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Gender, Body, Poetry

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Abstract

I offer here three poems which engage a feminist approach to gender and the body. They emanate (tangentially) from my ethnographic work in schools and my own embodied experiences as a woman. While I write more conventional academic prose and conduct research in schools on gender and sexuality (Fitzpatrick 2018; Fitzpatrick and Enright 2017; Fitzpatrick and McGlashan in press, 2016; McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2017, 2018), I offer a poetic exploration of these issues here in an attempt to engage with writing that is both cognitive and sensory (Sparkes and Smith 2014), while evoking emotion, cultural nuance and reflexivity (Faulkner 2009). In so doing, I also bring myself directly into the text (Brkich and Barko 2013) in the hope that a different kind of engagement with issues of body may result.

The contemporary moment offers up many challenges to writing about gender, sexuality and the body. As gender binaries are broken down and challenged, and new approaches to the body and sexuality are engaged (e.g. Allen and Rasmussen 2017), new challenges are posed. Engaging in poetic inquiry (Rinehart 2012; Richardson 1994) into gender and sexuality might help reimagine gender and body in aesthetic as well as political ways. Such an engagement is personal, disruptive and uncertain.

In this, I am inspired by Patti Lather's (2007, 6) notion of being lost. She encourages researchers to embrace getting lost, as a process "which shakes any assured ontology of the 'real,' of presence and absence, a postcritical logic of haunting and undecidables." I contend that all ethnographic work is in some ways lost, at the very least in issues of politics, representation and voice (Fitzpatrick in press). Lather (2007, 1) calls such engagement with uncertainty and voice "getting lost at the limits of representation". She explains that: "At its simplest, getting lost is something other to commanding, controlling, mastery. At its most complex...we spend our lives with language trying to make it register what we have lost, longing for lost wholeness." (11). Poetry is one way to engage with a methodology of being lost; one way to engage a struggle to communicate what we cannot ever adequately represent (Rinehart, 2012). In this spirit, I offer the following poems, which engage with being lost at the edges of gender sexuality and body, and which can only communicate my own experience, in intersection with what I read, discuss and observe socially and politically.



All the women I know

All the skinny women I know
Think they're fat
Even the really skinny ones
The ones with tiny thighs that are encirclable
The ones with 1950's waists
They think
They're fat.

All the skinny women I know think they're fat.
They look in the mirror at their arms
Their wobblers
Their breasts
Their stomachs
They think these anatomical features should not exist, should shrink to the unseeable
Even to the bones
All the skinny women I know
Think they're fat

All the fat women I know think they're fat
They look at their bodies with loathing, with worry
They hear their doctors spit the words
Obesity, diabetes, heart disease
They hear the words the doctors don't say: lazy, stupid, fault
Sometimes though, the fat women I know look at their bodies
with glee
Sometimes they think their bodies are out of line, beyond the line
And they rejoice, realize they are unsaveable

All the fat women I know think they're fat
They are secretly secretly
Thinking Fuck it.

All the skinny women I know think they're fat
All the fat women I know think they're fat
There are no other kinds of women.

Why New Zealanders won't talk about sex

According to research, New Zealanders watch a lot of porn
But they won't talk about it
In public
At least not those over 40
Especially women
Women don't like porn
Except for lesbian porn
Except for the ones who do
Like it
I am writing a poem about porn and I worry: what will my mother think?

New Zealanders don't like talking about sex
Not in the open
And not to their kids
They prefer 'sex ed' in schools
Except for the ones who don't
The ones who want it taught at home
Except they don't
Talk about it
And the ones who don't want it taught at school
Are the same ones who don't watch porn
Except when they do
But it's not discussed
Not in front of the children.

The other places

The other places are the ones I imagine
Lost in between gendering
The place where body isn't
The place where body is everything already
And complete
Where the secrets of norm
Unravel
Where a beard is welcome with stilettos¹
and the meanings of movements shift

are unintelligible
 unrecognisable
 And we shed the accumulated skins of history
 in low light

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¹ This line references and honours the story of Alok Vaid-Menon shared as part of *Style Like You’s*, “The What’s underneath project”. Available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7Gh2n9kPuA&feature=youtu.be>