

Dreadlocks as a Symbol of Resistance: Performance and Reflexivity

Tendai Mutukwa

Performance auto-ethnography, an interdisciplinary qualitative research praxis, combines auto-ethnography and performance studies as a system of enquiry. Auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to systematically describe and analyse personal experience, or autobiography, in order to understand a wider cultural context (Spry, 2001:707). Performance auto-ethnography takes the embodied form of narration and performance in front of an audience. It situates the socio-politically inscribed body, as well as emotion and poetics, as central sites of meaning-making. As such, performance ethnography as research method disrupts hegemonic modes of knowledge production, including colonial, white and male perspectives.

In this standpoint, I reflect on my own body as a site for resistance, through my choice over ten years ago to wear my hair in dreadlocks. I describe my family's responses to this hairstyle, and my strategy of re-enacting these familial scenes via performance ethnography as a form of reflexive research capable of rewriting my authority in the academy. In doing so, I suggest the value of moving 'everyday' personal struggles around the politics of embodiment into performance work which can incorporate audience feedback. I suggest the power of autoethnography as a method to counter the retelling of 'the master's narrative' in academic spaces.

The following account draws from personal events that took place in my life. I narrate the events as I remember them.

The politics of dreadlocks

In 2010, whilst completing a Master's in Dramatic Arts at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, a course I was taking in performance theory required students to create a performance presentation of their own choice.

I saw this as an opportunity to present, share and reflect on my experiences as a black woman wearing dreadlocks, in particular my family's initial reaction to my decision to wear the hairstyle. The final performance, which was a one-woman show, was presented to faculty members, fellow students and course examiners.

It was back in 2002 that I decided to wear my hair in dreadlocks, which remains my style to this day. I loved the idea of keeping my hair in its natural black and 'kinky' state. Black women's dress and fashion choices have psychological, social, political and economic meanings and consequences (Sika, 2014). However, I was not prepared for those that attended my choice of hairstyle. When I went home from university for a semester break with black, worm-like studs on my head, both of my parents were outraged as they had negative perceptions and beliefs about women with dreadlocks.

A struggle ensued between my parents and me, which was made worse by the fact that I was no longer living at home. My parents felt that I was rebelling against them and disregarding what they had taught me as 'a good Christian girl.' They queried what I would do with my hair when it was time to go to formal gatherings such as church, my graduation ceremony, and the job interviews that would soon follow. My father expressed concern about me smoking marijuana or converting to Rastafarianism. It seems that a lot of people do not understand the complexities of natural hair on black women; when they see dreadlocks they think of Bob Marley.

The tension over my hairstyle involved not only my parents but also other senior members of my extended family, who shared my parents' sentiments. The conflict was only resolved over time because of my determination to keep the style, as well as the pleasure that I experienced from resisting. Eventually, the hairstyle was accepted as part of my identity. But, in the meantime, I had become interested in exploring the connections between my family's mistrust and fear of my deadlocks, and the meanings of the style historically.

Dreadlocks, it seems, are particularly contentious. For instance, since 2005, the United States Army has restricted black hairstyles and banned women personnel from having dreadlocks. In 2014, the ban was extended to other black hairstyles like cornrows, braids and twists. This ban is seen as offensive by the African-American community, especially given that the policy described these hairstyles as unkempt and matted, (Abdullah, 2014; Byrd and Tharps, 2014). Critics of the policy argue that the rules are not the problem; the

problem is with such perceptions of natural black hair, which are of course racially biased.

Feminists consider the body a site for the creation of identity, and the bearer of multiple cultural signs. Dressing the body is an inherently political activity (Dogbe, 2003). Therefore, my choice to fashion myself through dreadlocks was a way of using my body to establish and signify my identity as a young, black African woman. But, for many, this process of emphasising my blackness signified rebellion. Fanon (1964) argues that what is deemed right, proper or correct to the coloniser often becomes right, proper, and correct to the colonised. Both of my parents experienced white rule first hand. Thus their identities are deeply rooted within a system of racial oppression, what Fanon (1964) terms the “colonised personality”. Therefore, it should not have been a surprise to me that they expressed what I would call ‘white sensibilities’ concerning my ‘proper’ embodiment. That said, it seems to me that it was as a sign of my independence and non-conformity that my dreadlocks may have been most offensive to my parents and other members of my family.

Performance beyond the everyday

This section of the article will take the reader through the final performance piece¹ created to explore my experience with my dreadlocks.

As the lights slowly fade in, I can be seen dressed in a long hooded gown. The hood hides my head and face, and only the shape of my body is visible to the audience. On stage left is an elevated black chair. ‘Dressed’ in a brown jacket, a long sleeved shirt and a matching tie, this chair represents my father. Next to it is another chair, representing my mother. This chair ‘wears’ a brown skirt. A hair-piece, tied down with a traditional African doek or head-cloth, protrudes from the back of the chair. Far down stage left is a clothes rail with lots of different kinds of clothes, hair-pieces and wigs on it. Some of the clothes are on hangers, others are strewn about. All over the floor lie different kinds of shoes. Three wooden crates are placed far upstage at equal intervals. These are also overflowing with clothes and hair-pieces. On all sides of the walls, and scattered on the floor, are pictures of different women in different hairstyles and clothes.

The light illuminates the stage, and my body starts moving but it soon becomes apparent that there are heavy chains holding down my left leg. I try to shake these chains off, only to realise that a thick rope is tied to my left

hand as well. I struggle more to free myself. The scene gradually turns violent until I manage to break free. I then remove the hooded gown and show myself to be wearing only green leaves, made of green cotton material. I begin looking for clothes and shoes to wear. I run through all the options in the boxes on the stage, looking for the right outfit for me. After I am dressed, I start trying out different wigs and hair pieces, all the while using the audience as my mirror. When I realise that I won't find the 'right' wig or hairpiece, I untie my hair and celebrate my dreadlocks in dance and song.

After this, I go behind the chair representing my father and imitate his voice:

"Eeh!!!, Tendai I will not allow such a hairstyle in this house. You won't bring shame to this family, an educated girl like you, degrading yourself, putting on such a shameful hairstyle. I will not allow Rastafarians to live in my house and smoke weed."

I move behind the second chair representing my mother and put on her voice:

"Tendai, listen to your father. My daughter, I can take you to the salon. You can have any hairstyle you want. Those dreadlocks do not suit you, lovie"

There is much struggle between my parents and me concerning my hairstyle. I ask the mirror: *'What's so wrong with the way I look? I love the way I look. I love my hair.'*

The audience, functioning as my mirror, is forced into an unplanned reaction. There are responses like: *'you look good'*; *'they look nice on you'*; *'stick to your choice'*; *'listen to your parents.'* With my hands in my hair, I break into song and dance and continue to celebrate my dreadlocks, my joy and energy rising as I resolve the issue – I keep the dreadlocks. With this spirit of celebration, the lights slowly fade out and I exit the stage.

After the performance, I sat down for a discussion with the audience. As Spry (2001) asserts, watching an auto-ethnographic performance forces members of an audience to deal directly with the history of the body on the stage, and in conjunction with the history of their own bodies. Women in the audience shared that they had had similar struggles with their parents in relation to their clothing and/or hair choices. I was surprised when some men stood up to recount similar experiences too, in which their fathers had denied them permission to get certain haircuts that they deemed for 'bad boys' and 'thugs.'

From this research experience, contrary to those who would refuse performance auto-ethnography a legitimate place in the academy for being too subjective and emotional, I would argue that the method is pedagogical and political. It brought about personal change and new awareness, not only for me, but for others who witnessed it. I would assert that any research that brings about “a change in understanding” (Bolton, 1979: 45) is scholarship with social significance, and contributes to knowledge. Auto-ethnographic performance can provide a space for the emancipation of the voice and body from hegemonic structures and discourses of academic knowledge production. It can also provide a space for *different* kinds of voices and bodies: in my work, concerned as it was with the politics of my dreadlocks, I placed my black African female body on to the academic stage, and through it created and celebrated new ways of knowing and resisting.

References

- Abdullah, Halimah. 2014. “Army’s Ban on Dreadlocks, Other Styles Seen as Offensive to Some African-Americans”. Available at <<http://www.edition.cnn.com/2014/04/08/politics/army-hairstyle-ban-debate>>.
- Bolton, Gavin. 1979. *Towards a Theory of Drama in Education*. London: Longman.
- Byrd, Ayana and Tharps, Lori I. 2014. “When Black Hair is Against the Rules”. Available at <<http://www.mobile.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/opinion/when-black-hair-is-against-the-rules.html>>.
- Dogbe, Mary, E. 2003. “Unraveled Yarns: Dress, Consumption and Women’s Bodies in Ghanaian Culture”, *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 7:3-4.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1964. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Sika, Varyanne. 2014. “Fashion for Feminists: How Fashion and Dress Shape Women’s Identities”. Available at <<http://www.osisa.org/buwa/regional/fashion-feminists-how-fashion-and-dress-shape-women-identities/http>>.
- Spry, Tami. 2001. “Performing Auto-ethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis”, *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(6): 706–732.