

And I in the middle-ground found¹: Documentation as Self-hack, Sigil and Blueprint - ELÆ
Excerpted for *Matters of Feminist Practice*, Belladonna*, 2020.

“If the female body is a signifier for a field of reproductive activities that have been appropriated by men and the state, and turned into an instrument for the production of labor-power (with all that this entails in terms of sexual rules and regulations, aesthetic canons, and punishments), then the body is the site of a fundamental alienation that can be overcome only with the end of the work-discipline which defines it.”

—Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*²

“I shall be a bestselling writer....This is my life. I write bestselling novels.... My novels each travel up to the top of the bestseller lists and they reach the top and they stay on top for months (at least two). So be it! See to it! I will find the way to do this. So be it! See to it! My books will be read by millions of people! I will buy a beautiful home in an excellent neighborhood. I will help poor black youngsters broaden their horizons. I will get the best of healthcare for my mother and myself. I will travel whenever and wherever in the world that I choose. My books will be read by millions of people. So be it! See to it!”

—from Octavia Butler’s notebook, 1988³

Imposter syndrome⁴ is defined as *a psychological pattern in which an individual doubts their accomplishments, with a persistent internalized fear as being exposed as a fraud*. Am I DSM certifiable, then? Despite decades of scholarship and what from the outside seems like confidence and a good deal of professional accomplishment (as well as years of meditation and conscious realignment), as I write, gain materials for, and prepare for this publication (or any other) my inner voice is still my cruelest critic: *There’s no way you read or referenced enough. You’re not qualified to write this. You’ll embarrass yourself*. But then, I think of the entitled surety of male colleagues both older and younger, who time and time again have parroted my ideas back to me as their own, the countless submissions I review from men proclaiming their merits with aplomb, the “mentors” who manipulated and abused and stole, and think of how many women, visibly queer folks, and people of color have recounted the same. I remember: *this tale is a familiar one*.

When we describe and diagnose, when we tell the story of humans in female bodies, by what set of rubrics can we contain the measure of a life? Or, more correctly, does there exist any scale

¹ Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*. Green Integer, 1987.

² Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2004.

³ Underlining as hand-written in the original.

⁴ According to the APA imposter syndrome isn’t an official diagnosis in the DSM, but is “a real and specific form of intellectual self-doubt,” accompanied by anxiety and depression.

which can possibly offer a reading of the non-cis-het-white bodied among us? What of the “hysteric,” the “invalid,” the “witch,” [*la*] *bete imparfaite, sans foy, sans crainte, sans costance*⁵? Existing units of measure by their very derivation threaten to erase and reframe along the very same lines that appropriates these bodies as the *site of alienation* Federici writes of above, forcing both these persons—and those who wish to know their stories—to insist on and engage in perpetual translation.

When, for *other bodies*, is the ability to know and assert the self and one’s perceptions of it an act that does not require excavation and ventriloquism, a passage through scar tissue and ground laid by not only personal but systemic gaslighting, negligence, and the adaptive behaviors these require?

How does one recognize and begin to gain footholds of confidence or perceptions of security, ability, and worth in a body that often rails against comfort or seeming “success,” so accustomed as it has been to *a priori* verbal and physical abuses normalized by institutional standards?

For the emergence of self-story in a body whose role has been officially™ pre-written, a certain forensics⁶ is needed—a process of sloughing, of attendance, of re-linguaging. In the case of bodies long subjugated and alienated by systems of power, (especially over multiple generations), the documentation that accompanies this forensic assertion of an alternative to the accepted/produced/disciplinarily enforced “norm” becomes an essential tool of survival.

As institutional power asserts the decree of the dominant paradigm over bodies, with science, medicine, law, education, and religious organizations falling in line to replicate the will of rule, the act of documentation is defiant: *here is a personal reprogramming system, here is an underground font or network of threatened collective intelligence, here is permission granted to another body such as your own, here are practices, here are tools, here is an archive, here is a different map, here not only I but you are seen.*

While this work will trouble specifically the question of *feminist* documentation, I feel the need to begin by addressing when and how this specifically relates to “women” and when and how it does not. To this end, I have explicitly begun this text examining the space of *subjugated bodies* and their practice of documentation as opposed to *women’s bodies*—because a “feminist” practice is not, in fact, a space reserved for female-bodied humans.

Thinking along the lines of Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology⁷ (where the act of *queering* is

⁵ French 17th c saying about women; translates as “[the] imperfect beast, without faith, without fear, without constancy.”

⁶ Recently I have been exploring the possibility of creative practice that could fall under the concept of *forensic* operation along the lines of Eyal Weizman and his team’s Forensic Architecture: “historical and theoretical examinations of the history and present status of forensic practices in articulating notions of public truth.”

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006.

understood not as that exclusively of queer bodies, but rather that refuses an adherence to the “straight lines” of normative expectation and behavior, risking alienation from the modes and systems of economic and social support) here I posit that a *feminist* practice of documentation is not one relegated to female-bodied humans but rather as one that refuses the systemic abuses, structures, and intelligence that form the backbone of cis-het (usually white) patriarchy.

Let me make this crystal for the ones in the back: a feminism that reduces itself to concern solely for cis-female bodies, that ignores transgender and genderqueer bodies, that does not extend itself to antiracist, antixenophobic, antifascist, antihomophobic, ableist concerns and indeed that does not extend itself to care and sustenance for the environment on which all bodies depend is a straw man, a thin embarrassment that continues to be based on false dialectics, fear, and continued (if partial) adherence to the same systems that oppress the bodies this faction claims to seek change for. The ways in which science, medicine, language, and institutional power structures have historically subjugated female bodies have worked continuously hand in hand with oppressive practices of any *other* who presents significant threat to the power-hungry, fearful, and greedy dominant forces that, literally, “wrote the book” from which our definitions, conditioned perceptions, schooling, and systems of measure derive.

There may now be unprecedented potential for real change, with technologies and tools that allow for the growth and/or building of emergent, rhizomatic counter networks for wide-scale dissemination and access to the documentation practices of individuals and communities that have for so long persisted as a groundwater “dark net,” accessed through whisper networks and radical pamphlets, diaries, letters and geocities webring—but it will need to happen intersectionally, or not at all.

Witches and Hysterics :: Documentation as Self and Community Healing

“In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid?... I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences.”

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”⁸

The history of the witch hunt, according to Silvia Federici, is in fact the history of proto-capitalist control, “instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where

⁸ Paper delivered at the Modern Language Association’s “Lesbian and Literature Panel,” Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1977. First published in *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978) and *The Cancer Journals*. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Crossing Press 1984.

women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources." These early capitalists, seeking loyalty from multifarious factions of pre-European groups, still largely associated by local cultures and traditions, effectively waged a psychological campaign, instilling widespread "fear and repulsion" not only of women but of much associated with this gender and their traditional labor/sphere: "the communal forms of life that had been typical of pre-capitalist Europe."⁹

The move to a proto-capitalism in rural Europe and the forced erasure of cultural signifiers through colonial rule sought to rewrite more than labor and property ownership rights, but also pass judgement on human relationship to nature. Here, the intelligence of folk and plant medicine, often held in matriarchal lineage and passed down through oral tradition, becomes conveniently linked to the witch narrative—penalized, scapegoated, and held up as opposite to rigorously, conveniently edited forms of Christianity painted as devoid of the rich mystic traditions from which it emerged, as well as the pagan/nature-based practices with which it remained intertwined for many centuries.

What we see in this precedent, or in the 19th century cult of female invalidism, with its widespread practice of ovariectomies, hysteria diagnoses, and assertion that some women "are congenitally sick while others are potentially sickening"¹⁰, are histories of widespread, officially vetted propaganda built to normalize social, cultural, and other institutional damnation of not only the female body, but of practices and traditions associated with that body that are deemed a threat to the production and maintenance of a cohesive, capitalist statehood.¹¹

In the process of seeking a personal relationship both to the nature of place and the nature of one's physical experience, the body becomes a warzone of highly contested definitions, a space where personal history / story are belittled, erased, and officially inadmissible. In the process of learning the relationship between the body and its natural environment, its natural ability to heal, and the ways in which it processes, learns, and grows, is also deemed the official right of the state to determine: entering into the illicit realm of alternative cures and traditions beyond the Scientifically / Economically knighted standard adds fuel to the fire of the medical establishment already seeking to undermine the intelligence of the subjugated body-mind, setting a precedent for the assertion of the body's/other's "foolishness" and inability to be trusted. In documentation of and through sickness (as well as, in many cases, against the medical establishment's official version of their body and its processes/ailments) feminist practices of documentation like Lorde's (or Acker's, or Halprin's, etc.) confrontation of living with a disease like cancer offer both author/artist and audience legitimacy and ownership of experience, story, and body that is often erased and belittled.

⁹ *Federici*, p.168-74

¹⁰ *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. The Feminist Press, 1974.

¹¹ To the previous point about documentation as a radical feminist practice being not as much 'female' as non-cis-het, we can draw parallels to the spaces of assertion this of course can be seen as parallel to other "scientific" claims about *other* bodies: from phrenology to eugenics / social darwinism, etc.

The confounding, frustrating persistence of a perceived Cartesian dualism between mind and body ensures continuous diagnosis and undermining of “psychosomatic” conditions today, despite the now well-documented evidentiary work even *in* the Western professional literature establishing the inextricable links between environmental, emotional, and mental stressors and the body’s systems. Traditional medicine and plant intelligence has long understood not only these links but also their relationships to the materials and processes of the holobiome / bioscleave within which the organism-that-persons¹² resides, seeking to learn and know itself—and yet we are only seeing the very beginnings of official recognition of this deep intelligence.

Permission for exploration into alternative healing modalities and narratives around the body and its experience emerges in parallel, primarily, to the norm, and is often mostly accessible to those who risk the least by and through experimentation. There is, too, some dystopic shadow cast by the virtual, corporate keeping and sharing of medical records, linked to shared ancestry data¹³, regulated shots and tests, and the texts I get from my insurance company reminding me I need to get a pap smear—the suggestion that at some point my *off the grid* process of self-healing and “experimental” treatments might not only be the laughable impetus for the standard shaming but also financially dangerous, linked to making oneself ineligible for insurance or care by having, as it were, *broken the contract* of expected behaviors, in the same way as building your own solar panels and removing dependency on fossil fuels is now widely punishable by law.

When the body is told that it is an imposter, when the mind is trained to disbelieve its own perceptions, when the rhetoric and *science* of the day tells one that it is frail, crazy, less-than—and when maintaining the illusion of *going-along-with* this is, perhaps, vital to one’s survival, how does one carve out a space of sanity? Of, if possible, an alternative? And even if one is to develop alternative theories, how does one maintain stability under constant attack? The question is not entirely different from accounts of how prisoners or captives have been able to keep from losing their grip on reality or personal beliefs: documentation or attendance becomes an iterative practice of mindful awareness, of tuning in to sensations, observations, and experiences that are by definition stricken from the official record.

Here, then, is the root of documentation as feminist practice: ownership and narration of a body, its role, its functions, its care, and its relationship to nature. Documentation, especially

¹² Arakawa and Gins, *Architectural Body*, 2002.

¹³ Though this issue has only recently entered a more widespread public awareness, there have been growing concern about abuses of customer privacy and anonymity for some years now as nearly every commercial genetic testing companies have revealed selling genetic information to third parties, to ends we are only beginning to understand the ramifications of. See “Another Personal Genetics Company is Sharing Client Data,” Katie M. Palmer, *Wired Magazine*, July 2015; in 2017 the FTC issued an advisory statement on the services, and in July 2018, new guidelines were drawn for Privacy Best Practices by the Future of Privacy Forum, with some preliminary agreement of adherence from the services. Time will tell.

that which is iterative in nature, as a stay against the tide of social, culture, and ideological pressure to disbelieve and devalue the self. As a meditative practice. As refusal. As healing.

The forms that these practices take, and those who have practiced and continue to practice them are myriad, and indeed: my inner critic is correct that I cannot possibly begin to scratch the surface of exhaustive inclusion, as far as modalities or individual practitioners is concerned . For the space of this essay, I've nominally called out "self-hack, sigil, and blueprint," as the goal here is to address less *specific examples* of documentary practice but rather *documentation as systemic corrective*, focusing on the personal and collective behaviors and applications of both act and outcome, in particular for re-programming of mind and body.

Diaries, Notebooks and Epistolaries ::

"A tentative construction towards a holding in place."

7/16/65 Paris

I haven't learned to mobilize rage—(I perform militant actions, without militant feeling)
Never *anger* but either *hurt* (if I love) or *version*, *distaste* if I don't
I never telephone anyone; I would [never] ask someone leaving my apartment to mail a letter for me, if I could possibly help it—
I don't trust anyone to do anything for me—I want to do everything myself, or if I let anyone act as my agent in any matter, then I resign myself (in advance) to its not being done right or at all
The mornings are the worst.

—Susan Sontag, journal entry
From *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*
Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980

Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins release us from our ordinarily inadequate tools in reframing the relationship of person to environment by providing us with new language. They use neologisms like "organism that persons," to help remind the speaker/writer that the linguistic standards of talking about a "body" in space" requires a logic that wants to erase and divide the expected "taking shape of surrounds and bodies and organisms and persons" that in fact "occurs intermixedly." They insist, instead, on seeing self and surround as "an organism-like whole," which "needs to be picked up... kicking and screaming, alive with process, emphatically, and urgently rushed into a supporting context of embedded procedures."

¹⁴

While their project is an architectural one, asking of spatial design a realignment with and renegotiation of phenomenology as relates to the built-and-lived environment, there is much to

¹⁴ Arakawa and Gins, *Architectural Body*, 2002, p. 5.

consider here as regards the self (especially the subjugated, alienated production of “self”) that is written into and onto a female or *other* non-cis-het body. What allows these bodies to claim space, to realize and navigate the intermixing of an organism-like-whole that ‘logic’ has required they officially, performatively, divide?

Documentation which is specifically centered around validating and re-writing the experience of the quotidian body has long performed these functions, especially in documentary practices that I like to think of as, at least initially, “inward facing”—insofar as the establishment of this practice is primarily driven by private motivations / intended for an audience of the self, a known other, or perhaps a small, established circle of persons.

For many of us (and indeed for myself), the advent of keeping of a notebook as a young person might be akin to Joan Didion’s in her eponymous essay on the topic¹⁵: a “peculiar compulsion” that has always compelled me, who even as a child found myself a “lonely and resistant rearranger of things, [an] anxious malcontent, [someone] afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss.” I also relate to her realization that her daughter, whose experience was so different from her own, would probably never be a notebook keeper (as my daughter, also will likely not), as they find themselves “delighted with life exactly as life presents itself..., unafraid to go to sleep and unafraid to wake up.”

I, as Didion, felt uncertain, afraid, frustrated, and confused with the situation as presented to me, and compelled to address it, question it ad nauseum, and change it if at all possible. Who knows how I came to the urge to use the space of writing or drawing to document what I saw or knew and how it differed from what I was told but I imagine it came from being encouraged to be a reader at an early age, and therefore already finding solace and companionship on pages when it couldn’t be found in flesh.

In particular, as a person in a female body, as well as a creative person, it was through immersion in documentary spaces—diaries, notebooks and epistolaries, as well as in linked practices in other media (iterative self-portraiture, sound recording, etc)—that I began to see alternative possible versions of myself, versions of the body and of relationships and being-in-the-world that were otherwise unavailable. In pages and in images I recognized a self I did not yet know how to bring into the world, but could now imagine.

Required of me, based on the pressures of institutional systems (and especially coming from challenging, scarce socio-economic circumstances), were countless social and cultural expectations of role fulfilment and accompanied emotional and actual labor. My personal and bodily presentation, my social behavior, my professional behavior, my language use, and so on, were all clearly linked to my ability to succeed, be accepted, and (as a female-bodied, queer, chronically ill personal of limited resources) to *survive*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Joan Didion, “Keeping a Notebook,” in *Slouching Towards Bethelhem*, 1968.

¹⁶ To the potential cis-het-white male reader who doth protest, seeing in my experience here a story he recognizes, *welcome*. The parts of you that struggle against the dominant paradigm, the parts of you who want to rail against

Countering this, it was through not the end-result of production but rather the *grappling* of others in their own private spaces that I recognized the tools or practices of my “trade”: the work of finding and developing self against yet still within the systems that rejected and warned against such choices. From childhood to present, I continue to find, especially, in journals and memoirs, letters, and other “inward facing” documentation trail markers towards and through a life that the “logical” conditions of my body, family, and (still) my inner voice say is impossible (and selfish).

*Your “our own” was sweet- Thank you for your constancy -
Icebergs italicise the Sea - they do not intercept it, and “Deep calls to the Deep” in the old way-
To attempt to speak of what has been, would be impossible. Abyss has no Biographer.*

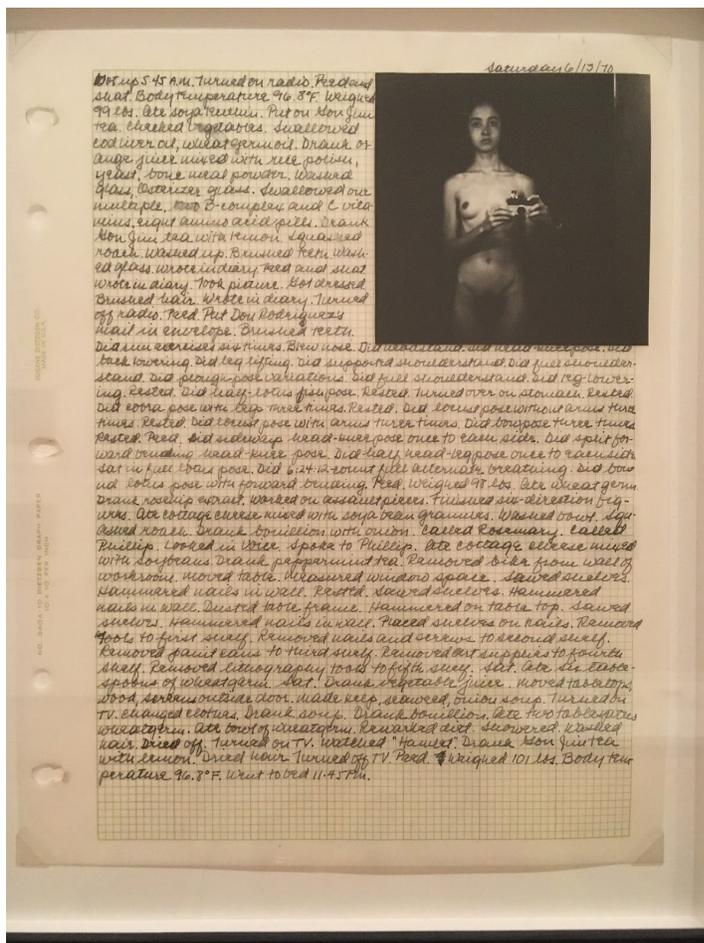
—Emily Dickinson, letter to Martha Gilbert Smith, about 1884

For *other* bodies the notebook page or the space of the letter (or for others, film or audio), offers a frontier beyond the constrictions of official possibility, a safe place to assert the inadmissible: one’s issues with jobs or school or partners or family, how one disagrees with the doctors, one’s frustration with one’s expectations to marry, bear children, one’s sexuality or shifting gender identity, etc. Sometimes, close friendships give air to these (sometimes illicit or potentially dangerous) explorations or concerns in the form of letters. The more dated of these, like Dickinson’s, can feel cryptic and full of references, under and overtones which are easy to make inferences about but hard to derive “facts” from—she even writes in multiple cases that her letters were opened, as is often the case for both women and any less privileged in the way of privacy. Certainly we can ascertain that this cryptic language is at times a precaution, but the density left here is enough for a million possibilities for the reader seeking to build their own alternative story. In some cases, when any sharing of such private thoughts could be a threat, the development of this rich inner life or inner conversation either with the self or with even an imagined, consenting recipient is the only outlet from restrictions, expectations, and abuse. On days when the world actively rejects this inward story, even a return to your own, earlier words can be a salve. Repetitive writing or other production of alternative language, committing to the page the invisible parts of the day, becomes a sort of mantra practice, a retraining of the organism-that-persons, so that one might, even if tentatively, “hold in place” one’s own story.

Blurring the Line: *The Political is Personal/The Personal is Political*

capitalism, the parts of you who resisted the expectations of your family or the role you were expected to play: recognize that this larger collective fight *is* feminism or other anti-fascist resistance. Unless you personally are an abuser, the issue here is only with you as long as you don’t realize that being complicit in these systems and their reductive crushing of the wide spectrum of identity, story, experience, perception, healing, value, etc. and remain silent, replicating these problems through your lack of refusing to be part of them. And then I say the same to you that I say to TERFs and other exclusionary activists: an injury to one is an injury to all. You are welcome here, please listen and have patience. People are tired and have long labored for the rights, treatment, and justice you’ve come to expect as natural, and still struggle for human equity on a daily basis.

But even in an “inward facing” practice of documentation primarily for the self or private recipients, I would posit that there is a certain kinetic potential of the future discovery and archiving of what is being recorded that fuels its power. Once we have been the recipient of the words, images, or material traces of others’ private practices and inspired or healed by such, we become innately aware of the power in the seemingly transient, ephemeral, or ‘personal,’ and each time one chooses to document one enters one’s own take into a sort of manifest akashic record, one with the potential to be found, read, shared, and healed by an imagined reader. It is a message in a bottle, of sorts, sent out into the seas of the future.



Troubling the space where traditionally inward-facing practices like journal writing, the taking of self-portraits, or keeping a symptoms journal become not only possibly but in fact *intentionally* outward-facing as a sort of antithesis to the vetted modes of and venues for cultural production has been central to the building of a public feminist creative practice, notably in the late 20th century¹⁷. Lucy Lippard writes¹⁸ how ‘the political is personal’ is the “neglected other side of the ‘personal is political’ credo introduced by feminism in the late 1960s, which brought autobiography and other taboo subjects into the art of the 1970s.” At this critical juncture, we see the artist/storyteller playing the role of historian/mythographer as well as a sort of social conscience, directing the attention of both the public as well as that of traditionally powerful art institutions towards spaces and mode(l)s of documentation, assertion,

archiving, and intervention in cultural discourse utilizing “inward-facing” practices, materials, and blurring the line between private and public spaces and lives.

¹⁷ As is so often the case, I feel like I need to add/admit “in the west/US specifically”, because my familiarity with how the history of feminist art intersects with movement in other countries is spotty; any statements of surety here are certainly only limited to what I know of the US and others immediately travelling in circles aware of this work.

¹⁸ “Feminist Space: Reclaiming Territory,” in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*. Lucy R. Lippard, 1995. (Reprinted from *The Event Horizon*, 1987).

I have no desire to open up the Pandora’s box of attempting to list all of the visual artists who played or continue to play a part in this process—a folly in this limited of a space—but in my own personal practice it was Adrian Piper, coming into my field of awareness in the late 1990’s, who blew open this way of transducing the materials of her body, its place in history, and her own personal experience into a compendium of records and materia that was at once both a question and an answer. This was a sort of *open sourcing* of her code as well as a conscious, deliberate, and continuous counter to the forces that sought to frame her life and even its successes in ways that served ulterior, patriarchal, colonialist goals (that means you, Wellesley¹⁹).

Piper’s documentation and commentary of and on her experiences, as well as her jamming of traditional modes and spaces of public communication like newspaper ad-space are a precursor to the private-public blurring we see as more commonplace today in the age of social media, or that we associate with official culture jamming movements like that of Adbusters and the like; further fuel to the argument that anticapitalist, antifascist work is often both in form and function, *feminist*.

The permissions offered up by the acknowledgement and assertion of the private were wildly influential across creative practices and mediums. What and whom could or should assert ownership over space or body was also playing out in dramatic ways in the dance world, where choreographer-artists like Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, Anna Halprin and others were breaking down the strictures of formal movement techniques, as well as to question and refuse traditional expectations of what types of bodies or persons *should* be on the stage, making specific, expected, constrained, forced, or inauthentic types of movement.

no ritual here
the weight of the body
is material proof
that air is matter
and mind’s married to muscle

— from “Trio A,” in Yvonne Rainer, *Poems*

While dance may seem like a questionable place to explore *documentation* as feminist practice, as is so often the case with human makers (rather than with capital-D-disciplines, invented and kept “apart” as they are by institutions whose very activity they threaten to crumble), it is far more fruitful a practice to understand the process of choreography and dance as simply another material avenue within which to explore life, through the body and space. Monk, Rainer, Brown, and Halprin performed these explorations across multiple disciplines themselves, often with rich writing practices (as well as those in film, or visual art, or music, etc.). We see in their archival traces, interviews, their inward-and-outer facing records as well as in the dance pieces

¹⁹ After more than a decade of contention as to the terms and expectations of her tenured position, under stress that the artist asserts forced her to take three medical leaves, Adrian Piper was fired by Wellesley College in 2008. Letters to and from the college president during these difficult years appear in her recent work.

that emerged from these investigations both the theory and attendant practice of *personing* the body, and in particular the very gendered body of classical dance; returning to Arakawa and Gins, we see these choreographer-dancers rewriting and then recording a re-negotiating of the *place* in which the body has been *held*.

Radical, too, in this shift in dance was the invitation to the non-dancer body to participate in its processes of re-programming and learning the body and space. With an intimacy and acknowledgement of the body and its processes, working through techniques like Feldenkrais and Alexander Method, movement artists and the public they invited into increasingly democratic spaces were invited to build a new relationship with their body and, quite intentionally, re-inscribe on its impulses and tendencies a more self-possessed awareness. Journalling, transcribing, or otherwise keeping a notation practice of these sorts of iterative exercises (as well as their physical recording through photography and video of both rehearsal and of ordinary movements) was often central to this process—documentation as tool for physical escape from the ways in we have been conditioned via the habits of mind-body-nervous system.

Take for example the work of Anna Halprin, who explains that while “before I had cancer, I lived my life in the service of dance,... after I had cancer, I danced in the service of life.” Long a documenter of her own life and a student of her body and its communications, she developed a process she termed the ‘Five Stages of Healing,’ which would become the basis for her work “Intensive Care: Reflections on Death and Dying.” Halprin then founded the Tamalpa Institute in California in 1978, developing the ‘Moving Toward Life’ program in the 1980’s for people with cancer and their caregivers, the public participatory ritual, *Carry Me Home*, for HIV-positive participants, and many other programs and public rituals sharing the express intention to marry awareness of the body, documentation, interaction, and dance with the healing power she believed was absent from standard treatment modalities. And yet, while these practices became “public,” their origin came from her own process of seeking, investigating and documenting healing through her own body, from “inward-facing” practice.

Even when a platform for public transmission may not have been readily available, or the audience not immediately visible or existent, in every medium we can locate a long history of documentation with service as its goal. In a way, we might understand such anticipation as a blueprint or sort of *sigil*, such as in the manifestation of Octavia Butler’s future successes: a writing into possibility for something that does not yet exist, but which you can envision and might make more viable through your leaving a trace, sign, clue, or tool.

Magic, Sigil, Spell : Willing Bodily, Environmental, Archival and Canon Correction



“I think of my gender as sort of like Lisa Frank threw up on Don Draper”

—Buzz Slutzsky, from
“Clothes Feelings,”²⁰
Video, 2013-16
(still at left)

5/28/18 : Milk & Honey, Philadelphia

The battle with the energetic signature, the fragmentation of the viral toxicity of my past story is confusing. I recognize and acknowledge it and find value in the allopathic, verbal, mapping ways of talking about body-mind, the neuro-science, the mindfulness science and practice, etc., but at the same time am not sure if there is a way to / if I can simultaneously offset the negative resonance of doing this shadow work.

—author’s notebook

“By changing the body DNA would give us, we say we deny your recording, your control programme... we found relevance in terms of how to liberate the self from its projected conditions and expected lifespan, and give people freedom to maximise their potential and to be the authors of their own narrative.”

—Genesis P-Orridge

²⁰ Buzz Slutzsky is an artist, writer, and curator playing with autobiographical and historical content, building upon trans, queer, feminist, and leftist Jewish cultural traditions. They describe ‘Clothes Feelings’ as “using comedic anecdotes and colorful illustrations to poke fun at their complex relationship to clothing. It is a self-deprecating and frank exploration of one non-binary person’s failures to find a clear gender presentation that the general public will understand.” This piece is currently on view as part of *Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward* at ICA Philadelphia.



Above: Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Hazel Hill McCarthy III: *Breaking Sex >< X (Sigil)*, 2013

I came to the word *sigil* some years ago through the work of Genesis P-Orridge, whose dedication to the persual of pandrogyny and the absolute dissolution of the line between life and art I have always found arresting (and difficult) in a way few have matched. S/he and her late partner, Lady Jaye, documented in depth the procedures and rituals of their project of re-programming their bodies / genders / DNA, within which the creation of visual symbols and performing of rituals was a central part. While neither my nor many of the other processes this essay addresses may be as dramatic, they do hold a similar, ritualistic, space of asserting *choice* into the narrative one has been told one has no right to.

Perhaps, then, we've come full circle to the witchcraft of which we were originally accused: indeed, women and *others* who threaten to undermine the projects and aspirations of the powers that be continue to show facility under great duress to transform oppression into seeds of change and growth, to communicate and heal in ways that “should not” be possible.

In P-orridge's projects, in Piper's “What Will Become of Me,” where the artist has filled honey jars with cuttings of her hair and fingernails since 1985, in controversial pieces like “Lethal Weapons,” filled with the blood of HIV-positive sculptor Barton Lidice Beneš²¹ and fellow AIDS patients, and in many others, there is an element of not only the textual or filmic documentation of body and story but the building of a physical archive in defiance of what you not only worried might be lost, a la Didion, but which in your lifetime had been actively erased.

As in spells and sigils, familiar from the magic that continues to enjoy a central role in the popular imaginary (and perhaps, latent desires) of our culture, there is an element of more than

²¹ While controversial pieces like “Lethal Weapons” are perhaps what Beneš is now most known for, in fact his work long addressed the archiving and arranging of what he called “artifacts of everyday life,” moving into the artifacts of a life with HIV when he and his friends were diagnosed and suffering from the disease. One of his best known, if never exhibited works, was the collection that filled his apartment and studio, which he referred to as “my tomb.”

the empirically tangible here, and perhaps that is what is so frightening to those who would gaslight away the lives and experiences they preserve.

In 2018, we daily live beyond the empirically tangible, as we (seemingly) deftly navigate the plateaus and black holes of social media, new technology continues to expand and shift the possibilities opened by immediate, shareable, accessible modes of documentation.

As a queer, nonbinary body, as well as a chronically ill body, spaces of virtual community and documentation have been lifesaving for me. It has been incredibly nourishing and life-affirming to have available to me personal accounts and documentation of transition narratives, experiences of disease and mental illness (even though in my case these became widely available somewhat later in my life, as someone born in the late 1970's). I follow and am followed by Instagram accounts of people I have never met who are transitioning, who are exploring their genderqueer identity, and who share my diagnoses or struggle with similar symptoms. I document my dietary adventures through FODMAP or photograph myself with the cardiac-device of the moment, with a stack of medical bills, with my cat when I can't move—or the mason jars of never-taken, failed cures, pills and supplements that I, like the artists who've assured me of *matter*ing, have saved. This isn't on my CV but it's perhaps as or more important, and seeing mirrored back the reflections of my community, or the direct messages from others helped or inspired by my words or images, is assurance enough in the value of the ephemeral.

Though I share the concerns of artists like P-Orridge, who is notably suspicious of social media and technology, vis-a-vis the damage to lesser used pathways of the brain, I also participate actively in and have broadly advocated for the use of social technologies as well as other intelligence from machine learning and code environments as potentially groundbreaking avenues for personal, cultural, social, and systemic change. Like any tool, these have to be used with intention—but when we can use these tools to jam the systems of power, harnessing scales of documentation and collection as never before possible (as the #metoo movement has done, as live filming of police brutality has done, as was used in the Arab Spring) this presents a clarion moment for all feminist action (and *all* action supporting justice and rights for non cis-het-able-privileged people, everywhere).

It is possible, in quotidian ways, to be a salve to another human through our documentary practices, more than ever. And so too is it possible to get this documentation into print, and into archives, requiring less capital than ever in our history—which in the age of born digital media, is an essential, necessary program. Is it this call that drove me to create and sustain The Operating System, oriented around the recentering of voices outside of systems of power; every publication is accompanied by, you might have guessed it, documentation. Of the artist or author's process, life, story, alongside ephemera or visual content. Each book is a way of asserting “WE WERE HERE, WE EXISTED, WE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY,” central to the

mission of “print-documentation”²² as a historical, feminist, radical practice of lifting up and shining light on any who is erased. Ah but... that’s a whole other (long) story, for another day!

ONWARD.

Lynne DeSilva-Johnson
Brooklyn, NY
2018

²² See “Why Print? Why Document? Why Print-Document?,” available at <http://www.theoperatingsystem.org/why-printdocument/>; created 2014