

Bodies of Knowledge: Definitions, Delineations, and Implications of Embodied Writing in the Academy

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This article differentiates three primary ways scholars in Composition and Rhetoric talk about embodiment as it relates to knowledge production and writing in the academy: embodied language, embodied knowledge, and embodied rhetoric. While these categories overlap and inform each other, clarifying the definitions themselves is important as there seems to be little agreement within the field about how one might define embodiment as it relates to writing. Additionally, this article illustrates how a strategic use of embodied rhetoric can disrupt the (faulty) assumption of a universalist discourse and provide concrete strategies for honoring difference and operationalizing a politics of location.

The link between bodies and language has a long history in Rhetoric, stretching back to Plato, Aristotle, and Montaigne. This tradition, of course, continues into the present: Carol Mattingly has drawn attention to women's bodies in *Appropriate[ing] Dress*; Cheryl Glenn has noted how women such as Anne Askew were able to use their positionalities as women, their female bodies, to subvert dominant ideas about authorship and power; Susan Kates has dubbed elocutionist Hallie Quinn Brown an embodied rhetor; Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury brought together twenty-four pieces on female embodiment and feminist theory (also the title of their collection); and in 1999, Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley published *Rhetorical Bodies*, a collection of sixteen essays on the intersections of rhetoric and the body. Even more recently, discussions of the body in Composition and Rhetoric have been highlighted in works concerning transgender rhetorics, such as Gayle Salamon's *Assuming A Body: Transgender and Rhetorics*; gay rhetorics (Alexander, Banks, and Gil-Gómez, for example); the burgeoning field of fat rhetorics (see, in particular, Kathleen LeBesco); works on disability and rhetoric, such as those collected in Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson's *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*; and much work in feminist theories in general and in feminist compositions and rhetorics more specifically. And of course this is only a tiny sliver of the work done on rhetoric and the body, in part because it's difficult to imagine discussions of the rhetorical practices of members of marginalized groups *without* reference to lived bodily experiences.¹

Yet what we might call “embodied terminology”—the use of terms such as *embodied*, *embodiment*, *bodily*, and references to *bodily acts*—also crosses disciplinary borders. Writing about the role of the body in science education,

for example, Hui Niu Wilcox argues “embodied knowledges—central to our academic, artistic, and activist work—not only render science more accessible to women and underprivileged communities, but also help cultivate citizenry for action and change” (105). Here, embodied knowledges are those that are created and understood through “lived experiences, cultural performance, and bodily intelligence” (106). Wilcox draws attention to bodily performance such as dance as one form of embodied knowledge, noting, too, that such knowledge is not validated within the academy. Ecofeminist Carol P. Christ uses similar language when she defines “embodied embedded mysticism” as a “sensing through the body of connection to the larger whole or web of life of which we are a part” (166). And Dina A-Kassim, in her article “The Faded Bond: Calligraphesis and Kinship in Abdelwahab Meddeb’s *Talismano*,” argues that calligraphy, linked in some cultures directly to tattooing, can be considered a sort of “embodied writing” (124).

In just these three articles, embodiment is defined as physical motion and the knowledge that might stem from such motion, sensory or bodily response, and a metaphorical and physical connection between the body and writing. This obfuscation of terminology is also clear when Wilcox explains that she will “use the terms ‘embodied ways of knowing,’ ‘embodied knowledges,’ and ‘embodied pedagogies’ interchangeably to signal an epistemological and pedagogical shift that draws attention to bodies as agents of knowledge production” (105). This final conflation of terms illustrates that confusion surrounding definitions of embodiment are not limited to what might be seen as limit cases (dance, calligraphy), but are instead central to the ways in which we talk about knowledge production and classroom practice. Here, Wilcox conflates *ways* of knowing, *forms* of knowledge, and *practices* of teaching, all linked to that term “embodied.” For Wilcox, all three are related to knowledge production, but I would argue that, while related, a physical motion like dance differs (or at least can differ) from an understanding of the world through lived experience in a particular body (a body that is transgendered, differently abled, or elderly, for example).² It is for this reason that I believe it important to differentiate the ways in which we talk about embodiment, particularly within English studies broadly, and Composition and Rhetoric more specifically. If critics conflate terms in the way that Wilcox does, it becomes too easy to further marginalize any form of embodied writing or ways of knowing within the academy.

I see three major categories of embodiment within the scholarship of our field: embodied language, embodied knowledge, and embodied rhetoric. This is not to say that these three categories are (a) mutually exclusive, or (b) the only ways in which one could categorize embodiment within Composition and Rhetoric. As is true in other disciplines, within English studies, too, these categories overlap, inform each other, even bleed into each other. And scholars interested in embodiment rarely consider or utilize just one category. And yet such delineation is important, in part because there seems to be little agreement within our field about how, exactly, we might

define embodiment as it relates to writing. Not understanding the differences between such concepts can also serve to hide the distinct contributions each form of embodiment can bring to Composition Studies. In this article, then, I will first clarify the terms and categories, exploring the benefits and drawbacks of each. I will then focus more specifically on *embodied rhetoric*, to illustrate how a strategic use of this rhetorical approach can provide concrete strategies for enacting Adrienne Rich's call for a politics of location in scholarly writing.

In brief, I define embodied language as the use of terms, metaphors, and analogies that reference, intentionally or not, the body itself. Embodied knowledge is that sense of knowing something *through* the body and is often sparked by what we might call a "gut reaction." Finally, embodied rhetoric is a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionalities as forms of meaning making within a text itself. I will now flesh out these terms more fully, beginning with embodied language.

Embodied Language

As Debra Hawhee points out, connections between language and the body were common in Greek culture. In fact, there was substantial slippage between terminology used to describe rhetoric and that used to describe athletics. Hawhee argues that the famous *agon*, as a place of both athletic and rhetorical engagement, was "a point of cultural connection between athletics and rhetoric," and therefore between the body and language (15). Hawhee also notes the connections between sports and the body in the term "stasis," explaining that stasis was used not only as a reference to one's rhetorical positioning or one's stance on an issue, but also one's position, stance, or posture in boxing (33). In this example, terminology, the very language itself, is embodied in that it echoes bodily functions and bodily motions.

In a more contemporary sense, I see embodied language in my introduction as I note that embodied categories "bleed into each other," and that I will "flesh out" my terms—phrasing that calls forth an image of the workings of the body. Such embodied language is common in English studies. As scholars, we "wrestle" with texts and ideas, we "embrace" arguments, we try to "wrap our minds around" complex concepts. Such language use might not immediately seem troubling, yet because it references the body itself, it is hardly uncomplicated. For one, *any* mention of the body in academic work can garner skeptical responses. While terms and phrases such as "grappling" with an idea have become normal parlance in academic writing, sustained use of bodily references still tends to provoke attention, as we will see in a moment. Perhaps more importantly, because embodied language speaks to and from bodies, it can carry multiple meanings, acting as a catalyst for both identification and disidentification. The work of Peter Elbow serves as one such example.

As Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly show, Elbow's work is rife with what I am calling embodied language. They note that Elbow makes space for "the role of the body—in all his writing" (210). In brief, the authors "argue that Elbow's voice is embodied—physical and present—in ways that bring an audience close both to Elbow's persona and to his ideas about writing and in ways that few academic writers attempt" (210). For example, Elbow uses images of eating, embracing (wrestling, holding, exercising), and seeing. Such references and metaphors, according to Ronald and Roskelly, situate the reader in Elbow's argument; they "become his way to make meaning and his way to connect" (214). In other words, because readers can relate to such bodily experiences as eating and embracing, and find satisfaction in many of these experiences, Elbow's use of such terminology may help readers identify with the author. It may help readers feel closer to the work and, in turn, closer to the act of writing itself.

But just as the embodied language that Elbow employs can serve to pull readers closer, it can also marginalize. Will Banks explains how Elbow's metaphor of the "marriage" between literature and composition leaves him (Banks) feeling "left out" because he, as a gay man, cannot marry.³ He wonders, "while Elbow *embodies* his understanding of English department rifts through the heteronormative trope of marriage, how would I embody it? And why do I feel so left out of his metaphor?" (29, emphasis in original). Banks illustrates how such language can actually keep some readers at bay, pushing them outside of the sense of inclusiveness that Ronald and Roskelly imagine, as Elbow's marriage metaphor does for Banks.

Perhaps even more troubling is when embodied language feels threatening and violent. In "Feminism and Composition: A Case for Conflict," Susan Jarratt famously draws attention to Elbow's embodied language in his discussion of the Doubting and Believing Game. In this well-known piece, Elbow suggests that the doubting game "tends to reinforce those personal styles which the culture also defines as male: aggressive, thrusting, combative, competitive, and initiatory" (180). He goes on to say that the doubting game is marked by "trying to remain *open*," says Elbow, or "a kind of trying-to-not-try" (181, emphasis in original). According to Elbow, to ask intellectuals to act or think in such ways often makes them feel as though all they can do "is just go soft and limp" (181). Furthermore:

The believing game asks us, as it were, to sleep with any idea that comes down the road. To be promiscuous. We will turn into the girl who just can't say no. A yes-man. A flunky. A slave. Someone who can be made to believe anything. A large opening that anything can be poured into. Force-fed. Raped. (185)

For Jarratt, Elbow's discussion raises two problems. The first is that Elbow's believing game reinforces for female students a passivity in which they must accept everything offered to them. Secondly, Jarratt gestures to the possible responses to Elbow's embodied language, including her own re-

sponse, when she writes “only read Elbow’s rhetoric of surrender as female subject, which I must do, and that positioning becomes frighteningly clear” (274). Such a positioning, according to Jarratt, “puts a woman [...] in a dangerous stance” (274). Her use of the term “dangerous” here is telling: Not only is the passivity that Elbow advocates potentially dangerous for women as it asks that women remain silent, but that term also references the physical danger associated with some of Elbow’s language: promiscuity, force-feeding, and rape.⁴

Like Jarratt, I am disturbed by this sexualized language, especially what seems like a rather casual use of the term “raped.” Perhaps similarly, as a woman reading these passages, I bristle at the phrase “a girl who just can’t say no” in a way that I don’t bristle at “yes-man,” in part, I believe, because of the sexual(ized), gendered, and sometimes violent connotations that swirl around the girl who “just can’t say no.” I imagine many men reading these sections might respond differently than I do to the assertion that intellectuals might just “go soft and limp.” I do not mean to imply here that Elbow *intended* to make readers feel uncomfortable or, at times, even threatened but, as Krista Ratcliffe has reminded us, sometimes the intent and the effects of language are strikingly different (89). Regardless of intent, the effect of these passages is, at least for me, bodily. And the effects of particular embodied language use might be different for any given reader based in part on that reader’s sexuality, gender, race, class, able-bodiedness, or size, for example. The multiplicity of potential response is one of the things that makes embodied language so tricky. Yes, it can serve to hail the reader, to connect with the reader, to bring a reader closer to the writer, but it can also push readers away, threaten them, disturb them, alienate and exclude them.

Embodied Knowledge

The above discussion of the effects of embodied language leads us into the realm of what I am calling embodied knowledge: knowledge that is very clearly connected to the body. Embodied knowledge often begins with bodily response—or what we might call “gut reactions.” As a trigger for meaning making that is rooted so completely in the body, embodied response is rarely legitimated in academia. Even so, I would argue that such response is a driving force behind much scholarly activity. For example, Betty Smith Franklin notes that her body, like all of ours, reacts when she encounters something exciting or boring, explaining, “As I listen to someone’s powerful story, the hair on my arms stands up. When I am held captive in a meeting listening to the droning of endless cover stories, I feel a deadening tension in my lower back” (18). Sara Ahmed further reflects this concept when she writes that “knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation; knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder, tremble, all those feelings that are crucially felt on the bodily surface, the skin surface where we touch and are touched by the world” (171).

What does this mean for us as academics and scholars? We, too, make sense of our worlds through our bodies and although such connections may not always be valued or sanctioned in the academy, some scholars are talking about the role that emotion *does* play in our academic work. Joy Ritchie, for example, explored the generative power of anger in a 2006 CCCC talk, and bell hooks has explained that rage can be a strong motivating factor for people who are oppressed, sparking an examination of the means of oppression in their lives and a determination to act (Crawford 683). I would imagine the marginalia of most scholars' books and articles would reveal strong emotional responses to these texts. And my hunch is that these reactions often prompted scholars to some form of academic action: a change in pedagogy, the writing of a response article, the launching of a new research project.

Banks draws attention to how his bodily responses inform his understanding of one of his courses. Writing about his reaction to a teacher who reminds him of his bullying older brother, Banks explains that the professor's booming voice made him "uncomfortable," and left him "feeling insecure and meek" (25). Because the professor's demeanor in class reminds Banks of his older brother, with whom he had never won an argument, Banks wonders if he was projecting, or "mapping one body onto another and responding through my body" (26). Banks further contends that the text of that class is now wrapped up in his bodily reaction to that teacher. He cannot separate the two (26). He has made sense of that class, and his experience of that class, in part through his embodied response to it. He has made sense of the world through his body.

Similarly, Jane E. Hindman, in her article "Writing an Important Body of Scholarship: A Proposal for an Embodied Rhetoric of Professional Practice," comments on her physical reaction to her graduate students' response to assigned readings, in particular those surrounding the foundationalist/anti-foundationalist debate in Composition and Rhetoric.⁵ Hindman reveals that in a frustrating classroom moment her "visceral responses were many," including an elevated heart rate and flushed skin (113). Yet, because the classroom is often imagined as a place of mind, of intellect, and not emotion, Hindman tried to keep such reactions hidden. Her dissatisfaction with her students' responses to this discussion, and with her own unwillingness to reveal her emotional reaction to her students, "produced and organized [her] professional process of producing knowledge," leading Hindman to develop her theories about embodied writing (112). Hindman's emotional and embodied response not only sparked a research project, it informed her construction of theories of embodiment and embodied rhetoric, theories that draw attention to the role of emotion and the body in academic work. This was knowledge that began, in very real ways, in Hindman's visceral reaction, a bodily knowledge that there was something worth exploring.

More broadly, Smith Franklin argues that "we know each other and ourselves through our bodies" (18). Our bodily responses become a form of embodied knowledge—a way of making knowledge through the body.

As Madeline Grumet points out, “whatever we have noticed, touched, and grabbed probably becomes part of our intuitive sense of the world” (252). Expanding on this notion, Grumet contends that “we see what we look for, and what we look for is constituted not only by what my body can do, but also what it cannot do” (253-54). In some ways, our bodies constitute our noetic fields—what can and cannot be known. While I can conceive of flight even though I cannot fly, I can only conceive of flight because I, in my body, have both felt close to flight (jumping off of picnic tables, running very fast, bouncing on a trampoline) and very far from flight. It is through my body, our bodies, that we know the world.⁶

Sometimes this knowing is even more concrete and physical. In her 2004 article “Words Made Flesh: Fusing Imagery and Language in a Polymorphic Literacy,” Kristie Fleckenstein relates the story her five-year-old daughter, Anna, learning how to draw a star. Her hand over her daughter’s, Fleckenstein guides Anna through the motions, whispering “up down up over down” as the two of them make stars on the page. Fleckenstein gradually lets go of Anna’s hand and the young girl continues to draw rough stars on her own. Eagerly watching, Anna’s four-year-old sister asks Anna to teach her how to make stars, too. “No, Baby, I can’t,” Anna replies, “I don’t know how. Only my hand knows” (612).

Of course, the mind/body distinction here is not only problematic, it’s also overly simplified. But we cannot, I think, dismiss Anna’s experience. At that moment, only her hand “knew” how to make a star, or at least that’s the way it felt to her. Her mind doesn’t seem to have processed the information in a way that would allow Anna to explain it to her sister. I imagine the delight in this new skill, the making of stars, but also the fear that if the hand stops, the skill will be lost. I have certainly had similar experiences, relying primarily on muscle memory, and confident that if I think about something too much (a PIN number or online passcode, for example), I won’t be able to accomplish my task. My hand, at those points, appears to know better than my mind. Such knowledge, it often seems, is of the body.

It is one thing, however, to draw on embodied knowledge as a generative force; it is another to include such aspects of embodiment in the writing itself. Such inclusion has often been met with resistance (although that resistance itself has not been without challenge). I posit that such reticence is due to a conflation of the forms of embodiment in writing discussed this far as well as the inclusion of what we might call bodily urges.

Perhaps the most famous example of the inclusion of the body in academic writing is Jane Tompkins’s 1987 article “Me and My Shadow,” in which Tompkins highlights the intersections between her personal life and her professional life, arguing that her desire to separate the two is quite simply a matter of academic conditioning (169). Tompkins comments on what she feels is an academic need to address a mistake in a colleague’s article. Such an approach should, in a traditional model, be calculated, rational, professional, *intellectual*, and would leave the body at the proverbial

door. Yet Tompkins breaks the academic mold by admitting that she doesn't know how to enter this debate (or conversation) with a colleague without leaving her personal life behind. "The criticism I would like to write," she explains "would always take off from personal experience, would always be a chronicle of my hours and days, would speak in a voice which can talk about everything" (173).

In a moment, I will turn to Tompkins' *rhetorical* use of the body in her article, shifting the discussion from embodied knowledge to embodied rhetoric. First, however, it is useful to draw attention to the moments in Tompkins's landmark article that can make it too easy to dismiss references to the body. I do not mean to dismiss Tompkins—over twenty years after its initial publication, I return to this article because I am still struck by the power of what Tompkins calls her "interruption" of academic conventions, her inclusion of the personal—but there are moments that are more productive than others.

Tompkins's belief that she would like to write criticism that would "be a chronicle of my hours and days" undercuts the radical potential of embodied rhetoric. While Tompkins argues that there are connections between her personal and professional lives, that her marriage, her childhood, her reactions to a summer teach-in, her emotions, and her scholarship are all intertwined, productive scholarship must also move beyond a chronicle of hours and days. There might, in fact, be a connection between Tompkins's father's illness, the grief she has over a friend who had committed suicide, her bodily urge to go to the bathroom, and her response to Messer-Davidow. There might be a connection, but these connections aren't clear to me as a reader. Tompkins's inclusion of the fact that she needs to pee does little to forward the conversation, and provides fodder for those critics who feel that the body has no role in academic writing. When she uses her own embodied response to critique the lack of bodily recognition in scholarship, however, the article moves toward productive embodied *rhetoric* and not simply the inclusion of bodily urges.

Embodied Rhetoric

Embodied rhetoric, like all rhetoric, is *purposeful* and therefore moves beyond "simply" including bodily urges in academic writing. I return now to the work of Hindman and Banks to construct and hone a definition of embodied rhetoric and illustrate the benefits and potential drawbacks of embodied rhetoric. Finally, I argue that clarifying the ways in which we incorporate aspects of embodiment in academic writing can encourage this form of productive *rhetorical* uses of the body.

While embodied language draws attention to the body itself and embodied knowledge recognizes the generative force of the body, Hindman argues that embodied rhetoric "requires gestures to the material practices of the professional group and to the quotidian circumstances of the individual writer" ("Writing an Important Body" 103). More specifically, she believes

we, as scholars, must “gesture to our bodies, our lives” in our work “by calling to the surface at least some of the associations that [our] thinking passes through, associations evoked by [our] gender, race, class, sexual orientation, politics, and so on” (“Writing an Important Body” 104). Importantly, this “gesturing” must be included *in the text itself*. Hindman’s work on embodied rhetoric is invaluable, but linking it more clearly with these further modes of embodiment both refines and operationalizes the definition. Embodied rhetoric, then, becomes more clearly the purposeful effort by an author to represent aspects of embodiment within the text he or she is shaping. Furthermore, when practicing embodied rhetoric, the author attempts to decipher how these “material circumstances” (Royster 228) affect how he or she understands the world.

Why would one choose to practice an embodied rhetoric? What purpose does it or might it serve? Perhaps most importantly, as Jacqueline Jones Royster argues:

knowledge is produced by someone and [. . .] its producers are not formless and invisible. They are embodied and in effect have passionate attachments by means of their embodiments. They are vested with vision, values, and habits; with ways of being and ways of doing. These ways of being and doing shape the question of what counts as knowledge, what knowing and doing mean, and what the consequences of knowledge and action entail. It is important therefore, to specify attachments, to recognize who has produced the knowledge, what the bases of it are, what the material circumstances of its production entail. (228)

Banks echoes Royster when he remarks that it is “quite simply impossible (and irresponsible) to separate the producer of the text from the text itself. Our belief that we could make such a separation has allowed masculinist rhetorics to become ‘universal’ in modernist discourses because the bodies producing the discourse have been effectively erased, allowing them to become metonymies of experience and knowledge” (Banks 33). The belief, at least in professional circles, that we could erase the body in favor of the mind (as if the two were separable), imagines what Susan Bordo has called “a dis-embodied view from nowhere” (4).⁷ Such a view assumes a sort of normed intellectualism, a seemingly utopian belief that place and body do not matter. That the academic, the intellectual, can transcend such material matters. But as all of these scholars draw attention to, there is no such disembodied place of nowhere. We are all situated beings, bodies situated in culture and language.

The disembodied view from nowhere further assumes that, because bodies do not matter, “any *body* can stand in for another” (Banks 38). In some ways, this is a comforting thought. As members of minority groups struggle for recognition within the academy, the lack of embodiment in prose might lead one to believe that we’re all on a level playing field. To be able to erase or ignore markers of difference, at least in written texts, might imply a sort

of race/gender/sexuality blindness. I am sometimes seduced by the thought of erasing the body, my body, in my texts because some of the markers of my identity are less valued than others.

Yet I am persuaded by Banks's argument that to ignore the body privileges the white masculinist discourse as universal. Such ignoring, in effect, erases difference, subsuming all into a discourse that has traditionally been white, male, and privileged. This imagined view from nowhere then functions like essentialism in a whole new fashion. A view from nowhere, a belief that bodies don't matter, seems much easier to imagine if one lives in a body that is not always already marked as other. It seems to imagine that others can forget their bodies, too. As bell hooks points out, "the person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body" (137). Who is asked to deny the body and who is asked to reveal is a question I believe we must continually ask ourselves.

The view from nowhere assumes, then, that each body is equally constructed, equally accepted, and equally provided for in this society. Of course this is not the case. The way my body moves through this world is often different than the way that your body moves through this world. And it's different than the way my brother's does, my grandmother's does, my niece Elenor's does, my friend Mei's does. To ignore the body in scholarship might, in some ways, aid those from minority groups, but only by asking them (us) to pass, to act as if our bodies, our experiences don't matter, to act as if we are white, heterosexual, able-bodied, privileged men. And that just doesn't sit right with me.

Instead, an attention to the body as reflected in an embodied rhetoric speaks to the concerns of Royster and Banks, as well as to Adrienne Rich's call for a politics of location in our scholarship. By locating a text in the body (understanding the importance of embodied knowledge) and by locating the body in the text, writers utilizing an embodied rhetoric work against what might be seen as the potential hegemony of (some) academic discourse, thereby beginning to enact Rich's politics of location. But, as Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie have noted, a politics of location in composition scholarship is remarkably complicated.⁸ Kirsch and Ritchie caution scholars that "it is not enough to claim the personal and locate ourselves in our scholarship and research" (140). Furthermore, drawing on Rich, the authors explain that we need to do more than "make the facile statements that often occur at the beginning of research articles, to say, 'I am a white, middle-class woman from a Midwestern university doing research.'" (142). Instead, a politics of location must "challenge our conception of *who* we are in our work," and must be "accompanied by a rigorously reflexive examination of ourselves as researchers" (142). As researchers, as scholars, as teachers, and, I would argue, as human beings.

Rich urges us to begin this process of location "not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body" (64). Rich believes that doing so helps us "reclaim" our bodies, "to reconnect our think-

ing and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual” (65). This is what embodied rhetoric asks of the rhetor, to reconnect our thinking with our particular bodies, understanding that knowledge comes from the body. But, lest we forget, these are bodies both shaping and shaped by culture. And these bodies, and the cultures they inhabit, are complex entities, not to be reduced to singular essential tags such as “woman” or “Chinese.” These terms signify differently in different contexts, and the terms themselves are socially constructed. By locating our thinking in our particular bodies, scholars in Composition and Rhetoric—perhaps any field—need to keep in mind the cautions of postmodern theorists, as well as the cautions of scholars such as Kirsch and Ritchie. Those cautions are (at least) two-fold.

The first caution comes from postmodern scholars who might argue that an embodied rhetoric, drawing from a politics of location that begins in the body, assumes a stable and unified body from which to speak. Scholars such as Foucault and Butler would of course remind me that bodies are constructed, that social positionalities are performed, and that there is no unified body that needs to or could stand in for another.⁹ Bodies are texts and are therefore unstable and subject to shifting positionalities, transformation, and continually revised and reconstructed histories. To write *from* the body, as asked by an embodied rhetoric, one must *have* a body, and in a postmodern world there is no unified body from which to write.

This critique reminds scholars such as myself that positionalities shift in different contexts. The work of postmodern scholars forces me to keep in mind that my body is in some ways always already constructed by culture, written on by discourse. But that writing, I think, can take many different forms and can be read in a variety of ways. Bodies may be imagined as texts, as cyborgs, as discourse itself.¹⁰ But that does not dismiss the very real lived experiences of that flesh, of *people*, not metaphors. Because whether or not I imagine myself to be a unified Cartesian subject or a shifting, slippery postmodern amalgamation of discourses, someone walks the dog in morning. Someone looks back at me in the mirror. This body, my body, has been cut into, has had violence inflicted upon it, has inflicted violence upon others, has been ignored and silenced, has been touched and celebrated. This body, my body, moves through this particular world visually marked as white, overweight, and female. In less obvious ways it is marked by class and assumed heterosexuality. This is how I am often read and, in turn, this is how I often read. So I turn to embodied rhetoric because one body cannot stand in for another, constructed or not, as lived experiences in a specific body help shape the ways in which that body, that person, makes sense of the world.

This assertion leads to the second caution concerning academic references to the body: that well-worn charge of essentialism, a critique often leveled at embodied rhetoric, and with good reason. Drawing attention to one’s body as a locus for meaning making can, if not carefully practiced, cause either thinker or reader to imagine that this particular body stands in for all bodies of a certain gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. In other

words, if I say that my experiences in a female body lead me to such-and-such a claim, the statement may be read (and could be intended to be read) as if I were saying that “as a woman, I think like this,” as if all women think as I do because of our shared biology.¹¹ Drawing on the work of Sandra Harding, Kirsch and Ritchie caution that “claiming our experience, then, may be as inadequate for making claims to knowledge as traditional claims from objectivity are. Harding points out that ‘our experience may lie to us’ just as it has lied to male researchers who believed their positions were value-free or universal” (144). In other words, in speaking from our own experience we must always keep in mind that that experience is local and specific, not universal.

In response to this essentialist critique, Kirsch and Ritchie ask that scholars “be unrelentingly self-reflective” (Kirsch and Ritchie 143), always keeping in mind how our own positionalities can not only help us make meaning of the world, but also keep hidden meanings not revealed by our positionalities. Hindman calls it “unflinching self-reflection” (“Making Writing Matter” 101). In other words, we must recognize that we cannot speak for others, and that our own viewpoints are always limited by our experiences, standpoints, positionalities, and bodies (and the ways in which they receive and are received in the world). We must constantly, unrelentingly, unflinchingly reflect on our own terministic screens and what these screens both obscure and draw into focus.

This reflexivity can refer not only to a reflection on our bodily experience and standpoints, but on our *professional* positionalities as well. Hindman extends her call for self-reflection by asking that academic writers practicing an embodied rhetoric make “gestures to the existing discursive conventions of the discipline,” drawing attention in the text to these conventions (“Making Writing Matter” 101). According to Hindman, this is necessary because in order to be heard in the academy, in order to construct the proper ethos, a writer must first prove that she understands the conventions, yet, in order to embody the rhetoric, the writer must also call attention to the fact that these *are* conventions, and that she is both working within them and intentionally challenging them. Hindman calls this an “interruption” that can unsettle the supposed mastery of an author who can work within these conventions. Those practicing embodied rhetoric can disrupt this mastery in order to reflect the writer’s positionality within the academy.

The writer’s positionality within the academy and her social positionality are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, social positionality often affects standing within the academy, and standing within the academy often affects the ways in which one is “allowed” or sanctioned to write, as Tompkins illustrates. She explicitly outlines the conventions of academic writing—what she is supposed to do in a critical response article—but then undercuts these expectations by including aspects of embodiment. As I note above, not all such inclusions are productive, but her rhetorical strategy of gesturing to her lived experiences and positionalities allows her to highlight

academic and professional conventions while simultaneously subverting those same conventions. Doing so illustrates for a reader that she can write in the ways she has been taught that she is not allowed to write and can still contribute to professional knowledge. In this case, part of that knowledge is an expanding of genre conventions. The form of the article itself helps to create and/or legitimate new professional practice. The self-reflection that Tompkins practices, itself a form of embodied rhetoric, further illustrates the potential of such a rhetoric. It moves the personal beyond the private and places it squarely in the realm of the social and professional, ultimately critiquing the exclusion of the body in professional practice. Tompkins makes clear that her knowledge comes from somewhere, from a particular body. Highlighting the personal source of embodied knowledge gives specificity and voice to the bodies behind the words on the page, helping enact that politics of location in a way that is more than a mere biographical blurb. In this way, an embodied rhetoric born from embodied knowledge can disrupt what is often assumed to be an academic or professional mastery (by gesturing to conventions as conventions), and can rattle loose the privileged white masculinist discourse to which Banks draws attention.

This is, for me, the benefit of an embodied rhetoric in professional practice. While not appropriate for all purposes, an embodied rhetoric that draws attention to embodied knowledge—specific material conditions, lived experiences, positionalities, and/or standpoints—can highlight difference instead of erasing it in favor of an assumed privileged discourse. Furthermore, a scholar employing an embodied rhetoric to illustrate self-reflexivity in terms of bodily or academic positionalities can open up a space for new professional practices and discourses, practices that consciously position knowledge as of the body. In order to fully enact this rhetorical practice, however, we need to be clearer about embodied terminology so as not to confuse embodied knowledge with embodied rhetoric (or embodied response or even references to bodily urges). Such specificity will also make clearer for both writers and critics that such writing is social, not solipsistic, personal but also professional. Embodied rhetoric, when functioning as rhetoric, connects the personal to the larger social realm, and makes more visible the sources of *all* of our knowledge.

Notes

1. Especially as much of this rhetorical practice was in response to marginalization that was based on human difference, or perceived human difference.
2. While a bodily motion like dance might lead to embodied knowledge, embodied knowledge is not only born of bodily motion. As someone who has never been a dancer, I can imagine that dance, itself, might be a form of embodied knowledge, but I am hesitant to say that one always knows about the world through motions like dance.
3. At the writing of this article, same-sex marriage or unions are legal in only a handful of states across the nation.

4. Because female students are often already socially conditioned to be passive receptors of information, such a reading is indeed gendered. But assuming that only females can be positioned as “opening[s],” that only females can be asked to “swallow,” or be “force-fed,” or raped illustrates the assumed heteronormativity of this discussion.
5. Students read a number of scholars, including Stephen North and Patricia Bizzell, who make a case for anti-foundationalism. When students then read a counter-argument by Stanley Fish, they were “outraged,” wondering why scholars kept making a case for anti-foundationalism when Fish had already “proved—and that was several years ago—that practice has nothing to do with theory” (Hindman, “Writing an Important Body” 110).
6. Of course, in the most basic sense, *all* of our senses are embodied; our very cognitive processes, too, are embodied.
7. Bordo credits Thomas Nagel with the phrase “view from nowhere” (217).
8. Kirsch and Ritchie focus primarily on issues of feminist research methodology in their article “Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research,” but their discussion of a politics of location is relevant to embodied rhetorics as well.
9. Lynn Worsham, too, would remind me that emotion is also socially constructed (397).
10. Donna Haraway cautions that “feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in field, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning” (195). Her point is well taken: I am, in some ways, imagining a sort of reified body in that I imagine a body that is bound to itself, that is bounded by flesh and therefore contained. But all bodies shift and change, sometimes naturally, sometimes violently. And the positionality of any body is constantly shifting within varied power structures and social situations.
11. Such thinking also privileges a gender and sex binary, juxtaposing men and women as if these were the only two biological categories of sex.

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