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Reflections on/of Embodiment: Bringing Our Whole Selves to Class

TRIXIE SMITH, KATIE MANTHEY, JOHN GAGNON, EZEKIEL CHOFFEL,
WONDERFUL FAISON, SCOTTY SECRIST, AND PHIL BRATTA

Introduction

What does it mean to study “embodiment”? What does it mean to study this concept from a rhetorical perspective? Why is embodiment important? These questions are at the heart of this article—a story about a graduate-level class that investigated these ideas. In this article, you will find reflections from the instructors, multiple students’ experiences, and finally an overview of what the instructors could have done differently. Situating the article in this way allows for a move that is integral to community-based work and negotiating the differences inherent in a classroom—using and privileging story and storytelling practices. Andrea Riley-Mukavetz reminds us that “we can learn from the stories we tell and re-tell,” and this is particularly true in relation to the intersections of experience across pedagogy, community, and embodiment in the classroom (110). By privileging story, then, we seek to create a space in which participants engage in their own tellings, thereby establishing an opportunity for participants to be heard, to influence, and to exert both written and embodied resistance.

The “official” scholarly history and literature of embodiment is quite extensive and multi-disciplinary. The discipline of rhetoric and composition has contributed to this literature, consequently developing the area of study arguably called embodied rhetorics. Embodied rhetorics, it is safe to say, emerged at a point in the 1990s when the linguistic turn had exhausted its scholarly limit. For decades, the linguistic turn held a foothold on epistemological and ontological inquiries in the humanities, creating a situation where, as Jack Selzer remarks, “words mattered more than matter” (4). Rhetoric and composition scholars strived to think beyond merely language within reading and writing practices and bring to the forefront materiality and embodiment. These efforts are not a contention with the power of words, but an offering of a convergence between language and the body. A “yes and,” if you will.

In various ways and degrees, many rhetoric and writing scholars have connected embodied rhetorics to visual rhetoric (Selzer and Crowley; Olson et al.), multimodality (Murray), and performance (Gencarella and Pezzullo), to name a few.

About five years ago, Kristin L. Arola and Anne Frances Wysocki also published the edited collection *Composing (Media) = Composing (Embodiment)*, an important text that brought rhetoric and composition scholars into conversation about bodies, mostly digital media, and knowledge.¹ As Wysocki proposes to readers in the introduction: “we ask you to attend to writing as a technology that enables us to experience our bodies as *our* bodies while at the same time writing mediates those bodies in line with existing institutions” (22).

Although some scholars talk about embodiment as something that is concerned with the bodies of the students, we are more interested in *effects* of writing on the bodies of the students. To be clear, we build on previous scholarship about the concept of embodiment, where meaning emerges not only at the level of language significations, but at the embodied material level (Hayles, Edbauer). In their 2015 piece, “Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics,” Maureen Johnson and coauthors posit that “The physical body carries meaning through discourse about or by a body. But embodiment theories suggest that meaning can be articulated beyond language. *All bodies* do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” (39). Rhetoric is not simply the art of persuasion—the common and popular definition—through speaking and writing but the consumption and production of meaning through various communicative modes and materialities. Embodied rhetorics takes up this latter understanding as a way to show the complex and nuanced ways human (and non-human) bodies do signifying practices and make signification within cultural contexts. Embodied rhetorics brings to the forefront

experiences of specific bodies as they produce and consume meanings.

Work about/on/with embodiment can sometimes be written off as self-absorbed—academic navel gazing. But this is a misstep because scholarship about/on/with embodiment works to continually remind readers, writers, researchers, and pedagogues that bodies matter to the paradigms, perspectives, relations, and decisions one has in a given situation. Johnson and coauthors noted that “Embodiment encourages a methodological approach that addresses the reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher from feminist traditions and conveys an awareness or consciousness about how bodies—our own and others’—figure in our work. Just as considerations of our own positions as researchers are critical to understanding our individual and collective commitments to arguments about the role of bodies and rhetoric, our bodies inform our ways of knowing” (39). Work on embodiment is not a subjective relativism, but a reminder that research and teaching is not objective, empirical, and disembodied. Epistemology also is not neutral and objective. Rather, embodiment offers the understanding that instantiations of bodies are rhetorically and culturally situated in relation to institutions and discourses. Furthermore, embodiment attributes a level of agency to these instantiations. As such, agency gives a means to embodied resistance, whether through language and/or materiality. In such acts of embodied resistance, bodies receive, distribute, and/or assert their cultural epistemologies.

Both in the Embodied Rhetorics graduate course we taught and in this article, we argue that work about the self, especially the self in relation to rhetorical

understandings of culture, is important. This is hard work; this sort of classroom experience and structure involves a large amount of risk for all involved. It requires constant reorientation of the participants to not dismiss anyone else's lived experiences. It also requires the instructors to constantly practice a critical praxis and their own reorienting.

To theorize and practice embodied rhetorics requires people to tell their stories through reflection and give voice to their ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological experiences. In this article, we argue that embodied rhetorics is not merely reading about embodiment and rhetoric, but experiencing texts and other bodies through one's own body. One way to understand and practice embodied rhetorics is through reflection and the writing/creating of story. For the classroom, embodied rhetorics presents quite a challenge, but by using reflection and story to engage with embodied rhetorics, teachers and students can contribute their own embodied realities in the classroom, in the readings, and in the writing. In turn, they can learn about the wide range of embodied experiences that make up learning and being together in this world.

In the rest of this article, we will discuss a special topics course offered in the fall of 2014 at Michigan State University in the Rhetoric and Writing graduate program. This graduate seminar was taught by Trixie Smith and Katie Manthey, who worked as the class intern. There were seventeen students from a variety of disciplines at both the master's and doctoral levels in this rather large seminar class. In a pedagogical move designed to increase the range of embodied experiences through the class and to also call attention to these experiences, students were asked to respond to

readings in a wide variety of multi-modal ways, including audio and video texts, maker projects, creative writing and/or visuals, as well as more traditional written texts, while being exposed to a wide range of text types through in-class and out-of-class readings, viewings, activities, and field trips. The class moved each week, meeting in twelve different university/public spaces over the course of fifteen weeks, once again emphasizing the embodied effects of different spaces and places, particularly on learning. This article offers an overview of how the instructors put the course together, highlights some of the students' stories, and ends with reflections on the course experience.

Instructor Introductions and Stories

Trixie: One of my main areas of study and teaching is queer feminism; I also direct a writing center where we work with student, faculty, and staff writers on a daily basis. I am often concerned about the bodies that enter our spaces and what it means to be humans working with other humans. Likewise, as a cultural rhetorician, I'm interested in the stories we tell as humans. So, it was no surprise that I found myself working with a number of graduate students and colleagues who were interested in issues of the body and embodiment: the body in writing, the body in storytelling and meaning making, fat studies, infertility studies, queer studies. With so many intersecting interests in embodiment, I proposed that we develop a course on the topic, so this work wasn't being recreated every term on an individual basis. The course was put on the books and I had over a year to think about what should be taught and how, but

there were so many possibilities, so many angles and things to be read that I was having problems narrowing. I thought to poll, via Facebook, many of my friends and colleagues who also did such intersecting work to see what they would recommend. I mistakenly thought there would be some consensus about what should be read and discussed in the class. Boy, was I wrong! A simple request on Facebook blew up into a giant discussion of texts, topics, methods, and more.

Katie: This is where I come in. Trixie was my dissertation chair and I was working on a project about fat as an embodied orientation. I was about to start my last year of the PhD program when we started talking about this course. Trixie asked if I wanted to be an intern for the course (our program has a structure so that a student can get credit for helping with a course or outside organization). My job would be to help her plan the class, attend all class meetings, and lead one day of discussion. This meshed with my research and teaching interests, so we set out together to swim through what seemed an overwhelming amount of possibilities for what this course might include; we really wanted to read and discuss all of it, but the boundaries of the semester said cuts had to be made.

Trixie: At this point, Katie and I sat down to discuss our priorities and goals for the course. What could we realistically accomplish in fifteen weeks? What was most critical, what could be divided out for small groups, what did everyone “have to” read? Based on the Facebook poll, we had threads that led to indigenous rhetorics, material rhetorics, queer rhetorics,

feminist rhetorics, medical rhetorics, digital rhetorics, and more—and often they overlapped. When asked what “embodiment” readings might include, everyone we polled provided an answer based from their own positionality. From this perspective, we decided that one of our main goals was to talk about embodiment in terms of intersecting identities and ways of being and how these play out on/in/through the body. We also wanted the class to be about experiencing embodiment instead of reading about its abstractions. With this in mind, we looked for readings that actually spoke to embodied arguments and the intersections of different embodied experiences and positions.

We knew from bell hooks that to make the classroom an exciting space where learning takes place we needed pedagogical strategies that would “intervene, alter, even disrupt the atmosphere” (7). With this in mind, we set up our classroom to be mobile, multimodal, and safe—as much as possible. We tried to make the class environment a place where students were encouraged to be vulnerable. As instructors, we modeled this by telling our own stories and carefully, critically framing our responses to other people’s stories. We tried to be strategic in the readings that we shared with the class, with different themes for each week such as policing bodies, bodies and health, bodies in the academy. We read theory, stories, fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, short stories; we viewed videos, films, art, museum exhibits. The readings/viewings served as models for the students’ own writings. For example, after reading Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, one student made a diorama of the border wall and added in labels representative of

the borders in her own life, while another student created a series of paintings representing his different selves. We gave feedback to each other. We celebrated early writings and asked/pushed for more.

We purposefully thought about different forms of embodiment, varied locations where the body is important and draws attention, how to make the body uncomfortable so people were aware of it. We moved the classroom all over campus so that no one could get “too comfortable” in a space. We were also interested in different spaces and places where the body played out or was played on—classrooms, homes, research (both the researchers and the participants), relationships. Another goal was to increase awareness of our own bodies as they moved through space, place, and time. Because we often take our own bodies for granted, we thought we’d have to make people uncomfortable at times to get them to be more cognizant of their bodies, to really observe their own bodies in place and space or as they moved through the semester.

We allowed space for experiments and even failures as people tried new genres and modes, knowing that students have to be free to take risks and possibly fail before they can master new tools or genres, such as audio reading responses or the creation of videos for the first time. We brought our questions to the whole class, and had them share their questions with each other when they could. We shared our feelings and our struggles, with the material and with the class itself. We continued to discuss in class. We had one-on-one meetings when needed. We broke bread together. We practiced talking circles. We did some meditating and some mediating. We referred people out as

needed. We decided to write this article as a final outlet. To give you a first-hand view of some of the experiences in the course, we invited students from the class to tell their stories of Embodied Rhetorics. In the end, four students took us up on this offer, and one student from the class joined us in theorizing the work. After this sampling, we will circle back to what we’ve learned and what we would change or do differently the next time around.

Student Stories

A QUEER FREAKSHOW SCOTTY SECRIST

Dancing, like all art, provides a mechanism for expression. The dancer moves to the beat of the music, embodies gestures that reflect the feeling of the music, flowing through time and space to communicate stories and emotion. Dancing, like all art, also serves as a mode of inquiry and a way of knowing. Muscles learn complex choreography; the body senses the music’s time and the stage’s space. Such a spectacle is a performance. Performativity requires the performer to conceptualize the audience, rehearse technique, and craft a routine that uses signifying gestures to intelligibly communicate. Two important concepts predicate this communication: shared understanding, and the body in time and space.

Noteworthy, though, is that for some reason people forget about the body. Often, the dancer’s body is taken for granted by the audience. The dancer conceptualizes the audience, but often forgets that performance affects the bodies of the viewers. All of these bodies are implicated in the spectacle. The performance depends not only on the dancer, but the

embodied experience of the audience as well. The point is that we have narrow conceptions of what the body is supposed to be doing. We read bodies in a way that allows us to forget about their sensibilities during performances.

Take for instance, the spinning ballerina optical illusion (“Right Brain vs. Left Brain Test”). Just by telling you that I will be discussing a ballerina in motion, you already have a preconceived image in your mind. You click the link, and you are pretty much correct about that image. But then, I ask you in what direction is the ballerina spinning? You tell me counterclockwise. I then challenge you to look again, and make her spin clockwise. This is a pretty simple optical illusion, but it aptly illustrates the ingrained notions we have about reading bodies. We learn to read bodies in certain ways. However, if we challenge ourselves, we can read bodies, including our own, in different ways, and the results can be astonishing.

During the Embodied Rhetorics course, I was constantly pushed (of course I do not mean this literally, although the metaphor exquisitely represents something my body was sensing throughout the class). My thinking was challenged. Constantly, I found myself thinking about things like identity, temporality, position, dispersion, orientation, knowing, but most importantly my body. Incredibly, this course was the first time I had been asked to think about how my body navigates and moves through the world, and how that translates into meaning-making and knowing.

Throughout the course, I began to see how time and space shape my body, and how my body might shape the times and spaces. For me, this is the most important understanding I gleaned. No matter how hard I try to “find myself,” I am on

a futile mission. There is no identity that precedes my experiences or my body. I come to know through my interactions, and the “myself” emerges. But just for a moment. In the next moment, my past along with the present body/environmental interactions reconstitutes the “myself.” Discourse, rhetorics, and language are the canvas and paints I use to render the portrait of myself. I am of them, and they are of me, inseparable and mutually constitutive.

Perhaps, though, the most significant experience I had during Embodied Rhetorics was reading and discussing the novel *Geek Love*. This book challenged me to think about how the body precedes identity, but identity isn’t necessarily a result of the body. It has to do with the context. The freak body doesn’t necessarily mean the freak identity. It made me ask, “What do I assume my identity should be because of my body?”

For a long time, I assumed my identity should be queer because of my queer body. My body has always, for as long as I can remember, been read as queer, even before I knew what queer, gay, or faggot meant. Resisting other interpretations of my body, I tried to communicate straightness. I tried to perform normativity, but to no avail. My body was queer, I was a freak, and there’s no room for a freak in a performance featuring ideal normalness. There was not a slot on the bill for my voice to be heard.

But Embodied Rhetorics gave me the chance to explore my body. In doing so, I explored how my body showed up in the academy. I began to see how I might insert myself into the time and space of literature, scholarship, and art. Eventually, I came to see my body differently. I began to spin in the other direction. I began to

think about my performance differently, and I realized my body was my voice. Being in a time and space is a way of me inhabiting that time and space, of getting to know it in relation to me.

I realized that my performance had, up until recently, been about not drawing attention to myself. It was more about fitting in, going unnoticed, fading into the background. But now, with my body as my voice and my art, I realized that I am not queer because of my body. I am queer because I am not part of the background. I am a performance to be noticed, one that can and ought to affect others. I can spin in any direction I choose, and my audience can read me in any way that makes sense to them. In any case, I am a performance that must be appreciated.

THESE THINGS ARE NOT ACTUALLY THINGS: THE TROUBLE WITH EMBODIED RESISTANCE

WONDERFUL FAISON

When I came to this Embodied Rhetorics course, I wanted to understand in what ways as a Black, lesbian, disabled, working-class woman I was oppressed; I wanted to know how all these identities overlapped or folded onto or on top of one another. Many of the texts we read challenged my ideas of identity, normalcy, and embodiment.

However, some of these texts troubled me. One such text was *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules*. I do not critique this book as much as I critique what this book is not: a story of my resistance—a Black resistance. And I argue if it's missing a Black resistance, then it's missing the resistance of many other "Others." I do admit that I am collapsing the absence of Black speakers

in this text into the problematic Black/White binary² that pervades American culture and scholarship on racism, and although there was a POC represented in this text—an American Asian woman—the absence of Blackness (African Americans, African immigrants, Haitians, Afro Dominicans, etc.) leads to a glaring, and, at times, blinding whiteness.

What conflicted me about this book was not necessarily if the stories of the authors were resistant, but why they were resistant. These acts of resistance were done by mostly white, middle-class women. Though the authors in this anthology do note that this is an issue, very few, if any, delved into how impoverished, working-class people of color willingly resist body norms, leading me to question if willing resistance to body norms is another White privilege.

I do not pretend to suggest that an anthology written by authors other than myself could write my story of resistance: it cannot. My story is still being written. In fact, it is being written now. However, we read books because they can relate and connect to parts of us we thought missing, overlooked, or dead. This is the power of stories: they connect. Yet all I read within this specific text were stories about choice, privilege, and money. Tattoos, haircuts, and roller derby: is this resistance? I live in a capitalist society. Choice, privilege, and money are not resistance to me; at times, they are the very things that oppress me. My people are being murdered by the police, having the rights they fought for taken away, living with scarce resources and a lack of opportunity, and becoming victims of injustice simply because of their skin color; getting tattoos, participating in roller derby, and cutting one's hair are not acts of resistance.

Altering one's physical appearance in unconventional ways is not what I consider a true act of resistance. The choice a woman makes to cut her hair short, or the privilege and money it costs to either adorn a body with tattoos or join a roller derby league are not acts of resistance to me: by and large all of these are illusions rather than practices of resistance. They are, simply and quite frankly, practices of privilege. Tattoos cost money. Haircuts cost money. Joining a roller derby league costs MONEY. These physical alterations simply account for choices relating to a physical representation of self. I know women of all sexualities with short hair. It's not that serious. I know people with several tattoos. It's not that serious. I know of women, mostly white women, who have joined roller derby leagues. I used to watch roller derby on TV, and again, it's not that serious. To me, these acts of "resistance" are not actually resistant. Do these acts of so-called resistance do what they purport to do: resist? Can their acts of resistance disrupt hegemonic notions of normal if/once they are commodified by this capitalist society? This question also applies to Black people as this society has also commodified Black culture. Though I felt excluded as a person of color when reading this text, I realize that I can only critique this text as exclusionary but so much because these were not stories about my resistance. My resistance has yet to be written—until now.

In *Embodied Resistance*, feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky argues, "The empirical evidence is compelling that bodies (and the people who inhabit them) are vulnerable to social norms of looking and behaving. There is no shortage of rules dictating what we should or should not wear, inhale, ingest, the size, shape, and overall appear-

ance of our bodies; and even our gestures, gait, and posture" (qtd. in Bobel and Kwan 1). When people resist these constructs, their bodies often become the site of fear, inquiry, oppression, and physical violence. I see resistance as being "out-of-order" and "out-of-line," and being born Black and female in the United States marked me as "out-of-order" and "out-of-line." I did not choose to be resistant. I neither had the privilege of being resistant, nor did I have the money to pick and choose my resistance activities. I was born into a system that marked me as resistant simply because of my race and gender. My sexuality made it worse; my lack of physical ability, even more so, and my class—the final nail in my coffin of resistance. It did not matter that I was born into a middle-class (or lower middle-class) family; it did not matter that I had the traditional family unit of mother, father, three brothers, and a sister; it did not matter that my father worked thirty-plus years. All that mattered was that we were Black in America—and that's a problem.

I asked in a discussion board post for this class, "what if a body is a site of resistance no matter how much that body attempts to conform to White hegemonic views of the 'proper,' 'correct,' and an 'in line' body . . . but is still marked as out of order?" If I am to be marked as resistant without wanting to be resistant, then I have decided that I will resist in my own way: I will resist that which is marked as "normal." Some scholars will call this resistance queer, other scholars will label it feminist, others will label it something else. I care not what the academy labels my resistance. My resistance is a practice of freedom. I practice freedom. This is my resistance. I resist the ideas that we are all the same and that we are all equal. We

are not. Ideas of sameness are lies: nothing but lies. My parents toed the line. They got married. They had kids. They worked hard. They paid their taxes. They sent their kids to good schools, and valued education and the possibilities it provided. They raised us to be God-fearing Christians. And they were still victims of astounding racism, oppression, and acts of violence.

I toed the line. I went to school. I got good grades. I earned three degrees. I am earning every ounce of this PhD. Yet I am still a victim of people thinking I'm not actually an intellectual. I'm just the "Affirmative Action" get. I resist the idea that any sexuality other than heterosexuality is "unnatural," "wrong," or "going against God." I resist ideas that because I am woman I am weak, stupid, and deserving of sexual violence. I resist ideas that say that what I wear is only for men to desire me. NO! I resist ideas that because I am disabled and poor, I am useless and dependent upon more able-bodied citizens. I resist these ideas everyday by being Black, female, lesbian, disabled, and working-class. And I am proud of every bit of who I am. I enact this resistance every day. This thing is an actual thing. I am a walking, talking, breathing resistance. I embody it with pride. This is my body and my story. This is my resistance.

EMBODIED MANIFESTATIONS OF MEMORY

JOHN T. GAGNON

Before reading further, you should know that the work I do is *driven* by stories, the stories told by others and my own stories, too. The stories that live inside me give form to my identity and constantly negotiate my place in this world. These stories

connect with, pass through, and bounce up against other stories existing inside other bodies, and in other spaces, places, and times. As Joy Harjo has written, "A story matrix connects all of us" (28). In this piece, I'd like to share a story of my own—a small part of that story matrix, if you will—because I embrace Cherokee author Thomas King's words, which have profoundly impacted my personal and academic evolution: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2). But I didn't always see it that way, *and that's part of my story*.

During the Fall 2014 semester, I enrolled in Embodied Rhetorics, a course situated within my concentration. I wanted to explore the significance of embodiment because, early on, I recognized the need to more fully acknowledge, emphasize, and value the human body in my research and writing practices because my research was focusing on lived experiences—experiences of the body. Generally speaking, I came prepared to do that work—a typical graduate student, books in hand, eagerly anticipating a semester's worth of discussion about concepts like race, gender, class, sexuality, and identity. What I wasn't prepared for was the internal, inward-looking work that would be required of me. The pivotal moment came early on in the semester, after a class discussion on Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, which explored the intersections of memory, the body, and objects across time.

I recall that it was an unremarkable late September evening. Not too warm, not too cool, a bit humid, the sun easing its way into the twilight phases. Like every other unremarkable Thursday evening, I bolted from my Embodied Rhetorics class, made my way along the Red Cedar River, and turned west, speed walking to the edge of

campus and continuing down the Lansing River Trail. Most evenings, I would keep an eye out for wildlife in the nature preserve, but on this evening I turned attention to my body, as we had been encouraged to do in class.

Slight breeze tickling ears. Cheeks flushed. Trickle of sweat on forehead. Tingling sensation in right hand. Recurring, mysterious pop in left knee. Tension in right calf. Abrasive rub of too-tight shoes on heels. Lungs heaving. Heart rate increasing. My feet hammered away at the pavement beneath me. I noted each twitch, every sensation, all the little pains and discomforts. I was methodical, precise, making mental notes.

Despite the meticulous effort to catalogue each physical sensation, I started to lose control of the process. My body began remembering things long forgotten. It remembered gnawing hunger. It remembered disabling fear. The sting of calloused hands. It remembered fists and bruises and the smell of cheap vodka. The taste of blood. It remembered shivering under the stars. My body remembered. *I remembered.* Then, dizziness, nausea, a shudder and . . . hands flapping . . . a sensation of falling . . . soft body on hard ground . . . chest constricting . . . Gasping. For. Air.

I had been asking, from the first day of class: How do our memories impact us physically? Sitting on the ground—hands muddled, trousers torn, gasping—trying desperately to regain composure, I finally had some sort of an answer. Cataloging my bodily activity initiated a physically manifested chain reaction connected to memories living inside my body, memories that I had long suppressed. No matter how far I removed myself, these stories had continued living within me. I had tried

to forget. I had tried to rewrite my history, both as a form of resistance to uncomfortable realities of my past and as a recognition of my own inherent failings. But the hopes and dreams and bruises that my body carried *then* were *still* carried within my body at that moment, no matter how hard I tried to forget.

That epiphany encouraged me to begin a process of knowing or, rather, re-knowing my story, revisiting where I had come from and examining how that story lives within—and influences—me even today. It gave me the courage to begin exploring and dissecting the many narratives that have defined me and undefined me, and to be more open about my own fragility, academically and otherwise. More importantly, that moment gave me the freedom to acknowledge the dis-ease within my own story. I realized that accepting it as my own would be a recognition of the places, people, and experiences that comprised my journey to this moment. I finally began understanding that I could not engage in good research and good research practices into the use of storytelling by others without first exploring how my own stories—knowingly and unknowingly—intersected with, informed, and framed my work.

On the wall of my home office hangs a rather ugly piece of self-created chalk art, something I made after that evening's walk down the Lansing River Trail. Chalk, as a medium, is easily smudged, wiped away, smeared, forgotten. Those who have seen it typically describe the piece as uncomfortable, raw, and gritty. The colors are off-putting shades of green, brown, and orange. Black smudges—fingerprints—are scattered over the surface. Those fingerprints are attached to me, to my past, and to all the stories I remem-

ber, am remembering, and to those I've forgotten, too. Superimposed over the fingerprints is blood-red text from Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*: "We survive until, by sheer stamina, we escape into the dim innocence of our own adulthood and its forgetfulness" (106). The words ride on top, in greater permanence, boldness, and visibility; crimson reminders that I, too, once escaped into forgetfulness and that all of the stories living inside me, no matter how uncomfortable, matter. They matter to my research. They matter to my relationships. They matter to my humanity. The image and words daily remind me that I need to continually strive to remember so that I can "impart [my] own life and experience into the telling" (Wilson 32).

What stories, I wonder, live inside you?

BODIES AS CONTAINERS FOR MEMORIES

EZEKIEL CHOFFEL

What does it mean to consider one's body for the first time? How often are we expected to remove our physical self from our scholarship? What is at stake when we begin to shift our physical beings into the space from which we have been asked to remove them?

Throughout our Embodied Rhetorics class I found myself returning to these questions frequently. I began to consider the different ways that I have removed myself from my scholarship, the only part of me left is my brain, but not really my brain, more like an abstract idea of my brain. A gooey mess that only reflected the things I want to be seen and investigated. The idea of ideas.

As I tried to bring myself, but more specifically my body, back into my scholarship I felt uncomfortable. I felt like I was

in someone else's skin and I couldn't recognize myself. As a scholar who positions their work at the crossroads of land-based methodologies and rhetoric, I know that the further I removed myself from my scholarship the further I removed myself from the land.

I have to walk the land to know the way it moves. I have to dig my hands deep into the soil to know how the earth feels. To do these things, I have to have my body to interpret the meanings my brain is making. The process of understanding my body in relation to the scholarship I do is hard. It causes me physical duress because I have separated myself from my thoughts and ways of understanding. This class represented my attempt to bring me back. A means to an end: to remember and practice the reasons why I began the work of a rhetorician.

I did not, however, expect the resulting experience. Reading texts that spoke as much to my body as my brain left me wasted and washed away. I found myself on edge but also expecting more. More of myself, more of my classmates. I wanted to deconstruct while constructing myself into newer ways of knowing. I saw my reflection in Harjo's *Crazy Brave*, not because of the content but because of the approach to knowing. I was not prepared to bare my soul to these people, the proverbial peer. No longer could I count my classmates as friends, because I was no longer Ezekiel.

Depending on what I was reading, I was the younger, angrier, left behind and abused version of myself that I had forgotten. I was Zekethemadelf, the lonely Aimer who sought love through hours of instant messages. I was Zeke (the shortened version of my name that reflects the simplicity that has been imposed upon

me). I was Dr. Rage, the alter ego whom I believe I could be, but have chosen not to be, nor do I want to be. I was The Prophet Ezekiel leading my Angels of Fire to eternal metal glory, spilling my soul and deepest thoughts through blazing guitar riffs and death wails. Bodies as containers for memories.

Connections and Reflections

The student stories illustrate the variety of ways that embodied rhetorics needs to be experienced and not just read about—each student had a very different experience and left with different takeaways after the fifteen weeks. However, they all reflect personal embodied reactions to the texts we read and their experiences with the class; they all show revelations about self and identity and how their bodies exist and make arguments in the world. As instructors, we had hoped that we would engage with students in a range of ways through the diverse readings, discussions, and multimodal responses that we asked for. And we did. But we also found that the reality of engaging with so many different students so deeply as they worked through interrogating their own embodied identities was that we, as instructors, felt responsible for making sure they grew in safe, productive ways—which was both rewarding and exhausting and, sometimes, frustrating. In this conclusion, we offer some instructor reflections about our pedagogies and end with suggestions for how to teach your own course focused on embodiment.

We were as organized as we could possibly be going in, and we were open to change and possibility; but still we weren't totally prepared for what we experienced teaching this course. As the instructors

of the course, we went into the semester knowing this was going to be a complex rhetorical dance. In retrospect, we had no idea what we were getting into. Teaching this class was hard. It was hard on the body, it was hard on our emotions, it was hard to evaluate. In fact, something we knew abstractly became very real: embodied rhetorics have to be experienced, not just read about. Trixie found herself physically and mentally exhausted by the end of class each week. Paying attention to her own body as it reacted to readings was just step one. There was also paying attention to what students were sharing—content that was often full of pain, anger, and intense vulnerability in reading reflections, in private emails, in class discussion. This required focus also included paying attention to the body language of eighteen other people for three hours each week. There were hard memories, and tears, and anger; alliances and disagreements to wade through. Paying attention, really listening to (and watching) this many people and exchanges at once takes a wealth of energy. At the same time, Katie, who occupied a liminal space as both instructor and student, found herself decompressing with other students over food and drink each week and getting round two of the lived curriculum, the debriefing of what had happened or been discussed in class.

We were determined to use feminist, queer, and decolonial pedagogical practices throughout the class, which meant creating safe enough space for a wide variety of voices, thoughts, and practices—seventeen (or nineteen) in this instance—and not allowing students to hide among the numbers. As mentioned previously, the riskiness of class topics meant there were numerous things to pay attention to, which didn't always include

making sure we had heard from each and every person each week. Some students naturally talk more than others, so those who didn't want to speak—because they were shy, because the topics were too painful, because they weren't prepared—found it easy enough to just nod and not contribute during whole-class discussions. We often combatted this by breaking into small groups for various activities and discussions and by asking for individual responses each week before class began. Because there were two of us facilitating the class, we could get to each group every time.

Using feminist, queer, and decolonial pedagogical practices also meant challenging thinking and expanding lines of thought without shutting people down. One tool for this is using the improv statement/approach of “yes, and” (as opposed to “no, but” or “yes, but”). Trixie was most known for the reply, “tell me more” or “say more about X.” Challenging while expanding often meant asking where a particular line of thought was coming from: What had been read? Experienced? Felt in the body? We had to slow things down and see what connections were being made—and why. It also meant heading off shaming practices; in fact, this may have been the only time we actually shut someone down and asked them to rephrase. We talked explicitly about shaming—what it meant, how it happened, how to disagree or have a personal preference without shaming someone else's personal preferences or practices. It is critically important to hold space for people who experience oppression in different ways than you; we tried to help the class develop their own inner critic so they could catch themselves when they were about to harm others with their perspectives or statements.

We tried to practice “calling in” instead of “calling out,” when people engaged in oppressive discourse. Writing for *Everyday Feminism*, Sian Ferguson explains that the “calling in” approach sees the transgressor as a member of the larger activist community and engages one on one with people to help them work through what they might have meant, so that they can see how their words or actions were harmful to others. This is opposed to “calling out,” which simply acknowledges harmful behavior without individual educational recourse. For us, “calling in” happened through emails, private conversations outside of class, feedback on assignments, and occasionally in the middle of class when a student was willing to engage in deconstructing their harmful views with others. We didn't always succeed when we called people in, but we hope that explicitly calling attention to and redirecting shaming practices continues to be helpful for everyone involved in the class.

Our pedagogical choices also meant allowing students to choose whether their weekly reading responses were public or private and then holding all of these in the proper realm each week. What had been shared with everyone and could be brought into class discussion? What needed to remain private? Who might choose to share despite their earlier requests for privacy? The extensive range of embodied experiences brought into and happening in/through the class each week at times created tensions with others who didn't embody the same ideas or understandings. This tension even led to outbursts of frustration as people tried to understand each other from their own, different, positionalities. Sometimes these moments were ugly, but we tried our best to make them productively ugly, such as

the talk about shaming referenced above and a later talk about different schools of thought/ theories about racism and intersectionality. At other times, frustrations and outbursts led to camaraderie and collaborative research.

These varied experiences also allowed for multiple “meta” conversations about teaching the course. Many weeks Trixie would start the class by discussing how she was feeling as the instructor—her frustrations, her joys, etc. Together we worked as a group to strategize ways to make the class better. This sort of decolonial pedagogy was critically important because this was a graduate classroom—we were seeking to embody, and to build, the kinds of pedagogy and practice we wanted to experience in other graduate classes. For Katie, this was very overwhelming at times—as she was always in between the roles of instructor and peer. The students were also learning to embody their scholarly selves in this class. We feel that it is critically important to teach scholars to approach making and understanding arguments from an embodied perspective.

The types of multimodal, multi-genre writings that we asked for, as well as the extremely personal and often risky topics that students wrote about, also created another difficult situation: grading. There was a wide range of scholarly experience among the students, from first-year MA students to third-year PhD students from three different disciplinary programs. There were video makers and artists as well as those who hadn’t picked up a crayon in twenty years. We kept trying to push people to move from their comfort zone into a contact zone (Pratt) to experience the weekly response in different ways through their body. We urged them to move from writing descriptive stories to

crafting vignettes that *argued* something. The feedback for this often seemed vague, or at least repetitive, as we asked them to “say more” or “dig deeper.” This approach demanded very individualized feedback and evaluation, as students took on different challenges for themselves.

We may seem to be stressing the negatives, but we actually chose to write this article in order to recognize how worthwhile a course like this is. Our first piece of advice for others who want to do a class like this would be: Go for it. Teaching an embodied rhetorics course can be an incredibly productive experience for both students and instructors. To make your course as productive and manageable as possible, we would suggest the following:

1. Keep it small. You need enough room for open discussion and trust among your participants without creating space for folks to hide.
2. Go into the course knowing that it will be exhausting emotionally and discuss this with students up front, so everyone can have their support system(s) in place. You may even want to have information about campus or local counseling centers or support available to share or on the syllabus.
3. Go out of your way to cultivate an atmosphere of respect in the classroom. Establish class rules for sharing, discussion, privacy, etc.
4. Talk about sex earlier in the class. We were halfway through the class before we had a week that specifically focused on sex, desire, and sexual practice, but this discussion really loosened people up, broke down some barriers, and made folks freer in discussion going forward.
5. Don’t move the class quite so much. Meeting in a different space each week definitely served the purpose of having

different embodied experiences in class and made folks aware of their learning spaces and learning needs, but also worked against having a sense of home and trust. So seek a balance of how and where you meet throughout the semester.

6. Don't write off someone else's story or experience—and don't let students do this to each other. Talk explicitly about shaming others and work as a class to call in instead of call out these behaviors whenever possible.

Teaching Embodied Rhetorics is risky business. But we contend that all truly engaged, critical teaching is risky—for both instructor and student. hooks sees the classroom as a performative space where all parties are required to acknowledge each other and engage with each other. This is never truer than in a class focused on embodied rhetorics. The result as hooks would see it, and as we would see it as well, is the transgressive pleasure of learning. We invite you to experience it for yourself.

Appendix A: Course Syllabus

AL 891.002 Cultural Rhetorics: Embodied Rhetorics

Fall 2014

Th 3:00–5:50

Instructor:

Email:

Office: EBH 300E

Office Hours: Th 1–3 and by appointment

Teaching Intern:

Email:

Office: EBH 300B

Office Hours: W 3–5

Required Texts

Ahmed, Sarah. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

Barry, Lynda. *What It Is*.

Bobel and Kwan (Eds.) *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules*.

Driskoll and Justice (Eds.) *Sovereign Erotics*.

Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*.

Harjo, Joy. *Crazy Brave*.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*.

Weber, Lynn. *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*.

Other readings will be posted on Angel as pdf files.

Course Description

This Studies in Rhetoric course will examine the idea of embodiment, how notions of embodiment play out in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, size, and other factors. Then how these various ways of viewing, interacting with/through, and thinking about bodies affect/create rhetorical structures and genres. In particular we will be considering intersectionality, ways of controlling/policing bodies as well as ways of

resisting and subverting such control, bodies in particular circumstances/places/spaces such as classrooms, research, medical establishments, dress, and performance. We will also be seeking an awareness of our embodied identities and thus what we bring to the places and spaces we inhabit, including our own relationships (with a wide array of people and institutions) and research. At times, readings, discussions, and activities required in the course will probably make you uncomfortable—they are supposed to; however, if something is too much for you, please come talk to me right away.

Academic Honesty

The university has firm policies regarding academic honesty and you will be held to these policies. You may not present another person's work—including pictures and other images—or ideas as your own, you may not allow another person to write an assignment for you, and you must properly acknowledge source materials. Be sure to save all notes and drafts that lead up to a finished piece, so you can avoid problems and correct errors if they exist. If in doubt about how to document source materials or about the originality of your work, please feel free to discuss it with me.

Please Note: Students with disabilities who may require assistance or who have questions related to any accommodation for testing, note takers, readers, etc., must inform the instructor and provide certification from the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD), 120 Bessey Hall, 517/353-9642 or TTY 517/355-1293.

This syllabus serves as a contract between you, the student, and me, the professor, and should serve as your guideline for the semester. By staying in this class, you are agreeing to follow all the guidelines given above and to be responsible for your own actions.

Assignments

You must submit all assignments to receive credit for the course.

Weekly Reading Responses (20%)—These 12 (---13) responses will serve several purposes: (1) to record your reactions/responses/questions about the assigned readings, (2) to list the issues from the readings that we should discuss in class, (3) to begin dialogue about the readings and then continue discussions from class, (4) to relate readings to your individual projects, (5) to experiment with different forms and methods of responding. I am asking you to make a variety of different types of responses, so you will have a variety of different bodily experiences responding to the readings/viewings of the class:

- Two written responses
- Two video or audio responses
- One visual of some type
- One making/production product
- One other mode/medium/style. . . —surprise us :)
- 5 Free choice (repeats of any of the above)
- You also have the option to pass one week; use it wisely

Due weekly by midnight on Wednesday night.

Class Participation (15%)—This is a seminar class, so you will be expected to be present, prepared, and engaged each day. Class discussion will focus on the readings and the issues you bring to class each week, as well as your ongoing projects. We will also have a number of presentations/facilitations throughout the semester; when you miss someone's presentation/facilitation, you miss important information and interaction that cannot be duplicated so you will lose a point every time you miss a presentation. This will include being a weekly discussion leader (see explanation below). If you are not in class, you cannot participate; therefore, tardies and more than three absences will reduce your final grade. If you must be absent, please let me know beforehand and check with your classmates to get missed notes.

✓ **Weekly Discussion Leaders**—Each person will be asked to facilitate the class's discussion of one or more related articles or chapters each week. You will sign up for these in advance. How you approach this task is up to you, but remember to have the class involved and to let them know ahead of time if they need to do anything or bring anything to be prepared for class on your day. You will typically have 20–30 minutes for your portion of the class.

Literature Circles (15%)—In small groups (of 3, no exceptions), you will read a text related to or illustrative of embodiment. This is a chance for you to pursue a topic of interest to you, a topic that we may not be able to cover in class otherwise. It's also a chance for you to introduce this topic to the rest of the class. In a formal oral presentation/facilitation—with a handout—you will summarize the text for the rest of the class and explain what it has to offer to the idea of embodied rhetorics. What can we learn from this text, as theorists, researchers, educators, activists, etc.? You will assign (and provide through D2L) an excerpt from this text, an explication of this text, or a published response to this text for the class to read in order to aid class discussion the night of your presentation. Please sign up for your book and group by September 11. Presentation date _____.

Literature Circle Text Suggestions

Alcoff, Linda Martin. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*

Allison, Dorothy. *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*

Dolmage, Jay. *Disability Rhetoric*

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*

Mol, Annemarie. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*

Moraga, Cherrie. *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*

Morgensen, Scott. *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*

Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality*

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed Other?*

Organic Mini-Projects (15%)—These will grow out of readings, discussions, experiences, community/university offerings, etc. They will usually be small projects of some kind designed to help you observe yourself, your body in action or stasis, the bodies of those

around you or in a particular space/place. They will also include self-reflective assignments and debriefings after various activities and/or experiences.

Self-designed Final Project (35%)—Projects should be multimodal in some way and should reflect ideas of embodiment in some way. They can be connected to conferences and publications.

Absolutely no annotated bibs. Project ideas should be discussed with me early in the semester; written proposals are due by October 16th and a progress report is due November 13th. Final projects are due at the end of the term and will be shared with the class in lieu of a final exam.

NOTES

1. There are several other texts that focus specifically on the writing classroom, particularly the common first-year writing class. Since this is not the type of class we are discussing here, we have not focused on that literature, but it was certainly in the back of our minds as we made decisions about our course. If you are interested, we would recommend these books: Jody Shipka, *Toward a Composition Made Whole* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Kristin L. Arola and Anne Wysocki *Composing (Media) = Composing (Embodiment)* (Utah State University Press, 2012); and Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes, *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies* (NCTE, 2014). We would also recommend these articles: William P. Banks, "Written Through the Body: Disruptions as Personal Writing" (*College English*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 21–40); Jonathan Alexander, "Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)composing Narratives of the Gendered Body" (*CCC*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 45–82), and Jane E. Hindman, "Writing an Important Body of Scholarship: A Proposal for an Embodiment Rhetoric of Professional Practice" (*JAC*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 93–118).

2. "The conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White" (Perea, 1997, p. 133).

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