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Autoethnography as an Analytical Method

To approach my analysis, I will be conducting an autoethnographic study of three experiences where my practice of contortion exhibited examples of gender performativity that strayed from normative societal standards of masculinity. Reed-Danahay defines autoethnography as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” (Reed-Danahay 9). This method of analysis combines the intersections of “narrative anthropology”, where people who were formerly subjects of ethnography become the authors of studies of their own group, “ethnic autobiography” which re-centers the broader narrative towards members of ethnic minority groups, and “autobiographical ethnography” in which anthropologists interject personal experiences into ethnographic writing (Reed-Danahay 2).

Despite not specifically referring to the term autoethnography, Stanley Brandes introduces “anthropological autobiography” as a study where the researcher is the autobiographical subject (Brandes 189). While he highlights the importance of analyzing life and culture through the self, Brandes argues that the life of an individual has no influence on cultural phenomenon. Alternatively, Pratt describes autoethnographies as a critique that addresses the writer’s identification with an identification of the dominant culture to highlight how meaning and cultural importance is developed through relationships to power (Pratt 12).

Dorst situates autoethnography in the materials and objects created by people as an inscription and interpretation of culture that create representations of the self. He establishes a relationship between people and their objects that create self-documentations which blur the line between ethnography and autoethnography (Dorst). In my analysis, I situate self-reproductions

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of my practice of contortion through photos and videos as an example of Dorst's representation of the self.

Ultimately, I define autoethnography as an analytical method that situates the self and self-documentations as a method and a text influenced within a social and cultural context. As I am analyzing personal experiences, this methodology will help me formulate a cohesive way to deconstruct my experience as a person who practices contortion and relay those experiences to my audience in a manner that resonates with them. Framing my experiences in an autoethnographic style will help emphasize the distinction between internal and external experiences of gender identity by highlighting how these conflicts and similarities interact with each other to illustrate the experience of gender as a social construct with physical implications. Therefore, I pose the question, to what extent does my practice of contortion as a masculine-presenting person influence my ability to perform masculinity?

Contortion and Gender

Jacqueline C. Ward conducts an ethnographic study on how the cultural perception of contortion as erotic influences the performance and experience of individual contemporary contortionists. While she hints at this notion of individual experience and acknowledges the gendered, social, and cultural expectation of identifying and being perceived as a contortionist, Ward does not examine how these experiences shape these individuals as people outside of their practice and theatrical performance. By conducting an autoethnography, my analysis questions, how does the intersection between the body as a medium for gender performativity and identity as an incorporeal system create a perception of an individual that becomes comprehensible to the rest of society?

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Regarding the prospect of a comprehensible perception of gender, Judith Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender is constructed under a constantly shifting social, cultural context that intersects nature, language, and symbolism to create a performance of gender that is navigated on a daily basis (Butler 531). In their analysis of activist art that ties cultural perceptions to expressions of identity as a minority, Graham and Koch conclude that the performances of identity within these artists works portray empowering examples of existing as a minority, whose performance manifests in reality through the pursuit of a "decolonized future and narrations where Black identity has become part of the 'norm' without losing a specific political significance" (Graham Stacie CC 211). Additionally, Spiegel's analysis of circus places it as ethico-aesthetic practice that uses rituals of embodiment to inspire a different mode of perception in its audience (Spiegel 51). This transformative process inspires an active self-realization in the bodies of both performers and audience members that reinforces this prospect of developing social and collective visions of the future.

Conveying Identity through the body

Shifting towards this process of using the body as a medium to illustrate the intangible notions of identity, Jackson defines the study of multisensory ethnography, which strives to answer questions informed by theories of the of the senses (Jackson 8). He suggests that establishing the relationship between sensory experiences and cultural identity might highlight how power is negotiated within contested spaces. Yet, he cautions researchers against use of the framework without alternative conceptual frameworks to effectively conceptualize the complex, subjective experiences of the body in relation to the wider social world. My analysis uses both corporeal and in-corporeal methods of analysis to deconstruct the intersectional relationship between culture and the body as a medium for the perception of and contribution to culture.

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As a queer, biracial person existing in both Western, American and East-African positionalities, my analysis of contortion as a subversive performance of masculinity would suffer without an emphasis on the transnational influence of my gendered and sexual identity. Asante proposes the operation of a “queer African eros” that merges the material concerns of African feminists and queer individuals through a lens that examines the cultural influence of a colonial heteropatriarchy (Asante 113). This institution thrives by arguing that discussions surrounding feminist issues erase African culture, prompting a panic within many parts of Africa that incite people to double-down on the standards established by the colonial heteropatriarchy.

Through his construction of a queer African eros, Asante identifies how power relations constitute the social location of people for political consequences. This creates a “site of un/belonging” that shapes how individuals in “Othered” groups see the world and their place in it. By examining the intersections of colonization and the heteropatriarchy my analysis questions how cultural context shape our ability to understand the manipulation of bodies as a form of identity expression.

In analyzing a performance artist that uses her body to critique the stereotypes that exclude yet objectify women in the realm of traditional art, Delpeux examines how the historical and political contexts of performance artists shape the strategies they use to disrupt the art world and broader society (Delpeux 233). She proposes that by subjecting their bodies to the realm of art to convey societal issues, artists create an “environmental body”, one that is no longer subject to the scrutiny of dominant culture as it produces its own environment to serve as a revolutionary virtuality that contradicts dominant culture through the process of acquiring agency. This process invokes Ward’s suggestion that if contortionists believe their performance is art, then it is art regardless of the audience’s interpretation. Ward determines that contortionists manage the

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discomfort of unwanted sexualization through a belief in the power of their self presentation and a rejection of responsibility that places the eroticization of contortion in the hands of the audience.

While both Delpoux and Ward believe in the agency of a performance artist to convey their different themes, Delpoux suggests that performance provides a medium to integrate the audience into a shared social space where alternative ideas can be acknowledged and redistributed. Alternatively, Ward argues that performers create a layer between themselves and the audience where the audience is invited to integrate into that space but has the agency to stay within their own social sphere of beliefs. My analysis more closely follows Delpoux's argument to emphasize how the performance of contortion has social influence for both the performer and the audience that exists both on and off the stage.

Intentionality and eroticization of the body

Although the practice and performance of contortion is not inherently sexual, it is often sexualized as an interpretive portrayal of eroticism (Toepfer 104, Wilson 7, Chisholm 423). Toepfer argues that practitioners of contortionism cannot escape the perception of overt sexualization as they exhibit disturbing expressions of erotic pleasure through the disruption of a "normal" threshold for pain contrasted with a repositioning of the acceptable juxtaposition of body parts. Contrarily, Chisholm argues against the assertion of an embodied, inescapable eroticization of contortion by citing the Western historical context of circus performers, who operated as liminal bodies of transgression and fascination. As nomads rejected from civil society, circus artists were said to embody all vices, yet they were respected as performers of desire amongst the high-ranking members of authority (Chisholm 417). Through this context,

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Chrisholm argues that the liminal nature of contortionist's bodies has been inscribed by the dominant culture and sustained into the modern day.

Wilson maintains a similar acknowledgement of the historical fascination and sexualization of flexible bodies but places the argument within the more contemporary era of 1970s burlesque culture. She examines how burlesque functions as a 'postfeminist' theatrical genre of dance that satirizes the objectification of women through the male gaze by navigating portrayals of attraction and desire with subversive portrayals of the dominant power structures of wealth and class (Wilson 12). By placing burlesque as a feminist performance, Wilson affirms the historical context illustrated by Chrisholm while returning to the notion of agency identified by Delpeux. Ward agrees with this process of intentional eroticization by proposing a variance in performance styles she refers to as the "spectrum of sexiness". She examines how a performer places themselves on this spectrum through an assessment of personal comfort level combined with some influence from the audience that they are performing for. My analysis maintains the historical context of eroticizing flexible bodies by highlighting how social and cultural factors influence my relationship to and performance of eroticism in contortion. However, I also aim to critique the cyclical nature of identification and perception in how audience responses shape my identification with eroticism and vice versa.

Invoking emotion in the visual disruption of normative flexibility

This discussion of flexibility and eroticism reveals a discourse surrounding what visual aspects of contortionism make it perceived as erotic. Fyfe and Law argue that a depiction of something is a material representation that becomes cemented in dominant culture by navigating hierarchies of difference (Fyfe and Law 1). This perspective argues that contortionists become identified as the social Other through their subversion of the dominant culture's understanding of

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normative flexibility practices. Regarding this process of perception, scholars examine representational theory as a process where concepts are identified through objects that are associated with those concepts in the dominant culture. Alternatively, the work of non-representational theory focuses perception in the bodily and sensory experiences that convey the symbolic meaning of objects. In Merriman's analysis of how space and choreography shape an audience's emotions towards a dance recital, he uses non-representational theory to establish how these aspects create a certain affect in the space that communicates emotions of positivity and inclusion (Merriman 428). My analysis uses non-representational theory as an analytical method to identify how my practice of contortion is symbolically gendered and eroticized.

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