

Concrete and Dust: A Performative Response

Amber Johnson

Abstract: *In this performative response to Concrete and Dust: Mapping the Sexual Terrains of Los Angeles by Jeanine Mingé and Amber Zimmerman, the author sets out on her journey reading and interpreting the text, and reflecting the text back upon her own body. Using poetic narrative and autoethnographic techniques, the author discusses (dis)memberment, intersectional identities, queer theory, and sexual assault.*

I am living in New York City for the summer as a Columbia University research fellow. Navigating subway trains and underground tunnels for the past four weeks, I am very aware of the way routes and spaces intersect. I am aware of my body flowing through a sea of speedy bodies, tall bodies, queer bodies, white bodies, dirty bodies, slow bodies, religious bodies, begging bodies, clean bodies, brown bodies, rich bodies, hungry bodies, tiny bodies. Bodies everywhere. On the subway you become connected to people and places without territorial boundaries based on class, race, and/or privilege. We are all here. All together. Navigating the same spaces. Close. My hips touch other hips. If I listen closely while the trains stop, their music becomes my music. The train, doors closing, jerks into motion, and now our bodies dance together in a sea of barely balancing, stepping on toes, grabbing poles to steady the movement bodies. We are not protected by freeways, car doors, or distance. New York brings our bodies together.

My living quarters at Union Theological Seminary are sparse. A full-size bed, night stand with reading lamp, desk, and table for eating. Hardwood floors and a large, double window overlooking Teacher's College and Broadway. There are no curtains, no double paned glass. I am exposed. Light shines through my windows from street lamps. I can hear the sounds of the city through the night. Wrestling with wanting my own sleep and wanting to be productive, I decide to use this night to begin *Concrete and Dust* by Jeanine Mingé

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and Amber Zimmerman. It has been sitting on my desk waiting to be consumed in a city seemingly opposite from the city it was written in—my city. I am a La La Land native.

Turning on my side lamp, my bed partners—a laptop and cell phone—perched next to me, I am naked. Acutely aware of my body and the exposed skin shining through shadeless windows overlooking the noisy city, I choose to read about the sexual terrain of my city. Mood setting.

I am excited to crack *it* open and begin reading. A bit giddy, this book is about my hometown. About the terrain I used to navigate. Where I learned about sex, did *it* for the first time, and spent countless nights acting grown with my friends. I wonder if my body is written within the lines of the text. If my experiences unfold with turns of the pages. I pull the plastic wrap from the outside, feel the texture, smell the new book smell. I lift open the front cover, focus on the copyright page, the font, the spacing,...

I pause.

The spaces they call Los Angeles are not my spaces. They are not spaces I belong to. The Los Angeles River, a cadaverous body I barely travel across or alongside. Foreign to my living body. Its murky waters and concrete a breeding ground for mosquitos. I only see it from airplanes leaving or arriving in the city. It is not my river.

Burbank. Chatsworth. Hollywood Hills. West Hollywood. Topanga Canyon. This is only a small part of Los Angeles, barely skimming the great underbelly of South Central LA, Culver City, Carson, Compton, Watts, Inglewood, Gardena, Midtown, Redondo Beach, Hawthorne, Lawndale, Torrance, Leimert Park...*Those* cities are absent. These are the white sides of town. Places only 30 miles from where Rodney King was beaten and spiraled a series of issues that led to my own neighborhood being burnt to the ground.

Where are my cities?

Where are the cities that my body once navigated?

Where are the cities that house people of color?

I draw a line on this map that she has constructed.

Her on one side | Me, the other.

And on my side | (my body, *erased*)

again

from the sexual imagination.

Brown bodies are not sexual except in pathologies. I lose the giddiness. I lose the excitement. I lose the desire to read into my sexual body through witnessing the stories of a similar other. I put the book down and play Candy Crush instead.

Four hours pass. I keep glancing over my shoulder watching the cover dance underneath my reading lamp. Wanting to be touched. Begging for forgiveness. Asking for a chance. Forcing myself to open the pages of the book, I try again.

I am glad I did.

This self-described physically fit white blond survivor of sexual assault navigating LA city streets to re-memory her own sexual agency positions herself. She positions her body. She understands the limitations of experiences that bodies put on other bodies. She understands that she can't navigate certain places easily.

"Compton. Hawthorne. El Segundo, Pacoima.

I've never entered these spaces."¹

Watching, listening, engaging, all with a feeling of not belonging to the place.

And even though our bodies are so disparate, we come together, within "these conundrums, moments of discord," and learn a lot about the "ways we create pockets of communities, temporary places in which to thrive and grow."²

Within the lines of this text, through the discord ignited because of the simple city titles and assumed white privilege on my behalf, her poetic storytelling allows [us] to build a sense of community. I get *it*. Her body did not belong. Her body could not navigate without a tour guide. Maybe. [Her] body, [my] body, does not belong. My version of *Concrete and Dust* would have looked different. More concrete, more dust, more brown, more of something else too. Less hills, less trees, less stalkers, less whiteness. Maybe. Less of something else too. But some very striking equalities emerge from [her] pages. Equal amounts of wine to deal with equal amounts of tragedy, despair, confusion, healing. [We] are not that different, regardless of terrain.

I wonder what we will share now. How our bodies will overlap in these spaces, these intersections. If our bodies ever could have touched, played, perhaps met on a dance floor in a sweaty club, what would they have said? How would they have connected? What would they recognize inside the skin?

By page 11, I *know* some answers. Our bodies would have loved each other unconditionally because our bodies have witnessed the same spaces unattached to place, but crowded with the same ugly memories and dis-ease. We are [her]. Disconnected, yet connected through our stories. She does not *know* me yet, but she does *know* me.

¹ Jeanine Mingé and Amber Zimmerman, *Concrete and Dust: Mapping the Sexual Terrains of Los Angeles* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

“Because of [her] past sexual trauma and [her] lack of connection with Los Angeles, [she] finds [herself] disconnected from [her] body, [her emotions], and subsequently [her] relationships.”³

[Her] can be me, [her] can be her, [she] can be us. Our stories are one. Our stories envelop a sense of community for [us]. This white, middle class, privileged woman. This victim. Her body, disconnected from a city that is not hers. This black, middle class, privileged woman. This victim. Her body, disconnected from a city that never felt like home though she navigated its streets from the moment she learned to read. Watched blinkers from back seats. Waited for a left or right turn into her future.

I searched the streets for agency, not realizing back then that agency exists within my own skin. Housed safely within my own mind, feelings, desires. “Agency is naming, reframing, and performing an identity that suits us, without the restrictions of essentialisms that both order and narrow our conceptualizations of sexual possibility.”⁴

We are [her].

And our bodies would have danced. Carefully. Because those memories are always there. Our bodies would have shared intimate moments of understanding. It is hard to find someone who gets *it*. [She] gets *it*.

I flip each page with an aching anticipation. I feel [her] loss, [her] struggle, [her] pain, [her] regret, [her] sadness, [her] light, [her] healing, [her] struggle for understanding. Her words move so beautifully on the page that I feel the urgency to write my body on *a* page. My naked body, laying in this naked room, listening, feeling, witnessing the city. The terrain. The bodies on that subway. I want to talk about my body responding to this text. My legs shift uneasy in the bed. I need to sit up. Wake my bed partner. Make love to my keyboard. My body is present because of [her] words.

Over and over again, I find I am at once [her]. [Her] lack of defining [her] body as strictly lesbian, “renders [her] on the outside of the spaces in [West Hollywood], as the most valuable bodies are those that have clear identity markers of gay or lesbian,”⁵ as if those categories are ultimate, all there is, definitive, static, not fluid. “Those that exceed these binary markers [read more] have less social access and are often ostracized. As a woman that identifies as queer, who loves and is attracted to people no matter their gender identity or their biological sex, [she] does [her] best to hold on to [her] sexual agency and identity in this place, even as others try to deny [her] subjectivity.”⁶

I am [her]. Existing on the margins of the margins of the margins of society. Learning to use my voice to project into the center, [*We*] are [*her*]. “[*We*]

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

become scavenger, living and learning about the pieces of [her] sexual identity.”⁷ And as scavengers, [we] are (dis)membered. Searching for the pieces of our identities as they lay splayed out on the concrete, collecting dust, waiting for us to get *it*. At once fragmented and attempting to be *completa*.⁸ [Her] stories— [mine], but not mine alone. [Her] fragments, [her] journey towards completeness, towards belonging— [mine], but not mine alone. “Since [she] moved [t]here, [she has] felt, no, created a sense of non-belonging. [She] purposefully [forgot]. Her. Him. The rape. The loss.”⁹ When we forget, we dismember ourselves from ourselves until we are no longer whole but fragments walking through each intersection remembering those things that are instinctual, intuitive, necessary, in that moment. [Scavengers] scavenging. “(Dis)memberment is comprised of forgetting, the detachment of limbs, and the disconnection of embodied memory from experience... The body parts bleeding, in patches, in layers, creates a process of dehumanization, of othering someone so you can’t feel them, feel the love or hate there anymore.”¹⁰

[Scavengers] bloody. Waiting for the right moment to find what has been severed. [Scavengers] scavenging. “(Dis)memberment creates an inability to articulate experience. You break the nerves, disconnect the tendons, stretch the skin until it snaps, and burn exposed skin so you can’t feel.”¹¹ [Scavengers] bloody. Waiting for the next moment to gnash, slice, break, cut, ease by erasing.

But

no matter how (dis)membered,

I don’t think anyone anticipates the phantom pains.

“[She and] I carry a history, the weight of ... history like mountains of words on [our] backs. Words such as ‘unwanted,’ ‘penetration,’ ‘rape,’ ‘fear,’ ‘victim,’ and now, ‘survivor.’”¹² Phantom pains. Growing hollow in our cheeks. Making our tongues thicker. Our skin the thickest. Growing full in our legs, making navigation a hurdle. [Our] intersections appearing less and less clear. A mirage made from the heat of fear, worry, doubt, questioning. Phantom, but so real. Real enough to choke us into silence.

[Scavengers] scavenging. Until we grow tired of the temporal restrictions of severing memories and decide to deal with *it*. (Dis)memberment is a temporary solution, a survival tactic. (Dis)memberment is (dis)placement from our bodies, from our sense of identity, security, a sense of being somewhere safe.”¹³

⁷ Mingé and Zimmerman, *Concrete and Dust*, 17.

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Spinners/Aunt Lute, 1987), 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

(Dis)placement as temporary means that at some point the limbs might grow back. Like a lizard's tail, reconnecting and regenerating. Each new cell destroying the bliss of ignorance and reminding you where exactly the pain hit. To write auto-ethnography is to help the limbs grow back even faster. Putting us back into our bodies, the memories rushing back, and falling out of our mouths like tomorrow's hangover thrown up. Purging. Wanting to find a space of its own to leak into and heal. The stories give life to healing by healing themselves; however, the initial beginning and severing are both painful and necessary. Through (dis)memberment and subsequent (re)placement, we find ways to be complete again. While "...the weight of these words on this page, spoken in silent spaces, crush [our] esophagi[i], displace [our] breath," we find ways to rebuild.¹⁴

Jeanine Mingé was told to start her work, her writing, where she is. "Where I am."¹⁵ I wonder, where am I? Standing at an intersection, trying to make sense of the/my/our world. Trying to rebuild. Recalling my own maps. Maps full of places, memories, navigation, keys. Texas, Cali, Missouri. Figueroa and the I-10 Freeway every morning. Traffic. Messy. These stories live in the intersections. One particular story [we] share lives in a dark place.

My, our, [her] words. So similar. Muted. Analogous. These words too crushing my own esophagus until my fingers have to breathe for me through story telling. I put [her] in my room. In my dress. Under him. It is 1996 and [she] is being raped, again. My skin, like hers, has also grown thicker. Calloused hands and feet, dry spots, hives and scars from anxiety, fresh scabs, even 17 years later. We grow stronger together, with each reading, each telling, each memory then (dis)placed, now [re]placed. We heal together by "transform[ing] the forgetting into a chance to remember. [We] know [we] need to walk in those spaces, to recall to mind."¹⁶

I walk with [her] through the hallways of old memories, dusting shelves, reclaiming body parts, piecing back together the agency of bodies by breathing life into these stories. It hurts as it heals, but it is healing. "In order to survive and to understand the very immense nature of this place, of these experiences, [we] need to write [our] way through it."¹⁷ Norman Denzin reminds us that our words matter.¹⁸ Our words matter, so we write. We write our way through it. We write to learn things we didn't know before, to unpack the mysteries of our

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretative Interactionism*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 155.

experiences. “We are writing for our lives, and for the lives of others as well.”¹⁹ [We] are writing to save lives. I watch each story unfold in Mingé and Zimmerman’s tales and theoretical unpacking, wondering who else, like me, is reading through each chapter as a moment for healing, for self-reflexivity, for questioning. And, like Heather Carver, I offer no definitions of autoethnography or performative writing, nor do I offer a traditional outline of apologies for content.²⁰ I offer a glimpse into my journey of a self-reflexive moment prompted by my own interactions with Mingé and Zimmerman’s work. Their treatment of each space, each place, and each experience pave a new intersection for terrain to be navigated and understood differently, from different eyes and standpoints, so that each moment becomes a space to understand ourselves, the world, and difference a little better. I am made better by reading their words.

I read about Chatsworth, the pornographic, the sex, the ejaculation, the scene setting. I wonder, what does it mean for a scholarly woman to watch? To desire? To be turned on? To orgasm...or not? I find it funny that the pornographic moment occurs on page 69.

I read about the “lucky woman...a woman who is not one out of the three who has been raped, a woman who hasn’t felt the weight of an undesired body on top of hers, a woman who hasn’t felt the intense loss of body and emotional connection when being raped, who doesn’t have these memories floating in. Or maybe she does, maybe we all have the violent cultural memory of “what if?” deep into our psyches.”²¹ I wonder about the what ifs. *What if* memories haunt. Not just the what ifs from rape, but the what ifs from fucking, from thinking about fucking, from wanting to fuck, from wanting to be fucked. It is not just “Rape [that] really fucks with you.”²²

I wonder about this idea of doing research on sexual agency and what it means to create the ethnographic moment. “Performance can make the raw self real to an audience, with a vulnerability that exists in the very moment of expression (Carver, 2006). I am reminded I am naked as I type these words. As I create this ethnographic moment with a book. Erotic scholarship.

Dramatic pause.

I wonder about this idea of wanting to be *more*. I write about this idea of more in my own research. I understood the idea of *more* as an adolescent in California, and it was the very reason why I so desperately wanted to leave the state for college. So I could be me *and* be enough. “The struggle for power and the need to attain more, have more, the desire for more is fueled by our sense of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Heather Carver, “Methodologies of the Heart: A Performative Writing Response,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 3, no. 1(2006).

²¹ Mingé and Zimmerman, “Concrete and Dust,” 71.

²² Ibid.

lack."²³ However, so see that others who pretend to have it all together do not is to feel the freedom to be you.

I wonder about being [her], the "gay wife," and the ways in which "sexual identity is created through the act of doing. Not of categorization."²⁴ Labels don't change or own our desires. And to desire is to do. But those labels have political importance. They are not without contestation. But still, [she] makes me wonder, "what good is a queer political sensibility when it excludes those who lives on the margins of queerness."²⁵

I wonder about the memories. After you're raped, the memories are there forever., chaperoning the way we navigate our own desires, feelings, emotions, and activities. I appreciate the author's honesty about those memories without victimizing [her]. I appreciate the ways in which our stories, emotions, responses, and experiences overlap. As a Black survivor, I appreciate that these overlaps are as much about race as they are about rape, being a woman, being a scholar. [Her] body may not be able to move beyond certain spaces, but [her] body understands its privilege to be in [other] places while simultaneously witnessing [her] own margins, limitations, and body work.

What Mingé and Zimmerman have crafted is a piece of art that maps out the messiness of intersections, the unclear pathways to healing, and the dirt and decay that frame our silhouettes before we can even speak of the (dis)memberment. They show us that through the (dis)memberment, we create new friendships, new connections, and new ways of being that allow the healing to (re)place our (dis)membered parts. No longer scavengers, but agents of our wholeness through telling. Through their narratives, they highlight the three concerns of performance autoethnography; (1) how cultural practices shape identity, (2) how identity shapes cultural performance, and (3) how publicly responsible autoethnography addresses central issues of self, race, gender, society, and democracy through imagination, intellect, reflection, and emotion.²⁶ Our bodies as sites of cultural memories are tied to broader conversations of identity. Even though her areas are miles away from my own, their tellings generate standpoints and perceptions of experience that kindle my own thirst to remem-

²³ Ibid., 137.

²⁴ Ibid., 175.

²⁵ Ibid., 183.

²⁶ Bryant K. Alexander, "Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture" in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 411-442; Norman K. Denzin *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 225; Mary Weems, *Public Education and the Imagination-Intellect: I Speak from the Wound in my Mouth* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2010); Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance* 2, no. 5 (1985): 1-13.

ber, replace, and heal. They provide a space to resist, test the limits of certainty, and trouble boundaries of binary labels.²⁷ They do what Norman Denzin suggests ethnography should do, “awaken moral sensibility and move the other and the self to action.”²⁸ [I][we] awaken and move.

These are [her] stories, these are [my] stories, these are [our] stories.
 Living inside intersections.
 Hidden within the peeling paint of traffic lines
 Brightness reflecting
 Red and yellow dots that light the path
 White lines peeled back like lips
 Revealing the cracks, the gravel, the dirt.
 The asphalt, the pain, the promise.
 Reflectors.
 Directing cars, bikers, pedestrians.
 Reflecting our stories back to us.
 Swollen concrete from the roots of trees lifting the dirt higher and higher.
 The dust settling only to be fucked with again.
 Memories that won't go away.
 The grime that infects pupils dilated from bright reflections
 And
 STOP
 signs
 pushing and pulling the flow of identity.
 Cameras flashing. Caught moving too fast
 Running past your own hurt
 These stories are not friendly
 But no one said they had to be.

²⁷ Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman-Jones, “Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography,” *Critical Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 108-116; Robin Boylorn, “Gray or for Colored Girls who are Tired of Chasing Rainbows: Race and Reflexivity,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 178-186; Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, “Autoethnography’s Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (2005): 297-314; Soyini D. Madison, “The Dialogic Performative in Critical Ethnography,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26 (2006): 320-324; Della Pollock, “Marking New Directions in Performance Ethnography,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26 (2006): 325-329.

²⁸ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), xii.

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