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From Solitary to Solidarity:
Approaching Ashley Smith through Performance Epistemology

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Keeping Secrets

The Latin root for the word 'secret' means to segregate, to remove from understanding. In 2003, fifteen-year-old Ashley Smith was incarcerated for a minor offence at the New Brunswick Youth Centre, where she spent 27 of 36 months in solitary confinement. Locked in segregation for repeated misdemeanors, she continued to misbehave, and the response of those overseeing her punishment was to repeatedly react in the same way: more solitary confinement. At eighteen, she was transferred to the adult prison system, where the apparent lack of understanding of how to deal with her mental illness meant she was moved between 9 different prisons, in 5 different provinces, 17 times, in less than a year. In October 2007, Ashley was brought to Waterloo Region, and on October 19, inside her solitary confinement cell at the Grand Valley Institution for Women, she died by self-strangulation using a cloth ligature – while prison guards allegedly watched, failing to intervene in time to rescue her. It would take 6 years, thousands of media reports, one lawsuit, two federal inquests, and millions of dollars in legal fees to finally conclude that the events of this night were a homicide. But beyond this provisional conclusion, there is much about this story of segregation, misunderstanding and secrets that has not been revealed; it is the part of this story that exists in all who suffer from mental illness, who live and work in plain sight among us, but whose condition is a well guarded secret which inadvertently contributes to the misunderstanding of mental illness in our society.

In this paper, I want to examine how a multi-faceted project entitled *From Solitary to Solidarity: Unraveling the Ligatures of Ashley Smith* worked toward addressing the lack of understanding – indeed the segregation – of people living with mental illness, within the Canadian prison system as well as in other institutions in our society, and in particular, the University of Waterloo, where I work. In the creation of a multi-media performance, interactive exhibit, and public symposium, the project had ambitious collaborative goals; it attempted to create dialogue between different disciplines, areas of research, and therapeutic practice at the University of Waterloo, and in the Waterloo Region, who share a concern about what happened to Ashley Smith. I want to consider the successes and failures of the project as a form of transdisciplinary performance epistemology, a way of generating meaning that has the potential in this case to offer a pan-institutional perspective on mental healthcare issues. Finally, I want to examine how the project has also revealed some dark secrets concerning mental health at the University of Waterloo, and how we have learned to have a public conversation about the management of mental illness within our own walls.

Wounds, Witnesses, and a Way Forward: Devising an Autoethnographic Performance

Often, at the origin of a creative path, there is a *wound*.

Eugenio Barba

Ashley Smith died in Kitchener, the city where I live; due to her incarceration and the misunderstanding surrounding her death, I didn't know about it until 2010, when journalist Hana Gartner, then with the CBC's *Fifth Estate* program, brought Ashley's story to my attention. The documentary included video segments of Ashley's mistreatment while incarcerated and her suicide, which Gartner had fought Canada Corrections to release. It was painful viewing, especially because I am a father and a teacher of teenagers. Gartner's two documentaries on the subject reveal a traumatic wound, and now, nearly four years since, we are only just beginning to appreciate the full reach of the mental illness and the systemic mismanagement and misunderstanding that brought about such a wound.

Since the fall term of 2011, I have asked students in a couple of my courses to watch the Gartner investigation and consider how it impacted them. It was difficult for them too. I expected this reaction, but what I didn't expect was the reality that most of them have an intimate relationship with mental illness. In the first class of 28 students, all of them had either a direct relationship with mental health management, or were close with someone who was coping with mental illness, and for the most part, keeping it secret. "If all [artistic] form is a face looking at us," to quote Nicolas Bourriaud, we wondered how the face of mental illness, known intimately by most of my students, might be developed into a dialogue and a performance.

The focus of one of these courses is to introduce students to the work of a professional dramaturge; each time I teach this course I try to make their research relevant and challenging by focusing the main project on a subject that is current, usually local, and difficult to understand. In the fall of 2011, the students in this class created casebooks and protocol presentations that developed their research into hypothetical production plans for a multimedia performance based on the incarceration and suicide of Ashley Smith; the research foci included subjects such as the history of Corrections Canada, carcerality and society, the body of the prisoner, technology and death, as well as mental health and incarceration.

The work on this project continued with a second class that happened in the fall term of 2013. Entitled *Devised Theatre: The Roots and the Shadow of Performance*, the course offered a practical and theoretical introduction to devised theatre. For the purposes of this course, devised theatre was defined as performance creation from means and materials other than a play script. The course offered a practical examination of a variety of contemporary practitioners of devised theatre; while the context and approaches to creation of the artists studied differ, all were seen to challenge traditional notions of how identity, language, the body, and place are represented in performance.

In addition to introducing students to a variety of devising theatre practices, this course was a development lab for a multi-media performance that would become *From Solitary to Solidarity*. All reading, writing, research, and the development of practical exercises into performances done in the class became foundational material for this performance. At the end of the course, students had the choice of whether or not they wanted to continue working on the project in the winter term.

Why Devised Theatre?

This approach to theatre creation is particularly good at challenging conventional ways of creating theatre. Devised theatre can be generated from a variety of resources, from the body, to a particular location, or an object, to some music, film, video, or other stimulus. Often this freeing up of the creative process allows for a variety of other elements of performance to be questioned, evaluated, or re-examined. For example, notions of how identity, language, the body, and place are represented in performance are often key subjects of examination in devised theatre; so, considerations of the form of representation are given equal consideration to content. This was a particularly good creation approach for *From Solitary to Solidarity*: first, our knowledge of Ashley Smith was coming from a variety of compelling sources: video, televised media, social media, etc., so through practices of devising we could draw upon many of these, and used them as resources for creating the final performance. For example, in this process, we often reflected on the fact that our primary knowledge of Ashley Smith is through the Corrections Canada video. In the creation of this performance, I wanted to make sure our audience didn't forget this particular framing of our referent.

The process of creating a devised theatre is collaborative in a manner not often experienced in more conventional theatre creation models. Devising processes usually entail a more thorough exploration of the creative relationship between those creating the performance, and thus a deeper exploration of the particular dynamics, mechanics, effects and distinct ways of knowing that are generated by the dialogical exchange in this process, whether it is between artists, artists and non-artists, or artists and environments. Collaboration in this context involves the development of strategies to facilitate understanding and inspiration across cultures, expectations, traditional understandings and behaviours. This consciousness is then applied to the work in that we question the ways we operate with content that is foreign to us. We develop techniques to enable a greater sense of participation and opportunities for engagement, which hopefully generate new ways of relating to and talking about difference – particularly ways that resist reification, possession, appropriation, or nostalgia.

Throughout the creation of *From Solitary to Solidarity* students majoring in other disciplines with a shared interest in the Ashley Smith story were welcomed into the process; perspectives from Women's Studies, Legal Studies, and Social Development Studies were incorporated into the final performance. Ultimately, an approach to mental health called "the social model" was adopted, which, in addition to informing the content of our performance, had a significant impact on how we created an interactive exhibit and symposium (which unfortunately I don't have time to discuss here). Briefly, the social model approach to mental illness "redirects analysis from the individual to processes of social oppression, discrimination, and exclusion" (Mulvany 1), and this perspective allowed us to

focus on both the effects of the institutional treatment Ashley received during incarceration, alongside and in comparison to the effects of the institutional treatment received by students with mental illness at the University of Waterloo.

Finally, in collaboration with writer, Melanie Bennett, an artist-researcher with whom I have created a number of performances, I decided that her research expertise in autoethnography would bring an important critical lens and style to the project. Briefly, autoethnography offered the students an opportunity to contribute an autobiographical voice to Bennett's text, and further develop cultural comparisons between a university campus and a prison. Auto-ethnography has been described as a way of presenting a story through reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that transform the authorial 'I' to an existential 'we'. This approach seemed an effective way of examining how our multiple layers of experiencing mental health, through the context of Ashley's story, might connect us all.

Ideally, the collaborative process for creating such a performance is the beginning of developing tools to help build 'architectures' of co-reliance, trust, and respect between artists, and between the artists and the broader community. The performance (the outcome of this process) may allow collaborators to explore the ramifications of shared / multiple authorship; they may explore various ways to maintain and sustain what is necessary to keep collaboration engaged, while allowing all participants to develop strategies for critiquing the process. Finally, collaboration differs from collective creation, which has a long and proud tradition in Canadian theatre history. In my reading of this subject, collectivity is grounded on the desire for absolute communion, commonality and consensus. In contrast, collaboration is open to disagreement, conflict, contradiction and difference; the focus is negotiation and trust. Collaboration promotes a dynamic of reciprocal openness, a willingness to be affected. The goal of collaboration in my work is to develop dialogical strategies and promote dialogical processes.

Performance Epistemology

David George posits an approach to examining the meaning of performance through a phenomenological perspective. His performance epistemology is useful here because, in keeping with the premise of this project, which was to redirect the context of mental health analysis from the individual to the institution, he offers "a new way of looking at known phenomena with different ways of responding to them, experiencing them and thinking about them" (George 22). Drawing on Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, he defines phenomenology in the following way: "Phenomenology [...] recognizes that we all construct and live in a variety of different realities, each one defined by certain conventions and specific cognitive operations and assumptions" (George 17).

For George, performance is distinguished as

an ontological-epistemological system by a set of characteristics and experiences which reverse the generalizing and immobilizing metaphysics of language in favour of a retemporalization and reparticularization of experience, and a common pattern of doubling – time, space, and person (George 22).

For instance, while a set in a theatre may be seen as representing a place described in a text, an object in a performance is no more or less than what it generates as possibilities of signification. It is not just a representation of anything else; it is a collection of properties, qualities, a condensed node of semiosis... A performer [or object, or image ...] is only ever a bundle of temporary and ever-changing attributes represented through performance activity (George 22). In contemporary performance, George notes,

the spectators may be deprived of narrative and hence of narrative hypotheses, they may also be deprived of characters and have only the performer to follow. The traditional task of 'making sense' is then replaced by unique experiences, which are both cognitive operations and forms of emotion (George 23).

George reminds us that the etymological origin of the word 'experience' is to 'put to the test', experience is experiment, so in this sense a performance epistemology transforms an experience of performance in theatre to less a matter of meaning from representation and more an experience of semiosis: an experiment in conceiving alternatives.

In *From Solitary to Solidarity*, our devising process manifested a semiosis toward conceiving alternative realities in three significant ways, using socks, origin stories (auto-ethnography), and video. First, we began with socks because in our research we learned that Ashley would create ligatures to strangle herself from all manner of clothing, including socks. Early in the rehearsal process, I asked the cast to create physical scores that would appear at the beginning of the performance, then return occasionally throughout the performance as a kind of choreography of self-harm, and finally as manifestations of each performer as they were tied together near the performance's end, in a sort of 'ties that bind' gesture that was seen to break the isolation – or segregation – of each individual's suicidal ideation. The socks held multiple meanings: the performance begins with the performers wearing the socks, seated among the audience; as a soundscape of media coverage commentary on Ashley Smith is heard in the theatre and builds in volume and intensity, each performer takes off the sock (or socks) and begins a physical score of repeated, obsessive, agitated movement. During this process, each sock was often broken down into the kind of fibrous material that Ashley would tie around her neck; each performer had a unique choreography of obsessive gestures with his or her sock, and ultimately each sock was worn down into a ligature distinct to the performer who made it. At the end of this process, all of the performers are wearing identical suicide gowns, but each has his or her different approach to self-harm, using a self-styled ligature; here the audience experiences impressions of attempted suicide on display that are real but not realistic.

The second strategy, which is grounded in the autoethnographic approach to the creation of the text, includes the various ways in which Melanie Bennett, the project's writer, wove texts written by the student performers into the material she wrote based mostly on extensive research on Ashley, including her origins, her history of incarceration, her death, the inquiry into her death, and the many ways the media framed the above for public consumption. Norman K. Denzin, whose approach to autoethnography is often termed "experiential texts," recognizes that our multiple layers of experience connect us all, yet knowledge is subjective and deeply connected to the knower (Denzin, 2000 256). For Denzin, autoethnography turns

the “ethnographic gaze inward on the self, while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self experiences occur” (quoted in Mingé and Zimmerman 12). Based on performances created in the devised theatre class of fall 2013 and responses to well-framed questions that Bennett posed to the performers during that term, the text for *From Solitary to Solidarity* contained many layers of autoethnographic revelation that effectively connected the biography of the performers with Ashley’s story. For example, Bennett asked the performers to write texts about their origins; observations about their families, education, and where they grew up. These texts were then juxtaposed with what the media reported about Ashley, including all of the competing versions about her birth place, and early years growing up in Muncton, New Brunswick.

These origin texts were in part staged as ‘family portraits’, where the performers enact slow-moving tableau of each performer’s family, as he or she delivers this text from a ‘media cell’ the same size as a federal Corrections solitary confinement cell, positioned upstage centre, made of semi-transparent mylar material, and in this case, illuminated by family archival photos and video projected on three sides of the cell. For most of the performers, this part of the text is a mostly humorous depiction, in text as well as digital and physical imagery, of their families. Similar to a game of charades, we laugh at the descriptions and depictions of each family, until one of students changes this routine and describes her relation to her family from the perspective of her mental illness. Her text alternates between manic and depressed portrayals until the rest of the students stop playing along with her, as if they have either lost interest or they are afraid of what she will do next. As the rest of the students pull away, and go back to their work of discovering information about Ashley, the student describing her family has an outburst in the media cell; she goes from description to crying:

It’s my fault.
 I’m ashamed of myself.
 My mom is the most beautiful woman in the world, and she must know everything.
 My dad is handsome and smart.
 I can’t get through the night without crying.
 I can’t get through the night.
 I am homesick.
 Take me back,
 hold onto me.
 I don’t want to hurt you.
 I love you. (Bennett et al 15)

During this text, the performer (Kandi Prosser) strips off most of her clothing in the media cell, as if she were a child misbehaving in her bedroom or a young offender being processed for entry into prison. Kandi’s text is followed by another unusual ‘family portrait’, as Michelle Kestle tells us about the relationship she shared with her mother, growing up. She does so while she changes Kandi into a suicide gown, similar to the one worn by Ashley for most of the last three years of her life. Michelle describes the loving, if over-controlling, behaviour of her Mom, while she appears to prepare Kandi for prison; she says: “My mom always asks me if I want a bun in my hair even though she’s awful at it I say yes anyway because I don’t want to hurt her feelings. She pulls my hair and my eyes water... but *Wheel of Fortune* is playing on television, so I focus on that instead (Bennett et al 15). Michelle then brings Kandi back to the table, centre stage, where the other performers,

who are essentially portraying themselves, appear to be researching the history of Ashley's life from numerous boxes filled with files and paper. Kandi, is one of the first students to change from her own clothes into a suicide gown, so visually she now sticks out, and this is aligned with the way she is treated differently by the other students, especially after her breakdown in the media cell, in the previous scene.

Empathy is obviously important in this project, but it is not simple, nor passive. In the above scene, the audience no doubt feels empathy toward the performers and their personal revelations; however in the experience of these texts, similar to the information revealed about Ashley, there is a challenge for us to confront our reactions to this type of testimonial 'reading' of both Ashley's story and the stories of these students; where instead of a consumptive focus being placed on Ashley or any one of these students, the audience become witnesses, wherein they are prompted to reconsider what they think they know about the material presented; what they think they know about mental illness, and about our prison system. The hope is that the audience may be challenged and perhaps changed through the process of experiencing the students' personal information alongside and juxtaposed with what the media has informed us about Ashley, and how these 'encounters' are the basis upon which we construct our 'truths' about people with mental illness.

The third strategy is video. Briefly, the use of video in *From Solitary to Solidarity* takes into account that the way we view things in the world is complicated. Technology makes viewing the lives of others a ubiquitous activity in our contemporary world, and the very proliferation of this viewing suggests to me that we are experiencing an ever-growing crisis about the truth of what we see. In the use of video, it was hoped by the project's scenographer and video designer, Paul Cegys (and myself) that both the form and content of the video would address the need to question this act of viewing, and to convey now more than ever that viewers are witnesses and therefore co-creators of 'truth'. With the role of witnessing comes the burden of responsibility.

To conclude this discussion of the performance part of the project, I want to address an important challenge to the vision of our audience in the way we asked them to collaborate as witnesses in the 'staging' of video. Writing about spectators of multimedia performance, Anna Fenemore reminds us, "the act of spectating is fundamentally a spatial act..." The creation of a media cell that provided a space for performers to 'inhabit' video imagery, instead of establishing a relationship that was *static*, *singular*, and *bodily suppressed*, our performance attempted to develop an experience of the performers (existing in video shot on campus or via live-feed cameras from other parts of the stage) that was replete with the possibilities of a spectatorial experience that was to be *affective*, and a *realisation* that is linked not just to the external visual surface of the media cell, but to the experience of the self and others as they perform live within this surface, in dialogue with the projected video. In particular, our approach to the use of video in this performance was an attempt to address that which is denied in the static, singular and symbolic performance of Ashley Smith in the media. Through a dramaturgical emphasis on the dialogical relationship between video and live performance within the surface of its projection, we attempted to dislodge spectatorial experience from a purely visual object into an arena of the spatial object. This is done through addressing the two types of visual experience described by Martin Heidegger. First, there is "epistemological vision" which features spectatorial distance, objectification, and a frontal point of view. Significantly these

all feature as major tactics of normative theatre practice in establishing a certain relationship to its spectator, but this frame of a relationship can also be seen in the way a viewer watches video on a screen. After Heidegger, Martin Jay asserts this epistemological vision to be the “assertoric gaze,” a way of looking that is “abstracted, monocular, inflexible, unmoving, rigid, ego-logical and exclusionary” (Jay 148). In contrast there is “ontological vision”, whose primary feature is embeddiness, where, as Jay articulates, “the viewer is situated within a visual field, not outside it” (Jay 148). This is the “alethic gaze”, which Jay argues is multiple, aware of its context, inclusionary, and dialogic. In the way we structured the presentation of the students, either live, via live feed, or as subjects within video behind the surface or in juxtaposition with Ashley’s video documentation, we wanted to immerse our audience into a visual field of witnessing, or relating as part of the dialogical context of the alethic visual field, which demands the responsibility of response.

In conclusion, I’ll say that even after working on this project with students for three terms, over three years, I am sure we have only just scratched the surface of challenging the stigma of mental illness on my campus and in my city. During this process, it was often said, ‘when do we ever have a public conversation about this subject?’ And, ‘why not?’ Moreover, why must a person feel they must not talk about how they are managing his or her mental health. I hope that *From Solitary to Solidarity* is a step in this direction, to a place where a student might say he or she was going to an appointment with a counselor as readily and easily as if he or she would say they were going to a dentist or to the gym for a workout. It’s clear to me now that this kind of understanding and openness is a process of collaboration. Collaboration happens across differences, it takes time and patience, it demands solidarity, which means a shared risk in addressing problems that can’t be solved solo. In my mind, this is precisely the way we may move forward in our pursuit of a better way to nurture mental health.

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