

ON THE ROCKS

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ABSTRACT

On the Rocks is a one-woman poetry-theatre hybrid project about a woman's quest for self-discovery. Mermaid, a landlocked prairie woman is shocked to learn that things aren't exactly as they seem when Grandmother, on her deathbed, reveals that her "legs aren't really legs." So, Mermaid ventures to Eastern Canada to uncover the secrets of her maternal history. Her travels lead her to the water, where she dives into a whole new world of knowing. Grandmother and the poetry of Adrienne Rich serve as guideposts for Mermaid as she uncovers the origin myths of mermaids from around the world. She discovers that her own experiences mirror those of the women in these folk-stories and of women today; Mermaid discovers that she is not alone in her experiences navigating sexual assault.

Using spoken word poetry, *On the Rocks* explores hybridity, bisexuality, trauma, healing, depression, myth, and maternal lineage. Settings vary, but the works primary locations feature the liminal spaces of shorelines. Using projections, shadow puppetry and live performance, *On the Rocks* creates a modern mythical world where Mermaid can finally discover her agency and embrace her lineage.

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I want to acknowledge that "she is a raw voice" from page 41-42 is a line borrowed from Margaret Atwood's poem "The Landlady." The singing portions of the final poem of the show on page 68 come from "Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life For Me)" by George Bruns and Xavier Atencio and from "The Mermaid" by Shel Silverstein on page 72-73.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I have long been fascinated by the intersections of spoken word or performance poetry, and theatre. Spoken word poetry is inherently antiestablishment and at times sits uneasily within academic contexts. However, there are many opportunities for the worlds of performance poetry and theatre to intersect. Writing *On the Rocks*, facilitated a further understanding of how theatre and spoken word poetry can connect and where they are inherently different. This project engages with performative and textual space as a way of honouring my maternal lineage; it also strives to deconstruct the social and cultural interpretations of my womanhood, silence and problematic constructions of women's resilience.

T. L. Cowan, in her Forward for the *Canadian Theatre Review* centered on spoken word poetry, writes: “[w]hat is the difference between acting and spoken-word performance? What do they have in common? In the call for papers for this issue, I defined spoken-word performance as ‘an umbrella term which may include text-based performances where the writer/performer is performing his/her own text’” (7). She goes on to problematize this definition because of the intricate relationship that theatre and spoken word have. Terminology is further complicated by Sheri-D Wilson's perspective: “there are very few individuals educated in the analysis or criticism of spoken-word poetry, and an actor would be more likely to understand what is happening in the text than a student of literature” (27). Cowan's statement resonates with me; in my experience, though most spoken word poetry is performed by the writer of the text, this is not always the case. I agree with Wilson because I have seen actors read and perform spoken word scores with great success.

How do these variables affect the writing of a performance piece like *On the Rocks*? I define this work as a theatre-poetry hybrid. “Hybridity is a cross between two separate races, plants or cultures. A hybrid is something that is mixed, and hybridity is simply mixture. Hybridity is not a new cultural or historical phenomenon” (Wikipedia). Mermaid does not belong fully anywhere and because of this, she pursues her quest in an effort to wrangle the hybridity manifested within her.

A roadblock between the academic literary community and the spoken word community, while lessening, still exists today. Kedrick James remarks that “[s]poken word lacks theorization, partly because it grew up in opposition to academic poetry and critical scholarship” (40). Cowan states it aptly: “[o]ne doesn't go to school to learn how to do spoken word” (8). Therefore, I face the question of how to study the writing and performance that fits best for my art within a context and tradition that has tried continuously to undermine the practice I am participating in. Hugh Hodges, when describing how to teach performance poetry remarks that “[w]e can't teach students performance poetry, but we can provide them the scholarly framework for its study, we can prepare them to analyze it on its own terms, and most important we can create situations where they can experience it” (108). For these reasons, the written score of *On the Rocks*, is not complete at this juncture, but rather a blueprint for a one-woman-spoken-word-show. By confining this work to a page, the aural and visual components of *On the Rocks* are under-represented. James clearly articulates my feelings when he states, “[a]s soon as spoken word goes silently into a book, it seems to lose its edge, becoming orderly, compromised, bag-on-its-head, Guantanamo worldview. Spoken word is

uncomfortable in secure pages, needing the gestural pace of TV cut-up light/soundscape” (40). I eventually see my work performed in the infrastructure of the theatre. Having said that, *On the Rocks*, at its core, is also poetry. Wilson identifies a considerable challenge with the genre of playwriting for spoken word poets: “it’s not theatre, because it’s non-linear” (27).

On the Rocks resisted linear composition; it is the story of a woman discovering that she is a mermaid as well as her forgotten maternal history. It is a coming-out narrative, a tale of self-emergence. More broadly, it is also the story of a wounded ecosystem. I could not connect these circular Venn-diagram-like themes in a linear plot. *On the Rocks* uses devices such as visual projections including other texts and images as signposts for the audience.

As indicated earlier, maternal lineage plays a central role in *On the Rocks*. Mermaid’s familial history, like all women living under patriarchy, has been erased. Rebecca Solnit describes this phenomenon distinctly:

I have a friend whose family tree has been traced back a thousand years, but no women exist on it. She just discovered that she herself did not exist, but her brothers did. Her mother did not exist, and nor did her father’s mother. Or her mother’s father. There were no grandmothers. Fathers have sons and grandsons and so the lineage goes, with the name passed on; the tree branches, and the longer it goes on the more people are missing: sisters, aunts, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, a vast population made to disappear on paper and in history. (70-71)

I have long been curious about mapping my maternal lineage. Both of my Grandfathers have spent substantial time tracing their lineage, which has made the lack of comparative knowledge I possess about my maternal ancestors starkly absent.

On the Rocks highlights the importance of knowledge passed through the maternal line, which is not without its challenges, as Solnit recognizes, “[e]very woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law” (78). In this way, Mermaid needs to tell her story out loud; her compulsion to speak, especially when breaking the fourth wall, speaks to her resistance to patriarchal ways of passing on familial knowledge. Understanding familial history can be messy, as is demonstrated in one of her conversation with Grandmother. Mermaid tries to push back against her family’s history of silence. In an effort to combat this, she receives lessons of strength passed on to her beyond direct verbal communication, as demonstrated through Mother’s cooking or Grandmother’s visit to the salon.

Related to the theme of suppressed maternal lineage is the culture of silence surrounding sexual assault. This has led to a society ripe with rape culture, where sexual assault is an epidemic. Judith Butler addresses this issue: “[v]iolence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way in which the human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, the way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another” (22). Butler’s description accurately characterizes Mermaid’s experiences throughout *On the Rocks* as she grapples with taking back the power that has been stolen from her. And although Mermaid is not immediately able to define her experience as rape, her need for

healing and resolution does not lessen; as Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, asks, “[d]oes the inability to call what happened to them “rape” mean that they escape the aftereffects of rape?” (166). My answer to this question is a resounding no. On her quest to discover identity, it becomes clear to mermaid that “[f]eminist Knowledge is an interactive process that brings out aspects of our existence, especially our own implication with power, that we had not noticed before” (Braidotti 13).

On the Rocks is inherently autobiographical. As Janet Rogers states, “[n]o good can come from poetry that is not rooted in individual truth and we all know truth ain’t always pretty” (254). As a woman involved in the Canadian spoken word community, I can confirm, based on my own experience, that many folks are uncomfortable with women performing poetry that isn’t pretty. During my first time competing in the Canadian Individual Poetry Slam in Vancouver in 2014, I was told not to dress to femininely, that a more androgynous presentation would reward me with higher competition scores. And, that poet was probably right; internalized misogyny permeates all communities and as a performer, I know that the audience will judge not only what I say and how I say it, but what I’m wearing. Helen Gregory describes how “[t]he presentation of a slam poem inevitably varies with each event, for instance. That is to say that the range of gestures and other body language, the variations in tone, pitch, and volume of voice through which the poet delivers her work, the clothes she wears, the props she might use, the way in which she is introduced, and, in turn, introduces her poem, the venue that houses the event, and the audience composition all work to make each slam (and poem) a unique experience” (90). Slam can be an intimidating scene. It is an old boy’s club, but this experience has led me to express my femininity more overtly while I’m on stage, to celebrate the feminine and demonstrate that femininity also means strength and competitive prowess. I aim, in my performances, to reclaim the feminine. Writing *On the Rocks* facilitated a similar reclamation.

Speaking to reclamation, Victor Turner, suggests that, “the performance characteristics of liminal phases and states often are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than their putting on and keeping on” (107). *On the Rocks* is a show about the liminal space, the shoreline. By giving voice in-between spaces, using hybrid modalities, an empowered performative space is made possible.

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DEDICATION

For mermaids everywhere.

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