

This Skin *Between Us*: A Feminist Analysis of a Solo Performance, *Brushpoint*

Özgül Akıncı

Every
Single
One
Of
You
Who looked away
While women were murdered
Left right and center
In this dream city
This gold mountain city
With its cold coal heart

I call you out
— Mercedes Eng, from “Address to the city”



What does a meaningful conversation about sexual violence and patriarchy entail today? Do we care to be part of a sustained dialogue as we witness the deep-rooted ways in which sexual violence shapes our lives? If we do, how to avoid a language that frightens already marginalized communities into silence and leads to nothing but apathy? University campuses house vital discussions concerning policies and strategies on sexual violence. Laura Kipnis stirred a storm in 2015 by arguing that (American) university policies aiming to prevent sexual violence are fuelled by a patronizing moral panic which renders all romantic relations between professors and students somewhat abusive and encloses students into a psyche of victimhood. Kipnis states: “The melodramatic imagination's obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what's shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those whose

Özgül Akıncı completed her PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies at that University of British Columbia in 2017. Her research interests include performance, sex work, and embodied pedagogies. She continues to explore performance as research in her solo and collaborative works in between Canada and Turkey.

interests are supposedly being protected, namely students. The result? Students' sense of vulnerability is skyrocketing." Accordingly, vulnerability to sexual violence cases mostly results in infantilizing women with the institutional purport of "protecting women from the predators." Yet, the downside of this argument, as Goldberg (2015) pointed out in her response to Kipnis, is that it renders every act of speaking back to the rape culture futile, nonproductive and accusatory, while the need to act upon the problem of sexual violence asks for our urgent attention. A striking and recent case regarding the urgency and complexity of this task is the resignation¹ of Sara Ahmed from her position at Goldsmith University. As she explained, her resignation was a feminist response to the ineffective handling of her university with the epidemic of sexual violence. This piece, and the performance as its subject matter, looks into what confronting this intricacy of sexual violence might actually look like today on a university campus.

The first step towards this goal is to recognize the challenge in drawing attention to the issue. The hegemonic masculine narrative sets the criteria that are then used to determine which cases deserve attention and which do not. Susan Ehrlich discusses what constitutes legitimacy in sexual violence narratives in depth, in *Representing Rape: Language and Sexual Consent*. She writes that:

'Legitimate' perpetrators are strangers to their victims, carry a weapon, and inflict physical injury upon their victim, beyond the sexual violence; 'legitimate' victims are women raped by precisely these kinds of perpetrators. The discourses of rape construct stranger rape as 'real rape' and render the vast majority of rapes invisible. (Ehrlich 51)

This sort of -almost fetishized- imaginary dominates the ways in which we speak about/to sexual violence. Revisiting the language of rape from a philosophical standpoint, Lois Du Toit takes Ehrlich's point even further by stating that within such terminology made available by the masculine symbolic order, the real damage of rape cannot be expressed. According to Toit, sexual violence has been situated as an anomaly against a background "which in fact normalizes rape." This, according to Toit's terminology, renders both conversation on rape and healing from rape *impossible*. By pre-empting the act of rape through systematic erasure of women's subjectivity, the male symbolic order governs the ways in which we problematize the heart-wrenching realities and complexities of sexual violence. Thus, the general lack of appreciation of the damage of violence

¹ Sarah Ahmed resigned from her position at Goldsmith University in 2016. In a piece she wrote about her decision she asks: "what is our own work of exposing a problem is used as evidence there is no problem?" <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/08/27/resignation-is-a-feminist-issue/>

derives from and feeds into what Toit uses as a term, “the impossibility of rape” (Toit 14).

The ephemeral practice of performance, on the other hand, holds a vital potential as to it “bears the complexities of complicity” (Schneider 22). As Schneider argues, performance is directly involved in cultural critical analysis in its exploration of binary system of social signification. Feminist performance artists dealt with issues of power in relation to body and gender since 1970s (most well-known feminist performance art comes from Euro-American lineages—Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann, Cindy Sherman) and valued what occurs at the level of skin during their encounter with their audiences. They addressed hard-wired questions of feminism by literally re-configuring/re-writing them on/through their bodies, flesh, and breath.

Trusting the urgency of the issue at hand, I performed a solo performance, *Brushpoint*, at the University of British Columbia Okanagan campus, in 2012. *Brushpoint* addressed the issues of power², body and intimacy woven into the fabric of sexual violence. It inquired whether performance can make rape *possible* (and consequently its devastating after-effects expressible) again. That is, can performance produce a uniquely open space that encourages and fosters conversation about rape and its potential consequences, not only in survivors' personal lives but also in the discursive spaces and practices we all share, consume, enjoy, and relate to everyday?

Brushpoint was developed as a response to a public notification given by Kelowna Police about the release of a serial rapist. The leaflet that invited visitors to the performance informed them about the source of my motivation to act upon this notification and it gave instructions for people who are interested in *responding together*. It read:

This performance is part of my effort to respond to a public notification given on the 9th of November by concerning a serial rapist who was released from prison to Kelowna and deemed a high risk to repeat violent sexual attacks. Along with his name and picture, rapist's method of operation was also explained with following words: “He randomly grabs a female from behind who is walking down the street. He threatens to kill women if they scream and rapes them at knifepoint.” Hearing of this “warning”, I was horrified more about the ways violence circulates in public discourse than the release of my “would-be-rapist”. Although

² Sarah Hunt, an assistant professor at UBC in the First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program and the Department of Geography, argues that the legacy of residential school system (which included systemized sexual abuse of children) lives on in the normalization of sexual violence in the larger society and very institution of UBC. Her piece, "Decolonizing the Roots of Rape Culture: reflections on consent, sexual violence and university campuses", can be found online at EMMA Talks Podcast website.

the man has been said to move from Kelowna, my search for a way to reject this “friendly reminder” continues. How could I disallow this notice that is supposed to protect me? How could I add the woman’s perspective to the narrative which depicts her walking down the street incapable of protecting herself? Could she ever speak in this scenario? Scream? Fight? Why not? How could the “no” in her mind be visible in this narrative? In other words, how to change the conversation from “do not get raped” into “do not rape”? As the first step of an artistic and political response to this “horror scenario”, I am hoping to transform my threatened skin into a writeable/paintable skin. For this to happen, I am inviting you to write your own answer/reaction to this “warning” on my skin and join me in building a collective performance. If you are interested to join, please come downstairs to find me. After you show me this flyer, we will go into the room where you can write/paint on my skin. Please remember to take a picture of what you have written before you leave the room. Thank you!

Brushpoint, thus emerged from a state of *not knowing* how to speak to a particular situation. As someone who involved in sexual violence-related activism in Turkey, I have never encountered this aspect of the problem. We were too busy following court hearings of sexual violence cases and keen to see offenders behind bars. In the midst of grim news of femicide and violence towards women, our activism concentrated our attention and care on the side of women rather than perpetrators. In other words, the rapist that I had previously been trying to send to jail had now completed his original sentence. *He* was once again among us – back in the community, to which I was a newcomer. My response to the new situation demanded that I be the object of the performance at the center. I, as it was stated in the public notification, had to embody the *victim* in order to surrender and thoroughly pay attention to our responses in-the-making.

As in Mercedes Eng’s poem that I quoted in the epigraph, I spoke to the people of the city in which I lived, Kelowna, through my performance. Like her, I incorporated writing as a tool to trouble systematic operation of patriarchal violence. Unlike Mercedes Eng, I used my skin in place of paper and I called people *in* instead of out. The room (6’x6’) in which *Brushpoint* took place had a table that was large enough for me to lie on in case my visitors wanted me to. There were brushes and paint on the table. I played music in the background, mostly in the service of my personal comfort, helping me to be in my own space. I wore a gown with nothing underneath so that I could easily show my skin wherever participants wanted to write/paint. I accepted one person at a time. With each visitor, one part of my body was highlighted, written on, and exposed. Simply put, I called people in so that they could write on my skin in an intimate space. I had short dialogues with each visitor to confirm that we both knew why we were there. Lastly, there was a camera to document the words each visitor painted on my skin. It required my visitors to take a step back from

our conversation and their painting on my skin in order to capture it with another medium³. Pictorial documentation, which I could refer to and rely on after the performance allowed for my full immersion in the intimacy of the moment. At the same time, the pictorial documentation provided me with a distance from the intimacy of our one-to-one encounter, which also gave me a sense of safety.

Rebecca Schneider calls performing body “a stage across which I re-enact social dramas and traumas that have arbitrated cultural differentiations between truth and illusion, reality and dream, fact and fantasy, natural and unnatural, essential and constructed.” (Schneider 6-7) This piece, similarly, is a close analysis of and reflection on how the performance re-enacted certain social dramas surrounding sexual violence. It could do so thanks to above mentioned semi-structured set-up of our encounters with my visitors. In contrast to sexual violence, the mutual consent of two parties in the principles of the performative encounter are key.

The fact that the performance relied on the understanding of the rules by the visitors has to do with the role of touch on the skin in the encounter. If skin is the border that feels, in Sara Ahmed’s words, it has two different roles at once. On the one hand, skin separates us from other bodies and marks our boundaries. At the same time, skin affectively opens out of bodies to other bodies as it “registers how bodies are touched by others” (Ahmed 45). *Brushpoint*, as an attempt to embody the potentially victimized body of the woman who is open to physical attacks of men, has taken place on skin, my skin, for this reason. The touch, being the main action between two parties, encapsulates its own potential to complicate various boundaries. In Erin Manning’s words, touch “inaugurates violence since it compels us to write the relationship between self and other differently” (56). In this sense, the structure of the performance installs a certain kind of *violence* in the relationship between performer and visitor from the very beginning. This implicit -maybe productive- violence replaces the violent narrative that lingers in our imagery and language on sexuality with a new narrative about to come. In short, exposing my skin to others through inviting them to write/paint on it in a structured setting meant *carefully* collapsing the borders of skin as both a boundary and an opening.

Eight people answered my invitation, visited my room, and made this performance happen. The first visitor wrote a large *No* on my back, saying that if the rapist grabs the women from behind, she should write her message between my shoulders blades. I felt empowered by her strong-minded manner while, at the same time, the idea of a message for a rapist on my back was intimidating, too. The second visitor painted my left hand red to indicate that it is the responsibility of all. He was caring and gentle with every word he chose to

³ The images included in this essay are some of these photos taken by visitors.

convey his thoughts on sexual violence. His soothing voice resonated with me throughout the performance. The third visitor told me a personal anecdote of something that took place during one of his acting classes and that was quite demonstrative of the fine line between consent and transgression. Following the anecdote, which he said was revelatory for him, he wrote *awareness is the foundation of hope* on my leg.



The next visitor wrote *agency* on my chest as she shared her idea that agency should be emphasized in opposition to victimization. In contrast to the word *No* written on my back, having something written on my chest felt both empowering and confrontational at the same time. The next visitor wrote *I am woman, not a victim* on my stomach. Reclaiming a stance as a woman through the statement written on my stomach turned out to be powerful.



The sixth visitor talked to me about how women, deep down, desire to be raped. His eyes were all over my body and he was eager to convince me that from his perspective, women's susceptibility to violence was evident. His tension alarmed me and I asked him if he had read the flyer. He said that he had not, but that he had been pondering this *fact* for a long time and therefore had things to say. In that moment, the routine of the performance was interrupted. To continue my conversation within the context of the performance, I invited him to take a minute to read the flyer and perform the 'task' of the performance (writing/painting on the skin) if he still wanted to. I also emphasized the rule about taking a picture of the writing. He said he would like to write on my back, adding that I would not like what he was going to write. I agreed to turn my back and let him write. He wrote, *it is not rape if you enjoy it*. He photographed it as the others had.



Unlike what I did with others, I did not give him a hug before he left. Instead I touched him gently on the shoulder once he was outside the room. The seventh visitor first gave me a big hug, as she knew I was emotionally charged when she stepped in and saw the writing on my back. Then she wrote *beauty is mine* on my shoulder. My last visitor re-wrote the sixth visitor's sentence by adding new letters to it in a different colour. Keeping the old one still readable, she made a second sentence. She changed *it is not rape if you enjoy it* into *it is not an escape. Will you enjoy it?*





The performance ended with eight visitors. To my surprise, my skin was touched not only by like-minded people but also by a person who thinks fiercely in the opposite direction. By taking the performance to another level of engagement, the sixth visitor paradoxically helped me to see that the performance was vulnerable and could continue only with my determination to stay calm despite the unsettling emotions evoked in me. As I felt threatened and frightened in my skin, I became over-conscious and sensitive in regards to the edges of my performance. The tension at the moment was palpable, which was only prolonged as he had the longest sentence among all. A moment of revealing my fear to my visitor might have ended my performance if he had walked out without taking all the steps he needed to take as a visitor. At this point, I realized that the documentation of the mark my visitors left on my skin was of paramount importance. As soon as I reminded him of the camera on the table, he seemed a bit disturbed by the idea of taking a picture of what he was going to write. The uneasiness was clear and assuring on my side when he asked if I was going to see what he wrote. My fear from him was now reciprocal as I saw fear in his eyes. This reciprocity works to secure the relationship between bodies. In Sarah Ahmed's words, the feeling of fear is experienced as an "intense bodily experience in the present" (65).

The fear and tension could have stayed at the level of signification if visitors had not performed writing on my skin. Apparently, my permission of being touched as well as their participation made the dialogue an urgent and sensual one; what Manning calls *a politics of touch*. "A politics of touch calls forth a democratic movement toward justice that releases judgment indefinitely. In

practice, this means experiencing justice as the opportunity of postponing a final decision even while engaging fully in an act of reaching-toward” (Manning 115). It is in this postponement of final decisions that rape became *possible* and its damage speakable, even at the point of utter disagreement and its tendency towards an act of violence.

Brushpoint showed the ways in which embodied and dialogic act of performance is able to overcome the ideological boundaries that preclude open discussion on sexual violence. Re-thinking sexual violence through embodying the fear not only gave me the opportunity to respond to this particular notification, but it also reconnected me to a feminist politics, that does not dismiss the complexity at hand but stays with it as my body/politics intensified differently with every touch towards.

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