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Corporal Pedagogies: An Introduction

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SPECIAL SECTION: Corporal Pedagogies

An Introduction

Wendy Ryden

On my campus, we have a clothing store, which is part of our president's initiative to promote management opportunities for student-run businesses. The store is called The Student Body, a name which I suppose is clever enough—even a bit sexy—although I don't think it was chosen by students. Interestingly, and sadly for the student clerks and managers, I seldom see any customers; that is to say, The Student Body is lacking actual bodies. From what I can tell, it is a *women's* clothing and accessory store, even though the pun's effect requires the enlistment of the entire student collective. Or maybe not. Maybe the pun simply requires our willingness to collapse the sexy, naked body that must be clothed into a feminized image. Whenever I walk past the boutique, I think about how we tend to want to turn bodies into synecdoche even though actual bodies resist being symbolically appropriated. There is a constant war there among the real, the imagined, the represented. Our bodies are sites of cooptation, opposition, and complicity.

Country music fans might remember the song written by Bob McDill and sung by Don Williams, "Good Ole Boys like Me," which contains the couplet:

But I was smarter than most and I could choose
Learned to talk like the man on the six o'clock news

The speaker tells an escape narrative, similar to a scholarship boy's, of circumventing a limiting cultural and linguistic legacy. Over the years those lyrics have resonated with me as I pondered all the questions of language so contested in our profession. Those lines seem to evoke much of what has concerned us regarding authority and agency. What language? Whose language? When and how? Like much poetry, there's a concision here in McDill's lyrics, which succinctly encapsulates the thorny issues our field has spent much time and space exploring. The "good ole boy" speaker implies that he cheated destiny by appropriating the dominant idiom. Or rather that he betrayed his culture and his mother tongue in order to advance himself in a world that excluded both (although he never really has left it all behind, so it seems). He frames this as a decision, something to be chosen if you are smart enough. Does he mean to be elitist? The others left behind were mentally inferior because they lacked the capacity to learn this other language? Or is he saying that there is a kind of cleverness involved in performing language and understanding its linality? Is he saying knowledge is power to be inhabited, or merely a trick of mimicry, a *leger de main* of code switching?

The image of the TV newsmen, upon which the lyrics rely, makes clear that all these questions are questions of embodiment; that discourse is embodied, performed, lived; that through speech, language and bodies are inextricable. The language he speaks and the newsmen's body are inseparable in their normative authority, and the speaker's strategy of learning this man's language is available to the good ole boy precisely because he

too, like the newsman of his childhood days, is a white man. He can choose, and his choice will involve claiming a power that may be oppressive to someone else. There are others who cannot choose. Or wouldn't want to.

I have given my students a video assignment in which they are to work in pairs to write a dialogue and record a performance of it to be shown in class. The day we watch the presentations, Josephine is absent. Curious, since attendance, the presence of the body, "counts" in the course. Next class when I ask her why she missed her performance, she tells me she didn't want to see herself on the video; she didn't want to be present while others watched her performing body on a screen. You see, she informed me, she has a double chin ...

I am alternately obsessed with and terrified of bodies. Bodies are, after all, scary. They are strong and they are vulnerable. They are sexy and sexed, frail and fraught, they pleasure and pain us, they enable and inconvenience us, but of course even that is all wrong because they are us. As Nancy Mairs reminds us, we are taught to say "*I have a body*" not the more accurate "*I am a body*" because "open association with [our bodies] shames us" (393). (This is still true, I think, as I watch advertisements for toilet paper that displace the acts of human defecation onto cartoon bears and personify human effluvia as a green-colored trickster.) Despite the turn and celebration of/ to the body and embodiment and materiality, we are not always so happy with these bodies that fail, plague, mark, embarrass, limit us. We are often not happy with others' reactions to our bodies.

A classroom of instructor and student bodies is attended by particular advantages—and vulnerabilities. Teachers' bodies are prominent and on display in the traditional real time classroom. We adjust our pedagogy and curriculum sometimes when we see our students' bodies. (I decided not to teach Stephen Crane's "The Monster" in an introductory literature course when I saw that one of my students in the small class was in a wheelchair. I don't know if avoiding a story about disability and its stigmatization was the right choice, but I made it, nonetheless.) Despite these vulnerabilities, often when we teach on-line, we long for our physical presences, feeling like "something" is missing despite other affordances of an electronic environment. The conversation about bodies perhaps hinges on the private/public nature of them—the same perennial divide which writing and other pedagogies continue to negotiate: what part of our lives are public enough to be the subjects of scholarship and classroom intervention.

Traditional Western hierarchies and print culture favored a disembodied intellectual discourse that obscured the body's status as a productive epistemological site. However, social movements have combined and collided with technological trajectories of representation to make visible and reposition the relationship between being and embodiment, "to challenge" what was "the centering of subjectivities in the mind" (Selzer 7). When critics began to turn their attention to the body, it was with a need to correct the notion of the "natural body" that became ground zero for materialist anchoring (Davis

4). But as Kathy Davis says, “The body may be back but the new body theory is just as . . . disembodied as it ever was Postmodern theorizing about the body has all too often been a cerebral, esoteric, and ultimately disembodied activity” (14). What to do?

For teaching and learning, focus on the body might mean paying attention to lived experience and “situated-ness” and to the way discipline lives in and is enacted/perpetuated through our bodies, as Bourdieu describes in his concept of the “habitus” and “bodily hexis,” which

. . . can be seen in the differing ways that men and women carry themselves in the world, in their differing postures, their differing ways of walking and speaking, of eating and laughing, as well as in the differing ways that men and women deploy themselves in the more intimate aspects of life. The body is the site of incorporated history. The practical schemes through which the body is organized are the product of history and, at the same time, the source of practices and perceptions which reproduce that history. (Thompson 13)

What happens to the literal “student body” in our classrooms and what happens to teachers’ bodies as our classroom practices necessarily continue to transform themselves in the face of cultural crises and technological developments? This special section of *JAEPL* seeks to explore how our classrooms might “re-engage and experiment with sensory connections other than the relentlessly visually reductive” (Wysocki 7) pedagogies and modes/genres of traditional literacy practices that have previously dominated our classrooms, especially in higher education. For the ancient Greeks, rhetoric was a “bodily art” (Hawhee). What happens when we understand teaching and learning as bodily arts that holistically engage us rather than disconnect us from our embodied selves?

Without denying the significance of the trend that sees embodiment as inextricably tied to and invoking broader aspects of materiality and production, I use the word “corporal” rather than the expected “corporeal” to reemphasize the “bodily” real rather than the imaginary or merely tangible. While the body is always mediated and mediating, the stubborn, irreducible presence of our physical selves continues to challenge, provoke, and radicalize us. How does the body liberate and limit us when we refuse to allow it to be dissipated in metaphor or obscured in broader materiality? What is at stake and for whom? The essays in this special section have responded to this call in an effort to continue the work which has been done in this area and to provoke what might be possible in the future.



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