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12 Embodied Writing and the Social Production of Pain

Susan Ferguson

Writing is a deep practice. Even before we begin writing, during whatever we are doing—gardening or sweeping the floor—our book or essay is being written deep in our consciousness. To write a book, we must write with our whole life, not just during the moments we are sitting at our desks.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1998, 91)

There is a story in every line of theory.

Lee Maracle (1990, 7)

Let me begin with a story.

During my first semester of graduate school, I took a course on embodied learning with Roxana Ng. One of the course requirements was that we keep a journal, comprising both responses to the course readings and reflections upon our experience of qigong, a traditional Chinese practice that was central to the course curriculum. In one of my final journal entries, I wrote that I would have liked a more explicit antiracist theoretical framework through which to engage with course content. While my comment was intended to highlight the importance of politicizing knowledge production when learning about Indigenous health and healing systems, it also betrays the limitations of my perspective at the time—that is, the extent to which my

understanding of antiracism and critical pedagogy was located within the realm of an activist-academic approach that privileges the mind and intellect, often at the expense (or erasure) of our bodies and of bodily knowledge.

In her response, Ng acknowledged my critique but made a political assertion of her own. In the margins of my course paper, she wrote, “I believe that profound shifts must come from self-reflection and interrogation, not just from intellectual understanding.” While I agreed with her about the importance of self-reflection and interrogation, at the time I understood these as primarily intellectual activities, and I recall insisting (to myself) that we need theory and analysis if we are to do our politics properly. I later came to realize that Ng was suggesting a different kind of reflection and interrogation, however—one that calls into question the very foundations of Western academic knowledge production.

It took several years of engagement with mindfulness meditation and a variety of other bodywork practices—which share among them an attentiveness to the different dimensions of bodily life—for me to fully appreciate the significance of Ng’s assertion that personal and social transformation are intertwined processes that cannot be accomplished through analysis alone. Through working with a chronic pain condition and holding this embodied process in conversation with the work of writing and theorizing the body in knowledge production, I came to a deep awareness of how body and culture are fully imbricated; how history in its many manifestations lodges itself in the body. As I learned to attend to my body and expand the frameworks I was using to understand the nature of pain, and bodily life in general, I also discovered that our epistemological locations matter a great deal.

This notion of location, coupled with a concern with how we orient ourselves toward bodily knowledge and experience, and to what effect, became a key theme in my work. In particular, I became interested in how our epistemological locations—that is, those theoretical, discursive, and methodological frameworks through which we approach our practices of knowledge making—shape, and often delimit, the very possibilities of critique. Given my broader commitment to decolonizing methodologies, I also took my interest in embodiment and social theory as an occasion to explore the boundaries of critique and, conversely, the opportunities opened up by working through and across those boundaries. By tracing dominant Western, medicalized understandings of the body across social theories of

pain and embodiment, I was able to appreciate both the social and historical specificity of these theories and their relationship to wider histories of colonial knowledge production, and in so doing, to establish their contingency. In order to disrupt these dominant, taken-for-granted ways of knowing about pain and embodiment, however, I ultimately needed to reach outside common Western research methods and cultivate an approach that could help me to “suspend inherited habits of knowing,” as feminist scholar Jacqui Alexander (2005, 310) puts it, and centre the body within my writing and research.

It was through mindfulness practice that I was able to cultivate a different way of knowing about the body, through the body, which allowed me to read and write the body differently than I had before. I came to understand my approach as a form of embodied writing practice, and I began to read widely, across different disciplines and literatures, in search of other examples of embodied writing practices. Embodied writing, as I have come to conceptualize it, refers to the complex interplay between those discursive and material practices of reading, writing, and research that reach beyond Western objectivist and normalizing representations of the body and that instead seek to animate the body, and bodily diversity, such that representations of embodiment emerge through bodily subjectivity itself. Embodied writing, then, is writing that embraces open-ended, intertextual, and intersubjective representations of embodiment and that acknowledges both differently located bodies and diverse conceptual frameworks for understanding embodiment.

The remainder of this chapter explores the possibilities of embodied writing for social research and its implications for decolonizing knowledge production about and of the body. Beginning with the understanding that writing is a key, but contested, site of knowledge production in Western society (Richardson 2004; Smith 1999), I treat writing as a social and bodily practice. Using an examination of the social production of bodily pain to exemplify my approach, I describe how feminist autobiography, mindfulness meditation, and phenomenologically informed interpretive sociology can be brought together to foster an embodied writing practice.

After mapping my methodological approach, I turn to Lata Mani’s (2001) memoir of pain and disability, *Interleaves*, to illustrate what I mean by embodied writing and to explore its potential to shape bodily knowledge

production that treats the experience of pain as a social activity mediated by discursive and material processes that move among and across various disciplinary, historical, temporal, and corporeal boundaries. I suggest that through her use of mindfulness meditation, embodied narrative strategies, and textual practices that disrupt dominant Western academic writing conventions, Lata Mani's work represents the possibility of writing through pain and disability toward a space of decolonizing and liberatory praxis. In closing, I return to my argument that by attending to our epistemological locations, which are themselves always deeply political, we might open up opportunities to generate differently imagined relations to embodiment and, in turn, develop creative methodological and pedagogical practices that seek to engage, rather than negate, embodied difference.

Throughout the chapter, I also reflexively engage my own narrative of living with and writing through pain and disability, revealing that an embodied writing practice is also a pedagogical practice. Here I am taking a broad understanding of pedagogy, recognizing that any practice of knowledge production also involves teaching ourselves (Alexander 2005). If writing is a process of coming to know, as I believe it is, then surely there is a pedagogical imperative within all scholarly writing, and especially within writing that seeks to engage one's own narrative and experience, as mine does. As Chandra Mohanty (2003) notes, it is in fact experience that makes critical theory possible—we turn to theory to make meaning of our experience, connect this experience to wider social and political histories, and, in turn, shape new theories and understandings. Furthermore, Mohanty (2003) argues, we must understand these emergent knowledges “pedagogically” and take them up as a form of practice if we are to genuinely intervene in dominant structures of knowing. This is, then, to also recognize that our scholarly and pedagogical practices inform one another. And while I would argue that methodology is always to some degree pedagogical, this is especially true for those of us involved in education insofar as we teach from our experience, our research, our theoretical and political commitments—and, conversely, we research, write, and learn from how and what we teach. This is consistent with Indigenous research and educational practices, which do not impose rigid distinctions between narrative, experience, knowledge production, and pedagogy (Smith 1999).

In this chapter, my approach mobilizes and makes explicit the reciprocal relationship between methodology and pedagogy through my use of feminist autobiography and autoethnography: I trace my own narrative throughout this work as it anticipated, informed, engaged, and intersected with my scholarly inquiries. In particular, I make my writing process visible throughout the work as a way to ground my argument in practice. In so doing, I hope to intervene in normative bodily relations to text as they are typically manifested through academic writing conventions such that I might exemplify to readers not just what I mean to say but how it might be accomplished. Embodied writing, then, necessarily resists the closure and coherence that much traditional academic writing seeks to achieve. One way to decolonize knowledge production through our writing practices, I argue in this chapter, is to highlight the provisional nature of writing and the very (embodied) process of coming to know. I begin with the body and social theory.

Writing the Body

Writing is central to Western education, knowledge production, and social research methodologies. Writing is also a political activity. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 36) reminds us, academic writing and its role in the generation of theory is never “innocent” (see also Maracle 1990). However, at the same time as it carries with it a legitimacy reflective of wider social histories of Western knowledge production, imperialism, and domination (Smith 1999), writing can also represent a politicizing space through which to contest, reflect upon, and rewrite hegemonic narratives (Mohanty 2003). Sheila Stewart’s essay in this collection provides an example of embodied writing that resists the closure typical of academic language, argumentation, and structure.

While the significance of writing to social inquiry and the possibilities offered by nontraditional forms of writing have been well-documented (see, for example, Clifford 1983; Richardson 2004), the relationship between the body and our writing practices has been given less attention. Although feminist scholarship, in particular, has moved to redress the mind-body split characteristic of social science research through an acknowledgement of the researcher as an experiencing subject, an examination of the ways in which writing is both a social and a bodily activity remains curiously absent.

As Thomas Csordas (1994, 4) noted some twenty-five years ago, social theories of embodiment have likewise taken up their subject matter “without much sense of ‘bodiliness.’” This often remains the case. Although the body has come to occupy considerable space within disciplines such as women’s studies, sociology, and education, theories of embodiment often reproduce dominant bodily relations to knowledge production through their emphasis on the body as a site of representation and their reliance upon normative notions of embodiment: rarely, for example, does the ill body, the body in pain, the disabled body appear, and when it does, it is most often as an anomaly or negation (Garland-Thomson 1997). As Csordas (1994, 4) argues, the lack of “bodiliness” in theories of embodiment has consequences for knowledge production about and of the body:

This tendency carries the dual dangers of dissipating the force of using the body as a methodological starting point, and of objectifying bodies as things devoid of intentionality and intersubjectivity. It thus misses the opportunity to add sentience and sensibility to our notions of self and person, and to insert an added dimension of materiality to our notions of culture and history.

And so while I have found social theories of the body, and particularly feminist accounts, indispensable to my understandings of embodiment, pain, and disability as always already in story, I am also cautious about the limitations, both political and epistemological, of approaches which employ those scholarly conventions that reproduce a disembodied relation to knowledge production.

Phenomenologically informed interpretive sociology is helpful here because it both highlights that writing is always already a social and bodily practice and can help to reveal the effects, scholarly and otherwise, of normative bodily relations to text. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2004) phenomenological work tells us, for example, that it is through our embodied perception of the world that our understandings take shape. It follows, then, that if writing is not merely a method of knowledge transmission but a process of knowing more deeply, then our writing practices are also mediated by our embodiment. There is a tension here, however, for within the normative orders of Western academic knowledge production, we can also say that the inverse is true: our textual practices simultaneously mediate our

understandings of bodily life. This is to say that when we write, we write something into being; the form this writing takes thus writes, and indeed rewrites, an embodied relation to the world as it is represented in the text. This complex interplay points to a dynamic relation between body and form, which can be traced through the embodied and narrative strategies we put to work in our writing and theorizing.

By reflexively attending to the practices of reading and writing that shape knowledge production about the body, it becomes possible to destabilize objectified representations of the body and begin to write diversity, complexity, and intersubjectivity into our theories of embodiment and the knowledge that flows from them. Tanya Titchkosky (2007, 210–11) describes the relationship between embodiment and textual knowledge production in this way:

To know that the body is made manifest through our word-filled relations to embodiment actualized through our reading and writing of the body, is to know that any manifestation of language is an embodied activity that might open us to something other than what appears on the page. Reading and writing are socially oriented activities of embodied actors situated in the same world they are busy making. Attending not only to the sense in which texts give us versions of embodiment, but also to the ways in which we apperceive these versions, can teach us much about the ordering of relations to the bodies of ourselves and others through the medium of everyday texts.

This suggests that experiences of embodiment such as pain and disability are firmly located within those cultural contexts that give meaning to those experiences; in reading and writing any bodily experience we necessarily engage in interpretive work that involves the use of wider social narratives through which many different versions of embodiment are constructed. Embodiment is thus an intersubjective phenomenon, accomplished through social interactions and practices which reveal, as Gail Weiss (1999, 5–6) tells us, that “the experience of being embodied is never a private affair.” I am interested, then, in what bearing this interpretive approach has on the ways we read and write the body in pain, particularly given that bodily pain is most typically characterized as intensely private, subjective, and individual by nature (see, for example, Bonica 1990, 18; Scarry 1985, 4).

Reading and Writing the Body in Pain: Or, the Discursive Limits of Critique

Pain is an extraordinarily common yet varied human experience. It is one way in which our bodies communicate with us and is present in our language, appearing often in daily life and conversation as a metaphor for that which is difficult or undesirable. Pain is the object of medical knowledge and practice and is a commodity of the medical-pharmaceutical-industrial complex. Pain is also an emotional experience and is used often as a narrative device in the stories we tell about the world. Pain appears in film, media, and advertising; in books ranging from fiction and memoir to medical texts and popular health books; in doctor's offices and clinic waiting rooms; and in medical charts, questionnaires, and test reports. If we are attentive, we will notice pain all around us.

And yet pain is also nowhere. We feel it but we often do not talk about it, and we generally wish it would go away. It cannot be objectively seen or measured, and it regularly evades explanation and resolution by medicine, which subsequently seeks to suppress it. Pain often evades language, and thus, while pain is often evoked metaphorically, it is much less often described. We avoid pain, have difficulty acknowledging pain, and often retreat in the face of the pain of others.

And so pain is both here and not here. An integral part of our daily lives as embodied beings yet also a space of silence and absence. Despite the very common experience of pain, it is most often narrated as a sign of anomaly, concern, even crisis—requiring and yet defying explanation. This interplay between the presence and absence of pain is revealing, because it suggests that pain is a socially produced phenomenon, always already in story, part of an ongoing and incomplete relation to embodiment. Brian Pronger (2002, 80) writes of absence and the work it does: “Absence lies before presence, in anticipation. Just as absence lies in the foreground of presence, so too presence lies in the anticipation of absence. . . . Absence must receive presence, or there will be no making present.” Pain is thus made and unmade through the conditions and locations of its appearance; the absence of pain grounds, indeed constitutes, its presence, while the presence of pain desires its absence. The commonsensical understanding of pain as troublesome and undesirable needs, then, to be understood through an analysis of the conditions of possibility enabling its appearance in order to reveal both

how it works as a socially produced phenomenon and the work it is doing. Let us now examine the language of pain and its dominant discursive representation in Western society—that of medical discourse.

The word *pain* can be traced to the Greek and Latin words meaning punishment—*poínē* and *poena*, respectively (Bonica 1990, 18). The representation of pain through language is thus underwritten by the notion that it is an undesirable response to a transgression of some kind. The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) similarly defines pain as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage.” As a note following this definition indicates, pain is “always subjective,” and while “it is unquestionably a sensation in a part or parts of the body,” pain is “always unpleasant and therefore also an emotional experience.”¹

This common medical definition of *pain* reflects both the etymology of the word and dominant social understandings of bodily pain as troublesome and undesirable. While the reference to the emotional dimensions of the pain experience (assuming that the physical and emotional body can be held in separation) acknowledges that pain is more than just a physical sensation, pain ultimately derives its explanatory power through its biological facticity, as evidenced by the reference to tissue damage in the above medical definition. Interestingly, at the same time as medicine claims authority over pain—and even over its very existence—this definition also provides a kind of escape clause in suggesting that pain might only be “described in terms of such damage” (my emphasis) but still be diagnosed as pain.

The tenuousness of the diagnostic process in determining and treating pain, and particularly chronic pain, is well documented (for example, Good et al. 1992; Wainwright et al. 2006). Scientific theories of pain within Western medicine have undergone a number of changes (Kugelmann 1997, 45), pointing to the indeterminacy of medicine’s explanatory models for

1 See IASP Taxonomy Working Group, *Classification of Chronic Pain*, 2nd edition (revised), part 3, “Pain Terms: A Current List with Definitions and Notes on Usage,” http://www.iasp-pain.org/files/Content/ContentFolders/Publications2/ClassificationofChronicPain/Part_III-PainTerms.pdf, 3. The second edition of this standard reference work was published in 1994; the revised, online edition incorporates updates dating to 2011 and 2012. The full text is available on the IASP website at <http://www.iasp-pain.org/PublicationsNews/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1673&navItemNumber=677>.

understanding pain. In modern times, a major shift occurred when pain ceased to be treated as a sensation, the dominant approach until around 1950, and instead came to be understood primarily through Melzack and Wall's "gate control theory" (Kugelmann 1997). Mirroring the shift from biomedical to biopsychosocial approaches to health—which recognize individual health not as solely biological but as a complex of interactions between the biological, psychological, and social aspects of human life—the gate control theory shifted dominant Western medical conceptions of pain from understanding it as a *signal* to understanding it as a *process* within the human body (54). While the former model understood pain as a physiological reaction to injury mediated by specific nerves (55), Melzack and Wall's gate control theory of pain emerged in response to the "puzzle" of pain and the apparently inconsistent relationship between the existence of pain and (verifiable) injury (Melzack and Wall 1988, 3). This is a pain that attempts to acknowledge variety, cultural context, the role of language in describing pain, and the impact of personal history on the experience of pain; for Melzack and Wall, all these subjective dimensions to pain refuted any direct relation between injury and sensation and demanded a new definition and approach to understanding pain itself (12–14). This new definition ultimately signalled a key shift away from treating pain as a symptom toward treating pain as an illness unto itself (Baszanger 1998, 122).

Medical theories and definitions of pain do not simply reside in medical textbooks, however. Rather, they circulate and make their way into daily life through both medical practices that seek to treat the illness of pain and the many ways in which medical discourse permeates different arenas of Western social life. The practice of clinical medicine strongly shaped Melzack and Wall's theory of pain, and a major contribution of the gate control model was the measurement tool they developed to improve the treatment of pain—the McGill Pain Questionnaire, which asks the patient to rate the intensity and qualities of the pain they are experiencing. This questionnaire is widely used as a way of assessing what type of pain a person may be experiencing and is regarded as a way of bridging the very personal, subjective nature of pain with the objective needs of Western medical treatment regimes (Melzack and Wall 1988, 41). In shifting pain from a sensation with a singular source within the body to a process with multiple pathways throughout the body,

the possibilities for pain treatment were also expanded. In this model, there are two different pathways through which pain may be treated: intervening in organic structures of the body and intervening in mental processes. A wide variety of treatment modalities, including alternative or complementary treatments, were thus legitimated for use in the medical treatment of pain (Baszanger 1998).

This overview of the dominant Western biomedical understanding of pain is by no means comprehensive. What I hope it demonstrates, though, is that pain is a contested space. And yet, despite the indeterminacy of knowledge about pain in Western society, pain tends to remain within the objectivist authority of medical science. By attending to the language of pain in the definition above, however, and the theories of pain and embodiment that it reflects, we can better understand how pain gains its sensibility and secures its facticity as a medicalized phenomenon.

Pain, the accepted medical definition above tells us, needs language to enter medicine; pain needs to be described. As Emma Whelan (2003, 477) argues, “There is no medical way into pain except via patient subjectivity, however much some medical experts may want to minimize the role of subjectivity in medical claimsmaking processes.” This is especially true if pain is to be treated. The act of describing pain, however, facilitates a slippage between the subjective description of sensory experience that is labelled as pain and the diagnosis of damage that is said to produce the pain. Even when there is no observable evidence of injury, as is often the case, pain is understood by medicine as a transgression of the body; something has *happened* to the body. (Indeed, the demand of pain’s absence is often the very thing that makes it present.) And so while pain is acknowledged to be experiential, emotional, and subjective, requiring language to gain its sensibility, the epistemological move that links pain with medical treatment has the effect of securing the body as the body-object—that is, the body known objectively by science—thereby foreclosing other ways of understanding the body and the body in pain. This is one way in which medicine works to position itself as science despite its reliance on interpretive practices (Good and Good 1993).

The continuities and paradoxes among different conceptualizations of pain also reveal it to be an interpreted phenomenon, achieved through complex, interactive, and often conflicting processes of knowledge production.

Notably, the interactions that produce pain as a medical scientific phenomenon are profoundly social—they occur between bodies. Despite the dominant characterization of pain as deeply individual, it is only through engagement with another, and with the social, that pain is given its meaning as pain. By this, I do not simply mean to say that our experiences of pain, like illness, have meaning in our own lives, as some scholars have suggested in an attempt to intervene in medical discourse (Kleinman 1988); rather, I mean that the very conditions of pain's appearance precede and inflect the experience of pain itself. In this sense, pain is only pain—only *becomes* pain, perhaps—in the midst of others.

By highlighting the social production of pain, I am not seeking to deny or dismiss the painful experience that most often is pain. Indeed, my work on this subject was, for a long time, shaped by my desire to *not* be in pain. Rather, I want to trouble those Western epistemological practices that produce pain as only ever one possible sensation or experience. This is important because not only does Western medical discourse delineate the boundaries of knowledge production about pain and the body, but these discursive boundaries also limit the possibilities of critique if we take these boundaries for granted and perform our scholarly work within them. To deny that we are always already engaged in meaning-making about pain and the body is thus to deny that meaning-making is always political. This is especially problematic when meaning masquerades as an objective truth, or that which “just is.” And so, by treating pain as a socially produced phenomenon, I am concerned not only with intervening in those dominant medicalized understandings of pain that circumscribe the discursive boundaries of pain but also with the epistemological implications of taking Western medicalized discourses of pain and embodiment as self-evident. Indeed, as Judith Butler (2004, 4) reminds us, critique often emerges from those tenuous spaces between the dominant discourses and practices through which we know ourselves and the ways in which our experience exceeds the structures of knowing available to us. Our embodied experiences and perceptions are one such example. For critique to be transformative, however, it must reach beyond those structures of “settled knowledge” (27) towards the possibility of different ways of being in the world.

Writing and Rewriting the Body in Pain: Toward an Embodied Writing Practice

As I described earlier in this chapter, my interest in developing an embodied writing practice was motivated by a desire to animate the body within my writing and research and disrupt normative bodily relations to knowledge production—a desire that acquired a kind of critical urgency when I developed a physical impairment that profoundly affected my ability to produce written text and thus to participate in academic knowledge production. As Roxana Ng (2004) notes, our bodies are an integral but taken-for-granted aspect of our intellectual work; for me, the reciprocal relationship between my body and my scholarly work only became clear to me when I suddenly found that I could not write and was unable to participate in the intellectual work of the university (Ferguson and Titchkosky 2008). Disability and its intervention into my experience of typical bodily relations to writing thus shaped my interest in exploring how an embodied writing practice can intervene in those dominant epistemological practices that serve to secure the authority of particular bodies of knowledge and recognize only particular bodies as knowledgeable.

My commitment to embodied writing—particularly when it involved myself—initially remained quite intellectual insofar as I did not know how to know through any other means. Mindfulness practice helped me cultivate a different way of knowing about the body, through the body. My body. (And this was very important, because it allowed me to reach outside an objectified relation to embodiment and write the body's subjectivity.) I began to experience my body, and in particular the pain I lived with, quite differently. My sensory experience became more nuanced and the boundaries of my perception of my embodiment more expansive. I became at once more conscious of my sensory experience and, because I was more aware of the variety and changeability of this experience, less invested in it and its (possible) meaning or significance. Pain became part of a much broader set of sensory experiences than it had been for me in the past.

Knowing that I could experience my body differently was a profound confirmation that the body is indeed socially produced (Butler 1993). While I had previously been committed to this perspective, I came to understand this at the level of bodily experience (itself an interpretive process) and not solely as an intellectual interest in social theories of embodiment. During

this time, I also began to explore the potential for embodied writing to support a project of decolonizing knowledge production. Colonial histories continue to shape the social organization of knowledge; colonialism is not just a political and economic project that occurred in the past but is part of ongoing social and geopolitical formations that structure discourse in the present. Decolonization, then, does not only require a radical reconceptualization of human relationships to land and each other, including the return of land to Indigenous peoples (though this, too, is essential; see Tuck and Yang 2012); it also demands that we interrogate those knowledge systems founded upon colonial ideologies and the practices of exclusion that flow from them. Indeed, the discursive practices of colonialism have profoundly material effects, and it is critical that we recognize the ways in which the material and discursive are mutually constitutive. Within this context, I became interested in how various forms of dualistic thinking that rest upon colonial ideologies prohibit more integrative approaches to knowledge production and, more specifically, in tracing how this inflects writing as a site of epistemological practice.

Recalling my opening narrative, I returned to Ng's assertion that if critical reflection is to be put to the service of social transformation, it must be an embodied activity. In her work on embodied pedagogy, or embodied learning (2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2011), Ng argues that oppressive social relations are upheld by the division between the mind/intellect and body/spirit that is foundational to Western education and knowledge production. This leads to a disjuncture between analysis and practice, or "way of being in the world" (2004, 3). Even (or perhaps especially) critical education, with its explicit social justice agenda, tends to reproduce this disjuncture through its emphasis on critical thinking at the expense of embodied or spiritual understanding. Ng's (2004) model of embodied pedagogy seeks to redress this disjuncture through an integrative praxis that highlights Eastern health and meditation practices in the classroom as a way of disrupting the mind-body split and facilitating students' capacity for embodied (self-) reflection and critical insight. (For an example of how mindfulness-based pedagogy can foster critical reflection in social work education, see Yuk-Lin Renita Wong's essay in this collection.) Jacqui Alexander (2005) similarly charts a relationship between colonization and systems of dualistic thinking, arguing that the work of decolonization requires a critically engaged,

integrative approach that bridges the secular and the spiritual and is premised on a dynamic relation between radical self-determination and collective interdependence. Alexander's insistence upon recognizing the spiritual in our practices of knowledge production is echoed in Temitope Adefarakan's chapter in this volume, where she argues that we must recognize that students are not solely academic bodies but also spiritual bodies, as a strategy for resisting Eurocentric teaching practices that rest upon the bifurcation of mind/intellect and body/spirit.

Central to the work of decolonization, then, is the notion of practice and the possibility offered by integrative work that disrupts those hierarchical dualisms that are foundational to Western social thought (mind/body, male/female, reason/affect, nature/culture, for example). This is to say that without pedagogical, methodological, and other practices to accompany the work of knowledge production, our theorizing cannot support a project of decolonization. Epistemologically, Ng's (2004) approach is instructive because it allows for knowledge production about the body to take place through the body, thereby displacing the primacy of objectivist, scientific ways of knowing. Importantly, however, it also acts as a critical intervention into Western philosophies of the body by providing a set of alternative theories and practices of the body. In doing so, this approach not only demonstrates that the body is always already a space of interpretation (Butler 1993) but also locates our social and cultural understandings of the body, and relationships to our bodies, within wider histories of colonial knowledge production. (See Wendy Peters's chapter in this collection for a powerful example of an embodied narrative that similarly contests the dominance of Western medical knowledge.)

Philosopher Annemarie Mol (2002) suggests that we critically reflect upon how bodies are *done* through an analysis of those material practices that shape the experience and interpretation of bodily life. Mol warns of the risk involved in treating bodies as solely a space of interpretation and meaning-making, suggesting that "the body's physical reality is still left out; it is yet again an unmarked category" (11). Methodologically, this insistence upon the intersections between those material and discursive boundaries shaping bodily life is important when theorizing embodied experiences such as pain because it thoroughly denaturalizes any embodied relation while at

the same time allowing for the recognition that theorizing has consequences that must be lived with.

Furthermore, as Mol (2002, vii) asserts, “Attending to enactment rather than knowledge has an important effect: what we think of as a single object may appear to be more than one.” It is this kind of multiplicity and complexity that I sought to uncover regarding pain and the body, as a strategy for opening up the ways in which we experience and narrate our sensory experiences of pain and contesting dominant medical frameworks that discipline pain as an embodied phenomenon. I want now to take up Mol’s methodological proposal to explore the possibilities of embodied writing practices that reveal the multiplicity, intersubjectivity, and sociality of bodily pain and bodily life. In particular, I argue that mindfulness meditation offers one way of “doing” the body such that knowledge can be produced *through* the body and through bodily diversity.

Mindfulness Meditative Practice as Method

Mindfulness meditation is a central practice within Buddhism. While the term *meditation* actually refers to a variety of techniques developed over centuries, including different forms of yoga and sitting meditation, these practices share the aim of cultivating embodied awareness in the present moment (Orr 2002, 488). Most simply put, mindfulness meditation is about “paying attention” (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 21) without judgment. The most common means of mindfulness meditation practice involves using a stable and relaxed seated posture and breath work to ground us in our bodies such that we can be more aware of what we are feeling and experiencing (Rosenberg 1998). In this way, the practice of mindfulness creates a relationship of “witnessing” oneself and one’s body such that it fosters greater reflective awareness (Zhao 2006, 91). While this practice of paying attention can be developed through dedicated meditation time, mindfulness can also be taken into daily life through the cultivation of attentiveness to common activities such as walking, talking with others, and writing.

Mindfulness fosters a kind of attentiveness that aims to interrupt those cognitive thought patterns that lead us to narrate our experiences as we experience them. These “storylines,” as they are often called, are forms of received knowledge, acquired through our individual and social histories; mindfulness practice asks that we suspend what we think we know such

that we can experience our bodies and our selves more fully and deeply. Through heightened awareness of our feelings and sensations, mindfulness also helps to highlight the notion of impermanence—the idea that no particular state is permanent because the world is constantly changing. With this heightened awareness, we can clearly perceive the fluidity and variability of embodied experiences. This is particularly helpful when working with feelings or sensations that are generally understood to be troublesome or undesirable, such as pain.

I have found the practice of mindfulness meditation to be consistent with phenomenology through the shared emphasis on reflection, embodied awareness, and openness between self and other. (In fact, I began to appreciate the methodological potential of mindfulness practice when the body work I was doing in my conscious movement classes began to resonate with the phenomenology I was reading at the time.) Methodologically, phenomenology involves sustained reflexive engagement with research material through an “attentive awareness” to the subject matter and to the world as it is lived rather than as it is theorized (van Manen 2006, 713). Marianne Paget (1993, 8) describes it in this way:

Phenomenological work involves both the subject’s experience and the phenomenologist’s experience. Experience means that which is lived through, *Erlebnis*. The subject or subject matter is not an object in the sense of a thing. The subject or subject matter is explored through the subjectivity of the phenomenologist who perceives the subject matter, the phenomena, as a dialectical relation between self-understanding and understanding the other. Work in this tradition is reflexive and tacks back and forth between the subject matter and observing the subject matter reflexively.

Meaning is thus co-created, and while it inevitably draws upon multiple histories and subjectivities, it also fosters a kind of reflective present/presence.

Larry Rosenberg (1998, 16), a Buddhist scholar and teacher based in the United States, describes mindfulness as a way of being intimate with the world as we experience our world. When we are mindful, he suggests, the distinctions we tend to create between self and other can dissolve. Similarly, reflection in the phenomenological tradition is a way of “bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the

intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life” (van Manen 1990, 32). Mindfulness and phenomenology also share a commitment to openness of both the body and thought processes; they are not concerned with reflection as a form of truth-telling but rather with the cultivation of a reflexive practice that allows for sustained embodied engagement with and through the world. In this sense, mindfulness can help to achieve phenomenology’s hope for cultivating understanding through the recognition of the inseparability between subject and object, self and other.

Embodied Writing and the Social Production of Pain in Lata Mani’s *Interleaves*

Lata Mani’s (2001) autobiographical text, *Interleaves*, offers a good illustration of how mindfulness meditation can shape an embodied writing practice and thus act as an intervention into those normative writing conventions that position the body as subordinate to (and, in the case of disabled bodies, interfering with) the privileged work of the intellect. Lata Mani is a scholar, poet, and cultural critic. Formerly a professor at the University of California, Davis, Mani sustained a head injury as a result of a major car accident. In the author’s (2001, 73) own words, *Interleaves*

is about an individual’s journey through the social landscapes of our time, through the ways in which society constructs wellness, illness, success, failure, worth, worthlessness, as these are experienced by one woman attempting to live consciously through the trials and tribulations of brain injury. The social construction of illness meant that the rupture brought about by a physical disability and a medical emergency became also an existential crisis, one in which the broader questions of life and death, pain and suffering, belonging and outsider-ness had to be confronted every day and, at times, with every breath.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1, titled “The Journey,” consists of a series of ruminations, as the author calls them, on living with disability and chronic illness. Part 2, “Contemplations,” is a series of reflections on seven spiritual principles that the author developed as she learned to live through disability, pain, and suffering. The book blends narrative, critical reflection and poetry and makes use of a variety of different narrative and stylistic devices throughout.

Interleaves is also available as an audio CD, reflecting the medium through which the book was written: the spoken word. Mani initially tape-recorded the text and then had it transcribed—a writing practice that was necessitated by her embodied relationship to knowledge production. Following her car accident, Mani’s cognition occurred through hearing; she shared in media interviews that she was no longer able to read or engage in sustained, continuous narrative (Rao 2001). As a result, the narrative structure of the book is quite fluid, comprising relatively short and often overlapping chapters that, when taken together, explore many different aspects of the social location of disability but do not build a comprehensive argument. Instead of offering traceable analytic trajectories or conclusions to anchor the various chapters, Mani shares with readers what she has learned from her experience of disability. However, these pedagogical reflections are themselves provisional because they are grounded in another embodied practice of knowledge production—meditation and breath work.

I want now to examine how the body in pain is being *done* (Mol 2002, 31–32) in *Interleaves* and how this is accomplished through an embodied relationship to knowledge production as it is revealed within the text. The body as something we *do* is highlighted through the emphasis on reflections that have emerged through the embodied practice of meditation; in this sense, key meditation practices such as conscious breath work, observation without evaluation and attachment, and being present in the moment can also be understood methodologically. The text moves between description and discussion, but significantly, Mani returns the reader again and again to the present, to the embodied moment of reflection and the open possibilities of that reflexive space. This represents quite a different intention and temporality than the progressive movement of modernist Western practices of knowledge production that gain authority through coherent, forward-facing narrative and theorizing. In contrast, this text uses a kind of reflective, intersubjective present as a space to consider the workings and sociality of the body, pain, and disability. So while Mani writes of the body, and of *her* body, throughout the text, she consistently writes this body knowledge through her embodied relationship to that knowledge, achieved through meditation practice, and with the reflexive sense that it could also be otherwise. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from Mani (2001, 26–27), drawn from a chapter titled “Pain”:

Pain throbs. Pain shreds. Pain darts. Pain weaves sly patterns across the length and breadth of the body. Pain stabs. Pain pulses. Pain plummets the body into a vortex unknown and at times fearful. Pain nags. Chronic pain drones repetitiously, monotonously, ad nauseam. Pain flays the surface of the skin, turning it almost translucent with frailty. Pain makes one so weak that the whole world is experienced through its omnipresent filter. Pain drains everything into its core. Pain can be as focused as the point of a pinhead or as dispersed as one's consciousness and, if suffered long enough, the pinpoint can seem to grow and swallow one's entire physical being. Pain can be as hard as steel or as soft as a ripe pear. Pain shudders. Pain shivers.

Yet, to speak of pain like this is to suggest that it is an entity, a thing, when it is in fact something very difficult to grasp and hold. For when one does not resist pain so it pools, swirls, finds a crevice in the body in which to stay put, pain is revealed as a diaphanous energy permeable, dissolvable, transformable by breath. Pain, it turns out, is not an ice floe that must be hacked away, but a little pocket of stuck energy that can be released by softening, loosening, relaxing, by conscious breathing.

In this passage, knowledge about the body is certainly being produced. But this knowledge, much like embodied life itself, is represented as active, contradictory, and suggestive of other possibilities and experiences. This contingency is most clearly revealed through the break in the narrative, and narrative positioning, of pain's description. Whereas the section begins with a direct rendering of pain as an embodied phenomenon, with the paragraph break, the narrative perspective shifts to a reflexive space, mirroring the process of mindfully working with pain as an embodied experience. While the dominant approach to pain understands it as negation and something to manage, suppress, and eliminate—something to be “hacked away”—Mani's description suggests that through meditation, or “conscious breathing,” pain can also be something else.

Pain is thus represented as a relationship between people and their bodies, and as such, it is an intersubjective phenomenon—a social activity mediated by the discourses, practices, and other meaning-making devices available to us. (This is one way in which bodies are *done*.) Mani (2001) also offers us her own body work with breath and meditation and, in so doing,

contests medical discourses that seek to categorize, measure, and manage pain. (These are two more ways in which bodies are *done*.) Mani thereby writes the complexity, vulnerability, and social locatedness of embodied life into her narrative and her narrative practice, thus suggesting that one way of contesting those epistemological boundaries that represent bodily pain as somehow outside the social is to shift the very grounds of our theoretical and methodological approaches. (And here are many more ways in which bodies can be done.)

To feel pain, to live with pain, to be in pain is almost certainly accompanied by the desire to not be in pain, in this world. I do not wish to question or negate that desire, even while I would like to unsettle it. What I do desire is that we pay attention to how the body in pain is being accomplished and what this can tell us about bodily norms and difference and the boundaries of knowledge production about and of the body. While this relation to pain as a desired and potential absence is present in Mani's narrative above, I read this as a present-absent dialectic that exists among several different relations to bodily pain. In the text, pain is felt; pain is narrated; pain is written; pain is worded; pain is worked with; pain is held and pain is released; pain is theorized and pain is imagined. Perhaps most significantly, pain is both of the body and beyond it. Pain, when attended to with mindfulness, is a space of shifting, relational encounters with oneself and others. Pain will always exceed its narration.

Mani's narrative also reveals the contingency and indeterminacy of knowledge production about pain and the body. Just as there are multiple relations to pain in the narrative above, so too are there multiple bodies—her body writing, her body doing a mindfulness exercise, her body telling a story, to name a few. In attending to how the body is accomplished through different narrative practices, interpretive devices, and approaches to language, we can clearly appreciate both the multiplicity of the body and embodiment as a social phenomenon. In grounding her narrative in an embodied practice that reaches beyond dominant Western relations to both embodiment and writing, Lata Mani's narrative disrupts the singular authority of medicalized Western knowledge production about pain and the body. In so doing, her embodied narrative practice opens up the possibility of cultivating bodily knowledge that is also resistant knowledge. Indeed, as Mani herself has commented, bringing a sense of spacious attentiveness to

our practices of investigation can foster understanding of both self and other that is “explicitly open to perceptual frames being liquefied or recast by the observational and experiential process” (Gunawardena 2011, 24).

Conclusion

In reorienting ourselves to our bodily knowledge, mindfulness meditation offers the possibility of generating not simply new knowledge or critique but, importantly, new ways of being in the world (Ng 2011). This was certainly my experience. What began as an academic interest in the most typical sense became an immersive inquiry into the very grounds of that interest. While this was precipitated by my own experience of pain and disability as it shaped my ability to write and participate in academic knowledge production, it was also informed by a deep commitment to decolonizing research and educational practices. Only by grounding my inquiry firmly within my embodied experience of (re)reading and (re)writing through pain and disability, however, as that experience was enabled by a mindfulness meditation practice, was I able to understand the depth of my investment in normative bodily relations to knowledge production such that I could begin to work at their edges and, at times, to reach beyond them.

As Butler (1999, 17) reminds us, dualistic thinking has important social effects—it is not merely an issue of philosophy in the abstract—for it “invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy.” Bringing together mindfulness meditative practice and phenomenological approaches to knowledge production to foster an embodied writing practice can help to decolonize the tendency toward dualistic thinking that is characteristic of Western social thought and shift the very grounds of our critiques such that the meanings and experiences of embodied phenomena like pain, disability, and embodied difference can be reimagined. To open ourselves up to different ways of understanding and experiencing bodily life thus constitutes an important intervention into those dominant Western practices of knowledge production that reproduce hierarchies of social difference through their reliance upon understandings of embodiment and subjectivity that are underwritten by the mind-body split and other forms of dualistic thinking.

When taken up in the service of social transformation, embodied writing can support a project of decolonization when it intervenes in those academic

conventions that discipline our scholarly practices such that colonial discourses of Western modernity retain their grip on our imaginations and our theorizing. Bringing mindfulness together with writing as an embodied practice is suggestive of liberatory possibility, then, insofar as it summons marginalized knowledge and experience (Alexander 2005) and opens up our writing, and the stories we tell, to allow for the presence of embodied and textual difference.

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