

Running Head: RECLAIMING MY SISTER MEDUSA

Reclaiming my sister, Medusa:

A critical autoethnography about healing from sexual violence
through solidarity, doll-making, and mending myth

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Abstract

According to the poet Ovid, Medusa was a beautiful maiden, who was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Medusa called upon the goddess Athena for revenge, but, instead, Athena punished Medusa for defiling her temple, subjecting her to a terrible transformation. Her beautiful hair became poisonous serpents; her face so horrifying to behold it turned onlookers to stone. Some stories portray Medusa as *asking for it* or depict her as being *uppity*. Medusa, therefore, stands as a strong metaphor for the experiences of women who have survived sexual violence. This critical autoethnography presents my experience, along with 11 other women, finding community, voice, and courage with other survivors of sexual violence through community art, doll-making, and collectively reclaiming our sister, Medusa.

Keywords: sexual violence, doll-making, critical autoethnography, arts-based research, #metoo, creative nonfiction and fiction

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What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?

The world would split open.

Muriel Rukeyser

Many people contend that it does not pay to make over garments partially worn, hence the question, When is it... worthwhile to remodel a garment?

It is worthwhile to remodel a garment-

(a) When the amount of material is sufficient and in good condition.

The latter term indicates that the material may be reasonably expected to wear a considerable time longer...

(d) When the amount of time necessary to rip the old garment, renovate the material and construct another garment is not entirely out of proportion to its worth. (Hyde, 1923, p. 3)

Writing about one's life is both personal and public. To write about the self is to engage in a process of discovery, empowerment, and liberation. It can also be a risky process for an academic. Exposure has professional implications. As Barbara Jago (2002) notes, hiding becomes a pattern when scholars struggle within the highly stressful academic culture in which they live and work. This is especially acute for women. Aiston and Fo (2020) point to numerous micro-inequities and micropolitics that contribute to the subtle internal and external silencing of women academics. Disclosures of being a survivor of sexual violence can open one up to adverse employment actions or termination (Goldscheid, 2011) based on inaccurate stereotypes about the capacity to perform **the work** while navigating the personal cost of sexual violence. This adds cumulatively to the "credibility problem" women already face in academic contexts (Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

But making that writing public can achieve a power that transcends one individual self (Deleuze & Parnet, 1986). The #metoo movement is bringing into the spotlight patterns that aren't exactly news, but are overwhelming not spoken aloud. In making this personal writing

public, I use the approach of critical autoethnography, blending it with both creative nonfiction and fiction to tell this story.

There are many ways to enter a story. Thomas King (2003) cautions us that

once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world...

So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told..." (p. 10)

This story recounts my experiences with a group of 10 other women survivors as we make art and heal from sexual violence. It details an encounter with myth and an attempt to mend and rewrite / re-right a story let loose into the world long ago. As we shared the experiences that unraveled our lives, we also, in sitting together, collectively stitched, piece by piece, the fabric of a community by altering a frayed and threadbare myth. We doggedly determined that we are worth the time and effort it takes to mend.

Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a style of narrating, writing, researching and method that connects the personal to the cultural, social, and political by placing the self within a certain social context (Elligson, 2011). Critical autoethnographies "'give voice' to previously silenced and marginalized experiences, answer unexamined questions about the multiplicity of social identities, instigate discussions about and across difference, and explain the contradictory intersections of personal and cultural standpoints" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 15) in an effort to better understand and appreciate the interconnectedness of human experience. In addition, it challenges social injustices and promotes resistance and transformation (Adams, 2017). A characteristic of critical autoethnography that differentiates it from storytelling is the integration of theoretical frameworks for understanding how such stories "help us write into or become the change we seek in the world" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 228). I employ this method in order to highlight and emphasize the intersectionality of sexual violence

(Crenshaw, 1991). This telling exposes the longstanding cultural conceptions that rationalize sexual assault, yet draws attention to how women can come together to heal themselves through the creation of art/craft and community. Myths, and other cultural conventions, can be mended, remade and refashioned in order to reclaim what was stolen and lost.

Creative Nonfiction and Fiction as Research Practice

Creative nonfiction is a method of data representation that uses facts to tell a truthful story, but does so in a dramatic, interesting, and evocative way (Caulley, 2008). It utilizes literary techniques such as scene, dialogue, hyperbole, and description, allowing a personal point of view and voice to emerge (Gutkind, 2001). This technique goes beyond the mere reporting of facts; it delivers them in ways that move readers toward a deeper understanding, allowing them to discover underlying meaning (Cheney, 2001).

Aligned with this writing style is fiction-based research. This type of arts-based research utilizes the strength of fiction to connect with readers and portray the complexity of lived experience. It allows for details, nuance, specificity, contexts, and texture; activates empathy and self-reflection through relatable characters; and disrupts dominant ideologies (Leavy, 2015). This form attempts to achieve verisimilitude in the representation of human experience, i.e. the creation of a realistic, authentic, and life-like portrayal, which corresponds with the goal of qualitative social science research (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Fiction is particularly suited for telling stories about the possibility for constructing selves, enacting agency, and sharing social meanings (Banks, 2008). It injects humanness into stories about reclaiming identity (Leavy, 2015).

The following straddles the boundary between creative nonfiction and fiction-based research, reflecting a hybrid of the two- a *faction* (Haley, 1976), of sorts. It is written in the style of creative nonfiction in order to allow readers to vicariously participate in this world, and portrays truthfully the essential drift of the events as they happened (Barone, 2008).

I **am** a survivor of sexual violence.

I **did** participate in art making sessions **with other women who were also survivors**.

We **did** make dolls and **reclaim the myth of Medusa**.

The storytelling liberties of fiction serve to obscure enough detail to protect individual privacy. Conversations are recollected; situations compressed. The women portrayed in this story not only represent the women in the group, but also women I have met in the course of doing research on violence (Author & Other, 2002, 2008, 2011). Blurring these genres (Geertz, 1983) allows me to meld these two opposing forces (literal truth and the imaginal) into a productive dialectic (Barone, 2008). Therefore the truth/fiction binary is replaced with a complex conception of the act of reading as one in which an evocative tension between actuality, memory, and imagination may be experienced.

I want a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head.

(Bochner, 2000, p. 271)

Our Story

I vividly remember when we were going to make dolls. Charity¹ leaves early that day. She calls out before walking out the door of the studio, “Remember, don’t make her pretty, ’cause pretty’s got nothing to do with being raped.”

The Group

There is a group of women who have experienced various forms of sexual violence. They gather in Hana’s basement art studio once every two weeks to make art, to connect with each other, and to mend and restore themselves. The group has no explicit leader but is loosely facilitated by Hana. Everyone is considered an artist and the authority on her own work. As Pat Allen (2008) observes, “... the healing aspects of art making arise from the making and doing, the trying and failing, the experimenting and succeeding, alongside others” (p. 11). Art

¹ All names, other than my own, are pseudonyms.

is grounded in experience, and it is as much about the process of engagement as the artistic merit of the final product (Allen, 1995).

I have been invited to attend this group because of an art exhibition I am organizing at a local hospital and library about art making as a way to navigate adversity. I had been working on researching community art studios for about 4 years. I am tentatively groping my way (painfully and in insecure ways) towards an arts practice. And I am an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse, who has also researched its long-term impact on women's learning and development.

Research as me/search.

Hana thought, with the approval of the group, I might benefit from participating.

When I arrive at the studio, Hana immediately greets me by calling out, "Welcome!" A tall Black² woman, who I would later come to know as Charity, strides over to take my winter coat. In her musical East African accent, she says, "Hana told us you were coming." I begin to feel my nervousness dissipate.

Two of the four walls of the studio are a cacophony of color, covered from floor to ceiling... ceiling to floor with art making materials: paints, brushes, glue, pencils, and paper.

Is that a glitter pen?

Some of the material is clearly upcycled: fabric, yarn, magazines, dried flowers and grasses, shells and buttons. The women are seated around an old battered dining room table. Each is engaged in making art- some are painting while others are knitting or collaging. I sit down and smile. I choose to start by doing a collage. For me, it's the safest. As the afternoon wears

² I intentionally use lowercase for white and capitalize terms that refer to Black, Brown, Indigenous, or Racialized People. I do this to draw attention to the deeply politicized concept of whiteness, its dominance, and to decenter its influence. I am following this trend established by scholars such as Patel (2016), Bhattacharya (2019), and the editors of the journal *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education, and Society*.

on, we chat, sharing details about our lives- children, partners and pets, work, likes and dislikes. Since I am new, I think there is a tacit agreement to go slow that first day.

Over the next several weeks, I come to know them, and they come to know me. Conversation always happens over art making. Sometimes Hana introduces a technique like image transfer; otherwise, we are free to make whatever kind of art we want. Art and conversation become entwined to create a fabric of deep connection, caring, and intense strength.

I am going to introduce them to you through the doors of their stories of what brought them to this group, and how they want me to allow you to know them. I am trying to be careful with the stories I tell. I attempt to tread the treacherous middle ground between exposure and exploitation, avoiding trauma porn or further attempts at silencing and rendering their experiences invisible. Hana, an accomplished artist hosted the group. Though she herself did not have a history of sexual violence, she had had enough experiences of inappropriate touching to be empathetic.

- Charity was subjected to the *rape-her-straight* treatment common in her homeland for queer women. When she reported her rape to police, she was raped again. It is due to her indomitable spirit that she managed to emigrate to Canada 5 years ago, and she brought this spirit to every session of the group.
- Bronwyn, a white cis-gender woman was molested as a child by an uncle. When she told her parents, she was eighteen. They immediately believed her. However, this caused considerable friction within her extended family. Her mother did not speak to her brother for years, and the family blamed Bronwyn for “causing trouble.” There is a great deal of resonance between Bronwyn’s story and my own.
- Sophia, another white cis-gender woman who had emigrated from Eastern Europe as a young adult, was subjected to multiple assaults by family members, and was

repeatedly raped by a violent husband. When she went to her local priest for help, he told her that sex was a wifely duty. I think I gained at least 5 lbs eating the treats she would bring to share with group members.

- Magdela, a transgender woman who emigrated from Mexico, has experienced multiple sexual assaults, both in her home country and Canada. She was once told, “If you don't want to be raped, don't dress like a woman.” Magdela was, perhaps, one of the most generous women I have ever met.
- Vivienne, a pure laine³ Québécoise, was raped by an ex-boyfriend. She confided this to her best friend, who told her, “He just wants to get back with you. He must love you.” She decided to not tell anyone else, until she came to the group. Since English was not her first language, she struggled to express herself, but did so tenaciously.
- Lucy, a Racialized bisexual woman, was sexually assaulted as a young child by a babysitter. As she approached her preteens, she told her parents, who stopped the abuse, but never spoke of it... ever. After awhile, Lucy began to wonder if it really happened.
- Grace, the oldest woman in the group, rarely spoke. But there was a “flight-at-a-moments-notice” quality about her that suggested a long history of trauma.
- Rosa, a Black woman from Nova Scotia, whose ancestors fled Revolutionary America to promised freedom in Canada, was gang raped at a high school graduation party. Rosa was often the member who encouraged us to explore different art techniques. Like myself, she was a latecomer to art making, and wanted to make up for lost time.
- Gabriela, a graduate student originally from Columbia, was raped on the way home from school by a boy from a powerful family. She told her parents, who then confronted the family. They, in turn, insisted that it was Gabriela who had seduced

³ Pure laine literally meaning pure wool (translated as dyed-in-the-wool) refers to those whose ancestry is exclusively French-Canadian.

their son. Within three days, the story of *Gabriela the seducer* was all over the school.

She was 12 at the time. Gabriela was perhaps the most accomplished artist in the group.

- Jane, a fat woman, much like myself, was raped in high school. When she told her mother, she said, “Be glad the boys are paying attention to you.” Jane and I would often sit next to each other. I am not sure why...

Each of us experienced some form of negation from friends, family, or society: vilified, blamed, isolated. Though told here as a whole, in reality, these stories emerge in fits and starts as we make art together. Generally, as one woman begins to share her experience, others bear witness to her story and listen, murmuring understanding. There was something about using our hands in making that allow our words to flow. Sometime it triggers another story; sometimes we sit in silence, allowing the heaviness to seep into our bellies.

I can't remember the exact circumstances, but in response to Bronwyn's story of being labeled a troublemaker by her extended family, I am reminded of a painting I had seen of Medusa in the Louvre. I share her story from the painting with the group as one way of talking about my story.

Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous.

(King, 2003, p. 9)

About Medusa

As James (1957) notes, myths are collective representations, sacred stories that take shape mainly around events of high significance in order to bring them into direct relation with the existing physical, cultural, social, ethical and religious world, to stabilize the established order, to confirm accepted beliefs and customs, and to control behavior by means of supernatural sanctions. Within a Eurocentric culture, Medusa is a familiar figure from Greek

mythology. She was a monster, generally described as a winged human female with a hideous face and living snakes in place of hair.

But there is another story.

According to the poet Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 4.770), renowned for his faithful retelling of mythology, Medusa, with long silken hair, was the loveliest daughter of Phorcys. She was the focus of many suitors, but dedicated herself as a virgin in the temple of Athena. Poseidon, enamored by her beauty, desired to possess her. And when she spurned his advances, he raped her in the recesses of the temple. Medusa called upon the goddess for revenge; Athena was, after all, the goddess of war. But, although she was a “victim”, Athena punished Medusa for defiling her temple, subjecting her to an agonizing transformation. Her beautiful hair became venomous serpents and her face became so terrible to behold that the mere sight of it would turn onlookers to stone, rendering Medusa an outcast for eternity. To be isolated and alone, cast out from community, may be perhaps the worst part of the punishment. Some later versions (including a few contemporary children’s books) portray Medusa as *asking for it* since she boasts of her own beauty; other versions depict her as too pre-occupied with admiring her own sense of importance (in other words, *being uppity*). In any case, according to Ovid, she received a just and well-earned punishment.

This story strongly resonates with the group. Charity and Gabriela comment that their coming to Canada was a kind of self-imposed exile: Charity to escape further assaults, while Gabriela wanted to escape an un-repairable reputation within a machismo culture. Lucy is incensed. Her anger is palpable.

“Medusa is a powerful reminder that when... that **if** we tell, we will be transformed into monsters.”

I share that when my mother called out her brother-in-law for molesting me, I was immediately constructed as the liar, and isolated from interacting with my other female

cousins. Through our conversation, Medusa emerges as both a metaphor (Muncey, 2005) for our experience and a shared cultural artifact (Chang, 2008), an example of how myths shape and support societal norms.

I have a strong desire to further examine these reflection through art making. So do many of the other women. Hana suggests that we might want to explore these thoughts and feelings through doll-making.

Why Doll-Making?

Dolls appear in all cultures in all areas of the world (Feen-Calligan, McIntyre, & Sands-Goldstein, 2009). They are the world's oldest toys (Young, 1992), but were first used as sacred items in rituals. They have the power to soothe or provoke, comfort or unsettle. They are objects imbued with dual status: seen as powerful totems when used in spiritual practices or low status given their current gendered association with girls, play and childhood (LeVan, 2002). Dolls are objects of delight to some, and of anxiety for others, who see them as sinister. Doll-making has the transformative power to stir memories, stimulate the imagination, strengthen identity, and find solace (Feen-Calligan et al., 2009). I have always had an ambivalent relationship with dolls. Receiving them as gifts, but not really interested in playing with them, I was always suspicious of what was lurking beneath those smiling faces. It was partly this ambiguity of status and the power to evoke strong reactions that convinced me to use doll-making as a medium for exploration. Particularly for individuals who have complex trauma histories, doll-making can allow them to work intuitively and to bypass their customary cognitive processes. There are also forms of doll-making that are quite easy to do.

Making the Doll: Conversations about Sexual Violence and Women's Bodies

So Hana introduces a method of doll-making that involves no special skills, using pipe cleaners, scraps of fabric, and yarn held together by knotting or hot glue. This method is

powerful, not only because anyone can easily create a doll, but it also underscores the fact that sexual violence can happen to any one.

We start out by doing a test run of a small figure, to learn the basics of the technique.



Figure 1. My first attempt.

We then begin the ambitious project of crafting a doll on a larger scale. As we begin to create the frame of our dolls' bodies, we speak about our relationship (often adversarial) with our own bodies. Vivienne and Sophia both remark that their choice of loose clothing is based on masking their soft curves and the full roundness of their bodies. Embodiment is contrary to my default; for as long as I can remember, I have been more comfortable in my head, since my body has been the site of pain. So reclaiming a sense of body through making this doll is both difficult and revolutionary. In creating the body of Medusa, I become more in touch with my own body, my roundness, my muscles and sinews, my softness. I begin to embody

not what happened then, but how I am now. As Spry (2011) notes, this doll body is assisting epistemology (where my physical body has failed) rather than enacting it. Embodied knowledge is being constructed through performance, but my doll was doing the performing.

In thinking about the muscles and skin of the doll, our conversations drift to the violence perpetrated on Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous bodies, as well as those that resemble my own. But I am not content to only signifying bodies as sites of brutality. They are places where strength and courage are found- strength and courage that I witness in these women, and in myself. So I add a core of copper wire around the pipe cleaner bones.

Jane Bennett (2010) talks about “thing-power”- that things do stuff, make a difference, and “become the decisive force catalyzing an event” (p.9). This doll thing is creating linkages and connections between head and body. I *knew* about women’s resilience but I now feel this core of strength in my own bones. The act of creating the doll in the company of these women allow me to reflect on the bodies of all women subjected to sexual violence, but also to see / feel in my flesh the resilience and courage that characterize these women’s lives and relationships. The reflection (personal) and the collective conversation (social) is catalyzed by the creative construction of the doll.

I reflect as I systematically construct the doll. Magdela, Lucy, and Charity are reminders that sexual violence is not a heterosexual issue. In fact members of the LGBTQ2S+ community experience higher rates of sexual assault (CDC, 2010). I wind a rainbow band on one arm of my doll, the way one ties a ribbon on a finger to remember.

As we begin to construct the torsos of our dolls deciding on the size, we also begin to reflect on the size of our own bodies. Jane found it easier than I did to talk about her weight and her struggles. And I begin to wonder if the size of my body is to deliberately repel any unwanted advances like Medusa’s gaze. My weight is my crown of snakes.

Making the doll's hair generates considerable discussion. Hair, it seems, is a point of pride among many of us. Gabriela wants me to make it long and luxurious (much like her own hair). It is Rosa who digs up the dreadlocks yarn in multiple colors, but also greys. As I knot the yarn onto the frame I reflect about my own relationship to my hair. My hair is something that I feel that I had more control over: color, length, style. More than I felt control over my body. I had often been vain about my hair, that is, until menopause and it became grey.



Figure 2. Medusa doll: The bones and hair.

Perhaps the most intense and emotional discussions happen as we plan on how to transform our dolls into the Medusa of legend. As adamant as Charity was that the girl shouldn't be pretty (even though she is in the myth), the group begins to contest whether or not we should make her evil looking.

“She didn’t deserve her punishment.”

“She is actually like us.”

Sophia argues that transformed she should be beautiful.

“If we make her ugly, we are just buying into that crap about women,” snapped Magdela.

I didn’t know if I could, given my limited skills, create a beautiful Medusa, but I knit snakes using beautiful yarn.



Figure 3. The snakes.

And it is in this moment, which stretches out over several hours, that we reclaim Medusa as our sister.

“She is actually like us.”

Just as we repurpose the materials to make our dolls, we rematerialize our notions of Medusa and reconfigure our relationship to her, to ourselves, and to each other. We alter the myth into something that supports, strengthens, and heals us. We mend ourselves because the remodeling effort is in proportion to our worth.

As Fitzpatrick and Bell (2016) remark, “Things or matter have their own power that call a response from us” (p. 12). The dolls, in particular, call out. Susan Griffin notes that identity is “less an assertion of independence than an experience of interdependence” (1995, p. 91) and, therefore, “for each of us, as for every community, village, tribe, nation, the story we tell ourselves is crucial to who we are, who we are becoming” (p. 152).



Figure 4. Medusa reclaimed.

Conclusion

Trauma permanently changes us. It transforms us. There is no “back to the old me.” I am different now... full stop. Trauma can be disfiguring, much like Medusa’s transformation

into a hideous monster. Our self-perceptions after the events in our lives, often encouraged by others, were that

we deserved it

or were asking for it

or deserved no better

or were lying.

But grieving and healing are social. And art making gives life to the parts of ourselves that we often hide, or are scared to show. Medusa was isolated, but the women in the group and myself were not. We connected and were connected. We conversed kindly with one another as we worked on our dolls, and we helped each other. We tenderly spoke of and to our dolls. We carried them gently. We reached out and touched each other softly. All of these beautiful interactions and actions are ways in which we learn more about each other and about ourselves.

The Medusa dolls allow us to express our caring and compassionate qualities, which spilled further into our relationships with each other and ourselves. Doll-making helped us to connect with issues from childhood, with mothering, nurturing, and our identities as women.

And Love showed up in the most unexpected ways.

As Ron Pelias (2012) writes, “Joyful moments come with the presence of others, with faces turned to other faces, with connections that allow individual isolation refuge in the welcoming of another’s hand” (p. 163).

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