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Indisposed to Write: Teaching a Visceral Poetics

Miriam Atkin

***Abstract:** This essay begins from the premise that acts of thinking and writing are shaped immanently by corporeal need. Accordingly, my aim is to sketch a vision of composition pedagogy that acknowledges the moves and modulations of the thinking body. The route I take to get there explores four works of critical prose that mobilize form and content toward a radical re-orientation of body-in-space and body-in-writing. These texts—by Eleni Stecopoulos, Robert Kocik, William James, and Eli Clare—are to varying degrees experimental, demonstrating a manner of textual difficulty that signals the visceral difficulty implied in any act of writing. What follows is a work of both institutional critique and disability studies, examining the ways in which illness and bodily discomfort become intimately intertwined with the locales that are most insistent on erasing all traces of them. In invoking the architecture of writing education—both the spatial design of the classroom and its systemic elision of somatic experience—and pointing to alternative forms, I mount a critique that is more imaginative than diagnostic, more creative than critical.*

The classroom signifies a nearly universal set of defining characteristics: an enclosed space with tables and chairs that provide clear sight lines between students' and teachers' eyes and mouths; a large chalkboard, whiteboard or screen operating as a shared reading surface. These structural elements and the activities they are designed to accommodate adhere to the illusion of a lightning fast and unimpeded circuit between language cognition and spoken or written response. Tables ensure that only the organs and extremities symbolically associated with thinking, listening, speaking, reading and writing see the light, which imagines the inhabitants of the room as living processors, opened outward and fully in step with the exchange that defines the predetermined block of time called class. And yet what the tableau strives to hide is predictably, throbblingly palpable—viscerally familiar to any of us who has ever sat in such a room. What we feel in our knees, chests, intestines or underarms when we can't quite get the meaning of another's utterance; or when all eyes are on us and we don't have the right thing ready to say; or when we're achy, congested, nauseated, overheated, hyperactive, fatigued, depressed or afraid and these states feel egregious because the classroom is for minds, not bodies; all of this plays into the scene of teaching and learning as forcefully as does the desire for new knowledge and intellectual discourse.

This largely unspoken role of the body is as fundamental to criticism and scholarship as it is to the operation of the classroom: all works of critical prose, whether consciously or not, voice the needs of a body in space. The writer coordinating thoughts on paper toward the construction of an argument will always contend with her own physical and emotional hurdles along the way, and they will determine the direction of the writing—either by frustrating it, delaying it, or fueling the vigor with which language is enlisted

to mask all traces of corporeal need. Reading and writing, learning and teaching—actions in a system of intellectual input/output that is exclusively human and undeniably physical—must move through the labyrinthine channels of the body regardless of how well those channels are functioning. My purpose here is to bring together examples of a compositional practice that treats the essay as well as the classroom— regardless of discipline or topic—as forms of attention to an unfolding visceral present. Such a practice will necessarily entail consideration of how the structures we inhabit press upon our bodies and our words. My project is a descriptive one, aiming to fill out a detailed picture of what a critical writing practice that attends to one's physical and psychical well-being might look like. With this goal in mind, I close-read the forms of somatic investigation that are undertaken in critical-theoretical texts by Eleni Stecopoulos, Robert Kocik, William James and Eli Clare. Questing for an alternative to the gospel of disembodiedness that is my academic inheritance, I use their texts to sketch out a model of critical writing that is self-attentive and self-actualized. Toward that end, my writing—like that of the thinkers I invoke—takes a scholarly approach to lived experience, treating introspection as a productive critical mode. In doing so, I summon my own history as a teacher and a student, edging toward a reimagination of the composition classroom in its symbolic resonance as well as in its lived reality.

Autoethnography in Real Time¹

In *Visceral Poetics*, a 2016 collection of essays, Eleni Stecopoulos reveals how illness becomes an interpretive and compositional process. In the following description of her symptoms, she describes a manic obsession with the significance of things, a condition in which all elements of her environment became objects to be read:

At times I felt exquisite pain over almost my entire body, which seemed impossible. My skin stung to the point where I assigned colors to the degrees of pain, a form of relief through translation.... Like my migratory and proliferating symptoms, I became increasingly disorganized and lost my ability to concentrate on any one task or idea. I had always been digressive, but now every detail had enormous significance; I was ruled by manic attention to synchronicity and a compulsion to connect everything with which I came into contact. At night I could not sleep; my mind's eye zoomed over everything I had read, every conversation, every symptom, every bit of self-mythology with which I was tantalized. The experience felt like mania, yet somehow fascinating and wondrous—at once a disease and the very sign of my power to find the way out of the labyrinth. My mania itself seemed to signify my ability to excavate its origin and decipher its true pattern, eventually triumphing over it and its effects on my body. (Stecopoulos 11)

Visceral Poetics is a meditation on the essay as form, originally composed as a doctoral dissertation which the author undertook during the onset of a chronic illness. It per-

1. The subheadings in this essay refer to titles and phrases from Stecopoulos's and Kocik's texts.

forms the sick body's resistance to working within the formulae of academic argumentation, yet it is also a positive project that simultaneously exercises and theorizes the possibility for a prose that attends to the whole body of its author, making use of the body's full range of feeling and motion.

Stecopoulos's writing alternates between different forms of attention, using autobiographical narrative (or autoethnographic, as Stecopoulos terms it), literary scholarship (with an extended focus on the poetics of Antonin Artaud and Paul Metcalf), and polemical engagement with theory (taking up works by Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, Eduard Glissant, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilles Deleuze, among others) to compose a self-reflective work of criticism that maintains a constant questioning of what criticism is and how it functions. Her project is framed as a response to the limitations of a US academic environment in which "the authority of literary criticism has typically been predicated on repressing that bodies, not minds, write" (Stecopoulos 59). Her attention is externally focused on the poets and philosophers with whom she feels a kinship, and internally focused on the bodily sensations that attend the writing act, discovering "*a link between language and pain*" (59). She finds pain in the effort to corral thought and feeling in a legible sentence, and disablement in the act of engaging with an intellectual tradition and thus entering a realm in which institutional metrics will be used to judge whether or not she's a deserving inheritor of that tradition. Her text thereby traces its own limitations in harnessing the body's resistance to textuality.

Visceral Poetics implements in a literary critical context the epistemologies engaged by the array of movement practices and healing traditions Stecopoulos sought in order to alleviate her illness. In her exploration of Ayurveda, kinesiology, Thought Field Therapy, electrotherapeutics and a host of other healing modalities—which she approached not as a true believer, but as a suffering person willing to try anything—Stecopoulos learned to exert the range of what her body knows through a willingness to make use of painful and allegedly pathological sensations:

...(R)ather than robbing people of their bodies, on the contrary, [illness] may be one of the only ways they can actually experience the poetics of their bodies. This can act as a kind of fieldwork, and is often present in such dialogic terms by the alternative healing community: one "slows down" and "listens to the body," for "your body is trying to tell you something." (48)

I appreciate the sacrilege of this, as I know from my own extended battle with sleep medicine practitioners, that conventional wisdom—as a reflection of Western biomedical practice—regards disease and discomfort to be at cross-purposes with the sufferer; anathema rather than intelligent, aberrant rather than endemic. Studies have correlated insomnia with diabetes, heart disease, stroke, dementia and a general decrease in life expectancy, and therefore the medical priority is to fix it, not to understand it. I accepted the logic of this as long as I continued to believe that the fix could work. When I eventually learned that mechanical interventions made the problem worse, not better, I began reading the emergence of my symptoms as plot twists in an ever-unfolding story. Any odd or unpredicted event added new layers to the plot, and I was riveted.

I want to think along with Stecopoulos about how to elaborate a kind of personalized, somatic literacy as the groundwork for critical writing. Interpreting moments

of visceral unrest against what I know of “feeling normal,” and studying the way my private pains interact with my daily external conditions is the kind of attention that medication will always shut down. And it’s the same practice I prohibit if I let a student believe that her way into the work of criticism and composition is excessive or ill-suited. Stecopoulos writes: “Whether body fluids or vocables, disease or phatic gestures—to restore the full body to any aesthetic performance is to restore process” (23). There is much value in attending to what *hurts* about the writing process, and, if teaching with a singular focus on fixing the difficulties, the teacher will encourage an excision of the body from the composition, and thus silence the very means by which writing may remain close to the actualities that language purports to reflect. The struggle to think—which will always boil down to a struggle against the body—has a role in writing just as the presentation of a thesis, evidence, and conclusion does. Writers and writing teachers may find that innovating ways to represent that struggle on the page, whether within the space of the essay or in corollary experimental-poetic practices, helps one accomplish a kind of truthfulness, immediacy, and accuracy in written expression that, paradoxically, will improve the soundness of a thesis, evidence, and conclusion. Just like her recognition that mania manifests a heightened interpretive faculty that can aid in resolving the manic episode, Stecopoulos suggests that poetics can work homeopathically, in line with medical models that see the articulation of an illness not as something to be suppressed but as indication that the body is working to fight something off. The itch, rash, spasm or sneeze that disrupts the illusory stasis of the healthy body is itself an expression and verification of the healthy body. Such visceral adjustments are not disruptions at all. They are part of how the body expresses itself as body, and also as text. The itch, rash, spasm and sneeze are integral to the work of the essay just as they belong to the interpretive work of recovery. To define what is a good argument based upon the achievement of an even procession—without any hiccoughs—from initial premise to final conclusion, is perhaps to ignore those interjections from outside that actually help verify the strength of what is said. Stecopoulos observes how the resonance of bodily processes within a text helps to tune it to material reality: “*Sometimes the stutter is the plot*. Artaud stammered as a child; he was affected by facial tremors. Sometimes the stutter is the phatic tuning that opens the channel to the other” (23). An essay that accommodates the body’s non-logical verbal expressions—its reflexes, adjustments and phatic gestures—honors the fullness of how discursive reasoning comes to be.

Let us regard writing as a treatment for the discomfort of needing to work something out, needing to know. Perhaps this need is experienced as grief or excitement: in what way can a text vocalize the heartache or arousal that accompanies the activity of coming-to-know? It is when the omissions demanded by convention sever one’s writing from the productive discomfort which originated it, that we end up with an essay that talks about the body without using it, or talks about failed systems without disrupting them, or talks about difference while endlessly producing more of the disabling same.

Sick Reading

When I’m unwell, I can grasp neither letter nor sentence because the edges hurt, so my gut tells me to move, albeit slowly. It tells me that grasping for the

figures that lie out of my reach only makes things worse, makes me despondent, useless, unfit. My body floats on, despite the hampering of critical acuity, of interpretive consistency, of memory. My skin, muscles and joints comprehend with extra-sensitivity—to touch, to temperature—and so I can take in more information than usual, which guides where I go next. Standing, undressing, eating, peeing—all of it staggers me, each act manifesting such a particular and palpable result that it becomes its own speaker, articulated. In this state my body finds many places to go, though I anticipate none of them. I'm neither efficient nor blundering. With my tender faculties, I'm always ingesting a new condition, which in turn stages another, and I inhabit each as a fully new person with little recollection of the last.

I wrote the above passage during a week-long bout of insomnia. Sleeplessness, for me, is what happens when something troubling in my unconscious wants out. It often strikes me as a mysterious affliction—an invasion, like a cancer—despite the fact that I've been studying the intricacies of how it works for the whole of my adult life. Over the years, I've come to the conclusion that it's a fitting symptomology for someone like me, a writer, whose self-worth rests upon intellectual alertness: the ever-present fear of losing my superpower causes me to lose my superpower. The dilemma is always heightened when the end goal of my writing is to display mastery of a discipline.

A sleepless night is like being sucked into a vortex, whirled about, and atomized into an abundance of stinging concerns, each so overwhelming that you forget yourself, and the darkness helps to blot out where you are, or the fact that you're anywhere at all. Emerging from it—watching the slow progression of dark to light and realizing that you might as well get out of bed now—is always an interesting feeling. I'll find myself glad it's over—glad I survived—and often too dazed and groggy to be anxious about facing a full day without having been renewed by sleep. The day has restored my sense of place, and the quiet sounds otherworldly. As I go about my morning, I attend to the needs of my body always as a being-who-reads, such that the little zings of discomfort—aching knees, tingling headache—produce their own forms of studying attention and shifting interpretive modes or *moods*. The hypersensitivity I experience during states of exhaustion is like a vivid, technicolor re-rendering of the ways my body normally responds to things in its environment. In a well-rested state, these responses will be dampened and will go unnoticed because my energized attention will have a greater reach and will busy itself elsewhere. Perhaps the states of bodily enervation offer up a productive interpretive mode that I wouldn't know of otherwise. Perhaps the “sick” reader, directed by the will of an unsettled body, is able easily to feel her way to meaning, while the “healthy” reader employs what she already knows, using precedent derived from training as means to a logical, conclusive interpretation. It is a mode of reading that opposes any *rationing* of information that would isolate which lines of thinking promise completion and allow one to digest experience in manageable bites.

And yet there is that brusque little word called *work*—so incessantly used and blurily defined among us artists and writers—that tunnels through the thickly undifferentiated time of sick reading and rears its head, calling for rationing, parceling, an efficient course. Whenever I find myself looking ahead at a stretch of days or weeks in which

I'll be at my desk trying to complete some scholarly project that has a deadline in the foreseeable future, I experience the procession of time in a very particular way. All of my feelings and states—whether awake or asleep, hungry or full, focused or scattered, strong or self-doubting, agile or hampered, dreamy or calculating—inevitably become a part of the writing experience, whether I want them to or not. Even when I am not reading or writing, I am hyper-aware of what feelings or states make me disinclined to do so, because the project looms as a general standard of measure by which I gauge the quality of my days. Somatic interruptions look like saboteurs, getting in the way of “good work,” and in bed at night I'll mull over what went wrong.

Holistic Criticism

I am sick with exit
to say what ° we are the world the
dismemberers those names
mortify my satisfaction

—Eleni Stecopoulos, *Armies of Compassion*

The word “poetics” in Stecopoulos's title says something about the way the dissertation itself speaks, and the particular sort of reflexive analysis it extends. It is not poetry, but one senses the process behind it as a poetic process above all else. Its fragmentary nature—with short sections stitched together within short chapters that bear titles like “The Pasticcio of Parole,” “Kontiki Acrobats” and “Of Teratology”—reveals the project's seams and gives it the feeling of something hewn and molded, assembled and reassembled. If I place it alongside Stecopoulos' poetry, the critical attentions of one and the formal attentions of the other bleed into each other.

In the poem above—excerpted from her 2010 collection—a self dis-integrated by chronic pain finds uncertain resolution in the shape of the word “I.” The dimension of self that feels the pain and the one that labors to speak it are such irreconcilably different animals that they can't figure out how to approach each other. And the sounds and forms of words seem to occur to the speaker upon prompting by an internal urgency whose communicative tactics defy reason. In a body with crossed wires and constricted channels, words arrive via unexpected pathways—whatever the psyche can innovate to satisfy a craving for representation. Likewise, in Stecopoulos's critical prose, writing moves between different modes in a dynamic demonstration of the struggle to corral thought and feeling in a legible form. This holistic criticism—active both in her poetry and her essays—tracks the body's resistance to logos-as-accounting, and tracks as well the compromise between body and word, to which the existence of the text testifies. It observes the way that one's physical state continually renews how the word works, in accordance with visceral need.

Genre works as a tool for diagnosis, a measure of ability. It creates its own rules and thus its own deficiencies. It is an equation that says what cadences, vocabulary, topics and sentiments will ring deficient or pathological in a given textual space. Against this, Stecopoulos offers her vision of a holistic criticism. Holistic criticism treats what a text expresses not as indication of that writing's genre or mappable type, but as one phase

in a continuous movement between wildly varied conditions. This flow is “the poem of how the sympathies and antipathies of fragments play between artifice and organism” (58). Holistic medicine treats the expression of discomfort or pain as one condition in a chain of intelligent somatic responses. It is not certain states that are healthy, but the acceptance of an undeniably evolving state, one that experiences both pleasure and pain. Likewise, both logical clarity and poetic opacity are instructive states of being within a written work. The health of the work is in the life of these conditions responding one to the other.

Thus, against a literary criticism “predicated on repressing that bodies, not minds, write” (59), holistic criticism “follows whatever radiates from a text” (60). In a self-directed challenge spoken in the contrarian voice of her internal critic, or perhaps of the disciplined theorist nauseated by the task of reading another’s sick body, Stecopoulos writes:

...why would you insist so much on the way writing pervades your body if writing did not signify for you disembodiment, solitude, distancing from other bodies...if writing criticism did not seem to distend your head as an overseeing parasite, feeding off every contact...I insist on it because the feeling of disembodiment can only be known viscerally; to be aware of, to be conscious of feeling disembodied is already a response to the habitus. Writing embodies disembodiment. (59)

The critical writing tradition has regularly chosen not to see what it already knows: that it is overwhelmed by its resistance to bodily states, and that the pressure they assert can be read behind its words. The critical writer inherits a demand for teleological clarity—a course charted by intention—which the essay must perform. But the complex intercommunication between neurological activity and environmental input that constitutes the thinking process out of which the essay is shaped is necessarily haphazard and multidirectional, even in the healthiest of states. When the writer has a coughing fit, a herniated disc, a broken heart, or performance anxiety, the disjunct between the linear argument and the body it belies will be all the wider. The integrity of the plot or course that holds together the well-argued critical intervention is always therefore volatile, still ringing from the cacophony that produced it. Alternatively, holistic criticism recognizes that organs, muscles, bones and skin speak loudly in both the poem intended to channel the body’s wishes and the essay that was composed to subdue its voice. The moment when illness or disablement disrupts the habitual functioning of the body or the easy formulation of a sentence, is a moment when new critical faculties enter the scene. Thus, for Stecopoulos, sickness provides paradoxically a critical “edge”: “*Hole, whole, heal...* I feared I would no longer be able to write if I were not divided, if I were “healthy”... there would no longer be any fissure or gap, no disturbance (no parasite) by which to mean, no jagged edge by which to enter. And what is an edge if not the critical, a pickaxe with which to choose?” (43).

In a 1965 essay on Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze makes a similar observation, noting that Nietzsche, having suffered years of disablement from a series of conditions including migraines, temporary blindness, diphtheria, dysentery and syphilis, “saw in illness a *point of view* on health; and in health a *point of view* on illness” (Deleuze 58). Nietzsche viewed the disruption that his various illnesses caused as an escape hatch from the unre-

flective complacency of equanimity and good health. Likewise, Stecopoulos models a critical writing that grants the body a place both within the fluctuations of pain and pleasure as realized in poetic word play, and within the negative presence of what the essay denies as it perpetuates our longstanding history of wise men bent over books, with “distended heads” like “overseeing parasites.” She sketches a “Theory as Vision” (Stecopoulos 40), one that actively looks beyond the text and at the body, which is theory’s resident elephant in the room. The struggle to incorporate the invisible body will give rise to its own set of pains and pleasures. Stecopoulos models how the essay can accommodate all of this.

In advocating for a writing that attends to the body of the writer, Stecopoulos makes a case for incorporating into the book what is spatially outside of it. The cerebral practice of criticism will be more truthful, she thinks, if the products of mind are recognized as products of a larger body, an organic system which ought to show itself within the composition. Moreover, the resources that lie outside of and should be folded into literary critical discourse include not just the body of the writer but neighboring disciplines and genres that speak and make meaning in different ways. Stecopoulos’s book and the dissertation from which it arose strive toward this form of maximal inclusivity, drawing content from both daily life and a multitude of texts, and incorporating formal strategies from a range of genres including poetry, autobiography and philosophy. Her approach to critical prose embraces a process that is poetic in nature, expanding language’s function beyond the performance of logical clarity, and reaching for playful, speculative, intuitive, surrealistic, or para-logical experiments with syntax and sound. This formal expansiveness is one way to address the problem of feeling *unfit* to write during states of diminished health. In grasping for other forms, Stecopoulos reaches toward alternate representational environments where her thinking might find a better fit. The combined pressure of discipline and enforced fitness is something *Visceral Poetics* consciously struggles against, and it is a topic to which her friend and occasional collaborator Robert Kocik devotes extended critical attention in his own book *Supple Science*. There he elaborates a project of “overcoming fitness,” an approach to creative and pedagogical work that seeks to resolve the apparent conflict between holism and genre.

Overcoming Fitness

Kocik’s writing is never easily categorizable, as his books encompass poems, essays, architectural plans, lecture transcripts, libretti, songs, drawings and other forms. Bookstores classify it as poetry, though no single form ever dominates his work. For him, the poem always has an immediate purpose, and the purpose should suggest the best form for its own articulation. This does more than simply re-affirm the writing teacher’s insistence on “knowing your audience”; it is a realization of poetics as a broad attention to all forms of making. The writer who listens broadly will inevitably happen upon subject matter that calls her to build an altar, seed a garden, plan a meeting or teach a class without ever putting a pen to paper, and any one of these would be an act of poetic composition. Kocik practices poetry as a general meditation on making; not a hard science or a soft science but a “sore” or “supple” one.

This supra-generic poetics recognizes genre-affiliation as a tool of empire and exclusion, partly to the disabling structures of society which poetic making is positioned to redress. "Overcoming Fitness," an essay first published in 2001 that appears in *Supple Science*, teases out the many ways in which educational, cultural and economic institutions originate both the categories of identification by which fitness is measured, and the fitness morality that punishes distinctive bodies and artworks as deficient. Fitness is a biased assessment tool that pre-determines which affect, voice, posture, gait, vocation, earning potential, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and language will fail to pass as normal. As the valorization of a "greater adaptedness over others in a common, tightly-knit niche" (Kocik 30), fitness pervades the everyday conditions that support our living. Labor—creative or otherwise—cannot be quantified and paid if it doesn't adapt to the qualifying habits of its proper niche or discipline. It is difficult to imagine a world where every possible category of affect, voice, posture, gait, vocation, earning potential, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and language does not already demand its own version of propriety. We are disciplined by genre because without it our work would become de-standardized and unintelligible. And the engineered spaces we inhabit dictate the shapes of our bodies just like the genres, fields, niches and disciplines dictate the shape of our work. Reproducing the instructions given by our conditions will always reproduce fitness and unfitness, ability and disability.

As writers and academics, we are all aware of this hindrance to our freedom of movement, and we try to circumvent it by including as topics of our scholarship those perspectives that have typically been ignored by our institutional disciplines. The establishment of women's studies, indigenous studies, African American studies, queer studies and disability studies departments attest to crucial efforts at expansion. At the same time, they are unable to circumvent fitness, because what they ultimately accomplish is a persuasive case for the fitness of what has otherwise been judged to be unfit. How do we overcome this?

The Non-Affinitive Bond

In a piece he wrote for a proposed anthology of essays on "poetics of disablement," Kocik brings his project of overcoming fitness into dialogue with the academic discipline of disability studies. In that text, entitled "Without Suffering Succession," he admits: "My commitment to disability is disarmingly simple. I've vowed to help where I can, how I can, if I can, and especially if I *can't* (as the only way of overcoming being unable to do so)" (210). In the same text, Kocik quotes Stecopoulos: "Disability founds aesthetics²—for all persons, not just those with disabilities. If we became conscious of that, perhaps we might start to see how all our conditions determine our forms" (qtd. in Kocik 211). Artworks arise from the struggle to represent the unrepresentable, from the disablement induced by the fact that given forms of signification have always been tailored for a world that preceded this one in this moment, and for the people we were before we became what we are now. The painting and the poem trace the strain of saying and doing what

2. I find it useful to note that the term "aesthetic" originated as an indicator of embodied experience, as the Greek root *aisthanesthai* means "to feel" or "to sense."

can't be said or done. Kocik's work suggests a solution to the "discrepancy between activism and formal poetry innovation" (211): in allowing language a kind of stuttering play that relaxes the demand for transparency and easy communication, poetic experiments suggest the garbled communication that will always occur amid a diverse coalition of people who are trying to negotiate a shared path toward social change (or who are trying collectively to understand a difficult text that has been assigned for homework). Changing the disabling conditions we are in will require moving through a phase of inscrutability. Innovating new relations to our conditions, mutually helping ourselves to the extremes of what is available to thought and action—through constructing buildings that embrace a multiplicity of bodies, or inaugurating experimental institutions, or structuring unprecedented political systems, or communicating with those who speak a different language—will always be a process of productive mutual misunderstanding. This is his poetics.

Such a vision necessitates a great leap. It would demand a turning toward what is inconceivably distant. One of the fundamental poetic tasks Kocik undertakes is to discover the contiguity of opposites through writing. In a discussion of genetic sequencing, he muses about the inanimate chemicals comprising DNA that have given rise to humanity as such: "The immortal code responsible for life itself is inanimate. I find this fact utterly surprising—worth reflecting on for millennia to come—that we arise from the inanimate, are borne by the inanimate and ultimately return to the inanimate—and that our most profound commonality is with the inanimate" (34). This is what he calls the "non-affinitive" or "heterologous" bond; what makes it possible to identify with what we are not and to do what we can't do, allowing us to reach "extremes of accommodation." The importance of exerting this kind of practice cannot be overstated. Likeness and affinity do not facilitate connectivity; they are rather what threaten it most, because they make it easy for the dominion of fitness to swallow relationships into exclusive and commercially exploitable categories of sameness.

Kocik wonders how a text can accommodate what feels most opposite it, wishing to go further than the boundary pushing that has historically characterized avant-garde practice. Edginess—which I'll define as an aesthetic that embellishes the banal and palatable with small measures of strangeness (think a hamburger with kimchi on top)—is a quality to which businesses and other institutions aspire as they strive to articulate themselves in a competitive market. Advertising habitually borrows from the avant-garde, building branding campaigns out of forms with which readers, viewers or buyers are familiar, yet with a twist, a small dose of defamiliarization, a hint of exotic mystery. Spend a few minutes watching prime time TV commercials and you'll notice visual and sound motifs derived from contemporary art. The next logical aesthetic step away from where we currently are—the "near side of the norm"—will always be captured within the industry's purview. Kocik's writing exists in a wholly other realm, provoking an extreme defamiliarization that launches far beyond edginess. He utilizes styles, tones, words and inflections that draw from spheres of culture that, to his readers, will have none of the exotic mystery that otherwise lends avant-garde art some degree of consumer appeal. His vocabulary is a cornucopia of invented jargon collaged from markedly non-edgy disciplines such as business, social work, medicine and urban planning, and his stylistic mode alternates between taxonomizing, alliterating, punning and chanting. The

result is a textual assemblage that differs so wildly from one moment to the next that it would be impossible to isolate some tasty visual or sonic morsel that could serve to represent what this writing is. It is fundamentally resistant to branding.

The *abnormality* of Kocik's art is in line with his imagining (simultaneously architectural and poetic) of a place where norms are unstable, there is no common language, and everyone flounders. This would be a "disequilibrating" space of "radical facilitation" (Kocik 212). In 2008, Kocik cofounded the Commons Choir with the choreographer Daria Faïn. The choir is a performance group comprised of around thirty dancers, singers, actors, musicians and poets working together to conduct "choreoprosodic research," the findings of which would be publicized by way of performance, symposia and teach-ins (dariafaïn.net). Combining Faïn's expertise in Chinese Energetics with Kocik's investigations in poetic practice, the choir's performance work utilized both movement and voice in a group compositional dialectic between improvisation and resolute forms. In this process, everyone played, using gestural and linguistic vocabularies that didn't count on logical clarity for activating useful exchange. Rather, a rollicking, spastic, glosolalic, echolalic negotiation unfolded: "accumulation of all the vibrations of exchange" "things coming together and coming apart" "polarities popping up." Meaning, as an independent value pre-dating the play of words in action, was dethroned, humanized, collectivized, localized to give its consumers a better sense of where sustenance derives from and how it is cultivated. This is commoning, "a de-centralized, open-ended, slow-paced, often inefficient form of collaborative listening in which people help each other speak" (Kocik 234). In an "entrainment that includes the movement of bodies in space" (230), dance and speech become a combined investigation of—to quote Stecopoulos once again—"how all our conditions determine our forms."

What I've always appreciated most about postmodern dance improvisation is the image it offers of voluntary blundering. It makes the work of *essaying* into a form in itself, and under these conditions failure doesn't preclude grace. I have myself tried out various forms of collective somatic research, having joined the Commons Choir for a brief time, and otherwise participated in Contemplative Dance Practice, Authentic Movement, Underscore and Soma workshops. In movement improvisation I learn about how infinitely particular and variable are the ways with which each body is equipped to register or *say* its meanings. Seeing how a slight variation in the angle of a joint or the contraction of a muscle can pose a question to be answered by another body with its own inestimable range of subtleties, opens a kind of expressivity that requires sensitivity more than eloquence for its effective communication. I am struck most of all by the unique power to accommodate *fear* that dance practice seems to wield. In group improvisation the fear of ineptitude, humiliation or isolation will manifest on our bodies, either in how we give expression to our fear or in how we try to cover it up.

The body can't help but register its response to other entities in its environment, while words on a page have a built-in pretense to detached self-sufficiency. This irrepressible expressivity of the body is something that the architecture of a classroom is structured to hide, compartmentalize, and redirect. While I'm not interested in outlining a prescription for how to build bodily experience into curricula, I'll emphasize the importance of somehow employing critical thinking and critical writing toward an encounter with what is viscerally discomfiting about the present; which, in the classroom, will pal-

pably resonate a long history of institutional demands and exclusions. I see such a reckoning as a crucial learning goal. In academic settings, much of the pressure we assert on other people—to articulate better, to use language in an organized fashion, to defend a position, to change an opinion—is an unconscious redeployment of the punishing tactics that we're so accustomed to using on ourselves. Reflexive investigation will be a first step toward the possibility of producing intellectual work that isn't unconsciously shaped by the pressures and resistances that our institutional inheritance imposes.

What Stecopoulos and Kocik's writing accomplishes for me is a rejection of writing's pretense to unadulterated logos—of its promise to capture ideas in a realm untouched by the vagaries of the body—and an activation of the essay's capacity to show its own vulnerability in the face of the very real world it addresses. It allows writing to grope around where it isn't certified to go, more phatic and haptic than confidently correct.

The Story Illness Tells

When I made the decision to quit the recommended treatments for my sleeplessness, I had to take what I didn't like about how I felt as an irrefutable part of me, no longer separating it out as a defect that could be wiped away by medicines prescribed by experts. Nobody had the means to cure me because my symptoms were inextricable from the countless twists and turns of a thirty-plus year history lived in this body. Practically speaking, it meant I was looking at a future in which I would be contending daily with the discomfort of something that felt like illness instead of trying to artificially dampen the symptoms when they arose.

My purpose in recounting this has to do with how it ultimately bore upon my relationship to reading and writing. At the time, my days presented a continued struggle to reconcile my long-established identity as a writer with the fact that letting my body work out its own problems was leaving me feeling cloudy, exhausted, forgetful and blank; it seemed impossible to welcome my condition and also remain fit for intellectual exertion. But because I no longer believed in the medicine, I had no choice, so I attempted the work, and it was mostly agonizing; a daily extended reminder of my seemingly incurable defects. I thought that if I kept at it I could find a way through, and I resolved to read William James's writings on psychology, hoping that his introspective philosophical style might serve the double purpose of satisfying my intellectual hunger while helping me heal myself. As I dove into the 1400-plus-pages of *The Principles of Psychology* and his later writings in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, I found myself affected by the following passage, from the essay "Does Consciousness Exist":

If the reader will take his own experiences, he will see what I mean. Let him begin with a perceptual experience, the "presentation," so called, of a physical object, his actual field of vision, the room he sits in, with the book he is reading as its centre; and let him for the present treat this complex object in the commonsense way as being "really" what it seems to be, namely, a collection of physical things cut out from an enviroing world of other physical things with which these physical things have actual or potential relations. Now at the same time it is just those self-same things which his mind, as we say, perceives; and the whole philosophy of perception from Democritus's time downwards

has just been one long wrangle over the paradox that *what is evidently one reality should be in two places at once*, both in outer space and in a person's mind. (James 7)

James's resolution of this paradox invokes a concept that is key to his philosophy of pragmatism, which theorizes "pure experience" as the constant interplay between physical encounter and reflective process. Upon reading, I found that the teaching contained in this narrative moment was enacted in real time by the particular way in which I was affected by it. In experiencing a text *look at me* in such a way—as the passage exactly described the literal situation of my body in space as I read it—I began to see the book as a gesture of love, one that didn't brandish its complexity before my intellect like a prize I could possess only by means of an adequately athletic feat of reason, but revealed its conceptual intricacies as the signposts of an unfolding struggle: that of the reader's bodymind encountering its own knots.

In the beginning of *The Principles of Psychology*, James makes a case for introspective philosophy: "the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover" (185). (Stecopoulos formulates a version of this practice as "autoethnography in real time.") His writings formalize this work as philosophical practice, while also maintaining that introspection and reflection are instinctual, ongoing activities that define the very nature of what it is to be human. We are always aware of our own thoughts, while awareness is often a sensation more than it is a cogitation. "The Stream of Thought," perhaps the most famous chapter in *Principles*, describes how one thought always senses and crosses over into another, and thinking thus flows in a stream rather than in a succession of discrete thoughts. To try to zero in on a moment of thinking will always require one to attend to surrounding (preceding and ensuing) thoughts—James calls this the "fringe" of thinking—and thus there will be no zeroing in, as one will be led on a search that meanders in every which way. The more lively the thinker feels, the faster the stream will flow. But what happens when we are sick, fatigued or depressed? James writes:

in states of extreme brain-fag the horizon is narrowed almost to the passing word,—the associative machinery, however, providing for the next word turning up in orderly sequence, until at last the thinker is led to some kind of a conclusion. At certain moments he may find himself doubting whether his thoughts have not come to a full stop; but the vague sense of a *plus ultra* makes him ever struggle on towards a more definite expression of what it may be; whilst the slowness of his utterance shows how difficult, under such conditions, the labor of thinking must be. (247)

When the mind is fresh, it sees more, looking far ahead of the present thought even while still thinking it. The mind races toward the horizon which glows in the clarity of thought's bright vision. On the other hand, the weary mind sees not much more than what concerns it in the present, rimmed with a dim halo. Under these circumstances, though its perspective may be diminished, thinking is never arrested because it will always sense the arrival of the next thing. Maybe in states of "extreme brain-fag" there is a special kind of consciousness that the spry mind will deactivate. Maybe it is here we are able to have the bare recognition of the thing just one step beyond, because here

more than anywhere else we can see and feel the shape of it as it is—the *plus ultra*—as if emerging from the blankness of an emptied-out self.

The complexity of James' topics paired with his introspective, illustrative, and often genial style has the effect of affirming that all readers' bodyminds are intricately knotted, and that to move through the concepts with ease would be to understand nothing at all, as it would skirt the hard work of consciousness in action reflecting on itself. This is the overall shape of the critical work that his writings do. Thinking's constant fight to find representation, to be written and read, is painstakingly narrated in an oeuvre whose process of composition was to document the unfolding of that same struggle in the author.

The nonstop work of reading my own body, which became necessary once I realized diagnoses were not facilitating my recovery, *needed the defects* in order to understand and re-balance the whole. Noticing the context of each bout of cloudiness or confusion—what dietary choices, levels of stress or physical activity, and emotional events in my social life may have prompted the state I was in—was my learning path, and I needed to dwell in and move through the cloudiness and confusion in order to approach my goal of informed self-help. The demonstration of that very process is the *raison d'être* in much of James's work. Any hitch I experienced in trying to comprehend his flow of ideas was itself something that would help my understanding as it exemplified the kind of cognitive tangle that his writing strives to illuminate. The analytical powers I discovered as a "sick reader" enabled a similar kind of readerly and writerly freedom to what Stecopoulos describes in *Visceral Poetics*. Letting the fullness of my condition express itself, I found my discomfort to be "at once a disease and the very sign of my power to find the way out of the labyrinth" (Stecopoulos 11).

On Alien Grounds

I'd like to take a sharp turn here toward the writing of a very different thinker from James. The following passage comes from the queer theorist and disability activist Eli Clare, in his 2017 book *Brilliant Imperfection*:

Having shaky hands and shaky balance isn't as awful as they imagine, even when I slip, totter, descend stairs one slow step at a time. My relationship to gravity is ambivalent. On mountain trails, I yearn to fly downhill, feet touching ground, pushing off, smooth and fluid. Instead on steep stretches I drop down onto my butt and slide along using both my hands and feet, for a moment becoming a four-legged animal. Only then do I see the swirl marks that glaciers left in the granite, tiny orange newts climbing among the tree roots, otherworldly fungi growing on rotten logs. My shaky balance gives me this intimacy with the mountain. (87-89)

Clare reveals the complicated personal and political questions one faces when seeking to medically cure a bodily condition. As an activist, he wants better healthcare for people with disabilities; at the same time he realizes that the cultural obsession with medically "fixing" the body is detrimental to his vision of a truly pluralistic world, one that spans a range of bodily shapes and appearances without elevating one type as the best. The above passage represents both a longing for capacities he doesn't have and a love for the

avenues of experience opened by the particular way in which his body works. Like Stecopoulos' "autoethnography in real time" and Kocik's "choreoprosodic research," Clare's mode of thinking and composing in *Brilliant Imperfections*—which includes periodic forays into lineated poetry, with a poem appearing at the beginning of each chapter—is an effort of intense and ceaseless study of oneself in the world, in which the daily difficulties of being a body become fascinating and instructive even while they are painful. They bring him in contact with other languages, the sign systems of rocks and tree roots with the ancient stories they tell, and show him that each perceived limit to how he moves, thinks, feels or creates is instead a new terrain to inhabit. One can approach the threshold and feel around there, touching and testing the lay of the land at the edges of what is tolerable. An investigative dwelling in the realm of what one *can't do* as a way to annul the imperative of fitness and debunk the hegemonic ideologies of which it is an expression.

Pressure to *overcome* one's body is ubiquitous in the narratives perpetuated by the medical industrial complex, to use Clare's term. I quote him again here:

Overcoming bombards disabled people. It's everywhere. I think of Whoopi Goldberg. In airports and along freeways, I see her plastered on a billboard sponsored by the Foundation for a Better Life (FBL). Head in hands, dreadlocks threaded through fingers, she furrows her forehead in frustration. Or is it bemusement? She casts her eyes up, looking directly at her viewers. The tagline reads, "Overcaem dyslexia," coyly misspelling *overcame*. Underneath those two words brimming with stereotypes sits a red box containing the phrase "HARD WORK," and below that, the command "Pass It On." (8)

The message is clear: Goldberg traversed the difficult path to stardom and success despite her defect, and her renown evidences a remarkable triumph over a cognitive quirk that should have kept her among the ranks of other needy, defective, unknowns. On the contrary, Clare wonders if it was the othered idiosyncrasies of her body and mind that enabled a wide range of "abnormal" perceptive strengths that shaped her comedic talent.

The medical industrial complex renders as mighty heroes those who endure the therapies and medicines—which are often disabling themselves—that promise a path to normalization. It depicts the innate, brilliant imperfections of all bodies—our instructive coughs and hiccoughs, and even our deaths—as defects to be conquered. On the contrary, Clare presses the point that what appears as an intellectual or physical shortcoming is often the very quality that energizes and refines one's processes of thought or action. This was indeed the case in my experience of reading James and reading the daily ups and downs of my own body amid the ongoing work of recovery.

That work, without the intervention of external therapeutic mechanisms promising a "fix" —pharmaceutical or otherwise—led to the discovery that *my alleged defects were necessary for good reading comprehension*. Whenever my understanding butted up against a phrase in James that felt particularly dense or opaque, I experienced this as a bit of physical pain, an acidic burn in my skull and a bracing compaction of the vertebrae. It was my habitual policing of my own cognitive fitness that provoked these panic symptoms, and in recognizing the effort I exerted to discipline my own seeming limitations, I realized that the defect was actually generated by my propensity to self-punishment.

So I sat with what was troubling to me about my somatic state as it contended with the abstraction of words on a page, and it was then that the words resolved into meaning.

The medical preoccupation with fixing the body mirrors the pedagogical tradition of treating the classroom as a place for molding minds. Scholars Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson turn to the work of proto-anarchist Max Stirner in order to elaborate why implementing programs for molding the development of students—however progressive the program might be—might actually hinder the path to self-actualization. To Stirner, a person becomes self-actualized after two major developmental shifts: first, the compulsory sacrifice of one's inborn, singular, experiential intelligence to the forms of thought encouraged by dominant social constructions; second, the shedding of those imposed forms when one is finally able to uncover the buried corporeal self (Firth and Robinson 60-61). Firth and Robinson argue that when teachers are fixated on molding their students to exhibit particular behaviors and thought patterns, the second key developmental shift will be inhibited; for it is only after a student gains practice in allowing her embodied intelligence to discover on its own which behaviors and thought patterns will be efficacious for her unique trajectory in life that she may genuinely become a self (63).

At the crux of my investigation is a belief that the finality implied by the term critical writing—with its assumption that the activity of critique can be captured on a page, frozen in time, its various moments nested hypotactically to create a neat logical map—is at odds with the shapeshifting condition of being a body in the world, a body whose chemistry, dimensions, mood and climate are continuously overhauled by the influence of its environment. Any act of writing is to some degree a straightjacketing of cognition and all its concomitant visceral processes. This subjects the body's consciousness to an experience of alienation, which can feel rather uncomfortable. But one feels it in the body, and that pain brings the mind back home. To quote Stecopoulos once again: *writing embodies disembodiment* (59). The pain of feeling straightjacketed is perhaps a claustrophobic death-anxiety, where the incomprehensible inevitability of the body's cessation can only be imagined as a kind of cramping enclosure. *Visceral Poetics* sees this truncation of somatic experience as a necessary and instructive component of what the bodymind knows.

Critical writing cannot help but truncate critical thinking, and thus the essay I assign my students to write is wrong before it is written. Since no writing can perfectly "demonstrate" the multi-directional breadth of critical thinking, perhaps the purpose of the essay is not to demonstrate thinking at all but to carve out a space in which the author can consciously encounter the various existential contradictions embedded in the lie which says the self is composed of a mind governing the actions of a body. The essay has the capacity to reveal to the writer her own alienation, to make her feel it in her body. Stecopoulos, Kocik and Clare all recognize that the widespread belief in a detached mind that governs the body functions as a tool for colonizing somatic intelligence. And underlying the teacher's wish to instill in a student the ability to correctly represent her thoughts on paper is the conviction that one ought to overcome the discomfort of feeling alienated within the language one is given.

But perhaps alienation is itself educational. Perhaps the ill-adapted are the ones best equipped to see their conditions acutely for what they are. Our social institutions have

historically pathologized the resistance effected by those who can't or won't be molded into shape. Clare cites examples of this, beginning with the writings of 19th century physician Samuel Cartwright, who diagnosed the "problem" of enslaved Africans trying to escape bondage as a "disorder" called *drapetomania*, and their persistent unwillingness to work, even under the whip, as *dysaesthesia aethiopica* (24). The 60s era psychiatrists Walter Bromberg and Frank Simon saw "specific reactive psychoses" in the members of Civil Rights and Black Power movements, referring to the phenomenon using the general term "protest psychosis" (Clare 24). This tradition of viewing defiance as a medical disorder is perpetuated in the practice of pathologizing and punishing the "inability" of students to perform in the context of the institutions where they are educated. Some so-called defects need to be recognized as marks of conscious or unconscious resistance. If the resistance appears to lack intentionality or specific aim, it is because power works hard to make itself invisible and one often doesn't see the constellation of forces that combine to cause a feeling of powerlessness. Perhaps the source is too complex to be seen at all. But one must try. It is important for the critical writer to have the time and space to dwell attentively within his or her "defects."

All acts of scholarship and writing manifest failed messages, trite formulations, ill-defended points, missed points, misplaced or displaced dialects and maladroitness grammars that may contain a great deal of information about what authority the writer struggles against. What if the student writer and the writing teacher were to momentarily pause their institutionally-imposed, harsh self-assessments so as to value their alleged failures as information, and, with a rigorous scholarly eye, attend to them as necessary details within a larger emerging picture?

The notion of a well-argued essay is utopian, and such an ideal requires the consent to a certain fantasy: that of some reality, firmly and sustainably built upon reason, in which the fundamental unreason of the body bears no influence, or belongs to a different plane altogether. Learning to construct such an edifice is a useful intellectual exercise, but it will always be hypothetical, and require a temporary insensitivity—a kind of writerly sociopathy. This is because the writer is also a nervous system affected by temperature, quality of light, ambient sound, and perhaps most importantly, the interjection of other bodies with their own visceral realities. The essay is a pact with the reader in which both parties agree, for a duration, to imagine dwelling in a world that is devoid of those variables. The argument produced in black lettering and framed by the crisp edges of a white page, wants to temporarily displace and defer all of that input—wants to be airtight. Writers like Stecopoulos, Kocik, Clare and, to some degree, James, attend to these excisions through poetry, or through a hybrid poetic-essayistic practice. Experimental processes can help give airtime to somatic digressions, resistances, and contingencies. Writing can be implemented to honor the asides—the thoughts one has while trying to concentrate on the topic, the bodily pains that announce themselves during the struggle to think clearly, the daydreams that pop up, the series of wrong words and discarded phrases that precede the final form, the nonsense that the mind kicks up during the work of producing sense. These are not byproducts: they're the very fabric of thought. One can use experiments on the page to dwell within them.

When thinking stops at some logical leap that is needed in order to arrive at an intended point and the pressure to exhibit an impeccably polished intellect manifests as

a headache, a hot flash, or some other somatic expression, try relocating micro-essays in the margins of your writing that excavate how a particular thought has registered in the body. Borrow automatic writing prompts from the surrealists. Take cues from the concrete poets and treat the composition of thought spatially, activating the white space of the page. Write a list poem, representing thoughts as a sequence of complex nouns, each one a new creature giving birth to the next. Turn on a recording device and narrate the sensation of thinking as it unfolds. Listen to the recording and write in response to the sounds of the words you hear, the cadence and texture of your voice. Verbally address another body so as to remind yourself that thinking doesn't happen in a vacuum, and that the gnawing critical conundrum isn't simply your own. Write with your eyes closed. Take a walk; consider how the momentum of thinking changes in accordance with the motion of the body through space. I don't guarantee that any of this will produce writing that is beautiful, but in exploring compositional practices that transcend ideologies of success and failure, ability and disability, we reckon with the systems of subordination that operate inside and over us; to me, this seems to be the most urgent thing.

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