largely of theatre scholars. The third setting was in a community center in a small town in rural Bahia, Brazil. The fourth setting was a performance at the Phoenix Hostel and Cultural Center in Phoenix, AZ. I will describe the ways data was collected, compare the responses, and propose possibilities for continuing the research with future performance opportunities.

After the dress rehearsal at Arizona State University in November of 2013, fellow colleagues consisting of faculty and PhD students offered some critical insights. At one point an audience member suggested that perhaps I had elicited something I did not want to elicit during the opening head-shaving scene. She indicated that if she were presented with a nude female body and

was prompted to shave her head, she would not be willing to do so because the act would feel like a reinscription of violence against women. She felt like the substitute action of hair brushing felt more compassionate.

This points to an interesting aspect to remember when engaging in work that has the potential to elicit responses that might trigger past traumas in the audience members. The audience will have no way of knowing that I personally enjoy having my head shaved unless I indicate this to them. Furthermore, even though I added verbal information in the piece to indicate that I enjoy this, audiences in subsequent performance were still reluctant to do so. This seems to indicate that individual spectators' personal affective responses to the work will weigh more heavily than verbal instructions from the performer.

During the post-show discussion at the performance for the American Society of Theatre Research conference in Dallas, TX in November 2013, audiences had similar reactions. At this point I had not yet changed the pre-show voiceover and video montage to reflect my opinion that I enjoy having my head shaved. I was interested in testing the reactions of others to confirm whether or not this was a limited opinion or if several others had similar responses. I was particularly interested in testing this with an audience that actually physically engaged in the head-shaving. The Dallas audience confirmed what the colleague in dress rehearsal commented: that they felt like the head-shaving moment was an act of continued violence against a female body already literally inscribed with the written words "victim," "guilt," "shame," and "survivor" on her body. One person suggested I write other words on my body that were more positive. Another person suggested I indicate somehow to the audience that I actually enjoy having my head shaved and that I find it to be cleansing and empowering. Still another person associated the head-shaving moment with a provocative commentary on the socially constructed nature of feminine beauty. This might be true, but I consider that to be tangential to the main purpose of the project.

During the performance in Itacaré, Bahia, Brazil I faced an interesting challenge. The "plant" that I had selected for this performance encountered a difficulty. For this show, the site of the performance was a community center where two of the four walls were constructed from wooden posts where people outside could peek through the holes to see what was happening in the performance space. The community leaders had decided that we should not open to the show to children under 11 years old. Perhaps because of this prohibition, some of the children in the community became curious and were peeking through the holes in the wall to see what it was that they were not permitted to see. They might have been particularly curious to see what their "professora de teatro" was doing that was prohibited for them to see.

The person I had selected as a head-shaving plant saw this happening and went outside to chase off the children who had transgressed this boundary that was given them. As the soundtrack to the pre-show reached the point where I knew shaving needed to begin if I were to finish before I started the official performance, I was in a quandary. In a way, I became distressed at the possibility that no one would come forth. Perhaps this was occurring at the same time audience members were sensing a kind of inverse anxiety at the possibility of being asked to come forward and shave the performer's head. My response was to sit up, grab the clippers and slowly turn around to face the audience, wordlessly imploring someone, anyone, to help me shave my head. After a moment of tension, a woman I knew from my fieldwork interviews came forward and began the process. I closed my eyes again and allowed the moment to continue.

When I later looked at the footage from this performance I realized that only people with whom I had had some personal contact prior to the performance came forth to help with the head-shaving. This indicates that, to some degree, audience members who are strangers to me are not willing to engage in this kind of intimate exchange with the performer. However, it also opens up the possibility for another way of looking at this kind of performative exchange. The audience members who already know me, who already have a certain degree of intimacy with me, came forward and participated in the performance in this request for interaction. They were willing to co-perform this staged moment with me. This allows for those who don't know me to be witnesses or observers to the moment even if they do not feel comfortable contributing to the head-shaving moment.

During the performance at the Phoenix Hostel and Cultural Center in May of 2015 something different happened. The person I had selected to be the plant did not come forward to begin shaving my head. My partner, who was the videographer for that performance, sensed that something was wrong when he realized no one was coming forward. He walked over to a mutual friend and asked her to start the head-shaving because "no one else had the balls to do it." Because my eyes were closed, I did not see who began the head-shaving. What I did sense, was a particular sensitivity she had as she shaved me. I remember thinking "Oh, this person is being really gentle. I bet she thinks she might hurt me." After a few minutes of this I felt another person take over. This person shaved my head with a confident touch, but gentle enough that I was comfortable the entire time.

I found out later it was my own partner who had observed that our friend was being too gentle and the task would not be adequately completed unless someone stepped in who knew how to quickly and efficiently shave someone's head. He stepped in since he has shaved my head many times before and felt he

could ensure I reached a good point before the pre-show voiceover ended and the show had to continue. I also found out later from two other audience members that they felt nervous watching my head get shaved, afraid I would be hurt somehow, but as soon as they saw my partner step in they were more comfortable. One woman even said she was pleased to see a side of my partner she hadn't seen before, a kind of gentle compassion with which he performed the act.

Critical Vulnerability and Audience Response

I should point out that never once during any of these performances did I ever feel that a person shaving my head was being too aggressive or too rough. Even those with a firmer touch were still within a range in which I felt comfortable. I do recognize, however, that the risk is there for someone with ill intentions to hurt me, either with a rough touch of the clippers, or being in such close proximity to my naked body. In fact, after the Phoenix performance one audience member commented that the people who "really need to see this piece" are the kinds of men who congregate at sports bars downtown. He even suggested I stage this in a setting where I could bus a group of men from a local sports bar to the performance in order to see the piece. I have to admit I was not comfortable with this idea at all. The prospect of performing this show, particularly the opening scene, for a group of potentially drunk men gave me pause to consider the limits of my own proposed critical vulnerability. I am willing to place myself in a position of vulnerability as long as I have some systems in place to make me feel ultimately safe from harm.

However, my interests in exploring the act of performed critical vulnerability stem less from pushing my own boundaries and more with exploring the ways this critical vulnerability elicits particular responses in the audience in ways that might spark a shift in attitude or perception in order to prompt productive dialogue about this subject, which has proven so difficult to approach in many communities. What I have realized is that my own measure of vulnerability and each individual audience member's measure of what constitutes a vulnerable act might be drastically different. This also implies that the degree to which an audience member feels he or she is witnessing an act of vulnerability will influence his or her affective response. This in turn, affects the degree to which an attitudinal shift might occur. Additionally, initial findings have indicated that the degree to which a person had similar life experiences also contributed significantly to his or her openness to this kind of shift in perspective.

One audience member from Itacaré commented that the ludic manner with which I approached the topic, with no bitterness or aggression, allowed

her to remember a similar childhood incident in a way that did not provoke residual trauma. She admitted that she, too, felt a moment of relief and release in recognizing that the event in her childhood, which could have been construed as traumatic, was in fact to a certain degree enjoyable for her as she remembered it. She felt the performance allowed mental space for this kind of relief and release of past events. Another audience member in Itacaré who has openly admitted to witnessing domestic violence as a child and being subjected to emotional abuse in her marriage, indicated that this piece provided an invitation to dialogue in her community that had been previously difficult to approach.

One audience member from the Dallas performance indicated that the performance brings up important questions about how to teach consent to children. Another Dallas spectator commented that we teach kids how to eat healthy, but we don’t teach them how “to pleasure healthy.” So, while the performance does not provide possible solutions to these social dilemmas, the spark to dialogue is a step in the right direction. Another Dallas audience member indicated that the tension between the perceived “confident performer” and the opening moments where the images hint at the weakness of being a victim provided a space of potential. This space offered the possibility for others who might have experienced similar violence to imagine future confidence where histories of violence, which might have prevented them from imagining a confident self previously, could be reduced or diminished.

One woman at the Phoenix performance expressed to me that watching the performance provided her with a level of self-forgiveness she had not previously imagined for herself. Another woman from the Phoenix performance indicated that the demonstrated transformation from vulnerable victim to empowered independent woman provided a model for other women who might have experienced similar traumas. Another woman from the Phoenix performance indicated that, while the rest of the performance was entertaining and enjoyable, it was the opening moments that truly spoke to her on a visceral level, to a degree that it stayed with her for days. I believe that is in these visceral responses to the opening moments that the shift in attitude or perception can plant seeds for the personal transformation of the audience.

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