

What Does It Mean to Move?: Race, Disability, and Critical Embodiment Pedagogy



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Abstract: In this article, I argue for pedagogies that explicitly center the embodied perspectives of students and their audiences. Using Stephanie Kerschbaum's concept of "anecdotal relations," or orientations towards disability that inform rhetorical transactions, I analyze my academic experiences as a Chicana with "invisible" disabilities to highlight how race and disability are both highlighted and erased in pedagogical contexts. I present two personal stories from my time as a student and as an instructor, respectively, to show how instructors' orientations towards race and disability are typically based around impressions of deficit even as the importance of race and disability as critical heuristics are overlooked. Then I explain how my students and I attempt to build critical embodiment into our writing to compose more inclusively to suggest how we may all become more attuned to our audiences' embodied needs.

Rhetoric privileges movement—emotional, ethical, physical.^[1] Hence, composition pedagogy aims to teach students to move others toward particular stances or courses of action. These goals often rely on normate standards of emotional engagement and activity, based in standards of white eurowestern ablebodiedness that associate certain kinds of movement with agency and expression. But, as Margaret Price asks, "How does one speak (either aloud or on the page) if one's mind spins with anxiety, grapples with depression, freezes with panic, or is occluded by brain fog? What shall we do with notions of collaboration, activism, and community that presuppose all participants will arrive at the table ready and able to engage in 'lively' (and implicitly) logical conversations?" ("Her Pronouns Wax and Wane" 13). Typically, conventional notions of communication go unchallenged until the presence of non-normativity disrupts the rhetorical landscape, demanding answers to questions like those that Price poses. For some of us, these questions do not signify hypothetical concerns or apparent nods to inclusivity but the very frameworks through which we compose our writing and our lives. Here, I approach composition as praxis and pedagogy from a very specific positionality, as someone whose roles as writer, researcher, and teacher are fundamentally informed by my intersecting identities, that of a Chicana living with several "invisible" disabilities. I consider how we might make room for bodily diversity in composition by highlighting race and disability as critical means of embodied invention that gainfully unsettle habituated expectations.

From my intersectional positionality of racialized disability, I argue that we must strive for critical embodiment pedagogies, or approaches that recognize and foreground bodily diversity so that students learn to compose for accessibility and inclusivity. Below, I describe rhetoric's problematic treatment of the body and how it fosters institutionalized oppression. Then, I explain how life writing about disability and race contests dominant narratives. To illustrate, I present two stories, from my time as a graduate student and as a professor of writing, respectively, to identify the salient "anecdotal relations" (Kerschbaum), or orientations to disability and race, present in the rhetorical and pedagogical interactions I depict. Based on my findings, I argue that we must move beyond recognition of audience diversity as an abstract concept to teach writing using approaches that engage critical embodiment to contest conditions that create exclusion.

Embodied Deficit: Race, Disability, and Rhetoric's In/visible Bodies

Bodies allow us to perceive and inhabit the world around us; they are sites where the social and corporeal dimensions of our lives coincide (Merleau-Ponty). Our bodies determine our ability to navigate institutional contexts and constraints, adapting in relation to other bodies and spaces (Foucault; Ahmed, *On Being Included*). Our senses

provide interpretive frameworks that keep us safe (what Anzaldúa calls “la facultad” and Dolmage associates with *mêtis*) and serve as vehicles for connecting with the past and speaking back to power (Royster and Kirsch; Powell, “Dreaming”). Embodied knowledge proves a potent “generative force,” though it is often met with resistance in the academy (Knoblauch 57). Students often learn to compose as though communication and reception do not occur through our bodies. *Ethos* and *logos* are discussed as though they have no somatic basis. Academic discourse, which privileges logocentricity, devalues emotional appeals (Villanueva 12). Primary experience and situated perspective tend to be discounted, this disdain reified in the old saw that dictates we avoid “I” in essay writing in favor of (an ostensibly) disembodied objectivity (Paley). These inured norms ignore the embodied ways of knowing and communicating that make living our everyday lives possible.

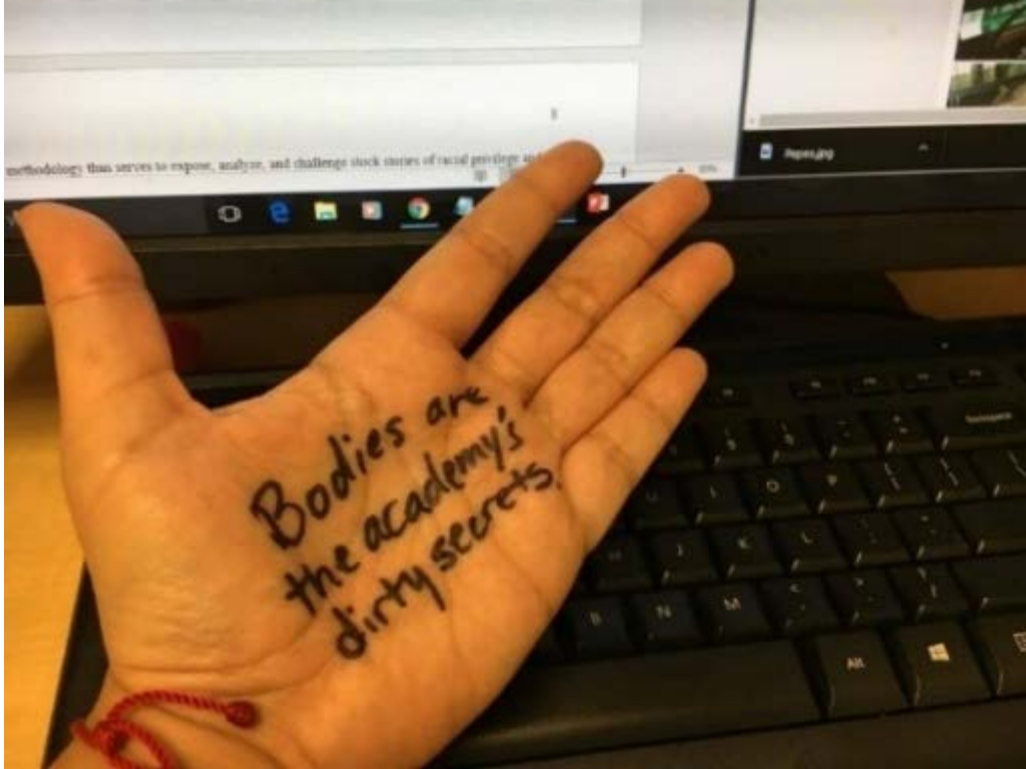


Figure 1. Written upon the palm of a hand are the words “Bodies are the academy’s dirty secrets.” In the background is a computer screen and keyboard.

Paradoxically, even as this discounting is enforced, student writers are trained to engage the body, to stir the emotions and move others despite a privileging of logic and ethics. Movement is the long-established proof of rhetoric’s efficacy. Aristotle calls pleasure a “movement of the mind” that allows us to refine our nature (Ch. XI, 87). This notion is not a metaphor but entails actual, material change. Kenneth Burke takes up Aristotle’s assessments of pity and fear as a moving-toward and a moving-away, respectively, also framing these emotions as active phenomena. Movement displays a relational quality, relying on interaction and intercorporeality (Burke 353). As Debra Hawhee shows, critics have consistently referred to the importance of the senses and the sensorial to rhetorical praxes (“Rhetoric’s Sensorium”). Attention to the body is nothing new in studies of rhetoric and composition, even if we tend to address it metonymically. Our bodies influence and make possible any and all rhetorical acts.

I cannot help but wonder: what about those of us who cannot feel a pleasure that is mind-altering? What about those of us whose cultural ways of relating and maintaining proximity to others diverges from dominant norms? Are we doomed to ethical and emotional stasis? I don’t believe so, but I do believe that our exclusion from traditional rhetorical models situates us as anomalies.

Nevertheless, rhetoric’s relationship to living bodies remains largely characterized by simultaneous denial and engagement. And this inconsistency tacitly privileges particular ways of feeling, being, and moving while framing bodies that do not align with those ways as “diseased, damaged, and worthless” (Erevelles, “Crippin’ Curriculum” 33). Human beings are classified according to aesthetic and scientific norms, our profitability, and our ability to embody social and cultural values (Spurr 22). But our bodies must also take on such signification without drawing attention to themselves due to markers of difference. The “invisibility” of privileged bodies lends credence to the

discourses advanced through those bodies, equating their speech with objectivity as though said discourses were not products of specific standpoints. Those whose bodies are seen (in terms of surveillance and an ableist predilection for sight) as Other are framed as too corporeal and incapable of legitimate speech, as rhetorically expedient but never rhetorical in their own right. They are mere bodies, objects upon which meaning can be imposed.

Rhetoric and composition's logocentrism and stress on the "objective" voice help to naturalize these biases. These discursive norms prove tools of "social hygiene" that function to "diagnose, cure, contain or expel" those whose identities cannot be seamlessly integrated into standardized (and standardizing) notions of rhetor and audience (Price, *Mad at School* 32). The "frequent invisibility and unspokenness of whiteness" means that this identity becomes, by default, that of the imagined but unexamined audience (Ratcliffe 155). Students learn to compose with default notions of communication and reception aimed at the whitestream, that version of reality "principally structured on the basis of white, middle-class experience" (Grande 330). To this habituated impression, I would add ablebodiedness, since notions about what it means to be fully human merge race and disability as categories of deficiency. (2) These norms are further exacerbated by institutional emphasis on speech as the main marker of authority and subjectivity. When we ignore the significance of materiality and of bodies, "intangible webs of discourses" created by privileged voices threaten to supplant the persons and cultures they describe, further reducing human beings to mere tropes (Selzer 4-5).

Though some instructors might prefer an apolitical approach that relies on seemingly universal rules that lead to a "proper" essay, recognizing interwoven systems of oppression proves crucial to a student-centered *praxis*. In academic settings, institutional ableism is used to create more "acceptable" forms of racism, allowing the segregation of racial minorities to continue under the guise of advocating for students with disabilities. For example, schools may diagnose students that need extra help with reading as learning disabled in order to access federal funds (Beratan). At the same time, racism reinforces institutional ableism by reducing racialized individuals' access to needed resources (Richardson and Norris; Snowden). Diagnosticians often misdiagnose or overwrite the experiences of students from minoritized communities due to explicit or implicit bias based in the assumption of ethno-racially based "intellectual hierarchies" (Ferri and Connor 94). In the composition classroom, these systematic oppressions function to construe Othered ways of knowing and writing as deficiencies, as rhetorical offenses to be corrected. Individuals whose bodies are perceived as non-normative are framed as unreliable rhetors who cannot speak to more than a thin sliver of experience, even though every individual's embodied identities determine their unique experiences and navigation of academic spaces. All bodies are not identical; neither are their needs, expressions of movement, or preferred modes of reception. When students take on the language of the academy with no regard for embodiment, their own or that of others, they may automatically analyze their experiences and those of others through the lens of exclusionary norms. These norms phenomenologically background (3) those of us whose bodies refuse to conform, rendering real people and real needs invisible except for our "atypical" characteristics, which are codified to center normate ways of being. If these -isms go unexamined, even a simple essay might become a tool of symbolic violence, silencing already vulnerable individuals when they cannot be moved in anticipated ways.

"Instead of recognizing expressions of development as culturally specific, [the Theory of Compromised Human Development] situates middle-class (White) children as the unmarked norm against which the development of 'other' children is evaluated. In under-analyzing how this referent is articulated in the culture and organization of schools and how it increases the likelihood that minority children will be evaluated as academically and behaviorally deficient and in need of special services, TCHD fails to recognize the extent to which schools socially construct disabilities..." (O'Connor and De Luca Fernandez 6).

Contesting Whitestream Narratives: Life Writing in Critical Race Studies and Disability Studies

To illustrate why composition must pay greater attention to issues of embodiment, I now present narratives from my own experiences as a student composer and composition teacher, respectively, to consider how the dictum "to move" that proves central to rhetorical *praxis* is complicated by embodied identities such as race and disability. I analyze these stories to determine their salient "anecdotal relations," what Stephanie L. Kerschbaum defines as "relations to disability that are created and disseminated through the narratives people share about disability," although I consider relations to race in these stories as well. These personal reflections reveal why my intersecting identities are practical frameworks inextricable from my research, writing, and pedagogy.

Scholars writing in the fields of both critical race theory (CRT) and disability studies note the liberatory and inventive

potential of life writing. CRT advances counterstory as a method for re-presenting events and experiences from the viewpoints of oppressed people in order to challenge narratives composed from the standpoint of the privileged perspective. As Aja Y. Martinez states, CRT counterstory “recognizes that the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (37). Likewise, an autobiographical disability narrative can provide a “counter-discursive portrayal of disability” (Ferri 2269) or a “counter-diagnosis” (Price, “Her Pronouns Wax and Wane”), thereby deconstructing culturally habituated stories that frame disabled individuals as either super-crips or objects of pity. These kinds of life writing describe the manifold denigration that minoritized populations encounter in daily life so that it can be confronted and countered. In reading stories about the experiences of others, marginalized people come to know that resistance to oppression is not only possible but rooted in long, untold histories. They can also learn to defend themselves against the prejudicial arguments embodied by these narratives (Yosso 119). By communicating our experiences, we can contest systems of oppression and build identification via a common struggle.

In offering these anecdotes, I do not assert these experiences as necessarily fungible with those of others. Racialized and disabled people know only too well what it means to be spoken over or spoken for. And academia’s propensity for generalization too easily leads to marginalized peoples’ pluralities of knowledge being abstracted into new forms of objectivity; such abstraction only further silences those who don’t fit dominant notions of disabled and/or racialized identity or falsely renders race and disability as transposable. As Lennard Davis makes clear, even a venture aimed at promoting inclusion can work to classify and contain “no matter how progressive it may seem” (Davis 5). My point here is precisely that everyone’s experiences are unique and, therefore, we must desist from framing some experiences as standard and some as anomalous. For that reason, I reiterate that what I present below, while intended as both counter-political and counter-discursive, represents only my own understanding of my own movement through academic spaces without advancing that story as another tool of bodily circumscription and diagnostic normativity.

However, because I know that what I share here will resonate with the experiences of many others, I deploy these stories to denounce the racism and ableism that inform pedagogies dependent on identity avoidance and myths of meritocratic objectivity. I aim to challenge academic norms that frame issues of embodiment, race, and disability as individual concerns or mere theories rather than ever-present conditions, and to hold space for others who also contend with overt and micro-aggressions enabled by these norms. I use personal perspective strategically to remind privileged readers that matters of race and disability are not hypothetical concerns but fundamental conditions that make up everyday reality for many of us. Indeed, these markers of identity determine all of our lives. And yet, ways of being and knowing employed by disabled and racially minoritized students are still largely devalued in the academy; pedagogy and *praxis* prove part of an ableist and/or racist social apparatus if common assumptions that devalue their experiences go unexamined. I suggest that analyzing anecdotal relations in our own stories and interactions is one approach for (re-)considering our relationships with, and orientations toward, disability and race. Negative relations to disability and race can hinder the formation of constructive relationships between teachers and students and force students to conform to harmful notions of movement and communication.

On the Author’s Relationships to Race and Disability: Two Stories

My distinctive embodied identity is why I focus on relationships between rhetoric and bodies, on those ways that rhetorics of embodiment compel us into corporeal configurations deemed socially acceptable and how we comply or contest these constraints. In my case, I cannot help but pose a challenge to order. Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) means I move too much; my thoughts jump to make connections that might appear inscrutable enthymemes to others. Anxiety can drive me into stasis, barraging me with conflicting questions and concerns. Depression means that sometimes I cannot move at all either mentally or physically because my “bodymindspirit” (Lara 16) aches too much. These “disorders” are not just a long list of medical conditions but rhetorical arrangements of and in the flesh, for they literally, corporeally, and spatially disrupt normative order. I am also Chicana, born and raised in a South Texas border town that spans both sides of the Rio Grande so that people move back and forth in the course of everyday life. Because we’re used to being from both countries and yet considered outsiders in both, we learn to go with the flow—yes, like that river—and adapt to a remarkable linguistic diversity that means one may use English, Spanish, Spanglish, or any mix of these as needed. Border epistemologies “can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries” so we develop “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity,” and function “in a pluralistic mode” (Anzaldúa 79). My cultural identity and disabilities mean I maintain a very particular relationship with movement that is inevitably polymorphic and variable and that permits a receptive flexibility, an appreciation for the ways that diverse forms of expression might reflect an individual’s reality. This flexibility and the movement it invites are mainly overlooked by traditional notions of what it means to rhetorically move, either oneself or others, and attain access to privileged spaces and social mobility.

It's 2006, my first semester back in graduate school after seven years, an opportunity made possible by a diversity fellowship meant to attract students from minoritized communities to the university. My cohort is chosen to pilot a course designed to help incoming students acculturate to the rigors of Ph.D. studies. I'm also enrolled in History of Rhetoric, which has an intimidatingly long list of required readings, and Old English, which has me excited but worried because I'm notoriously bad at languages that aren't contemporary Englishes or Spanishes.

It's the intro course that soon becomes the bane of my existence. Early on, the professor proclaims that she and another colleague are the toughest graders in the department. At the time the notion of an academic gatekeeper is not something with which I'm familiar. The first assignment, a short abstract, comes back with a grade lower than I expected and comments regarding its incomprehensibility. I ask the professor what I need to fix. She tells me these are common errors that many beginning writers make. I'm confused because I've already been in grad school and people tell me I'm a good writer. I read the abstract to several peers and ask if they understand what I'm trying to say. No one seems to have a problem with it. I pay greater attention in class, making sure to participate as much as possible to demonstrate engagement with the readings. Maybe I participate too much. Sometimes the professor doesn't reply. Instead, she looks at me like I'm interrupting an important conversation except no one's talking and she turns to others to provide the elusive answers she seeks. With each subsequent assignment, things just seem to get worse. In my other classes, I do well. In this class, my arguments make no sense. I'm wishy washy. My thoughts aren't logically organized. Some of the "idiomatic language" I use must be due to the influence of Spanish being my first language, I am told, except it actually wasn't but nobody has bothered to ask.

By the time I meet with the professor to discuss my final project, a précis in anticipation of the paper I'm supposed to write the following semester, I'm desperate. I have no idea what she wants. I change my initial topic to something that I assume she'll prefer. I enter her office, expecting to have a friendly chat, but presently, she grows impatient and frustrated, staring at me through increasingly narrowed eyes. I begin to stammer incoherently, trying to get past my brain fog. My hands shake and I'm gesturing a lot, so I clasp them together in front of me. I want to cry. As I stop to take a breath, I ask, "Does any of this make any sense?" and she says in an aloof tone, "I have absolutely no idea what you're trying to tell me." Her demeanor tells me I am wasting her time. I leave, feeling like I've made a big mistake by thinking I'm good enough to get a Ph.D. After all, who am I? I've aimed too high and now my wings are melting. I was good for my hometown but not out in the real world. I must have fooled the other professors. The chair of graduate studies, who had herself recruited me to the program, must have been willing to take anyone for the sake of numbers. I give up trying to salvage what little credibility I feel I have in that class.

The semester that follows, the second half of the course is taught by the other professor named as a difficult grader. I do well, and he compliments my writing. But every time I receive positive feedback from him and other professors, the joy is short-lived. Inevitably, I slide from satisfaction into despair. Even though I eventually work with a highly recognized and respected rhetorician who tells me she believes in me, I assume she just feels sorry for the sad minority student. I don't know about impostor syndrome yet because no one has explained it to me, but I do know I feel like a fraud, constantly, and that I had never felt that way before. The following year, when I seek treatment for depression following the death of my father, I'm diagnosed with ADD, unipolar depression, and anxiety disorder. When I tell my family, they say that all makes total sense. I feel like everyone else was in on something except me.

Writing, which was once all I ever wanted to do for a living, now feels oppressive, mentally and physically painful every time I have to do it. I often spiral and shut down, driven to bed to avoid facing my failure. Years later, I am a teacher of writing and I can't even follow my own advice to get things done. I'm a charlatan just trying to make it from one day to the next. I don't think this profession is really for me.



Figure 2.: A woman with dark hair and glasses looks at the camera. Over her shoulder are many books on tall bookshelves.

I often share this story with my students to let them know that I, too, experience distress when it comes to writing. But given that I teach sections of composition reserved for future teachers, I also want to illustrate for them the enduring effects of negative instructor attitudes.

Ten years later, I am an assistant professor of writing at a university designated a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), where I work with students who share my cultural background. I teach courses in first year- and advanced composition, the latter a course called Writing for Education that I theme to highlight issues of race, culture, and dis/ability. Many of my students are older, single and/or working parents; many were designated English Language Learners in high school. On the first day, I introduce my racial and disabled identities to hopefully mitigate the reluctance many students feel in discussing “identity politics.” It’s important to address these matters openly because as any public school teacher will tell you, teaching has everything to do with students’ identities and their classification by the state. I feel that somehow this understanding gets lost in higher ed. I also self-disclose my ADD in the course syllabus to tell them that there is no one right way to learn or write. I self-disclose my depression and anxiety disorder in subsequent classroom conversations as I have grown to trust them. When I do disclose, people nod. I’m always surprised at the number of students who willingly disclose their own relationships to disability. At other institutions, disability was accompanied by stigma or seen as an exception. Here students share stories about being diagnosed with learning disabilities because English was not their first language. They all commiserate about the broken school system.

After I self-disclose on that first day, we have class introductions. Several students also self-disclose and explain why they are afraid of what’s to come. One dyslexic student says that a teacher told her college was not an option: “She told me, ‘Give up, you’ll never make it.’ But I think I could be a good teacher because I understand what it’s like to learn differently. Still, this class makes me nervous.” Another student, also dyslexic, tells me flat out that she hates writing. I ask why. “Because I’m not any good at it,” she replies. “Why would anyone want to do something that they suck at?”

Later that semester, as we discuss the uses of multimodal technology in Universal Design for Learning approaches, we study Janine Butler’s “Where Access Meets Multimodality: The Case of ASL Music Videos,” published in *Kairos*. We watch the ASL music videos Butler links to and analyzes, including videos that feature lyrics in alphabetic text and ASL, and videos that feature only ASL. Discussing what these rhetorical choices reveal about each video’s intended audiences, I ask what they think. No one says anything for a while, and then the student who claimed to hate writing states, “You know, I think it’s okay if people who aren’t disabled feel left out just this one time. They already get addressed all the time. Every other time everything is for them. That gets old. It wears you out.”

I admit I like this answer. As a disabled Chicana in the academy, I constantly navigate spaces never meant to be occupied by bodies like mine. However, like my student dares to do, we must draw attention to how we create and hold space. We must interrogate inured rhetorical relationships between spaces on the page or screen and everyday life. It is not enough to teach students to recognize audience diversity as an abstract concept; we must all learn to contest the ideologies and assumptions that create conditions of “dis-belonging” that all too often go unchallenged (Erevelles, “Coming Out” 2157). We must address unequivocally the systemic oppression that centers white, non-disabled experience. As Carmen Kynard reminds us, “this is work that requires [us] to make people *uncomfortable*”

but must be undertaken if we are to openly “counter-narrate the mainstream assumptions on which far too many have built their ideas about literacy and action in higher education” (14). When I read her words, I am moved.



Figure 3. A stack of academic books about race and disability sits atop a stack of handouts.

What Anecdotal Relations Can Teach Us

Analyzing relationships facilitated by writing contexts proves crucial because these relationships influence later situations, serving as an informal pedagogy that teaches students, for better or worse, what orientations, moves, and displays of identity are expected. The repercussions of teacher-student interactions characterized by a disregard for their embodied identities inform their experiences long after they leave the classroom. Students who are members of minoritized groups can grow to believe themselves inadequate writers, perhaps even inadequate human beings, when they fail to acculturate successfully to discursive expectations. They and their more privileged classmates might assume that prevalent rhetorical norms are fixed and unquestionable, an assumption that further habituates hierarchical social dynamics. In the first story I shared, embodied identities like race and disability are erased except as sources of deficiency, making it difficult to attend to the problems that I have with academic writing. My ability to move seamlessly into the role of graduate student is hindered, but that inability is read as a personal failing, as my not being cut out for grad school because I am just not good enough. Only much later did I learn about the intellectual leap that most students must make when they (re-)enter the academy and about the impostor syndrome that too many of us contend with even after we enter the profession. And only much later did I learn, too, about the different ways that race and disability influence how we compose.

That is how ableism and racism operate to normalize injurious norms: from the whitestream perspective, this story is not about intertwined systemic oppressions but simply about a meeting with a rude professor. After all, that professor didn't know we were interacting in the presence of disabilities nor did I, and the subject of race never came up explicitly. We may ask, were disability disclosures or allusions to race really needed for us to communicate effectively? I argue that they would not have helped much unless they were an invitation to critically reconsider how an unexamined “insistence on shared community values” (Kafer 94) precluded any acknowledgment of our different positionalities and relationships to writing. In this narrative context, I was classified based on my identity as a desirable anomaly—a woman of color from a border town on a diversity fellowship—but I am automatically expected to perform in identical ways as my white colleagues, to engage new ideas as they do as though the only real difference between us is an ethnic label rather than an epistemology. Race becomes nothing more than a floating signifier, an additional marker that serves no real function but to grant me access to the university's fellowship funds.

Also at play in this context are ableist norms that confine people to the roles of super-crip or pitiful

Student: “I don't like the term colorblind

person. Here I am framed as both simultaneously: my expertise as a minoritized individual is extraordinary (hence the award) but also limited, a success to be lauded and a challenge to be corrected. Perhaps the institution and its members are the real heroes for allowing me to enter a privileged space where I do not really belong. I am lucky to be invited in, to be accommodated if you will, so that I can be fixed, or at least fixed up. Because accommodation is typically grounded in the notion of “problemated bodies” (Yergeau), the deficit here isn’t the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy or my issues with writing, but me; *I* am the deficit. I believed it, too. Sometimes I still question whether I was being too sensitive or if I was working hard enough to make myself understood.

racism because racism is bad and you *make* a choice to be a terrible person and not question it. Blindness isn’t good or bad; it just is. Stop being prejudiced against disabled people to discuss your racism.”
Me: “Yes, say more!”

However, when I share this story with others, those who identify with my feelings of insecurity also tend by and large to be people from minoritized populations or disabled individuals. While the incident portrayed in my story may be attributed to the prejudicial attitudes of one instructor, it highlights how individuals reify established mindsets regarding rigor, ability, and belonging. This rings especially true when we take institutional(ized) language into account. Academic discourse and its attendant interactions function to reinscribe norms that a department or university allegedly aims to combat by inviting us in when impressions of belonging are dislocated from our embodied contexts. Those of us perceived as not really fitting in are rendered actual outsiders by “socially constructed negative attitudes and ideologies ... reproduced through text, talk, social interaction, and discourse” (Richardson 765). We are framed as problems academia means to rectify, retroactively transformed into the proof of an institution’s benevolent inclusivity.

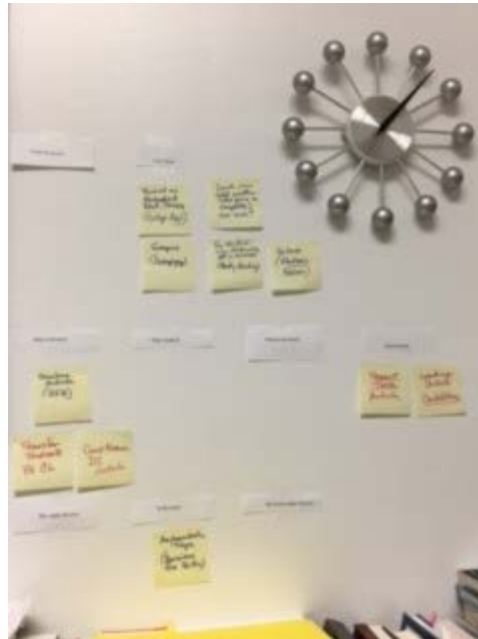


Figure 4. A white wall is adorned with a clock and several labels and sticky notes, signifying academic productivity.

Although institutions claim to desire diversity, our reasoning and writing processes must fit what proves to be for some of us a mysterious template to which everyone else seems privy. Such appeals to diversity are deployed as tools of normativity even as they apparently corroborate an institution’s commitment to change (Ahmed, *On Being Included* 52). Academia tends to show little appreciation for the personal and homegrown communication skills that allow marginalized people to adapt to the material conditions affecting our everyday lives, focusing only on notions of deficit and asking that we leave our identities at the door. The presence of our bodies in the classroom is proof of the institution’s striving for diversity, but we must struggle to assimilate academia’s enigmatic values or weed ourselves out. This conversation with a professor about my writing could have been an invitation to dialogue, to probe sources of pedagogical miscommunication. Instead, normative expectations impeded an opportunity to unpack the radical difference in our respective positionalities and in our relationships to writing.

A student asks, “Why is it that when we’re talking about a person of color, we say so, but if we’re talking about a white person, you

Consequently, because I know all too well what it feels like to be Othered due to my intersecting identities, as a writing instructor I assert the value of the embodied I/me as a strategic site of invention. We can use this

don't also have to say that?"
"That's a good question," I reply.

inventive potential to address directly and strategically the rhetorical assumptions that exclude so many of us. One such assumption is the idea that we must center whiteness and ablebodiedness when we compose or

develop our writerly *ethos*. Too many student writers believe that they "must overcome aspects of their own neuro- and physical diversity in order to write, to learn, and to be accepted in academic settings" (Elston 3). In the second story, my student perceives no problem with creating videos aimed only at users of ASL, despite the possibility that the composers might be understood as exclusionary. I am reminded of a past class where we read excerpts from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and a white male student accused Anzaldúa of reverse racism because she did not translate Spanish passages into English. Unlike that exchange, the discussion depicted in the second story highlights the rights of all people to sometimes be the central audience. It must be noted that the student who deliberately centers Deaf audiences herself identifies as disabled, and she uses words that speak to bodily understanding: "It wears you out" to be an afterthought, she says. Her description is no speculative scenario that relies on abstract logic to determine whose needs should be centered but a demand that the normate audience vacate its typical position at the center of the rhetorical situation. Living in a body that contests the status quo is an unrelenting process; it is indeed exhausting. Normative standards and classifications must move over and make room for the rest of us.

Another assumption that we must challenge is that "objective" writing is necessarily "good" writing. In the second story we find that embodied positionality and experience are revealed as undervalued means of invention that highlight the need for diverse forms of arrangement and presentation. Exclusive norms can render the page or screen an already antagonistic space for marginalized peoples before we even sit down to compose. Little wonder, then, that students find writing painful. It causes pain when your experience, your background, your life is constantly being diagnosed as Other. Critical attunement to embodiment can guide us as writers to imagine new orientations, arrangements, and approaches to composition. For instance, working from the body, I think of the stasis caused by my depression as a heuristic for change, as an invitation to spatial rhetorical invention, a means to disentangle meaning in open conversation with others. For my student, understanding that she could write for others like her and let them know that they, too, have something valuable to share allowed her to gain confidence in her writing. Over the course of the semester, she composed arguments in which she called on teachers to explicitly address disability in the classroom. Because they disrupt the status quo, our racialized and disabled bodies drive us to invent more effective pedagogies that value "adaptation, creativity, community, interdependency, technological ingenuity and modal fluency" (Wood, Dolmage, Price, and Lewiecki-Wilson 148). Our bodies allow us to recognize the forms of social control represented by methodological checklists for what they are. Ultimately, together we learn that our bodies exert considerable rhetorical power in writing and in the classroom.

Whose Experiences Count? A Call for Critical Embodiment Pedagogies

This rhetorical power is what critical embodiment pedagogies foreground. Recognizing that composition is political because marginalized people's everyday lives are constrained by social and institutional politics, such pedagogies emphasize a focus on the material and corporeal conditions that constrain audiences rather than reinforce harmful and exclusionary discursive norms. The "I" matters because *I* matter, because every person's engagement with the world occurs through bodily means, as does communication of our experiences. Thus, if we aim to "challenge the pervasiveness of compulsory able-bodied heteropatriarchal [w]hite supremacy" (Erevelles, "Crippin' Curriculum" 33), this aim requires a new orientation that foregrounds rather than ignores the everyday realities and physical needs of the disabled body, the raced body, and other non-normate bodies. It requires that we understand the embodied *I/me* as a strategic site of invention that moves in and about the world, destabilizing notions of space (and time, see Kafer) that are normative, ableist, and racist. And we must deliberately set about creating and holding space for others to let them know that they are recognized and welcome.

Foregrounding the material and embodied needs of audiences requires that we be upfront about why we do the things we do, that we eschew universal ideals in favor of plainly centering race and disability, whether our own or that of our students when we write and teach others to write. In many circles that might still get you pegged as "that political teacher" rather than "that meticulous rhetor." But that is what a critical embodiment pedagogy calls for: a recognition that writing *is* political. Some of us have no other choice than to be political because our lives have been politicized. I know my existence is political—as a woman, as a racially minoritized person, as someone who is disabled. My ability to find room to move and be moved reveals to me that words are never *just* words; they are spaces that are either accessible or else they are hostile.

Words are body-spatial. As bodies traverse spaces, bodies and spaces are both transformed, taking on one another's contours (see Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*). Because spaces shape bodies and bodies shape space, the ways by which we navigate spaces and interactions are intrinsically rhetorical though in ways that often go

unnoticed because of our intimate living relationships to them. But only if you have privilege. To lack privilege is to live with constant bodily and spatial awareness. Because I'm rendered hyperaware of my body within my own entered-into spatial environments, I think of others' body-spaces and deliberately aim to create and hold space for Othered others. This intention requires a whole new orientation, a reorientation that foregrounds rather than ignores the everyday realities and physical needs of non-normative bodies.

Hence, we must build into our pedagogies a greater critical attunement to space as more than mere background for verbal rhetorics. Space is never empty; representations and conceptions of space are never neutral (see Martin). Spaces and bodies adopt and engender assumptions about belonging and exclusion reified by the writing, dispositions, and actions of others, according to whose experiences are foregrounded or backgrounded. Too often, composition is reduced to issues of style and clarity without taking into account the importance of embodiment in deciding whether those standards are being met. As proponents of critical pedagogy urge us, we must recognize the difference between access to information—that is, access to texts and resources—and access to knowledge—meaning the ability to decode and utilize information (Sleeter 158). Both kinds of access occur corporeally, but our bodies and the lives they allow are usually overlooked as the crucial factor in determining accessibility.

In concrete terms, we must engage in rhetorical listening, in taking on a “stance of openness” that permits us to pay attention “*with intent* to [make note of] troubled identifications” (Ratcliffe 1, 46). This intention requires writing in a manner that accounts for our audience’s practical needs. For example, in an essay I assign every semester, Elizabeth Grace points to an inconsistency within academia for which everyone in our field (even and often especially me) should be held accountable, given that rhetoric and composition scholars theorize and teach about effective communication. Grace argues that we use overly technical and dense language to identify as members of a discourse community while excluding a large part of the world. Those of us who are neurodivergent need cognitively accessible language to avoid fatigue when reading or writing especially about ourselves, but that’s not what gets you published even when journals say they’re interested in our perspectives. When addressing particular demographics, we have to choose whether we’re speaking with them or for them, over them and therefore against them. The most fundamental way to make texts accessible is by ensuring they are readable. Yet readability is treated as an issue of quantifiable data and lexical indexes, and hence deficiency, rather than equitable communication and invitational exchange. How do we demonstrate that open stance toward our students if we won’t even do so for our colleagues? As a discipline, we must move to compose with regard for people’s actual physical needs rather than inured impersonal criteria.

We Othered folks get tired. There’s pressure to write for ablebodied audiences, non-raced audiences, privileged audiences, even when we’re talking about ourselves to people like us. But how often does the reverse hold true? Maybe just one time I don’t want to concentrate on moving those of you who don’t have the burden of hypervisible identities wearing you out all the time. Can you move over and make some room for those of us who do?

To give another example, in my first year writing classes students read essays by writers from marginalized communities who describe their own relationships to writing and their bodily acculturation to the academy in preparation for their final papers, an embodied literacy narrative (see [Appendix](#)). By reading scholars such as Anzaldúa, Victor Villanueva, Elaine Richardson, and others who talk about education as it relates to their lived identities, students are invited to connect to these writers’ enduring emotional, spatial, and cultural concerns, too often obscured in literacy narratives circumscribed by “triumph or tragedy” tropes. The prompt itself is simple and “open” to permit varied points of entry, meaning that students may focus on the embodied aspects of writing to which they feel especially drawn or that most deeply evoke their own experiences. Over several weeks, they reflect on the assigned readings and detect patterns in their reflections, at times surprised at which bodily aspects of these authors’ experiences they are drawn to and why. Some students make affective connections across time and space, recalling grandparents who used to read to them but stayed behind in other countries or proud moments that allow them to explain why even the smallest scholastic successes are intrinsically tied to familial security. Other students describe for readers the awkwardness they felt when first attempting to learn a skill or sport and find that their experiences make them more likely to empathize with others’ learning processes.

In reading these works and writing their essays, students who are members of minoritized communities realize that they are not alone in having to contend with unfamiliar linguistic and cultural expectations, while students with more privileged positionalities come to appreciate that all perspective is situated. Working together, students work through the rhetorical implications of these insights: knowledge is never unbiased, our lived identities inform the topics and styles that we choose, and we must write for multiple audiences whose lives and experiences may be very different from our own. Critical embodiment pedagogy helps us to ask: whose experiences are the basis for deciding what is good or effective? Do they belong to someone with a learning disability or whose first language is not English, or do

we still target the whitestream and make inclusivity a retrofit? What very real people do we imagine as we compose lest our audience remain always and ever a fiction? By entertaining these questions, we reorient rhetorical conventions. Clarity is no longer simply an issue of style or readability but about transforming an essay into an invitational space. Argument transcends its typically agonistic quality to become a story that encourages others to share theirs so that we can gain a fuller appreciation of a situation or event, especially from perspectives that are ignored or erased. *Pathos* is reframed so that emotional appeals are used to exemplify the writer's unique embodied perspective in order to promote relationality rather than to persuade the reader that the writer is the sole authority on a subject.

If we continue to base our composition practices on normative assumptions rather than the embodied experiences of people most in need of access to voice and space, our praxes can and do become part of a racist, ableist apparatus that promotes other -isms, tools of "social hygiene." Thus, we must take on that "open stance" to question rhetorical norms that, at the most naturalized levels of communication, affirm dominant ideologies, enact erasure, and background those of us who do not think and move according to the mean. These norms have the discursive power to render people visible or invisible, privileging some by pushing Others out of categories of the human. For this reason, we must foreground the ubiquity of embodied identities in our writing pedagogies, or at the very least, remember that experiences and practices are varied because they are grounded in our bodies. By developing pedagogies based in critical embodiment, we can recognize the diverse ways by which we all navigate spaces on the page and in the world.

Rhetoric and composition are social and political. Our practices move people in and out of relational spheres inhabited by others. Within academic spaces, institutionalized communication permits some to enter privileged spaces at the expense of those who are pushed out. I would rather move the assumed center point of academic community out of the way to make room for a multiplicity of rhetorical orientations. In plain terms, we must move beyond acknowledging bodily diversity and its value as mere trademark to becoming active makers of spaces that accommodate diverse experiences in print and in person.

Appendix

Although many first-year composition courses begin with a literacy narrative assignment, I usually schedule it as the final assignment of the semester so that students can purposefully deploy rhetorical strategies and devices that we have discussed. These include **ekphrasis** (the painting of a picture) and **enargeia** (engaging various senses to bring something to life), **audience analysis** (to determine one's primary, secondary, and tertiary audiences), **parallax** (considering alternative perspectives, especially those that are often overlooked), and **positionality awareness** (asking what one can know based on one's embodied identity and experiences, and acknowledging what one may not or cannot know).

The purpose of this assignment is to reframe a familiar genre to teach students that inclusive writing should be the goal of all composition.

Writing Project: Literacy Narrative

Assignment

The term "literacy" is highly contested, and experts find coming to consensus about what literacy means a challenge. Over the course of the semester, we have read texts about literacy such as Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," an excerpt from Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Tony Mirabelli's "Learning to Serve: The Language and Literacy of Food Service Workers," and Elizabeth Grace's "Cognitively Accessible Language (Why We Should Care)." Literacy often refers to someone's ability to read and write, but as these writers demonstrate, literacy is a complex issue that has cultural and bodily implications.

Your assignment is to write a **literacy narrative** (4½-5 pages) based on a personal experience. You should think about how literacy relates to your own life and how embodiment fits into the story. What kinds of emotions did this experience produce and still evoke? What did you learn to do—play a sport, get into a routine, feel more confident in a certain space? What new "routines" did your body have to learn? How does this experience inform how you relate to writing and to others? Your essay can incorporate images, comics, poetry, or webtexts to better convey your ideas and to speak to your audiences in culturally specific ways.

To complete this assignment, you must thoughtfully consider the basic elements of your literacy narrative, including its audiences, appropriate style(s) and tone, and arrangement. These will depend on who you are addressing and

why. Remember that your professor is not your (only) audience!

Your paper should

- present a story that is meaningful to you and/or others in your community;
- provide context that will help non-community readers understand literacy from your particular perspective;
- draw from the writers we have read;
- use carefully chosen rhetorical strategies that will engage your different audiences.

Suggestions for framing your paper, in case you have difficulty getting started:

- Relate an early memory about literacy, such as an important classroom lesson you recall from elementary or middle school, and explain why this memory has stayed with you all these years. Basically, you want to show how your body reacted, and still reacts, physically to literacy practices. Highlight the *affective* (or emotional) reactions that accompanied this lesson and why they made this experience especially memorable.

Explain the kinds of emotions that continue to inform your reading and writing processes even today. Are they generally all the same (mainly happy or sad) or do they sometimes contradict one another? What are some strategies you have developed to help you deal with their effects when you must read and/or write? Then finally, explain why you think it's important to think about the physical dimensions of literacy if we are to become more effective writers. Who is invited to participate or who excluded, whether explicitly or implicitly?

(Students who choose this approach tend to have had either very negative or very positive classroom literacy experiences. If the former, they typically present possible alternative scenarios that would have made their experiences more rewarding, particularly as English language learners and students with disabilities, and suggest that maintaining a focus on emotions as writers should guide us to always try to respect readers' feelings and needs. If the latter, they usually isolate effective strategies used by their teachers to create informal models of successful pedagogy designed to help English language learners and students with learning disabilities feel more comfortable with writing.)

- Reflect on your experience in gaining literacy in an important embodied procedural activity. In other words, how you learned a series of interrelated skills so that you could accomplish an activity; this activity should include becoming familiar with a specific *lexis*, *discourse*, and *community*. Examples may include learning a sport, a trade, or a traditional cultural activity like quilting or cooking. All of these activities require that individuals know the names for strategic plays, tools, or techniques; that we know where to find information about our interests; and that we note the communal/familial/teamwork nature of the pursuit.

Discuss how your body had to learn to respond in previously unfamiliar ways and navigate new spaces. What was the relationship between your body and the lexis of this activity? For example, if you were playing a sport, how did you learn to respond to the calling out of particular plays? If you were learning to cook, how did you become accustomed to arranging your space so your ingredients were readily available? If you were learning the particulars of a new job, how did you become more comfortable knowing what to do and where to go? As a result of your reflection, what did you learn about how we grow accustomed to being able to do certain things or feeling comfortable in certain spaces, and the difficulties encountered when you feel out of place? How did your identity as an individual and a member of a unit change during and as a result of your experience?

Then, connect what you have learned to writing. How does your experience highlight the importance of the many embodied factors that influence our writing practices? What do we ignore when we think about writing as something that does not involve the body? What does thinking about the ways in which the body learns teach us about the relationship between language use and the body? What can we learn about processes of inclusion and exclusion?

(Students responses to this suggestion have included learning how to sew from their grandparents to playing on a baseball team. Many of them explain how difficult it was to learn what certain terms mean or develop dexterity. Some common themes running throughout these essays have included that different people learn differently or at different speeds and that no one should be shamed for their process, and that ability is typically gauged according to arbitrary standards that do not account for a person's embodied needs. Some students have adapted this suggestion to tell candid stories about their experiences as marginalized individuals on a team or about their experiences dealing with

negative assumptions about disabled individuals, and how they had to become literate in interpreting the implicitly biased speech and behavior of others.)

- Reflect on the diverse dialects or voices that you use around your family, friends, or various “home communities.” Consider the distinct values and ethical ties associated with each dialect or voice. For example, Spanglish allows speakers to identify as members of a bilingual ethnic community, but it also reminds its speakers that we often make stronger emotional connections with certain words in English or in Spanish. In another example, we tend to identify with others as a peer group depending on the slang we use, since the popularity of certain terms increases or declines over time. How does thinking through the relationship between language use and community help us to understand how we rely on processes of *identification* and *dissociation*, both between words and things and among individuals? How do we use these processes strategically, to foster communal or familial ties? How can we make use of them to speak to the audiences that we address if we wish to be more inclusive?

Then, explain your impressions of a “universal” standard of formal English used in school settings. In what ways does it compliment or constrain any of your other voices in personal, public, or professional settings? How so? Have you found ways to modify Standard Written English so that the “real you” shows through even when you are composing a formal essay? If so, what are some of the rhetorical techniques that you use? Why do you think they are effective? Why is it important to you as an individual and as a writer to let readers know who you are? Explain how you found what works for you, and then suggest how other writers can determine what might work for them.

(Again, responses have varied. Some students have written about their use of Spanish or AAVE words deliberately because they do not want to feel as if they are leaving their communities behind. Some have expressed a desire to remind their teachers about their ethno-racial identities because they were the only non-white person in the classroom. A few have explained that English analogues do not exist for certain words and their full cultural implication and so they use them to explain share new ideas with their classmates.)

In closing, I want to point out here that I tell students that they should only share as much about their personal experiences as they are comfortable in doing since these are their stories to do with as they wish. I let them know as we work through the assignment that they are not compelled to play the role of native informant or inspirational figure, but that instead they should consider the assignment an opportunity to teach teachers (including me) and other members of the community about aspects of literacy and learning that we may overlook.

Notes

1. In this essay I follow the example set by Kathleen Blake Yancey and Malea Powell and include images and boxed text to evoke a fuller impression of the writing ecology that fosters my argument. In “Made not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key” Yancey shows how a text can “embody” its argument in many different modes, while in “Stories Take Place: A Performance in One Act” Powell teaches us that stories are never divorced from their cultural histories, locations, people(s), and discursive genres. The images included here are intended to remind readers that we are always reading real people, and to evoke the disregarded material media (including our bodies) through which we interpret the world. The boxed text signifies the nexus of discourses that inform my identities and my essay, and to which they, in turn, respond. ([Return to text.](#))
2. Social constructions of disability permit racial categories to take on the appearance of scientific fact by casting identity as naturally rooted in the body rather than in unstable, fabricated categories (Samuels 13). ([Return to text.](#))
3. In phenomenology, the background is a network of experiences, meanings, memories, expectations, and contexts that provide a “spatial background” through and against which an object, entity, situation, or person emerges as the central figure of perception (Weiss 18). Philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gail Weiss argue that the background is “indeterminate,” i.e., it is difficult to determine to what degree this information “inhabits” a particular situation and shades our perception, or how it is altered in the moment by our consciousness. I contend that backgrounding serves a similar regulatory function as erasure. However, I suggest that thinking through cultural hegemony and silencing in terms of the background and its indeterminacy helps to explain how marginalized groups can be paradoxically invisible and hypervisible at the same time. ([Return to text.](#))

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