

The Body Holds Us Accountable: A Response to *1000 Cuts: A Performance Studies Curriculum*

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A grayscale title screen—*1000 Cuts: A Performance Studies Curriculum*—welcomes the audience to a yellow-washed room, then a black box theater. We watch the performers flit around, meticulously arranging stage props for over two minutes. I can't place the genre or the epoch of the overlaid music, but it feels old-timey. It feels *classic, sincere, earnest*—but in the way white cisheteropatriarchy pretends to be *classic, sincere, earnest*. My critical suspicions activate: what is being covered over? Who does meticulous arrangement serve? Why do I feel like something bad is going to happen? Against the backdrop of my sonic crisis, I also try to make sense of what I am seeing, hearing, thinking—and I can't muster a coherent logocentric conclusion. More questions. Why are they fiddling with slapdash props with so much precision? Am I supposed to know what the props signify? Is this some sort of commentary on The Home Depot's bad politics? Why is there a build-a-bear dino in the middle of the black box? Is the dino speaking?? What does it *mean*?

When we engage in the art of knowledge production and knowledge sharing, we have choices. For example, when we don't know what it means, we could err on the side of *earnest, sincere*—and congratulate our colleagues for a skit well-done (what fun colorful streamers!) As *1000 Cuts* unravels, however, we learn this approach cuts—earnestly, sincerely, and infinitely. Alternatively, when we

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encounter knowledge beyond our learned coherences, beyond normative legibilities, we could, instead, ask our bodies to keep us accountable. We could ask how the incoherences inhabit our bodies? Where there is friction? Ease? Power? How my body relates to yours? How our experiences connect? Disconnect? In this second choice, we are called to consider how we are all implicated. *1000 Cuts* tells the story of escalating harm and the demand for accountability in its wake. It invites us to sit at the crossroads of theory and practice to not only champion interdisciplinarity, but also to blast apart rigid epistemic boundaries in Communication Studies, and to double-down on the promises of embodied praxis.

1000 Cuts: A Performance Studies Curriculum asks us to feel with the authors the pain of a thousand tiny cuts—cuts made onto the body each time disciplinary borders seek to contain the capacities for knowledge production, and knowledge itself. In their artist statement, the performers disclose a moment of the project's critical invention (Nothstine et. al., 1994). Their collaborative performance, born out of a long list of workplace micro/aggressions, is constitutive of their “own consistent efforts to make visible the persistent material barriers of interdisciplinary performance work at our own institution and within the discipline” (Artist Statement). These barriers are cuts and cuts, like the authors remind us, are injuries sustained to the body.

Once all the props are in place, I brace myself for these injuries, for these thousand cuts.

But after a few minutes, the performers leave behind the classic and earnest of the title track for something a little lighter. More fun. It's giving performance studies scholars on parade. More colorful streamers. More fun. The authors don't look hurt. We watch the performers dance, make noise, and play with their improvised instruments—bells, bottles, buzzers—to the tune of childlike play and frivolity. Their bodies on display. Are you entertained? Audience members are invited to interact with the performers. The audience is prompted to remove ribbons from their bodies while they sing, dance, and smile and put on a show. Then we learn what appears on the ribbons. The screen reads:

“Does this count as scholarship?”

“Is performance really a method?”

“So, is this just a skit?”

The questions don't feel like micro/aggressions. They feel like aggression/aggressions—ripped from the bodies of the authors, sometimes earnestly, sometimes with force. The questions perform a kind of meta-communication which, on the surface, signals an engagement with the limits of knowledge production, but the message underneath is always clear: cute *skit*, kid. These utterances are accumulative and are precisely why psychologists often refer to the psychic impact of microaggressions as “death by a thousand cuts” (Sue, 2021). As the performance unfolds, we watch the authors' bodies become less fun—more hunched, annoyed, a little angry. Tired. The music shifts to something wilder, resistive, a little punk. In the resistive turn, *1000 Cuts* asks us to consider the body as a site of not only *legitimate and legible* knowledge, but also to sit with the *impossibility* of knowledge without the body in the first place.

The punk rebellion of it all is almost parody—though there is certainly pain in navigating disciplinary power lines. As the audience continues to extract the ribbons from the performers bodies, and the ribbon utterances flash across the screen, the performance posits how complex interlocking systems of power underpin university labor and ventriloquize the tiny cuts. Grounded in white settler-colonialism, capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy, the neoliberal university—over and over again—dictates what “counts” as meaningful knowledge and often the body (especially the most marginalized bodies among us) is nowhere to be found. The disciplinary supremacy of settler-oriented logocentric traditions elides the possibility of the body to emerge (or at least any bodies beyond “great white men” making “great white man speeches”).

Consequently, *1000 Cuts* queries the false dichotomy between rhetoric and performance sub-fields in Communication Studies. The authors ask us to consider the primacy of rhetoric (and other “established” sub-fields) in its relationship to the legitimacy of performance studies. Drawing on Calafell's (2014) call to keep rhetoric honest, *1000 Cuts* doubles down on her concern “that what counts as knowledge is often equated with a tangible text manifesting itself in written form” (115). The performers animate their bodies and play their DIY instruments to ask us to consider the materialities and embodiments beyond the written form. The interspersed voiceover citations remind the audience of the importance of not merely co-mingling text and body (“the body is not an accessory”) but also of the importance of the body *as* knowledge/production. *1000 Cuts* dances in this embodied centering to draw together performance and rhetoric and pushes back against the bifurcated notion that the world is “rhetorically constructed and performatively realized” (Conquergood, 1992, 80). In the punk rebellion we see the

performers resist, get loud, angry—but also confront exhaustion and burnout. *1000 Cuts* invites us to sense into the exhaustion of demanding the legibility of recognition before the body ever even speaks.

Just before the final musical overlay, I'm left asking what happens when exhaustion meets the neoliberal university meets the body meets a demand for legibility? *1000 Cuts* offers an answer in the form of progressive (Berghain techno) reconfigurations of power. The unhinged, angry music loudly narrates the authors tired and frenzied bodies causing chaos in bathrooms, theatres, and sterile academic spaces. The body is central. The body is knowledge. The body's proximity to power is at stake and the performers don't give a fuck. Want knowledge? Suck on THIS knowledge! Finally, and with impassioned exasperation, we are dared to merge into the traffic between performance studies and rhetoric once more. The citational voiceovers in *1000 Cuts* illustrate that scholars have long busied themselves with conversations about knowledge, the body, and power. And even still, our performance studies colleagues continue to endure tiny cuts.

And so, to offer a loving rejoinder to *1000 Cuts*: I want to help caretake these wounds through the kind of queer embrace that celebrates mutual tenderness, creative promiscuity, and expansive curiosity. Inspired by Morris' (2014) own embrace of the relationship between rhetoric and performance, I am moved to linger on the three of us in relationship. Morris (2014) amplifies the place of reflexivity in performance studies and asks rhetoricians to engage in "an unceasing process of self-engagement . . . situatedness" for the sake of intersectional critique and the illumination of power (105). Queer embrace, here, hinges on "differential belonging" which enables us to think about coalitionality untethered to fixed identities while simultaneously attuning to power—messy connection across difference (Chávez 2010). *1000 Cuts* brings texture to this heuristic. The invitation to respond to *1000 Cuts* brings performance studies and rhetorical studies into collaboration on the pages of the journal. What is more: the invitation to respond also connects our differential belonging, our shared queer commitments. From me to you both: some tenderness, some promiscuity, and some curiosity.

Dear Beloveds,

You know I hardly ever call myself a *rhetorician*. I've also got some tiny cuts on my body that I'm only recently displaying, righteously, as the scars of cultural studies, feminist theory, and queer critique. In your artist statement you write,

A colleague once asked us if we could see any space of generosity within these (sometimes) well-intentioned quips. Well, yes and no. Our everyday responses to this constant barrage of barbs and misinterpretations is when we are generous. We nod, we explain, we move on. Our performance, *1000 Cuts*, is what happens on the other side of generosity (Artist Statement).

Listen.

I asked because, well, I love you both—just so dearly.

I don't want to imagine a world where your capacious work is approached with anything other than sustained curiosity (the good kind), wild promiscuities (the good kind), and gentle tenderness (the good kind). And I am grateful for your generosity. I am grateful for the lingering resonances of your performance, of your labor—resonances that make clear where your work and my work are interdependent: "the interdependence of rhetoric and performance as a cycle, like the seasons, sometimes indiscernible or tentative in the transitions, but not collapsible into each other." (Pezzullo, 2014, p. 97). *1000 Cuts* makes me want to keep asking where we become rhetorically performed in every moment of communicative exchange. I want to keep asking because there must be hope for improvising something more capacious than old tired disciplinary borders that stymie variegated knowledges. When our scholarship is embodied, we feel the cuts deeper. And like *1000 Cuts* reminds us, together, our bodies keep us accountable.

Thanks for the invite,

xxx

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