EMBODIED CLASSROOMS,
EMBODIED KNOWLEDGES:
RE-THINKING THE MIND/BODY SPLIT

At the small, private university where I teach, my classroom is typically filled with white students, save for one or two students of color. Because I am committed to raising and complicating issues of race in my classroom, I am concerned that students of color not be placed in the precarious position of “representing” a whole race, or of seeming to be the “subject” of our discussions. For fear of reinforcing these ideas, I have worked—perhaps too hard—to steer the discussions away from the personal, to keep our focus on how race impacts culture outside, not inside, our classroom.

There is good reason for this. A few semesters back, the one black student in my class, Shauna, became visibly angry at comments made by white students during a discussion about Black English. Several white students complained to me privately, saying they felt silenced by her anger, by the faces she was making in response to their comments. Shauna told me, also privately, that she felt like she couldn’t win—no matter how she participated, she would be read first as an angry black woman. Her body always preceded her voice. She was right, and as a result, the class dynamics were complicated, messy. Admittedly, I wanted them clean.

This past semester, I taught a course that went, at least on the surface, much more smoothly. The small group seemed to cohere well, and our discussions of “cultural myths” were impassioned and lively. I was pleased, too, that the two women of color were the most verbal participants. But again, the same dynamic—though this time not visible to me—was present. Alisha, an African American woman, noted in her final portfolio that in my class, and in all of her classes, she feels uncomfortable. She wrote about

Shari J. Stenberg is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Composition at Creighton University. She teaches courses in writing, composition theory, and pedagogy. She is currently at work on a book-length project examining issues of professing, disciplinarity, and teacher development.

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particular moments during discussions on race—an issue she was glad we were addressing—when she felt students were afraid to make comments in her presence, for fear of offending her. Even more, she wrote, “As the only African American, I have to work three times harder than everyone else in order to earn the respect of my fellow students. And when put in that position, I feel like I have to set an example for all minorities. [Some of my] fellow classmates act as though I got a free ride simply because I am black.” Like Shauna, Alisha saw her own body become a text that spoke louder than her verbal comments, a text that she needed to overcome to be taken seriously, to belong.

In both of these classes, silent conversations occurred. Students perpetuated (and perhaps occasionally challenged) cultural myths about identity as they read and wrote narratives on each other’s bodies. But even as these cultural myths operated powerfully inside our classroom, I wanted to approach them as if they existed only “outside” of it. Even more, I wanted us to examine “cultural myths” not as specifically situated subjects necessarily implicated in them, but as “minds” somehow existing above them.

Of course, it was likely no coincidence that this past semester, more than any other, I wanted to pretend away our bodies, for I entered the class eight months pregnant. I was hyper aware of the way in which my visibly feminine, maternal body could be read against my intellectualism. So I mentioned my pregnancy only in the context of my impending leave, never addressing the “cultural myths” that shaped my experience, my fears about how I would be read, my worries that the subjectivity of “mother” might overshadow that of thinker, knower. Certainly I “knew” better, that I was abiding by problematic (and archaic) assumptions about the body, and yet, I also was not naive to my surroundings—an institution, however committed to issues of “diversity,” which is still dominated by Western, masculinist norms of intellectualism and professionalism. An institution in which the agency of subjects like Alisha, Shauna, and me depends on the degree to which we are able to cloak, or overcome, bodies marked by difference—bodies that insist on being visible.

In this article, I will explore the tendency to deny embodiment in scholarly and pedagogical sites, and the related tendency to conflate disembodiment with authority and freedom. In the first section, I argue that while feminism has a long tradition of examining the body as a material, political site, “new” postmodernist scholarship has tended to “textualize” the body, articulating it as a site that can be altered and even transcended, often at the expense of attention to the concrete and experiential. I go on to explore and argue for pedagogies that take into account the body as a material, lived site of political struggle. In doing so, I examine critical
pedagogy's important insistence that we recognize the lived experience and embodiment of students, and challenge the way this discourse tends to assume a disembodied teacher who seemingly exists above the social relations she critiques. Rather than transcend the body, I contend that we might see its potential to operate transformatively. While I focus most extensively on female bodies—women, after all, have historically been positioned as mere bodies—my call for greater attention to embodiment includes all those "non-standard" (i.e. non-white, male) bodies that are erased to the detriment of critical consciousness.

Escaping the "Essential" Body

While many scholars credit Foucault with the conception of the body as historically and culturally disciplined, Susan Bordo reminds us that long before the advent of poststructuralist thought, feminist thinkers understood the body as socially trained—after all, for women, "culture's grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life" (17). This was particularly evident, Bordo argues, when second wave feminists proclaimed the personal as political and ushered in a new intellectual paradigm: the body as a site of political (and personal) struggle (17). Feminist thinkers of this era contended that we might gain a clearer vision of culture and history by looking through the embodied lens of gender, ultimately allowing us to revise male-dominated institutions that have excluded female bodies and ways of knowing.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist feminisms now challenge the notion that we can speak from or look through a single aspect of our identity (gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.), critiquing this era of feminism for its "oversimplification" of identity categories and its tendency toward essentialism. Instead categories such as race, class, and gender are reconceived as interlocking, in-flux, and historically situated. Differences among members of a group are as important as differences between groups. And bodies are understood not as natural, but as products of social discourse; we only know and experience our bodies through cultural constructs, values, and associations. Postmodern thought, in particular, has gone so far as to "textualize" the body, promoting "a kind of free, creative rein to meaning" (38). Judith Butler, for instance, argues that we must "cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body" by recasting discourse as foundational, so that the body is purely textual (93).

While these schools of thought are highly valuable, and certainly inform my work here, I am concerned that by deconstructing the notion of identity and textualizing the body, this scholarship risks reifying the modernist leanings it seeks to dismantle. One way in which this reification occurs is, ironically, through a deep seated fear of essentialism. This fear is
the result of extensive (and well-intended, certainly) efforts to combat totalizing tendencies, such that attributing anything to the “natural” or “biological” becomes highly suspect. As a result, the biological or anatomical body has become nearly untouchable in postmodern discourse. The following example shows how this plays out: Vicki Kirby describes attending a conference presentation on Luce Irigaray’s work in which the speaker foregrounded her argument—seemingly in anticipation of an essentialist critique being launched at Irigaray—by declaring that “corporeality” in Irigaray’s writing should be understood as a literary strategy, not a literal reference to the body (7). When asked what “danger” the speaker had avoided with this explanation, she pinched herself and said, “Well, I certainly don’t mean this body” (7).

This moment demonstrates an (all too common) intellectual move to separate the politics of the represented body from the lived, particular body. It further suggests a pervasive belief that despite our theoretical “insight,” the “anatomical body is indeed the unarguably real body, the literal body whose immovable and immobilizing substance must be secured outside discussion” (8). A false (and problematic) distinction is thus created between the body as discourse and the “real” body, which we leave outside of scholarly and pedagogical inquiry. This mind/body split is reified. As a result, the bodies we experience and learn are relegated to the “private” realm, marked as “individual” problems. For instance, as Kathleen Rockhill points out, although it is “common knowledge” that intellectuality and sexuality are opposed for girls and women, these issues are largely absent in literacy and education discourses. It is this absence, this unspeakableness, through which sexuality is regulated (340).

Another effect of the postmodern tendency to textualize the body is the conflation of “freedom” with disembodiment. Here, the body becomes a malleable site for making meaning, one that can be endlessly constructed and reconstructed (both figuratively and literally—through plastic surgery, sex-change operations, etc.). Butler’s oft-cited theories of gender as performative and parody as subversion rely on this mode of thought. For Butler, there is no natural body or identity. Instead, the “inner truth” of gender is a “fabrication” and “true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies” (136). Our identities are thus not expressions of some essential self, but are the effect of culturally learned performances and impersonations (136). Butler believes it is possible to subvert the system, by making visible the performative nature of gender through parody. She uses the example of drag, which she contends “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. . . . In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their
distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (137-38). In many ways, this is an exciting notion. When the body is purely textual, it is no longer regarded as a limit; it can not only be played with, continually (re)costumed, and altered, but can also be used to subvert cultural assumptions.

The problem, however, is that the body is understood without regard for context. Here the body becomes a text "whose meanings can be analyzed in abstraction from experience, history, material practice, and context" (Bordo 292). How is the body being read? Who is doing the reading? What cultural values and assumptions inform those readings? Furthermore, when only possibilities are emphasized, when metaphors of drag, trickery, and escape are celebrated as "the answer" to modernist notions of foundational and fixed identity, we risk obscuring "the located, limited, inescapably partial, and always personally invested nature of human 'story making'" (228). We may, in other words, forget to recognize that one is always "somewhere, and limited" and that there are always places where certain bodies cannot travel (229). The body situated in specific space, time, and material boundaries is replaced by the body that can endlessly remake itself, that can go anywhere, be anything. I agree with Bordo that this conception risks reifying the modernist mind/body split, simply replacing the Cartesian version with a "new, postmodern configuration of detachment, a new imagination of disembodiment: a dream of being everywhere" (227).

In the realm of pedagogical scholarship, the assumption that disembodiment garners empowerment is perhaps most clearly exemplified in conversations of online communities and classrooms. There is, to be sure, no shortage of praise for technology that (seemingly) allows us virtual freedom online—the ability to rid ourselves of bodies, and re-make ourselves into somebody else entirely. Cyber spaces like chatrooms and MOOs, which allow players to assume characters and thus to play with identity construction, are often celebrated as places where humans can become literal cyborgs—manifestations of the self "beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained" (Reid 328).

Like many teachers searching for ways of creating egalitarian spaces, Lester Faigley promotes the "networked classroom" in which students interactively communicate with each other, often using pseudonyms so as to allow for "freer" communication and to disrupt the authority of the teacher. Arguing that it is a "hybrid" form of discourse between oral and written, he suggests that the use of networked classrooms allows teachers to realize "the utopian dream of an equitable sharing of authority, at least during the duration of a class discussion" (167). The anonymity of the networked classroom, for Faigley, created a space in which all students could
participate, and wherein students from marginalized groups who were often quiet in class spoke freely. As one of his students writes, "[The networked classroom] made everyone equal. One comment had no more impact than another because the computer has only one color and the same print" (182). The "utopia" that the networked classroom seemingly provides, then, is a classroom (pretending to be) without bodies, one devoid of gender, race and thus, asymmetrical power relations.

I see how "trying on" different identities can easily be read as an exciting postmodern possibility, but declaring an egalitarian space on the Net does not guarantee that students sitting at their computers feel equally entitled to contribute, that they do not feel afraid of someone discovering "who they are" or that they ever experience a "leaving behind" of their bodies. When identity is thought to be a mere discursive formation, the material consequences of living in particular bodies get erased—as do the differences between them. Who, for instance, can "slip out" of one's identity, and what are the consequences? As Bordo asks, "What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all" (229).

**Studying the Schooled Body**

Arguing against essentialist conceptions of the body, Wendy Morgan suggests that we understand the bodies we "see and know, think about and feel with" as both "stubbornly material" and as "cultural constructs, representations, texts for semiotic readings" (24). With Morgan, I am interested in approaching the body as material site of political struggle, one that has been written on by a history of pedagogies (and here I would extend pedagogical sites to include schools, families, media, churches, workplaces, etc.) that both enable and deny subjects' authority. This approach assumes that schooling is not limited to the mind. As Brian Fay argues, learning is not merely a cognitive process but a corporeal one, such that "oppression leaves its traces not just in people's minds, but in their muscles and skeletons as well" (qtd. in McLaren 153). In school students learn to sit in rows and to raise their hands before speaking, of course, but they also learn how to discipline their bodies according to their particular social locations. Female students, for instance, often learn to hold their legs together, to make themselves smaller, to sit quietly, to be "good," and thus to perform the role of not just a student, but a *female* student.

Feminist scholars such as Linda Brodkey and Michelle Fine, Susan Bordo, Jill Eichhorn, and Kathleen Rockhill have also insisted that being taken seriously as intellectuals requires a denial of all those aspects of one's
identity marked “female”—whether by using clothing to hide one’s female shape or refusing to engage in scholarship traditionally associated with female ways of knowing. As Mimi Orner suggests, we learn at the site of our bodies to become our own “gender overscers”—“observing, judging and disciplining every aspect of ourselves” (279). We cannot assume, then, that our students ever work from a “level playing field” since they have learned through their bodies to discipline their voices, their writing, and their thinking in often problematic ways.

In “Schooling and the Postmodern Body: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Refreshment,” Peter McLaren argues that the “problem with schools is not that they ignore bodies . . . (although admittedly that is part of the problem) but that they undervalue language and representation as constitutive factors in the shaping of the body/subject as the bearer of meaning, history, race, and gender” (62). McLaren names the process by which the body is inscribed or colonized by certain dominant interests “enfleshment.” The body, then, is “conceived as the interface of the individual and society, as a site of embodied or ‘enfleshed’ subjectivity which also reflects the ideological sedimentations of the social structure inscribed into it” (150). In articulating modes of enfleshment, McLaren emphasizes the materiality of discourse, such that words and symbols become just as much a part of our bodies as flesh. We learn through our bodies and our bodies are the outcome of our learning.

Of course, as he points out, discourses do not “sit on the surface of the flesh or float about in the formless ether of the mind” but are instead “enfolded into the very structures of our desire in as much as desire itself is formed by the anonymous historical rules of discourse” (61). At once, then, enfleshment inserts the subject into the dominant social order and also fosters an investment in affect:

Affective investment transpires during the subject’s insertion into or engagement with various fields of discourse. To be enfleshed is not only to appropriate symbols but it is to be identified with the symbol that one is appropriating; that is, it is to identify oneself with that selfsame symbol and also to arrive at a correspondence between the subject position provided by the discourse and the subject. It is, in other words, to mistake authorship of such a position with the anonymous historical rules which have constituted it; furthermore, it is to fail to see (to repress, to forget) the contradictions between the body/subject and the discursive position or multiple positions one has assumed. (McLaren 61-62)

We see examples of enfleshment when women seek to assume disembodied positions—when I refused to acknowledge my pregnancy, for instance, or
when Bordo worked to demonstrate in graduate school that she could argue "like the boys" (37). In doing so, we inadvertently reinforce dominant conceptions of gender that have been used historically to justify gender oppression. Assuming these positions as "chosen" forecloses possibilities for examining how culture has already chosen them for women, that is, has constituted authority as something other than female.

We might ask, then, how can we enable movement from enfleshment to what McLaren calls "refleshment"—assuming self-consciously and critically alternative modes of subjectivity "hospitable to a praxis of self and social empowerment" (162)? What would a pedagogy that enabled us to examine the interdependence of body/subjects and the surrounding social structures look like? Though McLaren doesn’t move to the classroom site, or discuss specific practices, he does provide a vision for such a pedagogy. First, he argues, a "critical pedagogy needs to counter the tendency of some critics of modernity to dissolve agency, claiming that we are always already produced and finalized as subjects within discourse" (66). This means recognizing modes of resistant subjectivity, so that as we "reveal" to students how they are inscribed by conflicting social relations, we do not reduce individuals to the "static outcomes of social determinations" (66). McLaren insists on popular culture as a focus for this pedagogy, "for if we do not work with students in this area of their lives," he writes, "we deny them the very modes of subjectivity which give flesh to the meaning of their lives" (69).

Perhaps most crucial to McLaren’s vision of this pedagogy is the establishment of a "language of resistance":

The project of placing desire into critical and self-conscious circulation necessitates a language that speaks to the lived experiences and felt needs of students but also a critical language that can problematize social relations which we often take for granted. It needs a non-totalizing language that refuses to strip experience from its contingency to open-endedness, that refuses to textualize oppression, and that refuses to dehistoricize or desexualize or degender the body or to smooth over difference in the name of justice or equality. (67)

As a writing teacher who very much identifies with the goals of critical pedagogy, I read this with great interest. Above all, I am motivated to read on because I am waiting for McLaren to get to the part where students come in, where we see what this vision—the language—looks like in the classroom. It is not that I am waiting for a prescription; I know that the contexts of our classroom sites and the student subjects who fill them will never be the same. But I am waiting for the fleshing of his argument, to see what this means for students and for teachers because this is, after all, a tall
order for the critical teacher, who is expected not only to see her students' lives better than they can—to "reveal" to them their enfleshment in culture—but to help them see themselves through the correct "critical" lens. How, I wonder, does the teacher negotiate the conflicting social relations that inform her own (embodied) subjectivity as she engages complex student subjects in this critical process?

But instead of moving to any local site, McLaren goes on to articulate what this pedagogy of enfleshment must not be. It must not, he argues, enact a "flabby pluralism," which "constitutes a simple acceptance of the existence of a variety of perspectives and paradigms; a pluralism which regards different perspectives as virtually incommensurable; and the 'decentered anarchistic pluralism' which celebrates uncertainty or lapses into a brooding and nihilistic retreat from life" (71). I am struck here by his use of the signifier "flabby," which he links to self-doubt and a lack of authority. Once again—even in this article striving to legitimate embodied knowledge—flesh (or flab—excess flesh) has been linked to devalued ways of knowing, feminine ways of knowing. We want, according to McLaren, to eliminate that which is soft, excess, feminine from our pedagogies, since it only leads to paralysis.

Indeed, the article quickly shifts from McLaren's critical vision, to the dismantling or dissection of that work he deems too pluralistic, too flabby. He turns, in fact, to critique the work of Elizabeth Ellsworth, a feminist teacher who describes her efforts to enact critical pedagogy in her classroom. In doing so, he accuses her (and others like her) of falling into the assumption that if one is "unable to speak with any certainty, or with an absolute assurance that his or her pedagogy is untainted by any form of domination" she is "unable to speak at all" (72). He draws from a paper given by Ellsworth—later published as the oft-cited "Why Doesn't this Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy"—in which she, in his words, "attempts to discredit a select group of critical educational theorists by showing how their work actually undermines the process of liberation. The proof she offers is an account of her own attempt at using critical pedagogy" (72). He then accuses her of attempting to set "critical pedagogy up to fail from the very beginning" (72). Conceding that we can't, of course, know her intentions, he argues that "even granting her the best of intentions does not excuse her woeful misreading of the tradition she so cavalierly indicts. . . . Ellsworth's self-professed lack of pedagogical success can hardly be blamed on a failed critical tradition but is rather attributable, at least in part, to her inability to move beyond her own self-doubt" (72).

While detailing the conflicts between critical and feminist pedagogy is beyond the scope of this article, I do want to examine what it is about
Ellsworth’s position that gets demarcated as “flabby.” In her piece, Ellsworth argues that in the (specific context) of her class, abiding by the literature of critical pedagogy’s “highly abstract language (‘myths’)” of who we “should” be and what “should” be happening in our classroom” functioned only to reproduce the very conditions this ‘liberatory’ discourse seeks to work against” (91). More specifically, “when participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and ‘banking education’” (91).

In other words, Ellsworth found that the abstract visions promoted by critical pedagogues cannot simply be translated into classroom practice, because such visions “strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political positions” (92). They strip them, that is, of student bodies, and the experiences and histories they bring to class. Even more, critical pedagogy asked that Ellsworth assume a position of authority as one who could give students “empowerment,” who could “reveal” to them the intricacies of unequal social systems and show them means of resistance. This assumes that a teacher is free of learned and internalized oppressions, that her own complex social location does not factor into her relations with students. As Ellsworth notes, “I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism” (99). Even more, she points out that she could not assume to understand racism, for instance, better than her students—“especially those students of color coming into class after six months (or more) of campus activism and whole lives of experience and struggle against racism” (99).

Instead of the critical teacher positioning herself as a disembodied knower, an authority on social structures—not one who is always implicated in them—Ellsworth argues that greater possibilities are enabled when it is recognized that all members of a class, including the teacher, work out of partial knowledge. Not only does this disallow one from claiming to fully know a subject matter or the students, it also challenges the notion that anyone can reach a finished state of knowledge, that anyone is ever done learning. And in fact, she sees this location of acknowledged partiality not as paralyzing “uncertainty” or “self-doubt,” but as an important space from which to speak, to question, and to dialogue. By detailing her difficulty in assuming the (generic) subjectivity of “critical teacher,” she thus makes a crucial contribution to the often abstract, disembodied critical pedagogy discourse, challenging the identity of the “liberatory” educator. As Omer argues, this construct relies on presumptions of “unified subjectivity,
rationality, and universality” and leaves no room for those who seek to claim the identity of critical teacher to “see themselves as in process, making mistakes, and failing to be perceived as an ally by those marginalized others the educator is attempting to ‘liberate’ or ‘transform’” (“Interrupting” 84).

This is abundantly clear in the McLaren/Ellsworth dialogue, as he attributes Ellsworth’s inability to conform to the subjectivity of “critical teacher” as her own personal failing, thus implicitly sending the message that such discussions do not have a place in critical pedagogy discourse. This is especially problematic since it is exactly this kind of embodiment, this emphasis on experience, struggle, and learning, that women—and people of other marginalized positions—have been taught to excuse in academic settings. Moments where our bodies come into play, moments when we feel uncertain, moments when we realize our knowledge is always partial are deemed “excessive” to intellectual behavior. And so, even as McLaren points out that we must uncover the illusion that we can freely choose modes of subjectivity, examining how the parameters that define such choices have been constituted socially and historically, his discourse gives the impression that critical pedagogues can freely choose a position of authority, somehow existing above social relations. He argues, implicitly, for disembodiment.

**Embracing the Excess: From Transcendence to Transformation**

As I see it, the possibility for social transformation will not result from denying our bodies or those aspects of “otherness” that have resulted in oppression. Possibility, rather, arises from embracing those bodies, knowledges, and moments that have been deemed “excess” in our classrooms. With feminist education theorists Ellsworth, Mimi Orner and Janet Miller, I use the term *excess* to “call attention to the relation between particular education discourses and repression... Excess is a symptom of histories of repression and of the interests associated with those histories” (71). Without question, the body has been demarcated as “excessive” to our classrooms, carrying little weight either as a scholarly focus or as part of a pedagogical approach (McLaren 60). Embracing the excess would involve examining how we have come to know and conceive embodiment, understanding bodies not as a hindrance to our pedagogies, a liability to scholarly authority, but as a crucial site at which knowledge is produced, at which subjectivity is made.

But what would it mean to move away from pedagogies that privilege bodily transcendence toward a pedagogy that values embodiment—and aspects of our identities that are usually marginalized—as potentially transforming? What would this look like, in our classrooms and in our scholarship? This necessarily depends, of course, on local contexts, on the
way in which power dynamics play out in a particular class, on who feels comfortable and who doesn't. But I want to give examples—not answers—so as to offer material for consideration and reflection.

In their article "Excessive Moments and Educational Discourses that Try to Contain Them," Omer, Miller, and Ellsworth, examine the "excess"—moments or knowledges typically repressed in classrooms and scholarship—in order to discover how attention to the repressed might inform and transform their work. One of their foci deals with the way meaning is made in classrooms through readings of what is visible and invisible on our bodies. Consequently, Orner et al. seek to examine "how our relations to others are defined or at least delimited by appearance" (75):

It was only the second class meeting but already the familiar polarization between women/feminists/womanists based on who's wearing what was at work. Toward the window sat the women with short hair, Birkenstock sandals, hairy legs, no make-up. Near the door sat the women with long curly hair, nail polish, shaved legs, and lipstick. I was intent on making the class as hospitable to everyone present. This is not a watered-down pluralist position. It comes out of a deep commitment to deconstructing the politics of appearance. (75)

Presumably because there is no simple "solution" to the politics of appearance—no one single activity or text that would change the way the women in this course were reading each other—there is no "pedagogical answer" provided in this piece. We are only allowed to see the process of the undoing, of making the "excess" visible—in this case, it occurs when the students collectively name at least fifteen different "brands" of feminism. "Aside from calling into the question what we discussed as the 'will to categorize,' this exercise opened up some space for women to explore various takes on feminism and their own complex and shifting relations to feminist positions" (77). It was also an attempt "to encourage some movement across the invisible barrier that separated the women by the window from the women by the door" (77).

But as Orner et al. note, even in a women's studies class, it is difficult to discuss the issue of embodiment. Part of the reason for this, as Orner notes in her article "School Marks: Education, Domination and Female Subjectivity," is that authority and disembodiment are tied together; to admit to inhabiting bodies is to admit a weakness. "So many of us have serious issues around body image at the same time that the only available forms of discourse are those that require us to speak as if we are 'above' these issues, as if only others are affected by the relentless pursuit of thinness in our culture" (290). Here the stories of embodied narrators, of narrators learning at the sites of their bodies, experiencing fear, anger, and self-hatred,
are deemed excessive. These are exactly the stories, Orner insists, that deserve careful reflection:

As we challenge what counts as legitimate knowledge, we challenge a variety of knowledge forms as well. Since there is no objective or unbiased [or disembodied] position from which to understand the world, we need to find alternatives to forms of expression that continue to position us as detached—as removed from the very issues under investigation. (290)

For Orner, this has meant struggling to develop "nonconfessional modes" for talking about the body, in ways that address "the everyday, lived effects of power on our bodies and that address the specificity and the intertwining of gender, sexuality, cultural background, race, class, size, geographic region, age, and education" (278). Specifically, she looks to students' stories about schooling, which she reads—and helps her students to read—as lived testimonies through which the narrators make sense of how they have learned themselves as embodied subjects.

With Orner, I would agree that a crucial step toward embracing embodiment is insisting that we cannot sever our writing or teaching "selves" from our bodies. Though the "disembodied" position has long been conflated with one of authority, I would argue that there is more to be gained by examining how our knowledge is shaped by who we are as embodied subjects. In "M[other]: Lives on the Outside," Lil Brannon contends that teaching narratives tend largely to be masculine heroic narratives, rarely examining how male subjectivity plays a role in those stories. Women's stories of teaching, Brannon notes, are not so common. And those that do exist—like Mina Shaughnessy's—rarely focus on the teacher as an embodied subject. The problem with these narratives, Brannon argues, is that while they help us better understand "who we are and what we do," they do not account for how women "have suffered under oppressive working conditions within the academy" (462). Consequently, she calls for greater attention to the problems we confront as historical—and I would add, embodied—subjects. "Women need to speak as women teachers who are currently in the classroom and who find our working lives sustained by our teaching. And we need to speak as "outsiders," as teachers working against the dominant educational discourse that makes our 'lives' invisible or inconsequential" (462). Of course, this kind of speech is exactly that which is typically considered "excessive," confessional, or feminine. Because it deals with daily struggles, with the questions that emerge from colliding subjectivities in classrooms, because it is often without answers, it might fall into McLaren's category of "flabby pluralism." But it is the telling of these stories that challenges what is currently in place. Not to speak, as Brannon argues, is to perpetuate the given.
As bell hooks has argued, another means of promoting transformation is to bring marginalized aspects of our identities to the center, thus challenging and changing dominant ideology. Jill Eichhorn describes her own effort to do so in the realm of the classroom, when she makes visible to her students the struggle she experiences as a pregnant teacher:

Sharing with my composition students my conflicts as a woman in this male-dominated system is one way to fight the power structure that would use my skills against me. I wrote my students a letter, [in which] I explained what it meant to me to be a feminist teacher, and what it meant to me to be pregnant. Modeling the use of writing as a social practice through this letter, I opened my composition classroom as a space for counterhegemonic critique of the academy and the outside world it represents. (310)

Working in a similar vein, one of my undergraduate professors once called attention to the way in which she was “sanctioned” by the university for her theoretical (and thus legitimate) knowledge at the same time that her female, raced body was read as anti-intellectual. Attempting to make visible these conflicting readings, she explained that she was experiencing hot flashes as part of menopause, and wanted us to read this newly acquired knowledge of her against our cultural readings of a “professor” or “theorist.” She asked us to think about the images that come to mind when we think about a menopausal woman, explaining that she found it important for us to read her at once as a middle-aged woman of color and as a professor, thinker, and knower. While making her body so overtly visible in the classroom might be regarded as a threat to her academic “legitimacy,” this, Bordo argues, is a “risk we must run, not only in the interests of our own ‘right to subjectivity’ but also as the means by which culture is transformed and not simply reproduced with different players in the same game. Every time we are taken seriously it means that an entrenched paradigm has been shaken” (284-85). By asking us to take her seriously not just as a professor and theorist, but as a professor who is Asian, menopausal, and female, she not only shook our assumptions about particular cultural categories, but refused to allow us to separate the body from the mind. To me, these are examples of a “language of resistance,” demonstrating important efforts not only to show how bodies are learned and read, but to insist that such discussions have a place within the traditionally “disembodied” academy.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

With the above examples in mind, I want, now, to turn back to the bodies of students like Shauna and Alisha, and to my own pregnant form, to consider what it would have meant to acknowledge ourselves as embodied
subjects. What if, for instance, I shared with students my nervousness about teaching issues of race as a white woman? What if I acknowledged to them my own partial knowledge, rather than assuming I must (pretend to) be a disembodied authority? I cannot know, of course, what would have happened. But I do wonder—if I had acknowledged my own embodiment, my own partial, socially-situated, material location, I might have created a space for students to do the same. I wonder if I could have invited students to inquire into their own social locations, to tell stories about being schooled as embodied subjects, to turn their focus from outside the class to within.

As I write this, I am working to integrate questions of specific, embodied identity into my first year composition course, to create moments when we consider how we read bodies as signs, how we learn our own embodied identities, and how our readings of the world and each other are dependent upon our own embodied lens. I have, for instance, designed an assignment in which students study a medium (cable channel, magazine, radio station, college catalogs) targeted at some aspect of their identities, to examine how it constructs an identity for them—teaching them to “be” a particular way—as well as to consider how they resist and accede to that identity. I want them to examine the role culture plays in schooling them as embodied subjects, teaching them who to be and how to understand themselves. And I want us to imagine ways of intervening in this cultural inscription. But I don’t want to approach identity or the body as merely discursive, as if we are all equally entitled to re-write ourselves at will. Cultural structures “limit” some bodies more than others, teaching us that we must deny certain aspects of our identity if we want to embrace another. Nor do I want to pretend that we exist apart from readers, who bring their own sets of assumptions to each textual interaction. No matter how Alisha “re-made” herself, she knew she was first and foremost being read as black. So I want to create a space for students to also consider those aspects of their identities that are read and understood as most rigid, and those aspects of their identities that play a crucial role in shaping the lens through which they see the world, the way they see each other.

Though I can’t predict where such assignments will take us—it all depends on which bodies fill the room—I can enact the kind of work I hope they will undertake. That is, rather than set myself apart from these structures, acting as the disembodied knower who will guide students to critical insight, I need to follow Ellsworth’s lead, and examine the way I, too, am implicated, the way I learn my identity through public texts and “lessons.” I might begin by examining traditional images of the pregnant woman, depicted as passive, blissful, selfless. Above all, she is a body, valued for the life she supports inside of her. The stereotypical white, disheveled male professor is often seen as disembodied; he neglects his
appearance because he is so preoccupied with important ideas and knowledge. For me, the clash between those two identities—one which made my body hyper-visible, and the other which required that I “hide” my female body—became particularly evident when I began to “show,” when my body became a text that could be (and was) commented on in the workplace. I was no longer a “professional” to those around me, I was a mother. Because of the way I had internalized cultural messages surrounding each of these subject positions, I desperately wanted to escape my pregnant body, to make it invisible.

Of course, we have other models that seek to rewrite the pregnant body, that aim to reclaim it as something other than docile, passive. For instance, we see a growing number of photos depicting celebrities (like Madonna) baring their pregnant bellies for the public eye. These acts could be read as significant attempts to remake the pregnant body as beautiful, even powerful. We might read them as deserving of celebration, and indeed, they may be. But I don’t think we can stop there. To do so would be to deny the specific contexts that shape individual lives. What we could do, however, is to examine the contradictions and complexities surrounding the pregnant body that these rewritings help to make visible. Why, for instance, are maternity and power typically opposed? Why are intellectualism and sexuality dichotomous? What does it mean for a woman to be at once maternal and intellectual? What is the difference between a pregnant teacher (often understood already as nurturing, motherly), and a pregnant professor (typically understood as rational, disembodied)?

My hope is that such a move might allow an opening for students like Shauna and Alisha to make visible for themselves (and potentially, for others) the complicated contexts that surround their embodiment, to consider the “myths” present in our local culture. For instance, rather than having to *privately* internalize the discomfort she feels as our university’s “Diversity Scholar,” Alisha might explore the gap between the aims of the scholarship and her own experience. Why, she might ask, does the university deem it important to include more students of color in our largely white student body? Presumably, a diverse group of bodies, of embodied knowledges, is thought to enrich the fabric of our university’s culture. By offering the scholarship, the university (potentially) re-writes bodies of color as important and knowledgeable in a context that has traditionally excluded them. And yet, as Alisha shared with me, her lived experience teaches her that her body is still read as anti-intellectual, her scholarship as a gift of “charity” rather than an acknowledgment of the knowledge and insight that she has to offer the university. This contradiction opens up an interesting set of cultural questions to explore: Why are blackness and intellectualism traditionally opposed? Does (or how does) affirmative
action rewrite this dynamic? What does it mean to embrace "diversity"? Who (and what) has to change?

Indeed, this sets us up for a heated, messy conversation. It requires those of us who occupy white bodies to consider the way we read students like Alisha. Even more, it asks Alisha to make visible the ways she experiences being marked "different" at our university. It puts her in danger, I fear, of having to hear students express the very sentiments that she now perceives only indirectly, through looks, through veiled comments, through strained interactions. But it also gives her a chance to talk back.

I feel a visceral response when I imagine taking such risks. I worry that these practices might make those of us who are "marked" by our bodies even more vulnerable, hyper-visible. But to deny the bodies in our classrooms does not prevent us from reading (and misreading) each other as bodies. Instead, it only naturalizes those assumptions, cloaking them in silence and making them unspeakable. It only results in an overlooking of our bodies as bearers of meaning that we learn to read, value and experience in complex and often troubling ways. It only results in a lost opportunity to examine how our readings of each other as embodied subjects impinge upon what can be said or written, and on who is allowed to speak and be heard in any given institutional site. It only results, one more time, in removing from the classroom those knowledges, issues, and bodies, that seem excessive to it. Challenging the status quo of disembodied, rational intellectualism means taking the risk of inviting them back in.¹

Omaha, Nebraska

Notes

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Works Cited


