

The Body of Knowledge

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Alice Walker once exhorted her audience, "Stand up, speak out, and get beside yourself!" Her amusing urging was by way of saying women should stop sniveling. Once in a while they should even try being outrageous. They should get beside themselves. "Beside" is an interesting preposition. Eve Sedgwick (2003) comments "there is nothing very dualistic about [beside]" (8). "Beside" is friends with "with" rather than "or," and encompasses a wide range of emotions that some might consider outrageous, like mimicking, aggressing, warping, twisting, repelling, and paralleling (8). Sedgwick's sideways celebration gives a wide berth to what it means to be human. Her argument and culminates in a discussion of the queer-identified performance known as "camp." "Camp" has usually been seen as a form of parody that seeks to expose the assumptions of the dominant culture. Disagreeing with this characterization, Sedgwick sees camp as not just critical of culture but as acting along side it in order to be "additive and accretive" (149). Her descriptive use of language defending this point mirrors the sense of amplitude that her vision of "beside" behavior enjoys:

the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism; the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the 'over'-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, triloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture. (150)

Sedgwick is having a really good time with her writing—something we don't feel or see much in academic prose, with its noun-heaviness and air-abstractions. Eve Sedgwick's tongue-in-cheek research is both funny and serious, attitudes that lie happily "beside" her points.

Refreshingly, even some writers in the medical field take a "beside" position, not only to their patients—daring to sit beside them in the hospital—but also in their writing about their profession. Rafael Campo refuses the anesthetic guise too often associated with doctoring. Writing as a homosexual surgeon, Campo wastes no words in shedding the white coat image that is meant to cast the wearer in some sort of armor of purity. In his work *The Desire to Heal* (1997, Campo begins, "His erection startled me," and continues, "What could be more natural than that I was there, a witness to another man's ailing body" (13). The word "natural" in that sentence arises naturally, calmly—Campo's "camp" opening observation meant to stand as a response-rebuke to the prohibition against desire in professional arenas. Indeed, the centuries-long prohibition against any subjective emotion, especially desire, by doctors (include teachers) has been viewed as, well, undesirable in the work place. I understand the reasoning here. But Campo is not just raising questions about boundaries; he is testing the acceptability or nonacceptability of homoeroticism in Western culture. That which is "natural" has been so well defined through the centuries that any behavior outside the bounds could be considered ungodly. Marla Morris (1998) has remarked that the church fathers from the thirteenth century on defined the natural self as an essentialized self, one that acts in accordance with God's laws, one that "must be heterosexual" (18).

Throughout his book, Campo writes of the struggle between his natural desires and the medical god-complex. Ironically, he chose Amherst and Harvard as the straightest, hardest (as it were) environments for his medical training, with the intention of ironing out his homosexuality. His assumed identity as an objective, heterosexual doctor became a goal that would define his success: "I wanted to make a cast to protect myself, to straighten myself out, to keep me correctly aligned," he writes (112). His account is a wide-eyed retrospective of his struggle, all the while with full knowledge that a society "desperate for homogeneity" (116) was capable of turning him into a monster, "one who killed bloodlessly, silently, with the most surgical of wounds" (113). The series of essays in this book make a resounding point: in the attempt to be what he was not for the sake of profession and social coding, Campo was losing his humanity. He concludes with this startling observation: "I have come to appreciate how little one's sense of identity ultimately seems to matter in the definition of communities" (267).

The medical community's definition can be too clearly seen, interpreted, and understood by the white coat, as Delese Wear has often commented. What a costume that is! Meant to inspire confidence because of its sterility,

it serves to keep the subjectivities of both wearer and patient at a distance. Costumes worn during carnival season do the opposite. Masks bring out the hidden selves beneath the persona. Cubist paintings suggest a similar sense of the multiple self by drawing multiple facets on the surface of the human form. In the Kachina dances of America Indians, costumes and masks allow the dancers to reflect sacred powers released by actions that can be grotesque, humorous, or outrageous (Highwater, 1981, 139). These masked behaviors and artifacts are foreign to the Western idea of identity instantiated by the single persona, the one name, the appropriate demeanor. Educational systems, too, defend singleness when administrators hand down dress codes, require standardized testing, and install the podium. These rituals of dress and prop help keep us all lined up. How ironic that the white coat and surgical mask for doctors and the polyester suit for deans are also costumes, although I doubt their wearing encourages outrage.

If, as I am suggesting, institutions have ruled out “beside” behaviors, I am not the only one to do so. Recall Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), where Freud fiercely argues about the damage to psychic wholeness when the flow of id is stanchied. “Men have now gone so far in the mastery of natural forces that with their help they could easily exterminate one another to the last man” he writes (in Gay, 1998, 551). “They know this, hence a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, their mood of anxiety.” How to restore happiness, humanity, the natural being? Why are so many people unhappy? Is happiness, truly, a self-evident truth, as promised in the Declaration of Independence? According to a recent study, only thirty-eight percent of Americans are happy with their lives (“Money,” A,1). And this is attributable not to interiority but to income (a \$75,000 income can make people happy!).

In a wonderfully exuberant account of his patients’ bizarre behaviors, Oliver Sacks celebrates the wide range of human possibility that he learns as he watches, visits, and lives with people who are “beside themselves.” His title, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995), gives a clue to Sacks’ experience with those who are so far away from Earth space that they seem from outer space. One of his subjects was like the Holy Fool; another was an eidetic artist; another was autistic. All, perhaps because they were extra-ordinary, had extra-ordinary talents, either in art or music, or, as in the case of the man with Tourette’s, in practicing surgery. With the latter, Sacks is clearly fascinated by the man who couldn’t stop touching, vocalizing, and ticking; but who, when in the operating theater, was the eminent professional with no outward sign of his weird explosions and gestures. His “beside” behavior actually gave him rest when at work.

Sacks remarks that any disease foists doubleness. An alien “it” inhabits the core of one’s being (77–78), he says. Often this “it” overtakes personal-

ity to the point that the person seems possessed. But the case of the surgeon is paradoxical because the defect is at one and the same time counterbalanced by a high level of skill. "The convulsive or broken motor or speech patterns that may occur in Tourette's can be instantly normalized with incanting or singing. . . . Such identity transformations, reorganizations, occur in us all as we move, in the course of a day, from one role or persona to another" (98-99).

Lest this all seems to be fetishizing the bizarre, more needs to be said about the body of knowledge. The body may betray one in its inability to conform to standardized behaviors, but look at what it can do otherwise! The "it" that a Touretter tunes into with repeating sounds and rhythms can actually give momentum to the sensation of vitality, even relatedness, between the "I" and the "it." Sacks shows us that there is something fundamentally liberating and paradoxically creative in some bodies that go awry. More: by observing the transformations in his patients, Sacks suggests that we, too, are capable of deeper tapping into our non-socialized selves to release creative potentialities.

Many works of art focus on the theme of bodied knowledge, of course. In American letters, a classic example of bodied knowing is Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* wherein a nineteenth century Southern wife rebels against the social codes for Mother-Women in her Creole community. Her awakening is a bodying forth, quite literally, of the wonder of her own health, strength, and limberness of flesh. Mrs. Pontellier's rebellion was considered outrageous for her time, not only because she no longer subscribed to monogamy but, more, because she relished discovering the sensuality of her female skin: "She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms and she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh" (1989, 48). Chopin shows, however, that a female in the Creole South of the post-Civil War years cannot choose to be "beside" herself while also being a wife, and so Edna chooses suicide by drowning.

Another classic of American nineteenth century woman's writing is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892). Interestingly, this text anticipates French feminist theory of the twentieth century as articulated by Helene Cixous, for example, in that Gilman's writing demonstrates a revolutionary power of the unconscious imaginary. In Gilman's text an unnamed wife suffers from post-partum depression and is prescribed a rest cure by her "kindly" doctor husband. The room in which the protagonist rests is anything but calming: she begins to see a figure behind the wallpaper that the reader understands is a projection of her imprisoned self. But,

as with Cixous's celebration of *l'écriture féminine*, the protagonist's monologue reveals her unconscious awareness that the social codes deeming her "sick" are themselves stifling. Instead of succumbing to the patriarchal command to be still in isolation, the narrator undergoes a quiet revolution. She uses words that, like the pattern on the wallpaper, commit every artistic sin against the "natural" order of the socialized world. The wallpaper, she tells us, is "not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of [. . . with its] bloated curves and flourishes" (1137). Similarly, in describing her predicament, the piece reads the way her mind works, changing as the light changes (1140), focusing on the bars of the paper, the woman creeping behind the bars, her husband's words, the smell of the paper, and the movement of the wallpaper itself: "The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!" (1141). Cixous describes *l'écriture féminine* as that which comes in "waves, these floods, these outbursts" and "her speech, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectified,'" because "woman unthinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield" (1976, 876, 881, 882).

In order for my students to experience the startling humor of the text, its revolt against regime, I perform it in class. My little joke is that my initials, MAD, encourage me to occasionally act out and get beside myself. I love the antisocial language of the protagonist, whose madness gives insight into the cruelty of order. And I love the way the narrator describes her mimicking the woman in the wallpaper, creeping around the smooches in the wall. Audience reception to my little performance has a strange effect: students either cite the text as one of the most memorable of the course, or they dismiss it as so much female craziness. What Gilman accomplishes, nevertheless, is to show how women can write "through their bodies" (Cixous, 1976, 886), as Cixous urges. Both nineteenth century mistressworks of Chopin and Gilman predate feminist criticism of Lacanian theory, celebrating instead the unconscious imaginary as the origin of female "forelanguage" (Cixous, 889).

The dualism evident in Cixous's attack against male thinking essentializes a definition of female language as ultimately and most definitely empowering. Still, her argument, when placed along side the examples both Campo and Sacks offer, suggests the "naturalness," if you will, of human imaginary powers expressed through the body. And the body itself is a two-ness: two eyes, ears, arms, legs. In fairy tales and myths, this system of twos is not dualistic but rather composed of outer and inner body purposes. One set of eyes is for seeing what is out there, another for intuiting; one set of ears is for hearing in the mundane world, another for hearing the

soul. Two sets of strength are also often shown: the strength of the muscles and the invincible strength of the soul. In a fascinating study of the teachings of fairytale and myth, Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992) draws attention to the interplay of this set of twos for our understanding and healing:

The body is a multilingual being. It speaks through its color and its temperature, the flush of recognition, the glow of love, the ash of pain, the heat of arousal, the coldness of nonconviction. It speaks through its constant tiny dance, sometimes swaying, sometimes a-jitter, sometimes trembling. It speaks through the leaping of the heart, the falling of the spirit, the pit at the center, and rising hope. The body remembers, the bones remember, the joints remember, even the little finger remembers. Memory is lodged in pictures and feeling in the cells themselves. Like a sponge filled with water, anywhere the flesh is pressed, wrung, even touched lightly, a memory may flow out in a stream. To confine the beauty and value of the body to anything less than this magnificence is to force the body to live without its rightful spirit. (200)

Throughout the tales in her book, Estes shows how vitality is lost when connection to our healthy, instinctual, visionary attributes is severed, lost, or suppressed. The “natural” human being is the one most like the wolves, she suggests, who “live and play according to what and who and how they are. They do not try to be what they are not” (1999).

One of the most dynamic portraits of the body natural, being what it is, is drawn again and again in Toni Morrison’s portrayal of the bodies of women of color. Morrison writes to correct the invisibility of black experience from American literature, which has fictionalized blacks as *opposed* to whites, thereby making blacks an Other (1992). Morrison’s project is not to oppose whiteness but to stand beside it, in outrage and outrageousness. I think of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, a child so ugly that not even her mama loves her. Pecola’s experience inside her neighborhood grocery store is a counterpart to the pretty experience of Eudora Welty’s white child inside hers. But rather than feel pity for the black child’s dispossession as opposed to the white child’s ownership, the reader sees Pecola’s sexual pleasure upon eating the candy called Mary Jane. Putting the Mary Jane inside her mouth, she tastes that “its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named” (2095).

The body natural makes me think, as well, of Morrison’s earth women in *Tar Baby*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon*—the women whose natural place is with the “ancient properties” (1982b, 305). Ondine, in *Tar Baby*, is like the soldier ant who “seals herself off from all society and eats her own wing muscles until she bears her eggs. When the first larvae appear, there is nothing to feed them, so she gives them their unhatched sisters” (291). This

is nature's naturalness. I think of Eva in *Sula* (1982b), who killed her war-torn son rather than have him try to get back inside her womb: "But a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he'd suffocate. . . . I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man" (72). Sethe in *Beloved* (1988) also kills her baby rather than have the slaveholders take the baby into slavery and never be able to call her hands *her* hands. These examples are a mother's naturalness.

Morrison brings to her readers the extra-ordinary portraits of women who are beside themselves. Reading these stories and entering their worlds, I am made aware of how thin a portrait of womanhood the image makers craft on American media. Watching Laura Bush speak, I see only a lower lip move around, woodenly, dummy-like, letting her handlers' words be voiced through her orifice. I see perfectly groomed hair, perfect suits, eyes on the prize of her husband. Then I recall how Toni Morrison terms beauty "the most pernicious and destructive idea in the Western world" (in Otten, 1989), because beauty, like identity, has been socially constructed—or in our era, politically manipulated—lest a body get out of line. To invoke Robert Frost, one could do worse than be a swinger of birches. We just must—we really must—get beside ourselves!

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