

Ekkreinen: A Stop Motion Capsule Performance

Desireé D. Rowe

Before all the shit hit the fan, I read this amazing book.

The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson—and it was everything I want to do. The intersections of queer theory with personal narrative were evocative. The language pulled at pieces of me that I didn't know existed.

Nelson's interweaving of Irigaray, Klein, Butler braided within her own stories of a queer pregnant body made sense to me. Troubling normal and pushing back against a queer rejection of motherhood and all the leakiness of a woman's body. Her, autotheory, as she called it, pressed forward to a future orientation in the face of Edelman's death drive, though with a wink and nod of understanding. I was digging her autotheory. I wanted to drive it around the block.

I was still basking in the warm glow of Nelson's provocations when I went to the doctor for a bump on my head. It was making me self-conscious of my body when I would get my hair cut. A bump sticking out from my head that would get caught on the brush.

My body was sticking out in all the wrong places.

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I could feel the strings unravelling in the moments between — “charting the vectors and vicissitudes of my own body.”¹

I’m doing this work of mapping here. Charting the course through a diagnosis, treatment, and...the unknown.

The deft dermatologist at Johns Hopkins sliced the bump off. And my bump was sent away for “routine paths.”

I imagine my bumps trotting down a path in the early morning light. Routine paths. Well-worn. I worry that my bump isn’t asking the critical questions. Are we talking paths like matrices? Like Spivak?

Cause this path quickly became a dense forest of early morning calls and tears and surgery.

No one wants to hear they have cancer from a hesitant dermatologist at 8am phone call.

“You should go to the Cancer Center.”

I had Eccrine Carcinoma. A cancer of the sweat glands between the skull and the scalp. With a high reoccurrence rate and a surgery date within the next 2 weeks. I was overwhelmed, unbalanced, and decidedly not happy.

Everything moved really quickly. Until the day of when I sat patiently on the hospital bed with tears streaming down my face. My anxiety and panic had returned for an appearance right before I was to be wheeled to surgery. I saw the room begin to blur at the edges not from the anesthesia, but from the shivers of panic swirling through me. I felt insignificant and disposable in the giant medical industrial complex. I was scared.

It took me awhile to write that sentence. Scared is a position of vulnerability that I am not one to readily admit. Within the circulating discourses of power, scared is not something pulls one into high regard. I am loathe to admit being scared. Yes, I was scared. In that moment. But am I still scared? Should I frame that as present? Present-future? The conjugations swirl around and I stand, transfixed in a liminal space of anesthesia induced fog. I am always scared. And the “I”? I’m

¹ Micah McCrary. “Riding the Blinds: Micah McCrary Interviews Maggie Nelson.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 26 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/riding-the-blinds/#!>.

skipping the dissertation on the performative “I.” It took long enough for us to get there.

I woke up with a reverse mohawk and a procedure that I was not prepared for. The doctor told me he would remove the cancerous area one way, but changed his mind in the middle of the operation. I was now left with three times the amount of stitches, more pain than I expected, and a growing concern that the scarring would mean I would wouldn’t get my hair back.

A complaint about vanity. Yes. That is where we are. I am scared. Scared that I might die, but...um...also that I may....um have a huge bald spot. While “the non-complainers get all the credit for coded gracefulness” I have never considered myself graceful.²

My recovery sucked. Most because I ignored it. I went to work three days after my surgery. I came to this conference two weeks later. I pretended as if it was all ok. I wore scarves for a year. My hair never grew back. Like a tree, you can see the rings in my head.

Laura Ellingson writes in her blog, *Realistically Ever After* that “I know that the tyranny of cheerfulness is largely about other people’s discomfort with cancer survivors’ (or really anyone’s) suffering. But the tyranny is also seductive, in that it tempts us to believe that our suffering will abate if only we embrace the good cheer mandate with our whole hearts.”³

I was pretending.

During all of this I had started a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at Hopkins as part of the holistic treatment approach. They wanted to explore other ways of pain management. Because now, for the rest of my life, I get unbearable migraines from the scars and tightness on my scalp.

In the out breath and in breath I mark my own depressive politics of feeling. I breath in Cvetkovich’s talking back to medical narratives and breath out alternative ways of understanding my own explorations into the politics of pain.⁴

² Avital Ronnell, “Ach! The History of the Complaint,” in *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy: Conventions and Crossings*, ed. Anna Street, Julien Alliot, & Magnolia Pauker (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2017), 237.

³ Laura Ellingson, “The Tyranny of Cheerfulness,” *Realistically Ever After* (blog), August 21, 2017, <https://realisticallyeverafter.blog/2017/08/21/the-tyranny-of-cheerfulness/>

⁴ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

My mindfulness training was 8 months in group therapy twice a week. It makes the pain and anxiety more manageable. Brings mind into focus with my body. I breathe through and into the pain that will be in my head—no—on my head forever.

But sometimes, during conversations I tap the spot where the bump was where the hole is. The hole that still leaks and scabs and repeats. There is still something to be said in the iterative performance moments. I repeat my head tapping thinking that this time I won't feel the smoothness of scar tissue or scratching of the scab or the wetness of...abject.

TAP TAP TAP

I'm like the Aye Aye of Madagascar. Watching *Wild Kratts* with my daughter the Aye Aye taps on the tree bark with one super long creepy fingernail and then digs out a maggot.

TAP TAP TAP.

My nail scrapes the top and I feel guilty. Did I hurt myself again? I don't care.

TAP TAP TAP

I asked once, "Can you hear that?"

Yes. We can.

I don't care.

I want a way to talk to that spot surrounded by scars. Why aren't you healing? What do you want to say to me? But then I sound crazy. I only say these things to myself during meditation and mindfulness time. And now. To all of you.

A year after my surgery and my wound is still there. Still leaking. Still needing skin grafts. Still scarred. Still painful. I want to apologize to myself for all of this because it hurts.

My vanity runs deeper than my leaky head and always reminds me that I have a bare patch of scar tissue on the top of my head with a leaky hole in the middle. That I'm a gross person whose body isn't working.

This is the inciting moment here. That my desire to be normal has made me a leaky mess. It was supposed to be better. Through this surgery, I would be normal. The conditions were not met. This is where the material reality of cruel optimism smashes into autotheory to produce a memoir that is laced with slow death and a politic that embraces the melancholy of depression in the face of mindfulness.

The abjection within the wound can't be ignored. There is the "vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between self and other."⁵ The oozing pus and TAP TAP TAP blur the lines between my insides and outsides, stripping away the pretense of normal that I wanted so badly. What's left behind the curtain? When the TAP TAP TAP matches the beat of my own heart and pulses so loudly that everyone else turns and stares.

I don't care.

Every few weeks is a new cancer punch biopsy, which is as delightful as it sounds.

TAP TAP TAP

I don't have cancer anymore? I say with a rise at the end of my voice. The hidden question: will I have to come back here in a few weeks and cry in the parking lot again?

For now, there is nothing but more pus and less healing. I'll take a skin graft and a punch biopsies and a retreat inside myself to manage the pain. In breath. Calm breath out. Mindfulness. Thoughtfulness. Not happiness. Not positivity. Reality. Complete with matted hair, throbbing temples, and an uncomfortable familiarity in the spaces between.

⁵ Robert Phillips, "Abjection," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1-2 (2014): 19.



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