

Review of Melissa Nicolas and Anna Sicari’s *Our Body of Work: Embodied Administration and Teaching*

    

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Nicolas, Melissa, and Anna Sicari, eds. *Our Body of Work: Embodied Administration and Teaching*. Utah State UP, 2022.

As a female PhD candidate aspiring to build an academic career, I think about what kind of life I will create for myself—and what kind of lifestyle compromises I will have to make. I wonder if I should abandon hope for a manageable work-life balance, if I must sacrifice desires for motherhood, and if this career path will take a toll on my physical health. This edited collection addresses these concerns by providing an impressively diverse array of stories about the embodied realities of writing teachers and administrators in higher education. *Our Body of Work* is divided into 10 sections, each comprised of one traditional academic article and 1-4 creative pieces (i.e., narratives, poems, and even an “Embodied CV” (Comer) and painting (Malenczyk)) that contribute to rhetoric and composition’s current “embodied turn” (Banks xi). *Our Body of Work* accomplishes similar goals as *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles* (2019) and *Bodies of Knowledge: Embodied Rhetorics in Theory and Practice* (2022) as it pulls back the curtain and spotlights the bodies and stories typically ignored in academia. It distinguishes itself, though, with its wide scope (writing centers, classrooms, and programs) and its grounded, visceral descriptions. This book is for everyone who wants to (re)focus on the bodies attached to the minds privileged in academia; from early-career graduate students to senior faculty, everyone in rhetoric and composition can benefit from its expansive coverage.

Section 1 includes Nicolas and Sicari’s introduction, which clearly explains the exigency, practical goals, and theoretical contributions of the book. They came to this project with feminist underpinnings as they realized that although “fleshy presences” (Price, qtd. in Nicolas and Sicari 3) impact academic work, academia fails to acknowledge them “for fear they are too personal, not academic or professional, because of the shame associated with having certain bodies and/or the knowledge that no one will listen” (Nicolas and Sicari 4). By highlighting diverse bodies—and the stories they carry—Nicolas and Sicari “strive to make the academic structures we work within more inclusive and accessible” (4). Additionally, they distinguish between institutional bodies and institutional embodiment. Institutional bodies are taken as a given because institutions, like academia, need bodies to do its labor; institutional bodies can be “*anybodies*” that are “everywhere and nowhere” because “their fleshy presence is assumed and beside the point” (Nicolas and Sicari 6). However, institutional embodiment—the aim of this collection—investigates how specific bodies operate in academia. As Nicolas and Sicari argue, “institutional embodiment allows *everybody* to become visible” (6). Furthermore, the authors speak candidly about the challenging production of the book. Wanting to complicate the overwhelmingly white and triumph-only stories from *Women’s Ways of Making It* (2008), Nicolas and Sicari explain how they had to make an additional outreach effort, after their initial call for proposals was published, to recruit “authors who did work on embodiment from a multitude of intersectional perspectives” (11). This transparency, alongside their thoughtful articulation of their own embodied privileges, highlights their careful efforts toward dismantling exclusive and ableist systems.

Since stories of embodiment cannot be neatly organized as topics bleed into one another, Nicolas and Sicari encourage readers to work through the text in whatever order they choose. In this review, I categorize the remaining 9 sections into three themes: 1) bodies in pain, 2) institutional marginalization, and 3) embodied balance. Although I am unable to discuss every chapter at length in the way it deserves, each and every piece of this edited collection shares insightful, vulnerable, and necessary stories that merit their own space and attention.

Bodies in Pain

Sections 2, 9, and 10—“Discomfort and Pain,” “Trauma,” and “Cancer and Death,” respectively—highlight stories of physical aches and afflictions. “Discomfort and Pain” features work about racial (Wang) and postpartum (Rodríguez Carey) pains. Wang discusses his transition from working in a culturally diverse writing center in Hawai’i to a nearly all-white center in Indiana, as he struggled with physically positioning his non-white body. He draws on three critical frameworks from Inoue, Ahmed, and Cedillo to argue that by attuning to his body and “embracing discomfort” he can begin strategizing with others to welcome decolonial changes (Wang 33).

“Trauma” expounds upon physical pains associated with anxiety—from mass shooting threats (Walters) to sexual violence (Brentnell) and painful divorce (Comer). Walters uses Lorey’s “three valences of the precarious” to theorize how different bodies (especially those with disabilities) responded to the threat of a mass shooting on her campus (195). She asks chilling questions: Who is able to “Run. Fight. Hide.” as the university’s protocols instruct? Brentnell also asks a haunting question in her piece; responding to Johnson et al. (2015) who claim, “We are all moving, breathing, thinking, rhetorical bodies” Brentnell asks, “But what about when we aren’t?,” describing the ways trauma-induced panic can stop us in our tracks (209).

“Cancer and Death” explores bodies in pain, as Gerdes-McCain, Prebel, and Johnson discuss cancer’s impact on WPA work, teaching, and writing, and Boquet and LaFrance describe the pain of grief. Gerdes-McCain uses Mina Shaughnessy’s life and premature death from cancer as a case study to unpack the embodied labor of WPAs. She introduces a framework of “(inter)personal labor” and uses archival materials to argue that WPA labor is personal and interpersonal, material and immaterial, and deserving of mental and physical support. Moreover, Prebel narrates the way cancer created a tension where she saw herself as both subject and object. She tried to “hid[e] behind [her] pedagogy to evade bodily surveillance” (Prebel 238) by not taking a medical leave for cancer treatment and “sidestep[ing] the C word” in her tenure review files (Prebel 239). Johnson also grounds her piece in a tension—the tension of producing scholarship about embodiment while experiencing a disconnect between mind and body. For both Prebel and Johnson, cancer asked them to reconsider their mind-body relationships.

Institutional Marginalization

“Surveillance,” “Emotional Pain,” and “Culture of Whiteness” describe the way particular bodies are systematically relegated to the peripheries in academia. “Surveillance” features a detailed look at the way genderqueer bodies are regulated by the university and the state (Waite), how trans bodies are surveilled (Gatten), and how non-tenure-track faculty are made hyper-visible as they are required to prove their labor (Napoleone). Waite draws upon Foucault and Lorde to argue for intersectional alliances, not dissimilar from Wang. She answers the titular question of her piece, “What On Earth Am I Even Doing Here?” with the striking response: “I am uncomfortable. I am making everyone else uncomfortable... I am here to be a queer body that is also a mountain” (Waite 57).

“Emotional Pain” makes visible the way academia marginalizes bodies that emotionally labor as they navigate barriers like racist microaggressions (Carey), traumatic memories of seeking refuge (Hijazi), and a toxic marriage (Young). Careful to articulate the way microaggressions are systematically created and circulated, Carey details her experiences as a Black graduate student and explains how she responds by “taking up spaces in both physical and metaphysical ways” (121). She also thoughtfully critiques the way rhetoric and composition programs, at large, include theories from women of color but fail to put them into practice, ultimately pointing out merely performative support for graduate students of color.

“Culture of Whiteness” picks up Carey’s argument as it unpacks the way whiteness harmfully contributes to radical individualism (Daniel and Lewis), negative teaching evaluations (Silva), and even breastfeeding on the job (Tang). Daniel and Lewis argue that neoliberal logics—which are “drenched in whiteness” (144)—make diverse bodies invisible. As WPAs at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), they present three means for making these systematically marginalized bodies more visible: outcomes, mentorship, and orientation. This chapter offers concrete steps other WPAs can take to materially value “a diversity of bodies and embodied knowledge” (Daniel and Lewis 151).

Embodied Balance

The remaining 3 sections, “Liminal Spaces,” “Resilience,” and “Relationships,” describe the ways writing teachers and administrators have realized the need for a “work/life balance.” (There is, of course, irony in this phrase as this collection points out how embodied realities make this “work/life” divide difficult to distinguish, if not arbitrary.) The first chapter in “Liminal Spaces” features multi-authored “scenes” in which racial, linguistic, cultural, and sexual differences play out in writing centers. In addition to sharing stories to raise awareness of the way “our bodies affect the space of the writing center, just as the space of the center affects our bodies” (Smith et al. 80), Smith et al. also provide detailed steps, like Carey, for what activism in writing centers can look like. While Smith et al. navigate embodied balances regarding space, Ardenall and Lee seek balances in time. Ardenall discusses how her father’s suicide led to adjusting her graduate school timeline, and Lee details her hectic first year on the tenure clock.

“Resilience” continues the conversation about time constraints. Walker et al. narrate their experiences resisting institutional oppression as women in graduate school. Their embodied realities of wearing a hijab, being pregnant, suffering from poverty-related anxiety, and living as a transracial adoptee materially impact their lives as students and teachers. Stories like theirs are important to tell; however, as they point out, these stories are not commonly published because of “the very condition of being a graduate student,” which includes extreme time constraints (Walker et al. 98). Navigating time limitations is also difficult when writing; Kotzeva creatively depicts writing time as a distorting “rabbit hole” (110), and Atlas details how it becomes more complicated with miscarriage and motherhood.

In “Relationships,” Skinnell also details the effect of limited time on his life, especially his family relationships, as he was consumed by writing his book that led to stress, anxiety, and sleep apnea. Hoermann-Elliott narrates her delicate balance of vulnerability when she disclosed her pregnancy, which ultimately allowed for others to be vulnerable with her in return in complicated but “viscerally meaningful ways” (186). And Faris speaks to yet another kind of balance: university needs with departmental resources. Due to increased undergraduate enrollments and a lack of funding for instructors, the FYC program employed a distributed grading model, wherein instructors taught but graduate students anonymously graded. Faris explains why this product-based model was ineffective, arguing that not only do processes matter, but relationships do, too, because writing and pedagogy are about “being in relations with others” (172).

Though there are endless threads that tie this book together, the one that reverberates most in my body is best articulated by Young:

Academics, I believe, tend to get mired in a paradox of our own design when it comes to issues of embodiment: as a group, we probably have a higher-than-average awareness of what it means to live an embodied life, yet we are perpetually at war with the reality of our embodiment. (140)

The greatest strength of this book is its honest grappling with this paradox. This book pushes those in the ivory tower to look down, to look out, to look *in*—to see how bodies matter and how we can make our institution more inclusive and accessible.

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