

Rhetorical Bodies

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Afterword

The Material of Rhetoric

I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains. I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies “are.”

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*

In his introduction to this book Jack Selzer notes that we live in an era marked by a so-called discursive turn, an era in which scholars have been preoccupied with “the text” and the ways in which discourse is thought to play a role not only in the invention of culture but in the construction of reality as well. If rhetorical theorists celebrated the discursive turn as a welcome return of scholarly interest in language and hence in rhetoric, they may now be dismayed to learn of the interest in bodies and the material that is displayed in this book. What, they might ask, does rhetoric have to do with bodies and matter? Rhetoric is after all a verbal art, they might aver, and this is why the canon of delivery has (justifiably) received only sporadic attention from rhetorical theorists since ancient times (Urch). It is a fine irony, then, that at the very moment when post-structuralist philosophers have legitimated the study of rhetoric, rhetoricians are being urged to look at the human body and the material conditions and practices associated with it. The chapters herein, most of them written by scholars who identify with rhetorical studies, manifest a great deal of interest in bodies—pregnant, queer, eaten, drugged, dissected, rustic, testable bodies. We read too about the material conditions and practices—images, texts, monuments, institutional inertia—that produce such bodies. Where have such scholarly interests come from?

The scholarly focus on bodies and material practices owes much to the second-wave American feminists who launched a thoroughgoing critique of re-

ceived attitudes about sex, gender, and the body during the 1970s. Susan Bordo eloquently makes the case that it was feminists who first cast their scholarly gaze on bodies: "Neither Foucault nor any other post-structuralist thinker discovered or invented the idea . . . that the 'definition and shaping' of the body is 'the focal point for struggles over the shape of power.' That was discovered by feminism, and long before it entered into its marriage with post-structuralist thought" (17). To bring her point home, Bordo quotes from a set of consciousness-raising exercises for men, developed by second-wave feminists in 1971:

Sit down in a straight chair. Cross your legs at the ankles and keep your knees pressed together. Try to do this while you're having a conversation with someone, but pay attention at all times to keeping your knees pressed tightly together.

Run a short distance, keeping your knees together. You'll find you have to take short, high steps if you run this way. Women have been taught it is unfeminine to run like a man with long, free strides. See how far you get running this way for thirty seconds.

Walk down a city street. Pay a lot of attention to your clothing; make sure your pants are zipped, shirt tucked in, buttons done. Look straight ahead. Every time a man walks past you, avert your eyes and make your face expressionless. (19)

I quote this passage, in the age of Chamique Holdsclaw, not to make the point that "You've come a long way, baby." To the contrary, I suspect that even now many of my women readers will find their public behavior depicted in the last paragraph of the passage. I do want the passage to point up the fact that, in modern culture, women are particularly well placed to develop analyses and critiques of the body and of the regimes that govern bodily practices. Women's worth has been measured through and by their bodies: Are these virginal or not? Impregnable or not? "Attractive" or not? Negatively charged cultural constructions of women's bodies as both dangerous and fragile have forced women to become highly conscious of their bodies—the space they occupy in a room, on the street, in a crowd. As objects of the male gaze, women know what it means to occupy the position of "the other," even if they do not read the philosophical texts in which they are imagined as such.

The great contribution made to body studies by second-wave feminists was their articulation of the fact that bodies are intricately enmeshed in what Bordo calls "the 'micropractices' of everyday life"—eating, cooking, cleaning house, wearing clothes, going to the doctor, to the hospital, to church, or to school. Feminists from Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Daly forcefully elaborated the ways in which everyday material practices are saturated with politics. As second-wave feminists claimed, the personal is the political.

The fact that public discourse typically assumes a male subject (and hence a male body) has made it necessary for feminists to interrogate the assumptions that inform public practices and rhetoric about them. The assumption that distinct public and private spheres exist, for example, animates much contempo-

rary rhetorical criticism of public discourse. However, it is doubtful whether this theoretical distinction has ever applied to women; that is, it is doubtful that the "official" public sphere—conceptualized by bourgeois theorists like Adam Smith and Joseph Addison in the eighteenth century, and revived by Habermas in our own—was conceived as a place wherein women traffic. This is emphatically not to say that women did not participate in public practices, as they continue to do today.¹ But we should remember that the eighteenth-century coffeehouses on which Habermas models his notion of the public sphere denied access to women. Women's bodies were banned from public spaces during the nineteenth century, and women were denied access to public discourse both de facto and de jure until first-wave feminists during the late nineteenth century secured their rights to own property, legally represent their children, and vote. (The connection between their inability to own property and their inability to claim legal rights to their own and their children's bodies was not lost on first-wave feminists.) It is also doubtful that contemporary women can easily locate or inhabit a so-called "private space" that shields them from the effects of certain public discourses, such as those governing health care and reproduction. Christina Haas's chapter richly details the complex legal struggles required to create such spaces for some of the women who utilize health clinics where abortions are performed. If a secure realm of privacy exists for women, surely it ought to include sexual habits and birth-control practices.

Animated by both political and scholarly agendas, then, feminist scholars continue to investigate the material conditions of reproduction, women's health, the circulation of disease, the distribution of justice, and other crucial issues. (The chapters by Hollis, Sharer, and Wells are contributions to this effort.) Investigations such as these are profoundly rhetorical. Feminists practice rhetoric when they attempt to have a voice in policy-making and when they intervene in public practices. But feminists, including feminist scholars, also analyze the public rhetorics that affect women's lives, not only in the attempt to understand how these are deployed but also in order to intervene in the power relations that produce and sustain them.

Post-structuralist thought also laid some important theoretical groundwork for the development of scholarly interest in bodies and material practices. One needs to be careful here: as Celeste Condit rightly observes in her chapter, a radical version of post-structuralist thought—what Condit calls "ultra-structuralism"—can be read as hostile to materialism and the material. Nonetheless, it remains true that some post-structuralist thinkers, such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, must be credited with contributing to the development of the theoretical machinery that allows us to think the body and the practices that produce it. Indeed, Pasi Falk, author of *The Consuming Body*, argues that post-structuralists' relentless resolution of dualisms into continua opened the way for the dissolution of the body/mind distinction that has been

embedded in Western thought at least since Plato (4). Jacques Derrida has taught us that all such inherited dualisms privilege one term over the other, and of course Western thought has always privileged minds over bodies. The post-structuralist displacement of body/mind onto a continuum

BODY ← → MIND

privileges neither of these terms. Rather, it opens up a space for thinking about the relations that obtain between body and mind, and for speculating about the difficulty of distinguishing the limits of either in relation to the other.

Falk and other writers attribute to Sigmund Freud an early instance of the habit of eliding the distinction between *psyche* and *soma*. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud comments on the constructive relation of the body to the ego:

A person's own body, and above all its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions spring. It is seen like any other object, but to the touch it yields two kinds of sensations, one of which may be equivalent to an internal perception. . . . Pain, too, seems to play a part in the process, and the way in which we gain new knowledge of our organs during painful illnesses is perhaps a model of the way by which in general we arrived at the idea of our body. The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface. (19–20)

In this passage there is such play with the notion of “the surface” that it is difficult to draw any other conclusion than that drawn by Freud: egos are bodily entities. Because of the way human perception works, the ego does not just depend on the body for its formation but projects itself as an imagined body, as the surface it imagines itself “to inhabit.” The surface is the interior, the outside is the inside, there is no sure way of telling which is which.

So much, then, for another inherited distinction on which the mind/body dualism depended: inside and outside. Freud's analysis of the embodiment of perception, and hence of ego, raises an interesting series of questions. How do we mark “the inside” of a human body as opposed to its “outside”? Where, for example, does the “outside” of the human eye end or begin? At the eyeball? The iris? The retina? But then where does the retina begin and end? Female genitalia raise further interesting questions about the confidence with which we can distinguish between bodily insides and outsides, as Luce Irigaray has convincingly demonstrated. And, to elaborate on Freud's example, when I place two parts of my body together, say, touching thumb to index finger, both digits experience the touch as both “inside” and “outside.” To distinguish skin as the differentiating organ requires intense concentration, as well as my (learned) assumption that the “skin” of my thumb is the same “skin” that covers my finger. Is the mouth an “inside” or an “outside”? In her chapter on the Donner expedition, Christine De Vinne notes the grim fascination with which Americans con-

templated the news that members of this group had practiced cannibalism. I suspect that fascination with the Donner story has to do, at least in part, with its challenge to the distinctions we like to make between bodily insides and outsides, and our habit of attaching our sense of identity to the presumed limits of the body.² Once someone has consumed (parts of) someone else, who is she? Something of this same uneasiness apparently attends the practice of organ donation. Very few people sign up as organ donors when they are issued drivers' licenses, and the bodies of only about 10 percent of donors are made available to hospitals. Families, it seems, are loath to allow parts of their loved ones to become part of someone else.

Cultural anxiety about bodily boundaries exhibits itself in other ways as well. Scholars who study disability, as well as those who are interested in exceptional bodies, are investigating the ways in which cultural-material practices shape and maintain what is included in the category of “the normal body” and the cultural uses to which the category of the “not-normal” is put (Davis; Thomson). Our culture seems to do its most rigorous policing around the boundaries of the sexed body in an effort to maintain a rigid distinction between male and female. In her study of hermaphroditism, Elizabeth Grosz notes that even though the existence and formation of external genitalia are the criteria most often used to determine anatomical sex, there are at least six different combinations of additional factors—such as chromosomal sex, internal sex organs, and hormonal functions—that combine to produce beings whose sex might be said to be both female and male (59–60). The problem, says Grosz, is not with hermaphroditic bodies but with a restrictive system of sexual classification that insists on a bipolar distinction between male and female. Within such a regime, we do not celebrate the multiplicity of sexes “given” us by “nature”; rather, we presume that people whose bodies do not clearly comply with our bipolar definition of “true sexuality” are inadequately or inappropriately sexed, and we urge or force them to become one or the other. If our presumption of bipolar sex is troubled by the range and variety of sexes found in nature, it becomes even more troubling when we discover, as we do when reading the work of Thomas Laquer and other historians of sexuality, that “male” and “female” have not always been defined as they now are.

The body ↔ mind continuum also complicates modern notions of identity and the self. Bodies are sexed, raced, gendered, abled or disabled, whole or fragmented, aged or young, fat, thin, or anorexic. In other words, bodies are marked in ways that carry a great deal of cultural freight. Identities are also marked by cultural constructions of bodies, and hence cultural evaluations of bodies extend to the subjects who inhabit them and with whose limits they are supposedly coterminous. Certainly this is the point of Peter Mortensen's study of rusticity, included here. Students of the new field called “whiteness studies”

take this insight as their motivation as well, assuming that the cultural privilege accorded to bodies marked as racially white produces something that can be called "white identity" (Dyer).

Freud's elision of body-mind also suggests that the private mental space accorded to "the self" on modern models of identity, the space of fantasy, is produced to some extent by the body's being-in-culture. Slavoj Žižek notes that "at its most fundamental, fantasy tells me what I am to others" (9). That is to say, our fantasies, those wonderful or terrifying stories we weave about ourselves in our supposedly most private moments, are actually extensions of culture into that space formerly and mistakenly called "mind." Žižek argues that fantasy has a "radically intersubjective character" insofar as it is "an attempt to provide an answer to the question 'What does society want from me,' to unearth the meaning of the murky events in which I am forced to participate." Hence the rabidly racist fantasies advanced by white supremacists, say, are not simply graphic projections of a mental force called "hatred" onto the bodies of others, as the traditional account would have it. Žižek reads such fantasies, rather, as the racist's attempt to cope with the realization that his identity is not in fact the founding center of the universe—that he inhabits a network of ideological and material relations that relate, at best, indifferently to his person.

So, fantasy is constructed, at least in part, by ideology. Does it at the same time construct ideology? In other words, is the body ↔ mind continuum repeated when human beings are considered as aggregates? Certainly, feminist thinkers have taken the psychoanalytic insight about the intersubjective nature of fantasy in overtly political directions. In her recent work Zillah Eisenstein reminds us that shared fantasies have physical impacts on real bodies. Arguing that ethnic hatreds are projections of "fear of the other," Eisenstein writes that "hatred is not only color-coded but inscribed on such body parts as noses, hair, vaginas, eyes. . . . Bodies are always in part psychic constructions of meaning symbolized through coloring hatred on sexualized sites" (22). This is one reason why the enactment of ethnic and racial hatreds in war or other violent episodes often involves rape and torture. The aim is not merely to inflict pain, but actually to eradicate the enemy's subjectivity by invading, harming, and even erasing his or her body (Scarry).

Jacqueline Rose argues further that fantasy "fuels . . . the forging of the collective will. . . . You don't have to buy into Freud's account of hidden guilt to recognize the force in the real world of the unconscious dreams of nations" (3). Rose's primary example is Israel, where, she says, "if you listen to one dominant rhetoric, it seems as if Israel cannot grant statehood to the Palestinians, not just because of felt real and present danger, but also because so great is the charge of fantasy against such a possibility that, were it to be granted, the nation would lose all inner rationale and psychically collapse in on itself" (4). Rose's work causes me to speculate about the shared fantasies that moti-

vate other nations' politics. The reunification of Germany seems to mark a triumph of national fantasy over impossible realities, while the American fantasy of superpowerhood rationalizes sending thousands of young bodies to Iraq, to Panama, to Rwanda, to Bosnia, either to make war or to keep the peace (which is which is not always clear).

And what has all this to do with rhetoric? Not much, certainly, if rhetoric is defined as "strategic, agent-centered discourse in the public realm" (Gross and Keith 2). Celeste Condit's theory of linguistic materialism, elaborated in this book, puts the notion of agency under severe strain—that is, if "agency" refers to a sovereign actor, fully aware of the discursive and practical constraints operating on discourse and able to embody persuasive intent in a spoken or written text. I do think, however, that rhetoric's traditional association with public discourse is still one of its defining characteristics. Contemporary claims that the *polis* has ceased to exist, it seems to me, overlook the multiple arenas in which such public discourse is staged and waged (King). The chapters in this book suggest a wide range of public arenas in which rhetoric is operative, from abortion clinics to memorial areas to media depictions of ideological loyalty. They demonstrate how discourses like those of AIDS prevention or the beautiful pregnancy actually produce practices that circumscribe or open new or other possibilities.

From my point of view, one of the most important contributions to rhetorical studies of analyses like these is that they point up the interestedness of boundary-drawing and distinction-making. Distinctions and boundaries are never disinterested: when someone is named as a witch, a factory worker, a rustic, or an illiterate, someone else profits from that distinction. When images are distinguished from texts, someone profits. What I learn from these chapters is that no body is disinterested. And that is why this work is central to rhetorical studies, which has always taken the study of partisanship as its province.

Notes

1. See Eley and Ryan for elaborations of this historical fact. My point is only that the "official" public sphere characterized in theory is a male or masculinized sphere. For arguments in support of this position, see Fraser and Pateman.
2. See Derrida and Falk for elaborations of this argument.

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