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Keywords: Death, Grief, Performance, Mourning, Feminism

Title: Healing the Mother Wound: Metal Performance and Grief Management

Abstract:

Metal saved my life. It is not the first time and it probably will not be the last. The murder of my mother when I was twenty-one, meant I was alone and if it had not been for metal, my grieving process may have been the end of my story. The death of course is one thing, but mourning is something that characterises many years after the event. If I had not bought my first guitar the year she died, the last seventeen years of my life would be a very different narrative.

I firmly believe that metal and metal performance, prevented my suicide and any plans for revenge. It matched my pain, sonically, texturally, musically and aesthetically. It initiated a cathartic process that I have returned to since, because it offers me emotional and psychological balance that other music forms do not. This may be a purely subjective engagement but that is precisely the point.

Remembering this time in my life is not easy, and can often come in hesitations, blanks and painful memories. By using interpretive performance autoethnography, a methodology that Richardson calls CAP or creative analytic practice (2000b, p. 929) means,

[it] allows the researcher to take up a person's life in its immediate particularity and to ground the life in its historical moment. We move back and forth in time, using a version of Sartre's progressive-regressive method. Interpretation works forward to the conclusion of a set of acts taken up by the subject while working back in time, interrogating the historical, cultural, and biographical conditions that moved the person to experience the events being studied' (Denzin, 2001 p. 41).

Through this methodological application, this paper seeks to analyse how metal and metal performance helped me write my trauma into a performing life that ultimately liberated me from my grief.

➤ Healing the Mother Wound: Metal Performance and Grief Management.

There are no words for grief. And this is the first time I have tried to write about the murder of my mother by my step-father. I have only been able to get to this point because I discovered a methodological framework called Interpretive Performance Autoethnography that provided me with a way in to the abyss of trauma. My ability, seventeen years after the event, to engage with her untimely death at 45 years old, is best characterised by the French phrase, 'l'appel du vide' or 'the call to the void'. This is how I have come to know and think about her murder and her absence, as a void, a gap filled with darkness that I have been stuck in since. My navigation through the abyss has been through metal, initially as a fan, a girlfriend of someone in a band, through to becoming a performer myself. And it saved me.

The research begins by using autoethnography to analyse my experiences of trauma and my subjective evolution as the front woman in a black metal band. In so doing I have been able to present not simply an autobiographical study, but an autoethnographic inquiry that applies psychoanalysis to analyse my subjective narrative. By adopting this way of researching, it has meant leaving other methodologies in favour of this one but I have come to know a particular *Écriture Feminine*, inasmuch that it tends to focus on women's writing. As Clough states, 'I made a choice to abandon the writing of ethnography of other women. I chose instead to set out again to know myself as a woman, as a woman writer' (6). And not just as a woman writer, I now see myself as a feminist autoethnographer, a survivor of parental domestic violence, a musician and an academic.

In Marilyn Metta's 'Putting the Body on the Line: Embodied Writing and Recovery through Domestic Violence', she structures her essay much like I have here; epiphanic moments are presented as vignettes surrounded by feminist autoethnographic engagement. This format offers a useful arrangement of subjective experience. She states:

- As contemporary feminist scholars, we are constantly wrestling with how we create knowledges in an era where personal stories collide with the cultural, the historical, the political, the embodied, and the imaginary [...] Women's autoethnographic writings provide critical spaces for women's silenced experiences, voices, and stories to be told, mapped, and shared, and hence, contribute to the ways in which we make knowledge about the world and our senses of place in it. (491)

There is definitely a sense of urgency and significance that autoethnographic texts ask of us; they demand that we pay attention, that we listen rather than respond. My journey from victim to survivor to feminist autoethnographer and black metal performer has not been an easy one and I knew that using my subjective experience would cause me pain and effectively tell people what I have been through. This has not been something I relished.

So, with all of this in mind, my engagement with interpretive performance autoethnography as my chosen mode of inquiry has offered me a joining of feminist

autoethnography and performance, and this is the dominant model I use in my research. Tammi Spry states 'the body in performance is blood, bone, muscle, movement; the performing body constitutes its own interpretive presence, a cultural text embedded in discourses of power [...] disrupting the status quo, uncovering the understorey of hegemonic systems' (18-20). My interpretive performance autoethnography presented through my stage performance as physicality and movement has provided me not only with a healing opportunity but has also enabled my voice to be identifiable amongst the brilliance and hegemonic difficulties of black metal.

Kristeva notes, 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (169) and my autoethnographic narrative is no different; my epiphanic moments are laid bare, they overlap and absorb who I was in order to move forward. I must, therefore, choose a starting point; I provide three epiphanic moments in order to identify experiential markers of my domestic violence that provide a foundation to the thesis as a whole.

➤ The Call to the Void.

Vignette 1

*Epiphany - I couldn't stay any longer. She trapped herself in this situation with this horrid man and I had to get out. She should never have left Dad for another man. If she wanted to leave, she should have done so independently, not expected another man to save her. He did not. He killed her. There is no reprieve. There is no benediction. It has been a secret that I have kept, locked away in the depths of my heart, inadvertently making terrible decisions on my behalf; the pain, the wrongly placed trust, the inability to ever tell Dad what happened to you. He doesn't know, even now. It would kill him.*

➤ Vignette 2

*Epiphany - It was a Sunday. I'd been out to lunch with my partner at the time and two friends of ours. I remember coming home and checking my answer machine messages. I remember the phone was bright green. Slim line. One of the ones where the numbers were stylishly hidden in the handset. I checked the messages. There was one from you and one from him. Yours was sad. You sounded so, so sad. Defeated. You told me you loved me and for me to give you a call. I thought, right I'll do that now. I deleted the message. I DELETED THE MESSAGE. Little did I realise that was to be the last time I ever heard your voice. The next was from him. You were at the hospital in intensive care. Visiting hours were at 6pm.*

➤ Vignette 3

*Epiphany - I'd popped back to the house to get some of mum's belonging's he said he didn't want anymore. He was drunk when he opened the door. I didn't stay long. I didn't want to be there at all but I needed something of yours to take with me, to know that this*

*had really happened and you weren't here anymore. The day before my aunty had called, telling me that she had been removed as the executer of the will and that I needed to ask about this. So, stood on the doorstep, facing you, I did. It is the only time you ever let your mask slip, wasn't it. I asked. You said, 'since I married her, I get it all now and you get nothing'. I asked you to repeat what you said and you made your drunken excuses and shut the door in my face.*

Black metal performance saved me. It has become my saving grace. I did not expect it but I do not know what would have happened to me without it. Surviving trauma was only the first part of my journey to recovery; learning to excise it from my heart and mind has meant finding ways in which to do so. For me, becoming the guitarist and front woman in an experimental black metal band and learning to write about my trauma have been crucial. The two intersect, I believe, because they both centre on the nature and narrative of the self. I am drawn so fully towards the injured, visceral heart of black metal because it matches my own and the subjective recognition that autoethnographic research provides facilitates that heart, a voice. These elements, the engagement of the self through black metal and the purging of trauma through writing, coalesce through the function and necessity of the subjective.

Writing about trauma through autoethnography is an emancipatory and liberating experience. By using interpretive performance autoethnography means I am able to revisit my subjective experience in a way that allows me analytical perspective, critical distance and perhaps most importantly, healing or catharsis. Interpretive performance autoethnography is best understood as process. According to Denzin:

- [it] allows the researcher to take up each person's life in its immediate particularity and to ground the life in its historical moment [...] Interpretation works forward to a conclusion to a set of acts taken up by the subject while working back in time, interrogating the historical, cultural, and biographical conditions that moved the person to the experiences being studied [...] Performance and interpretation work outward from the turning-point events in a person's life. The sting of memory defines those events. They become part of the person's mystery, part of her interpretive autoethnography. (xi)

This offers, therefore a model to identify and re-engage with 'turning-point events' or epiphanies that demarcate specificities in our lives that in turn shape who we become. The bipartite approach of *interrogative* (engaging with past turning-point events) and *interpretive* (working forward to a conclusion) offer a valuable axis upon which to found a framework for investigation. My turning-point events or epiphanies were traumatic but without them, I would not have been able to acknowledge what was happening to me. The real clarity however has come from a retroactive examination; I work back interrogatively to understand the trauma and work interpretively towards my musical performance as expurgation. The examples provided in the vignettes offer three turning-point moments, that when I recollect them, offer more valuable information than when I experienced them at the time; I now know that it was not my fault. Similarly, there are only certain epiphanic moments that I can feel I can share, whilst the darkest moments still cling with hard fortitude to my insides like

festering glue. It will take time so the knowledge that autoethnographic research focuses on process, helps me sequence what I choose to examine and at what time. It facilitates control.

Autoethnography encourages examination of the self examining the self and after experiencing trauma, re-engagement with one's own subjectivity is essential. Her abuse and murder serves to enforce an unreality, a questioning of self-identity that means you cannot know any truth from lies, who am I in relation to this event; to be able to tell the difference between what really happened and the abuser's version of events takes time. In other words, your understanding of the world and the person who you thought you were become eviscerated, replaced by an unrecognisable shadow, an imposter and in order to find some purchase, some anchor in the storm, one must revisit, interrogatively, in order to move forward; love your wounds and you will be healed.

Of course, there is no reason to believe me but that is not the point. As the black metal band Wolves in the Throne Room suggest, I am in need of catharsis, 'not a lily-white and guilt free existence' (qtd. in Morton 21). I have found other people's belief in my experiences difficult because I have not always remembered everything and any sense of time and place has been blocked out. I have tried to recall as much as I can but it is patchy; the pain caused by remembering these events does not allow for total, indexically meaningful accuracy. According to Clough:

- In the last years of the twentieth century, critical theory came to focus on trauma, loss and melancholy...[I]n taking up trauma, critical theory was able to transition...to new forms of history often presented at first in autobiographical experimental writings...[T]hese writings...call into question the truth of representation, the certainty of memory, if not the possibility of knowledge of the past...The experimental forms of writing that mean to capture trauma often present the subject in blanks, hesitations – a topographic formulation of forgetting, loss, uncertainty, disavowal, and defensiveness...[T]rauma makes the past and the future meet without there being a present. The future is collapsed into the past as the past overwhelms the present. (5-7)

The difficulty therefore in writing about trauma means that these issues dictate not only the tone and style of the writing but also the representation of subjective engagement. This in turn reaches out to black metal because trauma, loss and melancholy, as thematics function as metanarrative arcs that pierce the heart of the genre and its aesthetics. Nicola Masciandro suggests that the 'thrown conceptual space of black metal, [...] is concerned with expressing the deepest and self-dissolving relations between things, the abyssic proximities between and within entities, intimate links to the non-relatable, the fact that one is' (90-91). Autoethnography and black metal performance act as conduits, a cannonade that uses melancholy, loss and trauma as alchemical compounds to purge the subjective and acknowledge the fact that one is. The subjective becomes the *denigrata cervorum*, the blackened he/art of being.

As a survivor of domestic abuse, trauma and murder, being believed by others was initially crucial; attempting to convey that trauma, loss and melancholy through language was almost impossible, as Gilroy suggests, '[...] words were never enough to communicate the unsayable' (37). The necessity to find a medium that represented my subjective engagement with trauma became more important than getting others to believe my story. I found that my black metal performance gave me solace in a way that other-belief did not. I discovered that

the longer one deals with a life beyond trauma, one begins to question the significance of that other-belief. This is because searching for that sense of understanding is not always forthcoming, some do not believe you, wish to understand or empathise, others take it upon themselves to try and fix the past. All of these processes are redundant. However, where I do think the trauma becomes valuable is what one chooses to do with it. It will, if you let it, squat in the core of yourself, silently dictating your thoughts and actions, manipulating the ways in which you interact with your own subjectivity, other people and wider culture. In other words, it will make you rot from the inside out. I made the decision to use that rot for creative purposes and in turn, heal myself in the process. My autoethnography facilitates a process of using black metal as a cathartic model for expurgation and sacrifice.

### ➤ **Autoethnography as Praxis**

There are some issues with autoethnography that require acknowledgement. Firstly, there is the problem of 'I' as the bearer of meaning, the performative first person pronoun. When I say these words, they are immediately invested with a particular ideological and psychological position, in other words, they are not objective. Critically identifying the subject in the text by applying 'I' engages in the assumption that an objective reality is somehow being circumvented or distorted. If we step back from autoethnography for a moment and consider ethnomethodology as a meta-model, recognising and identifying objective reality can often mean a problematic engagement. Stanley and Wise suggest:

- While recognising that objective social reality exists, at the same time ethnomethodology suggests that what this 'objective reality' is will be contextually grounded and specific. It won't be something that is objectively true for all people at all times, but is instead the result of specific sets of encounters, events, behaviours. So it recognises that many competing objective realities coexist and that we all of us [...] have methods for producing accounts-held-in-common-between-us. (142)

As the models of ethnomethodology and autoethnography firmly place the importance of 'I' at the heart of the analysis, holding to an objective reality as an analytical default position is unnecessary. What is true for one person is not necessarily true for another and this acknowledgement is valuable to those writing about trauma because it signifies the importance of a person's ability to articulate their story. The power differentials that normatively place the objective in the dominant position within objective social reality become transferred in autoethnographic research to the subjective, conferring the dominant position onto it. This means that one person's narrative is in a position to be believed, rather than picked apart and analysed by others who hold to that objective reality axiom.

### ➤ **The Way that Grief Functions: Mourning as Living**

It is not a destination. It is not something to get over. It is not a disease. It is a process and you can't rush it, you can't ignore it; you must live it and live with it. It is a crushing responsibility to remember details, details, details. It is nightmare after nightmare, it's crying whilst you sleep, that lovers would tell me about the following morning, it is depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, it is the most devastating sense of loss, the call to the void. Judith Herman states:

- [...] the survivor tells her story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that

it can be integrated into the survivor's life story [...] [In] describing normal memory as 'the action of telling a story', traumatic memory by contrast, is wordless and static [...] a reconciliation with repressed material which is coming to expression through symptoms, [and] at the same time, place is found for a certain tolerance for the state of being 'ill'. (175-176)

The conflation of mourning with illness is a problem. I do not think that the grieving process can be fixed with the same medical or psychoanalytic procedures allocated for the treatment of illness, by which I mean those who experience mental health issues outside the frame of mourning. Grief is specific to and of itself. Anti-depressants only block and hide very necessary processes that you must go through. Tablets may help for a time but they do not alleviate grief, they only obfuscate it. As soon as you stop taking them, grief returns in huge, overwhelming dark swathes and it became necessary for me to find an effective grief management system that did not rely on medication.

My desire to play extreme music had also reached a tipping point and so the trauma and my own music performance and composition began to coalesce. Denigrata was formed and developed into an experimental, avant-garde black metal collective. The vocals are screamed with backing vocals that are roared and operatic respectively. A dialogical space for expression began to evolve through the birth of Denigrata.

I perform as Denigrata Herself, a representation of parts of me that facilitate access to my trauma in order to purge them on stage. It has become increasingly important to locate a specified locus to put the trauma in that incorporates interiorities and exteriorities simultaneously, providing structured access when I choose it. Denigrata Herself has become a dialogical construct that houses my subjective experience of trauma and functions as a vessel for expurgation. The performing body, my body becomes a site therefore, for black metal performance and catharsis. Self-referentiality and consubstantiation between the negativity of trauma (subjective) and the perceived negativity of black metal (objective) mulches down into a monolithic misunderstanding of what black metal performance can be; it does not have to be atrophic, it can be uplifting.

Masciandaro suggests that 'the negativity of deixis...resolves to a deeper auto-deixis, its pointing to itself' (5) which ties autoethnography to my black metal performance. The need to 'point at itself' demonstrates a need for the performative, meaning-bearer 'I' to be heard, for it to scream out its self-referentiality, to howl its existence into the abyss; its deitic context the wailing harsh vistas of black metal timbres. Yet this functions differently to telling someone face to face about the trauma. That for me, is too personal, I feel too vulnerable. Screaming the pain out on stage, and writing about it autoethnographically, I feel the exact opposite. Instead I feel ignited by the flames of passion as I push the trauma out through my own choice of writing and musical performance. I am able to regain control. By taking something I hate (trauma) and pushing it through something I love (black metal), recategorises the trauma, it re-encodes it as a source for inspiration, rather than a source for emotional collapse. The physical act of screaming, as a singular performative component, allows my trauma a voice. It is a vicious, enraged scream that with every cry vomits forth moments of hurt, pain and humiliation and in so doing, I reclaim my subjectivity, I take ownership. It is mine. I feel the blood hammering through my veins, the rush of air flooding me between verses, my diaphragm pushing the scream out until, by the end of the song, I am

physically empty; I am nothingness. My performance body is every singular part as its whole, all working together to let loose this other-worldly, pained unsound (Thacker 179). The blood, breath and sweat, the calluses on my fingers from the guitar, the actual act of doing, facilitates the extreme shift from victim to survivor, from passive signified object to active signifying subject. My performing body 'constitutes its own interpretive presence. It is the raw material of a critical cultural story' (Spry 18-19).

➤ **Catharsis**

*Vignette1*

*Epiphany- I take the stage, strap my guitar on and turn up the volume. The pulsing beat swells behind me and our first song bursts into its hammering blast beats. I open my mouth to scream, staring out into the crowd. I am filled with fire, the howl erupts from my soul and I know I am healing as I play. My fingers surge with electricity across the fretboard and I give myself over completely to the music. For that moment, I am no longer me. I am transformed.*

➤ *Vignette2*

*Epiphany - I am alone in the room. The mic and pop shield in front of me with the headphones balanced on one ear. A click, 'are you ready? Four count in'...one, two, three, four...my voice explodes and fills the space with an acrid, acid scream and I can't believe it is me. I am making that noise and I am overflowing with cause and clarity. I am Denigrata Herself.*

➤ *Vignette 3*

*Epiphany - We all stride into the water, the coldness washing our thighs as the photographer gets us into position. The leaves of the willow bow to grace our heads as we stand, affixed, amongst the liquor of nature. The shutter fires off rapid hits as I lean forward, my hands plunged into the icy depths, ready to spring forth on command. I have the strength of my band with me. I am home.*

This is my story and it is not the end.

➤ Thank you for listening – show last pic slide