

Methodology of the Heart: A Performative Writing Response

M. Heather Carver

The search for form requires more than anything else, the maneuvering of self, sometimes putting the self forward, sometimes holding the self back, sometimes testifying, sometimes sticking to the facts, sometimes using fiction to tell the truth...As I work my way, the self is always there, demanding its negotiation.

—Ronald J. Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic & Daily Life*

The work of art is always already the work that art does.

—Gerard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence*

Prologue

May 1, 2006

I begin this introduction at 2:40 p.m., between my daily radiation treatments and picking up my daughters from school. It has been almost a year since I wrote this essay and if I revise on time it will be published. The thrill of publication is in each word I type, for despite my insistence on the organic nature of creativity, my overzealousness for working with my students' final performances, and my own untimely (is it ever timely, though, really?) battle with breast cancer, I

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want to finish this essay and see it in print. First, however, I need—and want—to address a reviewer’s question about the piece. And it is a good one.

Question: Why did I choose to respond to Pelias’s *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic & Daily Life* through performative writing?

My students ask me about performative writing all the time, specifically for a definition of it. “What is it?” is a much less important question, however, than “how is it?” Because they don’t really just want to be able to define it, they want to engage in this type of writing that seems so free, so full of promise and lightness. Writing can be so heavy—not the thoughts, but the practice. The act of sitting at one’s desk and putting pen to paper or fingers to keys is so much more daunting than it sounds. For to do so, one must have something to say. I have plenty to say.

But I haven’t always known how to simultaneously express my academic and my daily self in my writing.

This is why I studied and built a home/career in Performance Studies—because performance and writing are where I live. Reading Pelias’ *A Methodology of the Heart* last year connected me with his experiences and his way of viewing the world—not the stereotypical “elitist” view of the academy, but a deep, soulful expression of the real worlds in which we all traverse.

Answer: Because reading the book helped open a path for me to share my words, my voice, my poetry, my own academic story of life and everyday performance knowledge. Pelias writes in “The Heart’s Introduction” that he was drawn to writing about the methodology of the heart because of a feeling of lack. He writes that he wants “a scholarship that fosters connections, opens spaces for dialogue, heals” (2). I echo this longing, and what follows is a glimpse into my scholarly, artistic, and daily living experiences to open even more spaces and continue working toward healing connections.

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In sum, if you continue reading, you won't find in this essay definitions of either the autoethnographic or performative writing, and you won't find a traditional book review that outlines or judges another's work, and you won't even find the author apologizing for her form or content. But what you will find is a journey of self-discovery as I interacted with Pelias's autoethnographic performance pieces.

I have written this essay in the way in which I was inspired, beckoned, and challenged by Pelias's work. *A Methodology of the Heart* is not a guidebook, but it has beckoned me to travel the highways and byways of academic performance, freedom, expression, and daily life.

There are no maps—just unclogged arteries with expansive terrain.



May 31, 2005

I begin at 8:36 a.m., having dropped off my daughter at pre-school and skimming a few e-mails that have gathered over the memorial holiday weekend. The sun is up, the students gone, only five days until summer session.

My office is thrillingly quiet.

I spy the book across my desk, perched atop the beige couch cover that I had purchased to look “more professional” than the wild peach patterns hidden below. The title beckons in its allure of the heart intertwined with academic necessity—and I reach over to take a peek.

It is 10:02 a.m. before I look up from reading, momentarily confused as to where I ought to be—checking my computer clock and reassuring myself that I'm not due home for at least another hour for Bill to go to his doctor's appointment. Bill's strange pains and illnesses always seem magnified despite our nonchalant pretense, for

hidden under the casual nature of the doctor's visit always lurks questions of blood, threats of cancer.

Where had the past ninety minutes gone? I had been lost, absorbed in the language, structure, beauty, and drama of *A Methodology of the Heart*. My heart thumps as I realize I am not alone. Not alone in the way I constantly critique the world, nor alone in my fervor and passion for performance, literature, and autoethnographic expression.

I didn't begin reading at the beginning of the book.

I never do.

I am not a start to finisher, but a constant juggler.

I believe in circular and spiral patterns and often resist hierarchical patterns less for political reasons and more simply by nature.

Thus far this essay seems to be about me. And it is. And it isn't.

I find myself writing about the me that connects with Pelias's views of daily academic life and performance—a me that I rarely express in writing. And, like Pelias, I yearn to connect with others about such a performative perspective that shades my everyday experiences as a parent and an artist/scholar.

There must be more of us searching for how to express the journey. Are you out there, dear reader? Come in. Come into this conversation with me inside my head. Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable—or uncomfortable, whatever you choose.

I am visiting with *Methodology of the Heart* today. Where does this tale begin? Once upon a time, not so long ago...

I began with the lists.

Flipping through the pages, wondering when I would get the time to read this book at the top of my summer reading list, I saw a list of names. I began reading about Paul Gray, Emeritus Professor of Performance Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Pelias writes about this scholar and I am reminded of Gray's careful work. To read Gray's essays in journals such as *Literature in Performance* and *Text and Performance Quarterly* is to read the poetry of the discipline—you can not just see, but feel the oral interpretation roots in literary analysis of performance.

For me, however, I don't think about Professor Gray who led the field of Performance Studies into a new way of writing and performing on the page with his unprecedented and daring 1997 edited issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*.

Instead, I miss my afternoon chats with Paul—talking about the field, where performance studies had been, where we were going. Thinking about my years at the University of Texas brings memories of burned coffee, and the smell of cigarettes and laughter led me back to the start of Pelias's essay on "Making Lists: Life at the University."

I was hooked. From the lists to the auto-ethnography of academia, I continued to marvel. I realized what I already knew, but had not named, what I had gotten myself into. I was and I am both the tourist and the twelve-year-old girl, angling to "get picked" by the street performers, the academic players.

My heart began to pump quickly. A methodology of the heart brings the mind, body and soul not just into the experience, but into the writing about that experience. It is a methodology that embraces the reality of our performing bodies as we conduct our research and as we express what we have learned. Pelias takes the method of autoethnography one step further in writing about the self's relationship with everyday life, particularly everyday academic life, a life that is often unexamined in scholarship. His work acknowledges that writing an auto/ethnography is in itself a performance act.

I re-read the whole essay on lists, lingering over the section on Paul again, and reading and rereading the section on Joanna Maclay, before continuing to the end of the book. My heart yearns to have had the presence in her classroom. Sometimes I forget how my heart would beat so rapidly when I was going to perform for my professors: I never had the courage to take Dr. Roloff's course at Northwestern. I heard the rumor that you had to get naked to be a real performance artist. My heart wasn't in that. While I may regret some of the courses I didn't take, I've never regretted the ones I did, like Judith Hamera's performance of poetry class. She was and continues to be a role model of both passion and impeccableness. Oh how I struggled to find my poetic voice. I'm not sure I did until ten years later. Maybe I am still searching.

I laugh, wince, celebrate and agonize over the experiences that are so real to me as I read "The Academic Tourist" and "Schooling in Classroom Politics" about the enormity of the politics of teaching. The last essay, "What the Heart Learns," takes me places I don't feel ready to go, but they are so frighteningly close. Burnout before tenure—not part of my midwestern ethics (too liberal to take on the baggage work of "Protestant"). I want to read more, but I must go.

Stopping by the gym for a quick 30 minute workout on the way home, I think about my life as an academic. I think about Ron Pelias's writing and how it draws me in through both its rich poetic language and its vulnerability as a participant observer in academic culture. I wonder what awaits me in the first thirteen chapters. I head home, and with a smile and a kiss exchange car keys with Bill. He tells me our youngest is napping soundly and I should have some time to get work done before she awakes. We don't mention the subtext of his appointment, just that he'll pick up Tricia from school on his way home. The door shuts and I grab my book, eager for the stories that await.

It is 11:30 and for some reason I still don't turn to the beginning essay, but I find myself reading "Remembering Vietnam." It is so candid and vulnerable that I find myself begin in waves, waves of

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tears about a war I will never understand, a war I was born into and yet no one would talk about: a war that only those who performed in it as soldier can even begin to understand each others' pain, but even then I saw the medic at a loss.

And then I began to understand the academic at a parallel loss some 30 years later. How does one express such visceral experiences with an unknown audience? The heart is continually pumping out life force, no matter what attention is paid to its work. The nurturing academic yearns to express this care in his writing, his life, his relationships, and his critical view of daily performance.

After reading "For Father and Son," the essay "The Academic: An Ethnographic Case Study" seems to call. The ethnographic case study of the academic is so full of desire, it lures me in with its hope and promise—and I read the same bright shine I have seen of the academy. But I don't make lists. Or at least I desperately try not to. I am not afraid of getting through them as much as staring at a Truth: a something that must be done. For that means I have a master, even if it is a master list. And a master's house will no more be dismantled with his tools (thank you Audre Lorde) than his lists. I can't help but think that this writing, this negotiating of performance, writing, and poetic knowledge takes a particular stroke of brilliance as it uses imagery and metaphor to guide readers on his journey. But his writing doesn't make me choke up on the bat like so many other writers seem to strive for in their readers—strokes of brilliance that simultaneously paralyze. No, his writing makes me want to get in the game even more. For I, too, adamantly believe in performance as a method.

Performance is a method that not only shows the complications in one's story, one's life, and one's daily experiences, but it allows for critique, analysis, and expression of differing perspectives, lenses, and emotional paths. Performance can make the raw self real to an audience, with a vulnerability that exists in the very moment of expression. Performance is a simultaneous method of inquiry and

discovery in the very moment that the performer and audience share air, space, and time together.

If every day is judgment day, then today I was inspired by a book, written by a body that performed on the page and into my heart. Irregular as my heartbeat might already be, perhaps this book, this writing has created a permanent skip for me...and I am better for it.

At 12:45 p.m., I hear Ellie calling out on the monitor. She's not upset, just up. I smile and put down the book, moving swiftly up the stairs to greet her. Several stories and apple slices later, Bill returns home with Tricia to tell of his sinus infection and glowing end-of-the-year praise from her teachers. We smile over all of the reports, celebrating health and early academic performance. I lather the girls up with sunscreen lotion as they exit the house with their father for an afternoon of adventures.

It is 2:07 p.m. and I am itching to get back to the book, but the call of tenure is loud and it clearly dictates that I must work on my book proposal. I drive to campus, find a shady parking space, and join my colleague Elaine in her cheery, full-professor corner office in the English department's prestigious Tate Hall. After brief updates on our life, kids, and health, we delightfully dive into our work on the book we are co-authoring on domestic violence and performance. In talking about one imprisoned woman's story of surviving abuse, I recall traces of Pelias's words that "the heart learns that stories are the truths that won't keep still" (171). These women want their stories to escape the prison walls, to share their truths of abuse that were silenced in the judicial system before "battered women's syndrome" was named. No other methodology than one of the heart would be ethical in helping these voices be heard.

We agree to write our ethnographic book in the form of autoethnography and performative writing. I add *A Methodology of the Heart* to the proposal's bibliography and enthusiastically try to summarize it for Elaine. She immediately recognizes Pelias's

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methodological call, and makes a note to purchase her own copy of the book.

8:47 p.m.

After dinner, playtime in the new sandbox purchased on the afternoon adventure, and planting some gladiola bulbs in my previously non-existent garden, we begin the girls' bedtime routine of teethbrushing and stories. Then Bill and I sit on our front porch and enjoy the evening air before watching a news report on the revealing of "Deep Throat's" identity and heading to bed. As Bill nods off, I turn to the book and read chapters eight, nine and ten, marveling at the attention to the word, the context, the metaphor, the image as it reveals the performance of the writer reaching out to his audience, his reader, me.

I go back and forth between thinking about the scholar and the human being, the Ronald J. Pelias I quote in my seminars and the Ron Pelias I see at conferences. I decide to read the book's introduction and the visceral reaction I'd been having to the narratives began to really make sense. I experience the book fully, from mind to heart to body to the writing and performing on the page and in my reading body as I too continually perform my academic and daily life.

10:42 p.m.

I begin writing in the form of a fan letter. My first. Do we even write those in academia? What do I want from this letter? A signed 8x10 glossy? No, I do not want the material, the gesture of the Hollywood star in exchange for applause in epistolary form. No, not that. But I do want to show the reflection and work that has surged from this academic pulse. I remember the tickity-tock of my tenure clock and make a note that perhaps I ought to write a book review for publication—or better yet, a review essay. But traditional academic writing is not where my heart, mind, or creative impulse is leading me.

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I get this. I get this more than a sense of polite understanding of an academic's discussion of power or knowledge of gender, race, class, sexual identity or performance communication practices and theories. I get this performance so deeply that I begin thinking about my own daily life. I begin this essay. I begin thinking of reaching out to my own readers—to you here with me on the page.

Bill rolls over and squints at the bright lamplight. I gently turn him back over and grab my book and notepad, flip off the light, and head to the kitchen. I begin to read, but I hear Ellie coughing and go to check on her. She awakes and says she's hot and needs a story. We cuddle and talk about "Blue's Clues." I sing her another song and lull her gently back to slumber.

It is 11:12 p.m. and I return downstairs. Have I read all the essays? I see that I had somehow forgotten "The Critical Life" and "Playing the Field." These two essays are really at the heart of the academic game. They expose the player and the plays and the complexity of the gamebook. Maybe there's a reason I saved "Playing the Field" for last—my own cliché of the icing on the cake or perhaps more appropriately the chapter that really "hits home." I want to expose the game, to resist the obsessive nature of academic scoring, and yet I am pulled into playing it. I decide I must confront my own batting average in my own academic and daily life. I begin to write...

~~Two co-edited books~~
~~Three invited book chapters~~
~~Two peer-reviewed articles~~
~~One published conference proceeding~~
~~One co-authored book under consideration~~
~~One award-winning adaptation~~
~~Artistic Director and co-founder of a performance troupe with over 50 performances~~
~~Producer of three student authored shows~~
~~Director of two mainstage shows~~
~~Director of five performance series~~

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~~Birth of two daughters, (raising them without daycare, a constant
juggle with my life partner—an academic with a different time
clock—he rises at 2:30 or 3:00am shortly after I’ve retired.)
Death of one father and academic mentor
Two Ph.D. dissertations advised and passed, five more on the not-
too-distant horizon—
Recipient of two major campus awards...~~

Uh oh.
This is a list.

If I erase the list it appears as if I didn’t write it. One simple tap on the delete key and I’m home free—score one for the resistance. But that would be dishonest, not only to you my readers, but to myself. I will cross it out. It was there in the essay, but no longer is it a laudatory list, but a toxic prescription for unnecessary academic stress. The list is still present, but absent of its same power. Did you read the crossed-out words in the list? What are we doing here?

I can’t help but wonder if my resistance to traditional structures has led me to comprehend this book in ways unintended by Pelias, or if in fact, it champions the very heart of his mission. I can’t escape the images imprinted on me through his careful language on stage—his writing performing each scene, act, and curtain call.

Where does my life and academia separate? They blend together like fabric, enveloping me in a blanket. This blanket is the lifeblood of performance, both the field and our daily life. Ron Pelias’s auto-ethnographic perspective on the culture of academia has warmed my heart and given me not just inspiration, but vision. “Bravo!” I call out, and then look at the clock which reads 2:10a.m. I have read the entire book.

I wrap this blanket around my shoulders and head to bed. I gingerly place *Methodology of the Heart* on my nightstand and turn out the light.

I do not sleep.

I take some deep Yoga inspired breaths.

Lights back on, notebook open—I write and write, late into the night, early into the morning.



Epilogue

May 12, 2006
1:30 p.m.

I am sitting in Rendezvous, my favorite coffee shop. Along with my computer, grade sheets line up on the table, their little ovals peering at me, waiting for the pencil lead to darken them in, to place a subjective/objective letter next to the names. I always see expectant faces. Pelias is right, “Teaching *is* Political.” Being a bald professor has made me look like a sick teacher of healthy youth. I have fought more stereotypes of femaleness and health this past year than I ever imagined I would after my previous year as a pregnant professor.

The end of the semester is finally here, coinciding with the end of my cancer treatment. I breathe slowly in and then slowly exhale.

Tonight I will tuck my daughters into bed before heading to a graduation ceremony to bestow a doctoral hood on one of my students. Next week I fly to New York City to direct a play about Otto Frank at the Anne Frank Center. My writing, my performance, my academic and daily life continue to intertwine with my art and scholarship.

In *A Methodology of the Heart*, Pelias’s expression of a “lack” in our academic scholarship has inspired my search for more critical performative expression. This challenge has inspired me to begin writing my one-woman play, *Booby Prize: A Comedy About Breast Cancer*. I will perform it next Spring. I will embrace a methodology of

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the heart to get me through my illness—and to use performance as a method of healing myself while reaching out to my fellow sister survivors. For as Pelias’s poem “Whole” notes, twice the river said:

Holes are always
Filled with something. (79)

I pack up my things and make a quick note to self:

Fill the hole.

Send this essay in.

Now.



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