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Body Oddities: Hypothetical (Com)positions from the Physically Extreme

Cover Page Footnote

Mark McBeth teaches composition and rhetoric courses at The City College of New York, where he also acts as the Director of the Writing Center. He resides in Manhattan and is completing his Ph.D. at the City University of New York Graduate Center, concentrating in Composition and Rhetoric Studies and Queer Theory.

Body Oddities: Hypothetical (Com)positions from the Physically Extreme

Mark McBeth

*Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and
most invisible body effects the divinest work: it can stop fear
and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity*

Gorgias

*The act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the
speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical
dichotomy between the domain of the "mental" and the domain
of the "physical," breaks down the opposition between body and
spirit, between matter and language.*

Shoshana Felman

The human body, arriving from the womb, is genetically constructed, a slick, wrinkled bundle of breath and flesh. In some cases, however, that package emerges deformed, failing pre-set expectations of the accepted biological model. Nature creates anomalous human forms, hermaphrodites or conjoined twins. Other times, the seemingly standard body goes hormonally awry to defy the standard ideal: bearded ladies, men whose weights exceed four digits. Paradoxically, these "victims of nature" have historically been hidden from sight or commodified upon the sideshow stage. When exhibited, these extreme bodies have been displayed like "freakish" theatrical props to play upon their observers' sympathy, curiosity, and sense of relief. Their (re)presentations provided a vantage point where on-lookers, as members of a prescriptive society, could position their own sense of normalness (or freakishness). In other words, their alternative subjectivities were replaced by the audience's objectifying and emotional gaze. The curtain pulls away to reveal their bodies, and, simultaneously, the audience's strange and

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shocking morbidity unveils. Yet the observers often forget that, for these constructed Others, conventional bodies are aberrations, anomalous to *their* self-naturalized states; thus, in the end, all are freaks. Freak, normally disparaging, becomes for my purposes a linguistic tool that implicates all, hence destabilizing entrenched sensibilities of a "naturalized" self. All individuals gain a self-generated subjectivity through their corporeal situation, a somatic accrual of experience that Margaret Miles (1989) calls "carnal knowing." She explains carnal knowing as being "both embodied and social," encapsulating all the particularities of both the public and private. She proposes, "Body and subjectivity have in common, it seems, a thoroughgoing vulnerability to the transformative effects of social conditioning through gendered representations" (p. 10).

For the purposes of this essay, I would extend her feminist statement to read "*engendered* representations" which, more generally, exist through a body of multiple influences and subjectivities. Feminists consider the implications of the female body (i. e., de Beauvoir, Cixous, Irigaray, Wittig); I broaden their ideas to ruminate upon the divergent body. I specifically explore atypical embodiments and their rhetorical effects: How do the bearded lady's ablutions and their aberrant effects shift the way the world perceives her and, thus, how she can control it? How will the hermaphrodite's bi-sexed body re-complicate his/her explication of events, a twice inflected worldview? How do conjoined twins negotiate their perspectives; would their strategy(-ies) be the same as our single-minded frames? How do extreme ("freakish") bodies lend certain nuances, values, or credences to the understanding of the world? And, finally, how do these physically different individuals compose their worlds? I want to reflect upon the physically cross-gendered, the hormonally altered, the biologically conjoined to consider how their diversity underscores the body's relation to a person's idiosyncratic processes, functions, and epistemes—in short, one's "freakishness."

The body, because it ceaselessly accompanies the mind, must have other altering perceptual effects. Judith Butler (1990) advises that the body should not be considered a passive medium that is defined solely by external, cultural forces. She questions, "What separates off 'the body' as indifferent to signification, and signification itself as the act of a radically disembodied consciousness or, rather, the act that radically disembodies that consciousness?" (p. 129). She implicates the body in the meaning-making even before cultural forces commence regulation. Likewise, Esther Newton (1979), in her ethnographic study of female impersonators, shows how crossing-dressing men and their bodily performances both defy and redefine legalistic and social (cultural) conventions. Her work, more than just theorizing a particular "deviancy," evinces how that extreme and marginalized community divulges general attitudes and ideals of American culture. Newton confirms, "But drag, like violence, is as American as apple pie. Like violence, it is not an accident or mistake, nor is it caused by a few people's weak character. It is an organic part of American culture—exactly the 'flip side' of many precious ideals" (pp. 112–113). Throughout her study, she demonstrates how that "flip side"—the life of drag queens—succinctly reflects and comments upon the society in which it exists. Thus, the extreme aptly exposes and expounds.

My characters' body oddities are, likewise, considered extremes, media hypes and photo ops at which to gape. But instead of relying on this scopic economy

(Dallery, 1981; Irigaray, 1981), I want to allow these extreme conditions of physicality to disclose their alternative perspectives, and to impart their compositional processes within the context of their material worlds. The challenge is to deflate the “hype” by reincorporating their bodies’ meaning-making significance, and inferring these personas’ differences as optional and productive ways of knowing. Through the act of writing, I, vicariously, occupy their physically extreme positions to ponder their diversity, and the effects those distinctions have upon their imagined thought-composing processes. I invent particular events in these characters’ lives by integrating my life experience with researched accounts and diaries of a bearded lady, a hermaphrodite, and conjoined twins, and in doing so, surmise how these figures internalize external pressures and respond performatively and compositionally to develop their ways of knowing (and being). I then compare these intimate narratives to the experiences of real writers who record how their bodies played important roles in their text- and meaning-making processes. I want the questions of this essay to become self-reflective: Do the physical constructions of allotted bodies affect my thinking processes and the way I know myself? How does my body relate to and/or affect my emerging compositional voice? Although these examples of private writing are admittedly hypothetical, I consider how these individuals with physical differences—as biologically, historically, culturally, and ontologically marked and Othered selves—demonstrate, in more revealing ways, how writers perceive themselves and how those selves compose and are composed. Their bodies, further, uncover other questions about learning to compose and teaching writing: How does the body intervene in the performance of writing and, likewise, how does writing recompose the body’s construction? How do (mis)conceptions of the body, in relation to writing, help or hinder students’ learning and teachers’ pedagogical efforts?

Bearded Woman: The Body’s Performance of Its -Ness

In the steamed bathroom mirror, she writes H-A-I-R-I-N-E-S-S; each letter condenses and drips. In the misty reflection I see the bearded woman. She is rugged and beautiful. I shall never shave. She said this years ago, and ever since sports her natural mane. I am a simultaneous change of disguise, beyond the tricks of quick change. She performs in the guise of five o’clock shadow. I gain the respectable handshake of unsuspecting masculinity. She conceals her breasts beneath baggy flannel. I hear them hesitate, “Something strangely pretty about that man with the beard?” She steps out her door, and I am he, if I choose to be. Today, she shall buy a hammer and nails, wood glue and spackle, consume the entire store and reconstruct all that it engenders. If anyone can emasculate that hardware world, I can. She can change your view and you won’t even know it. And like Samson, my powers grow thicker and longer, and like Delilah I control them. You can huff and you can puff, but she will not depilate nor debilitate. Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin.

The bearded lady's experience illustrates to us the body's power to violate society's preconceptions, while society, simultaneously, limits her actions/reactions. In a parallel situation, writers' bodies impel the external forces which, once again, motivate their actions/words. This interaction of "power and resistance" reproduces itself in recursive loops. Foucault (1978/1990), in his *History of Sexuality*, explains that "power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations " (p. 94). He sees power as a *not* solely top-down process, and recognizes how resistance is distributed unevenly, "furling across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds" (pp. 94-96). In this type of power relationship, a certain agency can then be reclaimed by the non-privileged. The bearded lady, although physically at a marginal point, can exercise the power of her whiskers with(in) and against a certain gender-marked system, and, so, her resistance and the world's pressure are equivocally confluent.

Writers also work with and against these external pressures. The resistances relate to the writer's body and its -nesses (Raceness, Classness, Sexualness, Genderness, Hairiness). These "nesses" are further accompanied by certain bodily habits and performances, such as ethnically-centered traditions, resistance against gendered expectations, or the bearded lady's refusal to shave. The external world maintains preconceived ideas about the writers' bodies, inevitably commenting upon them and the performances prescribed to their appearance. Thus, writers internalize the world's perception of them, influencing their chosen performances relating to the -ness of the body, and they react accordingly or discordingly. Who, then, takes agency—writers, society, or the "beard"? What might be called the power of inscription displays itself from and through the characteristics and (re)actions of the writerly body. If I am conditioned to believe that my voice must be underspoken (or just plain silent) because of my body's social position in society, how will my written voice emerge—as a relinquishing murmur or a relieving scream?

As an example, Carol Mavor (1995), in her collection of essays *Pleasures Taken*, records and analyzes the Victorian love affair of Arthur Munby (a Cambridge-educated gentleman) and Hannah Cullwick (a lower servant). Munby's collection of photographs of Hannah (the name she preferred to be called) displays the gentleman's voyeuristic interest in her working-class life posed against her ability at masquerading as an upper-class lady. Both Munby's and Hannah's diaries reveal that it was she who suggested that she dress as a man in public, so that her identity and their public activities together could be covert. In many instances, Hannah sustains agency in subversive ways within the societal context that she lives. Mavor (1995) comments:

Despite the volumes of diaries that they both kept, and despite the forty-odd photographs of her in the Munby Box, it is hard to get a hold of Hannah. One wonders if her invisibility within this space of excess representation is not tied to her own desire to defy visibility. She made invisibility into an art. She wore her thirteen-and-one-half-inch biceps as proudly as she wore her dirt. Her dirt, her masculine stride, her lack of womanly manners enabled her to go

through the streets of the city freely, without the usual constraints placed upon the Victorian lady.... Hannah writes in her diaries: “That’s the best o’being drest rough & looking ‘nobody’—you can go anywhere and not be wonder’d at.” (pp. 77-78)

The photographs and diaries of Hannah recount how aware she is of societal constraints about her image, her romance, and her position in society (all bodily-related). It is this self-awareness and insight into societal mores that sustain her control and her ability to compose herself. Through photographic imagery, journal writing, and daily performance, Hannah composes a life that concedes and transgresses her culture’s norms. While recognizing that she remains under public scrutiny, “looking ‘nobody,’” she nevertheless devises means to undermine the external view, using it to her advantage.

Similarly, throughout bell hooks’ (1989) essay “Talking Back,” hooks repeatedly refers to how the reactions of the people in her world affected her and her voice. Unlike the bearded lady and Hannah, who gain social advantages by rethinking their physical situations, hooks’ female voice (her talking back—her “beard” so to speak) repeatedly draws negative reactions:

In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, “back talk” and “talking back” meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion.... To make yourself heard if you were a child was to invite punishment, the back-hand lick, the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs. (p. 5)

She reiterates:

Questioning authority, raising issues that were not deemed appropriate subjects brought pain, punishments—like telling mama I wanted to die before her because I could not live without her—that was crazy talk, crazy speech, the kind that would lead you to end up in a mental institution. “Little girl,” I would be told, “if you don’t stop all this crazy talk and crazy acting you are going to end up right out there at Western State.” (p. 7)

hooks develops physically and mentally *through* the external forces—the back-hand lick, the silencing, and the warnings of insanity. She composes herself by “talking back”; the world reacts with a slap; nevertheless, she rejoins. She recognizes authority’s regulations, limitations, and threats, and realizes that her world’s perception has an indelible (in her case, painful) effect upon her thinking, yet she is able to prevail over those external forces and use their negative reactions to her advantage. The world tries to relegate change, but its intentions are not always fulfilled. Judith Butler (1997), in *Excitable Speech*, explains how the insult, or other external pressure, can indirectly enable the writer:

The insult, however, assumes its specific proportion in time. To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language.... Does the power of language to injure follow from its interpellative power? And how, if at all, does linguistic agency emerge from this scene of enabling vulnerability? (p. 2)

I join Butler in questioning how insults, oppressions, or restrictions introduce a certain type of agency to the "mouthy" hooks, the muscular Hannah, and the unshaven woman, regardless of potential linguistic injuries.

If a bearded woman passes through her day using her beard as a disguise to fool the world, will the world treat her differently than if she were without that prop? Will they give her allegedly masculine opinions more respect, not direct her attention to the vanity mirrors? Will they question her authority less because she is perceived as male? The world believes its paradigms of gender, sexuality, and social position; it has naturalized the implications of the body, thus designating who has the authority to speak and who doesn't. hooks uses the black male preacher's voice as an example of authority that was to be heard and remembered. Unlike his revered voice, her and other black women's voices were to be ignored. She proclaims, "Our speech, 'the right speech of womanhood,' was often the soliloquy, the talking into thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear you—the talk that is simply not listened to" (p. 6). Hélène Cixous (1991), from her own experience, confirms hooks' recognition of culturally-designated positions of linguistic authority:

You can desire. You can read, adore, be invaded. But writing is not granted to you. Writing is reserved for the chosen. It surely took place in a realm inaccessible to the small, to the humble, to women. In the intimacy of the sacred. Writing spoke to its prophets from a burning bush. But it must have been decided that bushes wouldn't dialogue with women. (pp. 13-14)

Cixous' satirical remark distinguishes how the female body and its words are suppressed and, through her writing, she reconstitutes a Jewish, foreign, female body which dares to compose.

The writing body reconciles. hooks (1989) finally resolves herself with the forces that try to silence her: "Certainly, when I reflect on the trials of my growing-up years, the many punishments, I can see now that in resistance I learned to be vigilant in the nourishment of my spirit, to be tough, to courageously protect that spirit from forces that would break it" (p. 7). And in "Coming to Writing," Cixous (1991) writes in a forcefully compelling voice about external powers in relation to her bodily identities:

Everything in me joined forces to forbid me to write: History, my story, my origin, my sex. Everything that constituted my social and cultural self.... You want—to Write? In what language? Property,

rights, had always policed me: I learned French in a garden from which I was on the verge of expulsion for being a Jew. I was of the race of Paradise-losers. Write French? With what right? Show us your credentials! What's the password? Cross yourself! Put out your hands, let's see those paws! What kind of nose is that? . . . Write? Taking pleasure as the gods who created the books take pleasure and give pleasure, *endlessly*; their bodies of paper and blood; their letters of flesh and tears; they put an end to the end . . . How could I have not wanted to write? . . . When my being was populated, my body traversed and fertilized [sic], how could I have closed myself up in silence? Come to me, I will come to you. When love makes love to you, how can you keep from murmuring, saying its names, giving thanks for its caresses? (pp. 12–13)

Instead of allowing the “body of knowledge” (her carnal knowing) to decompose under the forces that deride her, she re-composes her subjectivity, putting her critics under speculation and, thus, reconstituting her desire and herself in language.

How then does a disruption of “the naturalized”—whether that be the bearded woman, the biceped maid, the talking girl, or the writing “Jewoman”—affect the person who has been blessed with these respective gifts? If you can stroll through the world reweighing its prejudices, you perceive, and possibly undermine, far more easily its self-deceptions, its socially-constructed rules, and its idiocies. The bearded lady composes her day with the aid of her hairy face, not pretending, but allowing the rest of her world to pretend about what they want to perceive. hooks interrupts, talks back and writes while her family, colleagues, and critics try to hush her, silence her; they don't know that their futile attempts fuel her need to express herself. These women do not succumb to these rules and idiocies because they control them. They remain agents of their voices and passions for writing. The bearded lady, hooks, Hannah, and Cixous share parallel trickeries (hair, “mouthiness,” masquerade, passion). Their trickery is their resistance to and manipulation of what the world has accepted as “natural,” and their power is their ability to recompose it. In the end, none of them assimilate; all subvert.

Hermaphrodite's Note to His/Her Hateful Lover

I will not be with you tonight but you will feel me so close that you will weep when I am laughing in your face with my back turned to you. Why do you use all of my love to make me hate you? I know why but refuse to acknowledge the fact, but regardless, I can accept your fantasies. I can't imagine that you understand my adoring greetings within my despising farewells. With you, it is always so taxing the things you take for free. I am exiting now but I will find the right entry to escape the wrongful liberties you took. I just gave up. Down the road, you will realize why I remain so passionate about your indifference. Now get out of here.

The Hermaphrodite represents the polar views that dwell and are processed within the writer simultaneously, the internalized outside: man/woman, feminine/masculine, good/evil, strength/weakness, passion/reticence. And between those poles, between the penis and the vagina co-existing on one body, there is the interstitial space that is the fluid continuum of back-and-forthing. The hermaphroditic body lies between two societally naturalized sexes and, thus, hypothetically makes the contextual choices between those two social, gendered positions. This is exemplified by the diaries of Herculine Barbin (Foucault, 1978/1990), a 19th-century French hermaphrodite.

Until the age of twenty-one, Herculine Barbin lived as a female (working as a lady's maid, attending a women's normal school, and teaching in a girl's boarding school), after which she was medically and legally reinstated as a man. In some ways analogous to the bearded lady's situation, Barbin's situation might have been controlled by external powers, but s/he understood the advantages and disadvantages of knowing multiple perspectives. In the following journal excerpt, Barbin's multiplicity both clearly resounds and laments in her/his (com)position:

As the result of an exceptional situation, on which I do not pride myself, I, who am called a man, have been granted the intimate, deep understanding of all the facets, all the secrets, of a woman's character. I can read her heart like an open book. I could count every beat of it. In a word, I have the secret of her strength and the measure of her weakness, and so I would make a detestable husband for that reason. I also feel that all my joys would be poisoned in marriage and that I would cruelly abuse, perhaps, the immense advantage that would be mine, an advantage that would turn against me. (pp. 106–107)

Barbin reflects on how contextually paradoxical and problematic her/his position becomes. This hermaphroditic writer creates a voice that disputes and conciliates all that arrives/departs within her/his internal voice from outside influences. Barbin, as the hermaphroditic composer, constantly surveys the contextual shifts that exist in her/his life.

In Barbin's era, the spiraling realm of composing self becomes entangled in the external medicolegal forces and, likewise, in Barbin's own internal sense of morality and unfulfilled desires. Her/his self-actualization, in the end, is so pressured that s/he is driven to commit suicide. In Foucault's (1978/1990) introduction to the memoirs, he states:

Alexina [Barbin's female name] wrote her memoirs about that life once her new identity [as male] had been discovered and established. Her "true" and "definitive" identity. But it is clear she did not write them from the point of view of that sex which had at least been brought to light. It is not a man who is speaking, trying to recall his sensations and his life as they were at the time when he was not yet "himself." When Alexina composed her memoirs, she was not far from her suicide; for herself, she was still without a definite sex....

And what she evokes in her past is the happy limbo of a non-identity, which was paradoxically protected by the life of those closed, narrow, and intimate societies where one has the strange happiness, which is at the same time obligatory and forbidden, of being acquainted with only one sex. (p. xiii)

According to Foucault, under this constructed logosphere of sexless, “happy limbo,” Barbin’s desires and pleasures culminated into a fulfilling *jouissance*, which was, ultimately, destroyed by public opinion. Her detached attachment to both sexes offered Barbin multiple viewpoints in a desirously ever-shifting context, which in more conducive cultural conditions would have been enlightening and beneficial.

Cixous (1991) rejoices in the sensation of multiplicitous and unrestrained bodily writing, in which ambivalence is luxurious: “Languages pass into my tongue, understand one another, call to each other, touch and alter one another, blend their personal pronouns together in the effervescence of difference” (p. 31). She (and the once felicitous hermaphrodite) revel/rebel in a dichotomous world where opposites attract and repulse. They delight in the equal and opposite forces of the world, with their often contradictory and confounding sensibilities. They are oppositional and pluralistic—all-consuming—and confront each topic with the various influences that are attached to and through their bodies: male/female; writer/reader; penetrator/penetrated. Cixous (1991) extols:

I don’t “begin” by “writing”: I don’t write. Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text, history, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body, I go where the “fundamental language” is spoken, the body language into which all the tongues of things, acts, and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon in my flesh, intercepted by my nerves, by my senses, by the labor of all my cells, projected, analyzed, recomposed into a book. (pp. 51–52)

Finally, for Cixous (1990), the multiplicitous information, perspectives and sensibilities culminate into a univocalized text—a “text that is made of flesh” (p. 27).

The hermaphroditic writer is a diplomat, a negotiator, a single voice like a chorus representing all, yet constantly fighting the melody with him/herself, a cacophonous harmony. When Helen Wilcox (Cixous, 1990) describes Cixous, she states, “. . . the writer is exile and other, but also the reconciler of opposites. Underlying this is always the matter of . . . the perplexing question of the ‘I’” (p. 3). The hermaphrodite and the writer can clutch only temporarily onto the “I” because the “I” sometimes becomes, sometimes is already the “we,” the “you,” and the “they,” and, thus, as the writer proceeds, his/her identity shifts. Cixous (1990) confirms this idea when she succinctly comments, “Of course I don’t know who ‘I’ am/is/are” (p. 9). Even in Cixous’ grammatical construction of the copulas, the I of the writer collapses into the identity of I/he/she/you/they simultaneously. Accompanying this collapse (or, perhaps, inflation) of identity, the hermaphroditic writer develops a special relationship with his/her myriad

readers. Writer and reader, together, develop an intersubjective condition within the text (Brandt, 1990). These are textual places where the writer and audience gain awareness of each other in realms of ideas, opinions, experiences and perceived flesh.

In this textual place, the hermaphroditic writer reinvigorates the subject with an eros of ambiguity, which resonates with the multiplicity of discourses that exist there. Muriel Dimen (1989) writes in "Power, Sexuality, and Intimacy":

Erotic experience is extraordinary, lying somewhere between dream and daily life. Sped by desire, it knows no shame and no bounds. In it, pleasure and power, hurt and love, mingle effortlessly. It is a between-thing, bordering psyche and society, culture and nature, conscious and unconscious, self and other. Its intrinsic messy ambiguity confers on it an inherent novelty, creativity, discovery; these give it its excitements, its pleasure, its fearsomeness. Sexual experience entails loss of self-other boundaries, the endless opening of doors to more unknown inner spaces, confusions about what to do next or who the other person is or what part of the body is being touched or what part of the body is doing the touching or where one person begins and the other ends. This is sometimes pleasurable, sometimes painful, always unsettling. (pp. 46-47)

Dimen's description could as easily refer to the processes of composing as it does to the erotic; both erotic activity and writing can outwardly manifest the body's desires and pleasures. To highlight this overlap, I palimpsest: Sped by desire, *writing* knows no shame and no bounds. In it, pleasure and power, hurt and love, mingle effortlessly. *Writing* is a between-thing, bordering psyche and society, culture and nature, conscious and unconscious, self and other. Its intrinsic messy ambiguity confers on it an inherent novelty, creativity, discovery; these give it its excitements, its pleasure, its fearsomeness. Dimen's final statement, "This is sometimes pleasurable, sometimes painful, always unsettling" could not be more true about the process of composing. Writers, redefining themselves in these strategic processes, undertake relationships with the Other that often make them question their sense of self. And, as we will see in this final section, the bordering loss of self with the Other becomes even more pronounced in the situation of the conjoined twins.

The Simultaneous Journals of Conjoined Twins

On March 7, 1962, twins boys were born, conjoined twins commonly know as Siamese twins. The doctor said, "They've got one body and two heads." The father, stunned at the crude remark, felt suddenly divided about the Bible story of Abraham and his child lying on the stone. The mother gasped foreseeing their special tailoring, their summer jobs, their dates at their prom; for a moment, she lost herself. For the first two days the young pair did not move. The parents waited. The doctor told them, "If they live, they will be retarded." Those boys lived and developed as fully capable

individuals relegated to a single body. Their double-headed resistance defied their doctor's prognosis. From the age of six, they kept their diary. Following are mid-life entries:

December 25, 1992

Dear Diary,
Such a happy holiday! The children loved their presents. And their mother was so sweet with them. To think we've been together for 2 years already—her patience with all of us is heroic. I don't know what I'd do if I lost her. He always said he liked her but I can feel something opposed as residual as the beat of his heart against mine—a syn-copation, a complex and distressed syncopation. I've told him time and time again that if he doesn't stop sending that negative message that he will never connect with anyone. I feel as though he is so lonely (yet how can this be?). He rejects all of our invitations to join us in our games, our dinners, our family gatherings and yet he acts as if he's not a part of this. He refuses to see the importance of family, the importance of connections. It is as though he only wants separation, only sees the negative space between us. He didn't even answer me, only smirked when I wished him a happy birthday this morning. I guess he is worried about his age or something. I was too angry with him yesterday when he pontificated about how we shouldn't tell the children that there's a Santa Claus. He spouted some cockamamie stuff about how this would distort the children's sense of self. How this would separate them from a true sense of reality like a lie. I just don't know where he comes up with this stuff; he scares me sometimes.

Dear Diary,
Jingle Bells Santa Smells . . . I hate this holiday and its overblown importance and to think we were born on this day. I imagine our mother's horror when instead of getting some facsimile of the baby Jesus we popped out like some strange Hindu deity—our multiple heads wailing. He is killing me. His entire blind bliss infuriates me. This whole situation with the wife and those kids. They act like I'm not here like the complexity that I am. Like the living breathing monkey wrench that's thrown into their lives. When she fucks him does she not get off on me two (Oops Freudian slip)? We share our genitals. I always cover my head and go somewhere as fallow and barren as possible. Once the pleasure was so great that I whimpered beneath my cover. I accidentally gave over and that was the night the first baby was conceived. I know it. He was so pleased, so joyful. I told him to keep me out of it. As if . . . When he asked me to conceive the second one, I was hysterical. Couldn't stop laughing? But then his pain was so intense, so visceral, I could taste the bilious feelings rising within him. I gave in. I told him one more and that was it. When his stupid wife said that she would love if I was the godfather, I was dumbfounded. Those children came from my seed too and she talks as if I am a surrogate. And he said nothing. His lying silence astounds me. How can we be connected at all? How can he not face all that exists between us? —all that is both evident and implicit? Does he still believe in Santa Claus?

Imagine this scene. A pair of conjoined twins sits at a desk. The twins share a torso, a chair, a pair of legs with an attached yet unusable third leg. They have separate heads (thus brains) and attached to the opposite sides of their torso are two arms (logically, one twin is left-handed, the other right-handed). They freewrite on a given topic. What results from their inquiries, their explorations? How are their thinking processes the same and/or different? What will their perspectives be and how different can they be? Let's complicate this scene. There are two pairs of conjoined twins: the one previously mentioned, and another pair. These are attached at the head; they share only a part of their brain and no part of their bodies. They can never really face each other, always peering in directions slightly aschew from those of their physical partner. Will their perspectives be completely different? How does their shared brain process the simultaneous messages, images, and immediate visceral responses that each of these twins sends it at once?

Conjoined twins, an extension of the hermaphroditic writer, represent the multiple yet separate points of views that constantly exist within the writer, points of view that constitute a contingency to the world, an experience, a time, and a location. These poly-perspectives constantly separate and conjoin, re-shaping the self and voice that emerge from the body. The writer's voice, too, evolves depending upon the locations, limits, contacts, and attachments the body makes (i.e., socially, politically, sexually). The writer's bodily experience links him or her to other developments in his or her life, and other histories of other people, and other readers in other places. Bakhtin (1981) recognizes these links through language:

The tendency to assimilate others' discourse takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense. Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as *authoritative discourse*, and as *internally persuasive discourse*. (p. 342)

This ideological becoming of self, inevitably, involves the processes, markers, and performances of the body with and against authority (as seen, also, with the bearded lady, and the hermaphrodite). Throughout Bakhtin's writing in the *Discourse in the Novel*, he refers to various points of connection and separation from external (authorial) voices. At one point, he states,

[T]here is a struggle constantly being waged to overcome the official line with its tendency to distance itself from the *zone of contact*, a struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority. In this process, discourse gets drawn *into the contact zone*, which results in semantic and emotionally expressive (intonational) changes.... All of this has been studied by psychology, but not from the point of view of its verbal formulation in possible inner

monologues of developing human beings, the monologue that lasts a whole life. [italics added] (p. 345)

This lifelong inner voice relies on the body's interaction and experience with the surrounding world—a contact that is, at once, somatic and visceral.

Adrienne Rich (1979) recognizes the impact of her body, her performative lesbian body, on the connections and experiences (Bakhtin's "dialogized monologue") she makes with the rest of the world, in this specific case, the world of women:

Even before I wholly knew I was a lesbian, it was the lesbian in me who pursued that elusive configuration. And I believe it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength. It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack. (pp. 200-201)

She trusts this attachment to women so thoroughly, so faithfully that she uses the lesbian body as a synecdochic description of women's attraction to womanly worlds. The lesbian, in this metaphor, is not necessarily homosexual, but she is pro-actively homosocial, homopolitical, and homoaesthetic. Sex does not exhaustively inhabit her desire, but she burns with desire for other women, inseparably attached to them. But Rich's synecdoche ends up only partially true because some of her audience detach and separate themselves from her metaphorical desire. Her audience's individual interpretations, and their lack of shared "lesbian" experience, cause this elision. Rich (1989) concedes:

I believe that I failed in preparing my remarks, to allow for the intense charge of the word *lesbian*, and for all its deliquescences of meaning, ranging from "man-hater" and "pervert" to the concepts I was trying to invoke, of the self-chosen woman, the forbidden "primary intensity" between women, and also the woman who refuses to obey, who has said "no" to the fathers. I probably oversimplified the issue, given limits of time, and therefore obscured it. This experience made me more conscious than ever before of the degree to which, even for lesbians, the word *lesbian* has many resonances. (p. 202)

Rich realized that her words, and their interpellative power, had unexpected effects on women whom she did not want to alienate; yet, nevertheless, she did, in her overarching definition of "lesbian." Some accept her term; others reject it. Her seemingly "united" audience exposes its "multi-headedness." Like the conjoined twins, Rich and her audience/her readers conjoin and separate at various locations that each affect their abilities to understand each other, thus

exemplifying Bakhtin's contact zones between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. These contact zones are the bodily experiences that each respective listener/reader shares or does not share with Rich.

To bridge this disparity with her audience, Rich's solitary performance as writer must include newly conjoined voices—perhaps even adversarial voices—that will negotiate, not compromise, her communication to those with whom she obviously feels compelled to attach. Rich (1989) confirms this desire when she states:

The lesbian/feminist lives in a complex, demanding realm of linguistic and relational distinctions. One of the tasks ahead of us is to begin trying to define those distinctions (and the overlap of female experience that is synchrononymous with them) For us, the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action. (p. 202)

She recognizes that the act of composing (i.e., naming, defining) can assist in building communities, bridging gaps and, likewise, has the potential to negotiate all perspectives. Rich (1993) writes to her male friend, with whom she shares experiences of sexual and ethnic differences: "And, in the act of writing, to feel our own 'questions' meeting the world's 'questions,' to recognize how we are [attached] in the world and the world is [attached] in us" (p. 26). The unifying attachment, however ambiguous it may be, resumes at the site of the writing body.

Writing Body/Bodily Writing—A Concluding (Com)Position

I have explored the ways extremely anomalous bodies can be compared to and inform the writing body. Even though I don't have two heads from which to think, I have a multitude of perspectives and voices that separate and conjoin with each linguistic and contextual interaction. Even though I don't have a body that shares both male and female genitals, I am marked by sex, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation which, separately and in combination, signify certain meanings in my culture. Even though my body maintains standard systems of humors and hormones regulating my appearance, I am aware how my body, nevertheless, lies under public scrutiny. The sideshow dwells within me; the bearded, bigenitalled, two-headed Other resides in every utterance I compose and, eventually, this undeniably desirable and necessary freak show emerges upon my body in gesture, performance, view, and voice.

Although the positions of these characters are imagined, their circumstances effectively illustrate the power relationships, the negotiated perspectives, and the external and internal forces that the writerly body must confront and process. I realize that by fictionalizing, and assuming certain ideas about these various characters, I risk re-objectifying their positions. In my privileged positions, I can imagine that some readers might see this as a hegemonic act of appropriation, which undermines my intent; however, if, in the end, I infringe upon their subjective spaces, it is because I hope to create an intersubjective awareness that reveals new interpellations of our common and/or parallel experiences. As woman

or man, as black, brown, yellow, red, white, as gay or straight, as native, immigrant, or exile, as physically abled or disabled, the individual moves through a system of socially constructed experiences inflected through the body and its performances. In turn, when an individual writes, all of which has transpired through that body is disclosed in its (com)position. Recognizing this link between composing and the body helps us more closely reevaluate and re-value the shared subjectivities between ourselves and others. ☺

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