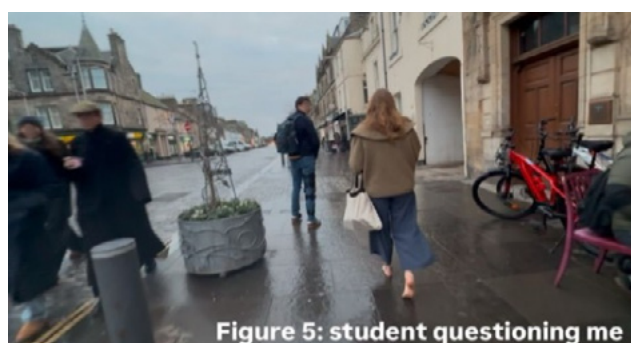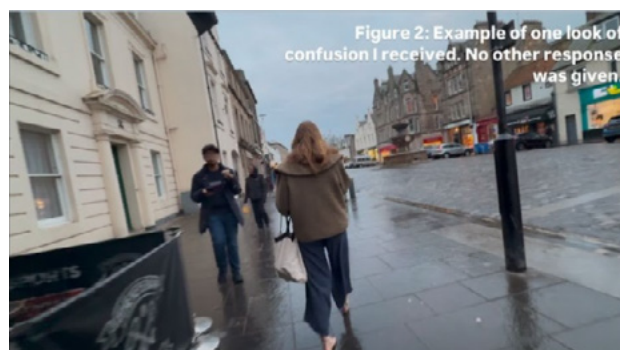# 3

Barefoot and brave: An autoethnography exploring performatiivity in St Andrews

•••• Tara Phillips ••••

ABSTRACT

In this paper, second year student, Tara Phillips explores embodied vulnerability by taking a bare-foot walk through St Andrews to expose prejudice and explore daily, unnoticed, social hierarchies. Inspired by William Pope L.'s 1979 Times Square crawl and Judith's Butlers theory of performativity, Phillips frames her action as symbolic and disruptive. The project, using the self as both research-er and subject, invited public reaction which revealed implicit biases inherited in everyday life.

Figure 1: Going unnoticed

Figure 2: Example of one look of confusion I received. No other response was given.

Figure 3: Walking past a homeless person

Figure 4: men at the pub

Figure 5: student questioning me

INSPIRATION

In 1979, a man named William Pope L. crawled through Times Square in a "performance piece in which he took to the streets in the name of, and in support for, those who lived upon them" (Chase 2006: 1). By doing so, he "became a visible boldly metaphor for the struggles that the homeless and disabled endure" (Chase 2006: 1). Inspired by Pope L., I sought to use my body as a source of data collection and example of performativity. In the artist's statement for "Bringing the Décarie to the Mountain," the title given to the performance, Pope L. stated that "when people achieve a certain status, they may feel they are more important than another person… But status is fleeting, we all begin on the same level with the same luck." When thinking about a reinterpretation of Pope L.'s crawl, I remembered a conversation I had with my grandfather many years ago before an interview: "In the morning, no matter who someone is, they put on their shoes on one foot at a time." Even the most formidable individuals are bound by the same basic human experience of putting on shoes. No matter the difference in status, power or wealth, we all share the routine of putting our shoes on every day, conferring a degree of physical and psychological protection and status upon the wearer. I therefore chose to walk through St Andrews barefoot in an attempt to disrupt the unnoticed hierarchies and privilege embedded in everyday actions that protect us from moments of vulnerability; by rejecting shoes I aimed to reject hierarchy. Pope L. gave up his verticality as a symbol of inverting traditional ideas of mobility and dominance. He said in an interview, "I did not see much difference between what I called the vertical folks of economic stability and the horizontal folks of economic lack" (Chase 2006: 2). I gave up my shoes as a symbol of voluntary vulnerability, exposing my body to discomfort as a way to engage with physical and psychological vulnerability.

PERFORMATIVITY

The act of walking around without shoes is performative since it is a physical action that defies social expectations, providing a message through my body rather than through formal arguments. In *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*, Judith Butler argues that "Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, form of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make" (Butler 2015: 8). Here, Butler shows how movements and physical expressions convey meanings through the body rather than through spoken words. Meaning is produced through more than just language, but through action as well. Actions which are tied to the particularities of different individuals, their lived experience, and the different communities they belong to.

Using St Andrews as my observational setting and site of inquiry, I considered how everyone I passed, myself included, is operating within a shared social framework that governs our behavior and social interaction. Because of this common system, bodies are already read and understood in relation to these pre-decided societal norms that categorize individuals. This affected my research because it highlighted the implicit prejudices I was acting within and ways my body was being interpreted within existing frameworks of assumptions. Reflecting on the experience, I was constantly reminded of the fact that "Autoethnographers [must] recognize the innumerable ways personal

experience influences the research process" (Ellis 2011: 274). I was being judged for not wearing shoes, but I was also conducting the experiment from a position of privilege and security as a young, English speaking, straight, white woman. I entered the field with my own bias and was likely perceived through a biased framework based on my appearance, presentation, and assumed privileges.

In the same text, Butler writes that, "The body politic is posited as a unity it can never be" (Butler 2015: 6), thus pointing to collectivity and homogeneity as a myth that erases the embodied complexities of individual experience. By removing my shoes, I therefore sought to visibly other myself and break with the presumptions of the campus "body politic"—breaking with the communal comfort and understanding of social order, and my own understanding of my stance within it. In reality, society is fragmented and does not fit within the ideal of unified society. My goal was to exploit and call attention to the tension that exists between the individual and the myth of social cohesion which "compels us to reconsider the restrictive ways 'the public sphere' has been uncritically posited by those who assume all access and right of appearance" (Butler 2015: 8). I hoped to use the discomfort felt by me and others as I disrupted our shared social expectations, drawing attention to the tension that exists between an individual and the body politic.

THE SELF AS A SOURCE OF DATA COLLECTION

"Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis 2011: 273).

Writing from the first-person perspective puts me in the position of both researched and researcher. I set out on my task, walking up and down Market Street on a rainy Sunday afternoon, with a degree of fear and trepidation. The town was grey, and its cobblestone streets were coated in water, reflecting the dim afternoon light. My first feeling was that of discomfort and vulnerability. I was insecure about what people would think and who would see me. Conscious of St Andrews as a field site, I anticipated running into people I knew and was doubtful about how they would react. Would anyone say something? Would I just be looked at funny? What if no one recognizes that this is an experiment and I'm mocked? In a town filled with a well-educated and affluent student body, there exist certain unspoken rules of social conformity: I tried to remind myself of the "impossibility of and lack of desire for master, universal narrative" (Ellis 2011: 274), accepting that my experience would be shaped by my own biases as well as those around me and that the goal with this performance was to point to and disrupt these same conventions.

Once this activity began, although my feelings of insecurity lingered, I felt my attitude shift. Unlike Pope L., who experienced doubt as a gateway to loneliness, (Chase 2006: 3), with each step, I began to feel more acceptance, leaning into my position of outsider and a stigmatized body. My feet were cold, and my body was tense. When Pope L. conducted his performance, he said, "I want to be a sieve through which pass the imaginations, fears, and anxieties of all those around me. On the other hand, I want to be a goad that disturbs the peace" (Chase 2006: 3). I too wanted to provoke a reaction but was weary about how I would handle the situation when

it arose. I was afraid of how others would react and thus was all the more surprised when the greatest reaction I received was that of indifference. Many people I passed were too caught up in their own world to even notice, walking with friends or talking on the phone (Figure 1). Many noticed and momentarily looked at me with confusion but were quickly distracted and went back to their lives (Figure 2), like in Figure 2. These responses made me reflect on how people engage with and learn to ignore disruptions within shared social spaces. As Pope L. explains, "There is no choice without its doubts and no doubts without its revelations" (Chase 2006: 4).

While walking barefoot, I finally began to understand that any interrogation is never simple and often reveals more than one intends. The doubt that I started with was not a negative emotion; it gave me the capacity to understand and gain insight into what it feels like to exist between self-consciousness and public perception. I passed three homeless people while walking, one of these interactions is detailed in Figure 3. Each one of them acknowledged my presence with a simple "hello" and didn't comment on my lack of shoes. The woman in Figure 3 was sitting on the floor and level with my feet, and she looked at my bare feet several times before looking back at me, suggesting recognition rather than curiosity. Others chose to question the abnormality. Figure 4 shows two men at the pub. As I walked by, they called out to me: "where are your shoes, young lady?" While in a different mindset I would have credited their reaction to the pints in their hands, I began to understand that they were expressing discomfort as their notions of correctness and social hierarchies were publicly disrupted. In Figure 5, a student and peer of mine walked past and, after choosing to turn around, asked, "What happened to your shoes?" When I explained that today I just chose to do something different, he laughed at the idea.

It was clear that the very notion of someone choosing to go barefoot outside in some way disrupted the social norms we belong to. Throughout the activity and the many hours since, I've had a chance to reflect on how what began as an experiment rooted in disruption and discomfort became an exercise in visibility that pushed me to challenge what I take note of in my everyday social experiences and why. Oftentimes, "autoethnography is criticized for either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful" (Ellis 2011: 283): I hope this study proves that embodied and highly personalized experiences can serve as the foundations for valid ethnographic research.

BERGER, J. (2003) Ways of seeing. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.

DABIRI, E. (2019) Don't touch my hair. London: Penguin Books.

DAVIS, K. (2003) Dubious equalities and embodied differences: Cultural studies on cosmetic surgery. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

DOUGLAS, M. (1970) Natural symbols: Explorations in cosmology. New York: Pantheon Books.

GILMAN, S. (1998) Creating beauty to cure the soul. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

LIEBELT, C. (2022) Beauty: What makes us dream, what haunts us. Feminist Anthropology 3: 206–213.

RAMŠAK, M. (2024) The anthropology of smell. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

REISCHER, E. & K.S. KOO (2004) The body beautiful: Symbolism and agency in the social world. Annual Review of Anthropology 33: 297–317.

WOLF, N. (1991) The beauty myth: How images of women are used against women. New York: William Morrow & Co.