

**Troubling (Dis)embodied Practice and Pedagogy in Bioprecarious Times<sup>1</sup> :  
Operations Towards a Radical Recentering - Elae [Lynne DeSilva-Johnson]**

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*Welcome, reader.*

I invite you, as you enter and read this piece, to consider the ways in which text performing as *information* may set into motion a long-embedded cognitive pattern wherein your experience with it asks you to detach from or undermine your somatic<sup>2</sup> experience at this moment.

Seeking to be both practicum and theoretical offering, this work invites and challenges you to be aware of / defy / resist / engage against-and-with these erasures.

It is designed as script, prompt, workshop, and guide, an open source opportunity to reflect on as well as personally interface with these questions. It seeks less to teach than to orient, co-facilitating with you an acute awareness for practice in individual and group settings, as solo operator, as student, or as teacher. As, in all of these roles and supposed identities, *body*.

This piece builds on the workshop I offered as part of the 2018 *Feminist Poetics, Emergent Pedagogies* symposium, “emBODY Work / Student emBODY :: The Radical Recentering of Somatic Experience in Practice and Pedagogy,” as well as related workshops—“How to Human,” (Next Edge Festival, 2015), “Building Interpersonal Infrastructures,” (SOHO20 Gallery, 2018), “Collaborative Precarity Bodyhacking,” (with Cory Tamler and storm budwig, Target Margin Theater / *Resistance Fantasies* residency, 2019), as well as mindfulness sessions led over the past decade and work implemented in my own classrooms, both inside and beyond the institution.

Here, I put forward a basic, introductory framework within which educators and creative practitioners can bring mindful awareness to the ways in which both institutional methodologies of “learning” and (one could argue resultant) pervasive ontological norms around mind-body division persist in the ways we teach, work, and “person” in the world, causing long-term damage yet going largely unnoticed as catalyst.

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<sup>1</sup> In hoping to be legible to audiences coming to this work with a range of backgrounds, let me begin with two quick descriptions here: “(dis)embodiment,” refers to a detachment from the material experience of the body; “bioprecarity” nods to a state of precarity in which the body, specifically, is at risk, or could easily be the site of increased insecurity. For instance, healthcare costs and lack of access in the US create acute bioprecarity (and fear of it) in its citizenry.

<sup>2</sup> *somatic*, ie: related to the body; ready definitions at hand, already, include “especially as distinct from the mind”

How do female, lgbtq, disabled / mad, and POC bodies suffer most from disembodied institutional / pedagogical practices? As educators, creative practitioners, and professionals in the arts, how must we consider the body—especially the traumatized body—as we teach, work with, and assess students, collaborators, or staff? At what point does its erasure constitute an emergency of equity and access?

And, realistically, how might we begin to offer a tangible entry into embodiment, even as the avowal of the body's erasure threatens to become a critique so virulent that it calls into question the ability to simultaneously remain both acknowledged, cared-for body and subject of the institutions and systems that perform this inverse alchemy? Perhaps Moten and Harney's concept of a *fugitive practice*<sup>3</sup> is useful here: for the bodies with the most at stake in these conditions, it is mindful critique *with(in) and against* that begins to loosen the chokehold, *towards* the sweeping changes that would ultimately be necessary. For those with more privilege, it is an opportunity to recognize the ways in which a lack of awareness around the deeply harmful outcomes of this disembodiment is a profound negligence requiring both immediate and ongoing attention, institutionally and in personal practice.

**Before we jump into the theory, let's start with a few questions. Feel free to spend a few minutes with each, and/or use each as a writing prompt, and/or come back to each later. As you ask yourself each question, close your eyes. These aren't questions seeking purely cognitive response, but rather looking to uncover how and where your body holds its own answers to these queries. \*t/w: some of these questions may be triggering for persons with certain histories / conditions.\***

*How do you feel?*

*How did you ask and answer the first question? Did it include, "how does my body feel?" Ask again, this time checking in specifically with different parts of your body. If you have time, do a slow and deliberate body scan, starting with your feet and moving through your limbs, core, to the top of your head. Where are you holding tension?*

*How and when are you aware of how your body feels? Did you learn anything from the bodyscan that you weren't already aware of, and/or check in with pressure / pain / or tension that you otherwise ignore?*

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<sup>3</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Autonomedia, 2013.

*Do you regularly ignore pain or other discomfort in your body? How and when? If so, when did you begin a practice of ignoring?*

*Have you internalized the belief that it is in some way “counterproductive,” unwise, unacceptable, risky or otherwise impossible to prioritize the above?*

*How have institutions of “learning” been instrumental in your disembodiment?*

*If you are an educator, how might your classroom, as a hinge between your teaching and the institution within which you function, be in danger of reinforcing disembodied practices in students? Where else within the institutions you labor in can you identify policies or expectations that encourage and/or require disembodiment from staff and/or students?*

*How have you carried patterns of disembodiment into your own practice and/or relationships?*

*What would you do if it was systemically and institutionally safe and supported for you to prioritize your body? What would you change?*

**Sometimes, awareness threatens to increase tension as we become aware of negative patterns and identify the source of pain or difficulty. This may have happened as you asked yourself the questions above.**

In moments like these it can be helpful to have certain tools at our disposal. For instance, understanding how breath control can interface with the parasympathetic nervous system.<sup>4</sup> You might use an exercise like this one, below.

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<sup>4</sup> Your body's *parasympathetic nervous system* is directly responsible for your “rest and digest” response. When the PNS is dominant, your heart rate drops, your breathing slows, and your blood pressure lowers. Your *sympathetic nervous system*, on the other hand, is responsible for the “fight or flight” response, preparing the body for an anticipated threat. When the SNS is dominant, your heart rate and breathing speed up, and your hormones shift in order to focus on what your body needs in the face of danger: specifically, an increased amount of *cortisol* and a similar uptick in *adrenaline*, released by your adrenal glands. (Did you even know adrenaline was a hormone? Until I realized I didn't really know *how to human* and started teaching myself to heal what I'd been taught to ignore, I didn't either!) These hormones, in part, delimit the functions the body considers a hindrance in the face of immediate dangers--or in our case, stressors. Which means that compound stress over a long period of time is often responsible for a hormonal imbalance, leading to what presents symptomatically as chronic illness, often undiagnosable.

## [An invitation to our bodies: Rest and Digest]

*Take a minute to check in with your breath. Are you breathing?*

*First, simply try to become aware of your breath coming in and out of your body, without changing it.*

*Your breath doesn't end at your lungs. Closing your eyes, visualize the in-breath as its imperceptible elements move through and across all membranes and cells of your body, oxygen/life/energy spreading to all parts of you.*

*See if you can move to a four:seven count, at your own pace. Four in, pause, spread, seven out. You've just told your body it is safe, and can more clearly work through your projects and ideas.*

## System Awareness: The Organism that Persons<sup>5</sup>

When I teach workshops like “How to Human,” I’m never claiming to have special dispensation over mastery of the body; rather, I’m drawing attention to the fact that in our relationship to our own organism / machine, our capacity to understand and regulate its processes (the process Arakawa and Gins refer to as “personing”) has often been “left to chance.”

In “Awareness Through Movement,”<sup>6</sup> Moshe Feldenkrais explains how human and animal learning differ, via the *phylogenetic* capacities of the latter versus our own, *ontogenetic* process. Meaning, whereas animals are programmed to instinctively learn their body’s abilities, humans *only do so if and when the context allows and/or demands*. As a result, we have “both the extraordinary opportunity...to build up a body of learned responses and the special vulnerability of going wrong.” Luckily, humans enjoy neuroplasticity<sup>7</sup> way later into our lives than originally thought.

Critically, however, much of that plasticity is *activity-dependent*—ie, based on cognitive activity and individual experiences, as well as affected by both positive and negative stimuli. Feldenkrais’ method and others offer somatic practices that attempt to “bring about better maturation” of the nervous system—practices which have now been shown to greatly improve the health and longevity of the human organism.

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<sup>5</sup> Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Architectural Body*, University of Alabama Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Feldenkrais, “Awareness Through Movement,” in *Embodied Wisdom: The Collected Papers of Moshe Feldenkrais*, North Atlantic Books, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The ability of the brain to change continuously throughout an individual’s life.

In the 1960's and 70's, research in computation, robotics and machine learning led to an unexpected conclusion, with deep and crucial ramifications on how we understand the human body and its relationship to the mind: it led to what we now understand as *embodied cognition* (the finding that cognition is shaped by the *entire body of the organism*,) supplanting and upending the tenets of a cartesian enlightenment thinking that privileges the mind over the body and encourages a repression of the urges of the latter.<sup>8</sup>

Concurrently in those decades, many somatic methodologies were opened up to the general public at the same time less formal human movements and laypeople were being introduced into modern dance, but unfortunately access to these techniques has remained relatively low.

Indeed—few are aware of these methodologies, and even fewer are aware of the research supporting their critical application. Unless one's disciplinary track leads you there, it's random in the best of cases, and systemically unlikely in others (based on levels of privilege, access, etc). On the other hand, the fact that most personing-organisms are largely unaware of central processes of their bodies, as well as the way to regulate them, should give us pause...but it barely registers, an indication of how normalized disembodied education just being “how things are” has become. And yet, it's entirely out of step with how we learn other disciplines: as a baseline *requiring* honing our relationship to a material, system, or device.

This critique requires a multivalent engagement: returning to an intentional relationship with our own somatic experience; becoming conversant in the system(s) of that engagement; as well as bringing that critique (and supporting documentation) into the (class)room, both for ourselves *and* our students, so that we and they become aware of the systems and processes that encourage this disembodied delimiting. How might we encourage them to *study up*<sup>9</sup>?

In my pedagogical practice, this often takes the form of locating *questions* I can begin to address with my students, in tandem with the topical work we are doing; this might happen through combining creative materials with theoretical texts from disability theory, the social sciences, architecture, and so on. What would it look like in *your* classroom? And/or, how could you give yourself a somatic embodiment “class” as a series of personal prompts to aid your practice?

**HMS 201B | Spring 2019 || In class thought question. Write until prompted to stop. [10-15 minutes]**

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<sup>8</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase “studying up” has its origins in a 1972 paper “Up the anthropologist: perspectives gained in studying up,” by Laura Nader in *Reinventing Anthropology*. Nader proposed turning ethnographic research on power structures and institutions, rather than the “other,” lower classes and ethnic groups, in an effort to shift the field in its capacity to understand systems of control and democratize the discipline. She writes, “never before have so few, by their actions and inactions, had the power of life and death over so many members of the species;” the paper proposes this reverse gaze is necessary to shift the balance of power.

*How are bodies policed, defined, and divided from the mind via institutional means, and how do the stakes differ for different bodies? What is institutionalized “learning”’s role in this? What is the difference between education, learning, training, conditioning, etc? How do language, technology, and the built environment play a role in supporting these systems and processes?*

**Read: Arakawa and Gins, Feldenkrais, *Keywords for Disability Studies*<sup>10</sup>, Mernissi<sup>11</sup>, *Tender Points*,<sup>12</sup> *What Future?*,<sup>13</sup> Haraway’s *Camille Stories*,<sup>14</sup> Lakoff and Johnson,<sup>15</sup> Orwell<sup>16</sup>, Fuller<sup>17</sup>, Grosz,<sup>18</sup> Rankine<sup>19</sup>, Goffman<sup>20</sup>.**

Our class might begin with students entering and writing quietly in response to the above, with their texts and highlighted photocopies fanned around them, with discussion following. Perhaps, before talking, we’d do a mindfulness exercise or “check in” with the body, to tie in their own bodied experience to the conversation. We’d share our own experiences, comparing personal narratives to our readings.

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When one begins to turn towards the deleterious effects of the institution within which they may practice on one’s own body as well as on student bodies, it becomes quite difficult to look away from the immediate, alarming modes of operation that become normal, neutralized as they are by Orwellian discourse. When our own bodies (for instance as contingent labor) are fighting similar abuses we learn to evade as a survival tactic, it can be overwhelming to take on the emotional and psychological labor that this frank recognition and critique asks of us. Are we safe if we speak out, even in our creative and critical work, about these conditions? Do we become less well as a result of carrying this reckoning?

Central to this troubling is a coming into communion with our own bodies, so that we may better navigate the ill-lit undercarriage of these truths. This work suggests not that we have the capacity to flip the script either for ourselves or our students immediately, but rather that it is a necessary beginning to locate inroads personally and pedagogically. These changes

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<sup>10</sup> *Keywords for Disability Studies*, Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss and David Serlin, Eds., NYU Press, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Fatema Mernissi, “Size 6: The Western Women’s Harem,” in *Scheherazade Goes West*, Washington Square Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Berkowitz, *Tender Points*, Timeless, Infinite Light, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *What Future?* Torie Bosch and Roy Scranton (Eds.), Unnamed Press, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Donna Haraway, “The Camille Stories: Communities of Compost,” in *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Basic Books, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” originally in *Horizons*, 1946.

<sup>17</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller, “Humanity’s Critical Path: From Weaponry to Livingry,” 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-Cities,” 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Claudia Rankine, “Citizen: An American Lyric,” Graywolf Books, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Erving Goffman, “On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction,” in *Interaction Ritual*, Doubleday, 1967.

require not only theoretical but human infrastructure to carry it forward, and we cannot continue to build over the fault lines of disembodied practices—a dangerous forgetting that comes to bear in countless ways when ignored.

What follows here to close are a few sample Field Notes from the state of emergency in disembodied higher education. What might similar notes for yourself, your students and/or community look like?

I invite you to begin to look, to note, and to remember your/self/body, gently, and to (however you can), invite others into this process, so that we might begin to repair, together—and might begin to bring an embodied learning out from its liminal edges, into quotidian experience.

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## **[POSTSCRIPT: CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER, FIELDNOTES]**

### **I. we regret to inform you**

*Since the summer of 2018, three emails have gone out to the listserv of the University where I teach officially announcing the sudden deaths of three students. “Sad News”; they read, “[The Institution] Mourns.” One of these deaths had its onset in the classroom, where an undergraduate with asthma had a deadly attack but hadn’t taken the time, during the hazing-like, ultra-demanding culture, to renew a prescription inhaler. The Official Voice of Concern directs students to Counselling and Faculty to HR for emotional support. My students report that faculty discourage them from attending vigils and services for their deceased friends if they’d miss class as a result. They’ve also skipped family funerals, weddings, births, deaths, and court cases, or, dropped out or changed majors when it became clear that a disability or illness was in no way made viable, despite the necessary paragraphs which promise otherwise. Faculty regularly remove the chairs so exhausted students must remain standing during 5-6 hour presentations so as to solve the problem of these students falling asleep.*

### **II. you had to know**

*I am at a bar with other faculty. A colleague relates how after their graduation his students related various strategies—mostly prescription drugs—they’d used during their studies to cope with the workload. To his apparent surprise, they chided, “you had to know this was happening,” but*

*his response to them and me was one of discomfort—not in alarm, or concern, but in wanting to remain oblivious. He laughs. “Man, I don’t wanna know about that, y’know?”*

### **III. but we need your help to make the project a success**

*“The deleterious effects of hunger on energy, productivity and mood are affecting our students physically and emotionally. Our team has committed ourselves to addressing this issue and we hope you choose to do the same.” On a campus wide survey, “76% of students reported having to skip meals or eat less due to financial constraints.” The Official Voice of Concern explains with Great Compassion how, as we know, “college is the first time many of our students have had to budget for themselves,” citing the “rising cost of tuition and art supply expenses” causing students to “choose between food and other obligations” as a conditional issue of the students’ failure to budget well, rather than institutional irresponsibility. Instead, contingent faculty and staff, many without benefits and chronically underpaid, are encouraged to bring nonperishable items like canned vegetables and granola bars for the food pantry that is being established.*