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Scar Tissue

z

OVER THE COURSE OF 2 SEMESTERS THERE ARE TWENTY-FIVE classes and if I add one more, the one where I sit, a teacher in her deserted classroom, this last lost letter, the zed of my alphabet of weeks may begin to make sense and words form beneath the ache of these walls.

These too-close walls crowd a sprawl of chairs; each chair the same size no matter its body, answering the call of a university administration that wanted always more bodies.

a

Our bodies¹ are present in the academy and with our bodies come their glorious leakiness, their sensuality, their transience.

This writing like my body bears scars, interruptions in its flesh, reminders of injury to tissue where cells repeat information in their efforts to repair. This is a work of repair. As a work entering the world it bears the scars that many bodies bear, working the in-betweens of teaching and learning. This body, marked by medicine, culture, is the producer of scarred knowledge.

b

I cannot find my notebook
And for days my thoughts are stuck here
And here I leave some with a young Canada goose and her ducklings
Pale green as new grass,
While others are stuffed into a paper bag
With a half eaten sandwich now
Attracting fruit flies
Who may be able to make something better of
These thoughts than me still looking for that white skin
And pale lines

1. Pressure brought to bear on every concept, I begin to not know what is body. Forever moving body is a material object, split open and sewn, re-sewn, it is prior to what it will be constructed as in discourse. Consequentially, the body is thick with ambiguity.

c

As an instructor in an introductory disability studies course, I may come to "embody" the field for my students. When this occurs, resistance to disability studies knowledge becomes deeply personal. While students stare and shift in their seats, I wonder whether disability, uncertainty, and vulnerability are performances that students are ready to receive (or participate in) within a scholarly context. Student calls for "more structure," "more PowerPoints," and their further wishes for setting boundaries around time, language and emotion may be grounded in a desire to contain the leakiness that they never invited into their lives, much less the classroom. Throughout the year I begin to wonder what work vulnerable pedagogy does for myself and my students and how it relates to and complicates the power I hold as a teacher.

d

Vulnerable pedagogy is characterized by a bodily perception briefly in my consciousness. I could step away, altogether deny the presence and effect of the barely perceptible, but the subtle mark rendered upon my flesh draws my attention. Etymologically the notion of the vulnerable means "to wound" but also "to be wounded." Teaching, wounding, being wounded . . . building up scar tissue.

e

That year was my first year co-teaching an introduction to critical disability studies, and it was filled with my vulnerability and that of my co-teacher. Contemporary scholars working from a feminist postconventional ethics (Price and Shildrick) acknowledge the importance of writing together from the positions of ability and disability and we would add to that the necessity of teaching. These pages, however, find me here alone. What is significant is how together we shored each other up, learning about the limits of our bodies, our relationship, and our teaching. Here I will perform the classroom for you, retelling my perspectives on the teaching and learning story, through a lyrical and poetic inquiry (Neilsen) into vulnerability, its discontents and containments in the disability studies classroom.

f

Disability enters the classroom. I bring it in, embody it but hesitate to define it. As a couple in the classroom, I am the body that is marked, yet not always visibly. I can pass—we will leave that conversation for another day, when we might place the rehearsal of nondisability, the years in rehabilitation and the attempt to erase disability, this lived body, at its centre. But in today's classroom there is some grumbling. I feel forced to come forward with some provisional definition of disability, my body isn't enough for them; I waver. My hesitation is grounded in the apprehension that many disability scholars experience: a definition can become restrictive, in error it begins to normalize our field—so I turn toward words that

will open up the apprehensions of disability discourse.²

My desire is not to define or normalize disability. Yet in teaching, I am obliged to provide in some large or small way an instance of language that provides a ground. And as various experiences, theories, categories, and aspects of what comprises this messy, inconstant, category are brought forward I feel other facets slipping away, as if I am disabling the field in which we are studying. . . .

Most importantly I have to convey to these bodies that inhabit this room that disability is ever shifting and changing. Anomalous embodiment (Shildrick, "The Disabled"), normative (Garland-Thomson), nondisabled (Linton), extraordinary (Garland-Thomson), ableism (Campbell) are terms used in juxtaposition with disability and these begin to force students to consider the notion of the fluidity of embodiment and its inconsistency. We begin to understand how words and concepts are fluid, not frozen, cold. And neither are bodies. The carpenter's square knows that it was never meant to be set against this body, this living, flesh.

g

I stand in front of the class breathing. Orienting in my usual way, obliquely. Like Emily Dickinson who I learned approached her work askance, from the side. And so she taught me this tactic.

h

What happens when disability is brought into the classroom as the central focus of study and hence tension? And when the professor exhibits disability and vulnerability—performances the students may not be so ready to perceive or understand; within a scholarly context, the professor may find herself or significant aspects of herself becoming various things: a target, reformed, rehabilitated, fixed, cured, wished away—and her awareness and response are not trivial.

Here we may perceive the manner in which students shift in their seats as they stare, desperately never wanting to be like us in our scholarly vulnerability. Theorizing not so much about bodies but from bodies as lived entities. Social institutions and discourse cannot be understood apart from the real lived experiences and actions of embodied human beings across time and space. Social theory must be rooted in our embodiment (Williams and Bendelow 209).

2. Shildrick cautions us that if there were agreed upon parameters we would "close down, and thus normalize, what must otherwise remain a shifting nexus of both physical and mental states that resists full and final definition. On the simplest level, what counts as disabling anomaly varies greatly according to the socio-historical context, and even were the inquiry limited to a westernized location in our own time, the category remains slippery, fluid, heterogeneous, and deeply intersectional" ("Dangerous" 223).

i

I awake in the middle of the night trying to find an example to speak from. Whatever I know seems to hurt, seems to cause pain for some. I have been here before.

During my lecture on queer theory, I walk through the aisles speaking about the coding of bodies, categories, and their blurring. When I end, I await a response. Silence. There is a wish for hard categories, for knowledge that does not shift, knowledge that is stable and reliable. An expectation for expertise. These are the expectations I continuously attempt to take apart. Yet my own authority in the classroom complicates everything.

Walking through aisles, between students, between knowing and not-knowing, between theory and practice, is a current of breaking waves. Waves seize and cast along the edge that tracks water and shore. In between we ride the tides.

j

In the coldness of this room, I was witness to the complexities of a group of students that left me wondering about my persistent hope for pedagogy and maybe the naivety of hope. I wore an extra sweater in this building, and carried my scarf and hat with me. Was I coming or going? As I walk through this room so early in the day and I wander amongst the chairs at the end of the semester, I remember the bodies that such a short while ago inhabited them. Each body full of breath and such passionate spirit!

k

We are creatures of relationship (Abram). I come to know myself anew with every class. I am called to witness how students begin to know themselves differently, through relationship and through resistance.

l

Anomalous, nondisabled and disabled bodies have brought into themselves the cultural norms that suggest bodies of difference are not what is celebrated and brought forward with delight. . . . There is a cultural and social pentimento that accompanies disability. The norms against which we are judged are exposed under the fat of oil, and no matter how thickly we are painted, the original composition remains.

I don't want this teacher, is the silence in the room.

m

"Abandon the sense that [we] can by sheer strength of will and desire, make the classroom an exciting, learning community" (hooks 9). I cannot enforce a learning community, I have to set the conditions in place.

This means being aware of how the world enters the classroom. Our classroom becomes a place to witness the suffering that has accrued to each body. It is filled with bodies that are hungry and that have experienced a mix of social injustices and privilege. Living

in this Northern country we cannot deny our privilege, but we cannot argue against the poverty and violence that still exist in our homes and on our streets. Each student is a curious mixture to me of privilege and suffering. As Walt Whitman might say “a great poem.”

These poems in front of me.

Lines lived already with autobiographical urgency.

Listen.

n

The sound is of a woman crying. Or maybe more than one. It is halfway through the alphabet—one semester almost finished and exhaustion is settling, if only it could find a spot. Rising from her chair she moves toward the noise. A thin line drawn with red chalk, its dust smaller sighs that tremble in the air before coming to ground where they outline forgotten wanderings. Again the sound. She is astonished to find this ruby din coming from within her skin.

o

Body/s of students no matter how she tries there is always one that is hurt, late, cloudy. Once upon a time a student leaves class perhaps the thought is leaving means nothing, it has no effect.

The student leaves because there are as yet no words for what she has experienced. Only an action, though this could be a lie.

p

She leaves her learning like a trail of crumbs that the teacher cannot follow
And birds hungrily fly off with them.

The teacher stands in the woods wishing she could understand birds
Their paths of flight would surely tell her where this student had stopped
Shadows of words would cease lingering in her dreams.

q

I do not rely on theory for much, theories are like a compass rose (Bringhurst). “If it tells me where to find true north, of course, I’m grateful, yet I don’t suppose that any north is permanently true” (Bringhurst 9). And so it is in the classroom. No permanent north and perhaps no permanent resistance. Just a rose blossoming, crumbs falling from beaks.

r

We are studying disability from critical perspectives in this classroom, reflecting upon its presence in the world and in the classroom. The students arrive with knowledge that they will have to learn to question and at times even to hold silent as knowledges that are at times given priority in this classroom may not come from the disciplinary home that they feel comfortable within. Some may have to learn the difference between critiquing a

social structure and a person who works within that structure, while some arrive with that knowledge. And they have to deal with me as their teacher, who looks for knowledge not only in books, but in the cracks of the sidewalks and in the bodies of worms (Davis Halifax). I believe we must take worms (Phillips) and the more than human (Abram) seriously as we shift our perception to life and all of human endeavor including suffering.

S

Students are not the only ones who suffer and resist in the classroom. It is also those of us who teach. We resist the lessons that we are being taught and there are days when I am uncertain what those are. All I can do is breathe and try to find a way to make sense.

T

To refuse breath to normative discourse and normative representations is a political pedagogical encounter with resistance. Interrogate words as they move from breath to sound. Breathe deeply to “uncover and reclaim subjugated knowledge” (Mohanty 185).

U

Subjugated knowledges enter the classroom.

We turn off the lights and continue to keep them off. The bright fluorescents uncover too much and we are naked under their cool radiance. The darkness is a blanket. The material is contentious and we need covering.

V

I speak through metaphor, and lyric, sensually and ambiguously constructing knowledge. Will students be amenable to the blurring of disciplinary distinctions as we begin to roll and walk and find a rhythm of knowing shaped by scarred body/s?

W

A poetics of disability scholarship is one way to respond to challenges to make available subjugated knowledge. Representations of cast out bodies. Knowledge of/from subjugated bodies. So we have to make “this” present in the classroom. Not just write about “them” in journals. And so I bring my feminist self into the classroom and the response is: a 10% solution. No more than that should be allowed in. I suffer and have a fever. I ache. What to do? I

“I will not allow
these knowledges,
this body to be pushed
out the door”

have to be congruent otherwise I cannot teach. So I bring myself to teach in the classroom. The students will have to learn that I teach a curriculum that counters particular practices and embodies others. And while I do not want to suggest a hierarchy of discourse I will not allow these knowledges, this body to be pushed out the door

anymore through arguments that are isolating. It will not be an easy semester.

This is resistance.

x

Why is it what I speak never reaches your ear?

The air thickens with this tragedy. The impossibility of this experiment

Whereby you never answer my questions

Makes me wish it come to an end.

You hear the voices only when they are ashes

Buried under iron red earth.

I pray for language not

Light but unavoidable

Trembling wet darkness.

The smallness of my body sticks to your tongue

Disclosing the weight of a body unheard

One moment the world language-full

The next a shallow grave. (Davis Halifax, "I Pray")

y

And so I stand there swaying. Wandering through the class holding a conversation with whoever will come forward. I speak and I listen to the room. There is a shifting of bodies

They say the readings are too hard I say read them like a poem And do not forever read for meaning Let the words arrive On your skin pricking slow wonder Through anaesthetized scars and calluses.

Read because you have a cup of tea beside you Read because your friend is laughing Read because someday these fragments Will knit themselves into a Sweater that you will wear to a conference Or a classroom that is too cold or warm.

z

Over the course of 2 semesters there are twenty-five classes and if I add one more, the one where I sit, a teacher in her deserted classroom, this last lost letter, the *zed* of my alphabet of weeks may begin to make sense and words form beneath the ache of these walls.

These too-close walls crowd a sprawl of chairs; each chair the same size no matter its body, answering the call of a university administration that wanted always more bodies.

3. This project is a feminist one, done in order to "understand the specificity of meanings and the particularity of participants, with the result that its answers must always be held open to modification at least, and possibly to radical change" (Shildrick, *Leaky* 3).

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