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Winter Quarter
Field Study Term Paper

Abstract.

This paper is modeled after Craig Holdrege's seven steps of "Delicate Empiricism" from his essay "Doing Geothean Science" addressing science as a conversation between observer and observed. What follows is the conversation I had with the language surrounding, inscribing, and labeling the body. I will talk about my search for my body through language, urban environments, letterpress, gender, poetry and science. Knowing that these conversations are far from over this collection of findings and metaphors does not end with a conclusion but an invitation to go deeper. The voices I have peppered in with my own range from feminist theorists, philosophers, scientists and poets, and I encourage you to question, to add your voice, to join in reverie with those speaking here.

Language=perception.

Lan-guage [lan-gwij]

noun.

A body of words and the systems for their use common to a people who are of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition.

Language is the lens through which people are taught to see the world and know themselves, to define, understand and communicate with their surroundings. For these reasons language is a powerful and beautiful part of human and all nature, yet for the same reasons it can be harmful if used as the main signifier of our place in this world.

The body and language are interwoven. The two provide one another with substance, frame work and shape. When confronting and challenging language, one is in essence confronting and challenging themselves. Language can either connect people or divide them. In Western Culture the high value placed on language and literacy pushes the bodily sensations and awareness lower down the hierarchy. By integrating the body's awareness into language a new way of knowing forms. And through a new way of knowing comes new meaning and new meaning opens within us a new organ of perception.

Feminine and Masculine: A New Language, A New Perception.

"But from the moment it is understood that every force is accompanied by a harmonics of sexuality, it becomes natural to examine the weighted words, those words which have a force." (Bachelard, 36)

"Like us, words have sexes and like us are members of the Logos. Like us they search for their fulfillment in a kingdom of truth; their rebellions, their nostalgias, their affinities, their tendencies, like ours, are magnetized by the archetype of the Androgyne." - Edmond Jabes (Bachelard, 50)

Language is laced with gender which people learn to decipher themselves through. This is when context becomes helpful and can say more than the words themselves. Words hold weight in their meaning and that meaning gets transferred to the object/idea being spoken about. There is not a clean divide among the genders within language, so what is it that makes words feminine or masculine? The historical, cultural, and environmental context they are they placed in helps provide that distinction.

The individual who speaks, writes, reads or hears the words also creates context for their meaning. For example; why men are not commonly referred to as “pretty” nor women “handsome” is because the words hold within them the *concept* of the object. In other words, the object (and its context) in conjunction with the word embeds the meaning.

Western Culture (Man)nerisms.

“To love things for their use is a function of the masculine.” (Bachelard, 31)

“It must be clearly understood that the masculine and feminine become values as soon as they are idealized” (Bachelard, 84)

I am not offended by the feminine and I am not threatened by the masculine, what I take issue with is the severity of preference for one over the other. In western culture there are labels and objects that prescribe the “female function” within society. From birth people are color coded, labeled and taught to behave accordingly. In today's society the feminine has been regarded as weak, delicate, unproductive, and ornamental. Emily Martin, a professor of socio-cultural anthropology at New York University, explores this in her essay *The Egg and The Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles*:

“Medical texts describe menstruation as the “debris” of the uterine lining, the result of necrosis, or death of tissue. The descriptions imply that a system has gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap.” (Lock and Farquhar, 417)

The way the female bodily function is described and framed in language creates an overall concept that bleeds into the perception of a woman's role in society. In Western Culture where production and function are among the highest values this description (and many others like it) of the female, in comparison to the male, makes her look dormant and unproductive. These concepts become reinforced within society and embodied within people. What a different world this would be if the female's “wastefulness” were viewed as cleansing, renewing, and rebirthing; a resourcing of energy like the trees shedding and flooding their ripe red leaves in Autumn.

Urban Space And The Embodiment Of The City.

As I walk through the city I look up at the many buildings towering high; some with large windows, some old with crumbling brick. I notice the nature in the city is small. The trees are confined to grated squares of soil, small baskets of flowers hang just out of my reach decorating the sides of buildings but offering no structural support. It is the architecture's flaw that these buildings do not employ the function of nature into their structure. Instead they impose and dominate. These structures embody stories and the beings that tell them embody the structure. Peter Stallybrass, a professor of Literary Theory at the University of Pennsylvania, and the late Allon White, an important figure of literary and cultural critique during the 1980's, correlate the structure of the city to that of the body in their essay *The City, The Sewer, The Gaze, and The Contaminating Touch*:

“The vertical axis of the body's top and bottom is transcoded through the vertical axis of the city and the sewer and through the horizontal axis of the suburb and the slum or East End and West End.” (Lock and Farquhar, 266)

Society's structure is shaped through an overly masculine mindset. It is linear, orderly, controlling, a grid set up in columns and rows, littered with signs that authorize ones movement and address ones surroundings. When the feminine is placed secondary the balance is lost within people and society. To restore this imbalance one must find the masculine and feminine traits within themselves and hold their value not in comparison *to* but in connection *with* one another.

In urban spaces people become conditioned to look towards the next sign for guidance and in doing so have turned down and discounted most the sensations of the body, self-governance, and self-reliance. How can body and mind function as equal organs of perception in a male dominated, linear society that dictates direction through false boundaries?

*street lights, sign posts, traffic lights,
children at play, people crossing, do not enter,
one way, dead end, private property.*

The city reveals a history that my body remembers and my mind echo's. The buildings, the wildness, the order, the signs and fences are all built into my body and my body is built into them. There cannot be a clean break when cement and bones are the same, however, the language can be torn from the city and its meaning reconstructed.

*The city sits
on wild ground
that re-enters
with force.
I've seen roots
break concrete
and moss
grow over stone.*

Poetry As An Organ Of Perception.

"Every new object, clearly seen, opens up a new organ of perception in us." - Goethe

"What relief is given to our language by a poetic image!" (Bachelard, 158)

Poetry plays with language by breaking, building and dividing the meaning of words. Poetry creates a space for a person to know their strengths and weaknesses, constraints and freedoms that exist within their internal landscapes.

"How can I make myself into a better, more transparent instrument of knowing?" - Holdredge

Poetry is a natural force that has the capacity to deconstruct the rigidity of man-made linearity, to weave one through their multiple selves. When I engage in reading, writing, and speaking poetry I listen with my body, my mind, and my environment. All of them are speaking through me and I become a translator of what lies between meaning and context. This space is speaking to and through people constantly, it is simply a matter of tuning in with the body and listening for the echo.

*my eyes
trace a memory
real and imagined—
 my hands are full of text,
 drinking letters while my mind
 pours out thoughts—
and the letters are still,
only alive
in the body
that reads them.*

Letterpress: An Intimate Machine.

Letterpress became one way for me to explore the connection between my body, language and environment. Handling the type was like handling my body. I let my fingers feel the size and form of each letter, reaching for their depth and tracing their curves. I closed my eyes so my hands could see and my mind flooded with the shapes of words. After pulling the text from the depths of the drawer I placed them on the bed of the press. They were set up mirrored and backwards:

*gnidaer erew ew
era ew won dna
GNIMAERD*

I surrounded them with furniture (blocks of wood or metal used to hold the type in place) and filled the space between the words with thin sheets of metal. Once locked in place, I painted the letters with ink and laid the paper on top. I then turned the handle of the roller to press over them, binding the page to the text in a mechanically caressing way. Slowly peeling back the paper, like sheets to enter a bed, revealed the words:

*we were reading
and now we are
DREAMING*

“...there are words which are shells of speech.” (Bachelard, 48)

I visited the studio frequently with loose intentions. This created space for me to listen and feel for what was being said through my environment. At first anxiety came with the silence but from my breath I was able to hear the echo of words held in the room.

*becoming an extension
of myself,
a more complex form
of the pen,
I feel the pressure--
 I press her
 body--against memories
spoken by a ghost.*

The letterpress is at first a cold and still machine but once brought to life through the touch of a being it becomes loose and circular in motion. It requires the hand, the mind and the words to activate and give

purpose to its function, producing lines of text that dominate, ornament and flow within the boundaries of the page.

A Body Found In The Space Between.

“Nature finds a new expression through the process of human knowing.”- Holdrege

I have come to find my body in the space between the words and their meaning, acting as a mirror of my surroundings. I am reflected in the glass windows of buildings and pools of rain on the ground, my voice is heard through the silence of letters and rumble of machines. The consistent fluctuation of my being is woven with that of my environment.

We are poetic bodies tangled in linear spaces.

Each person's internal landscapes can be explored and projected through the reconstruction of language, the entwining of the feminine and masculine, and the translation of the poetic voice murmuring in the traffic and vibrating leaves of the trees.

*The streets, trees, letters, boundaries
and breath weave together
body and environment.*

Bibliography

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