



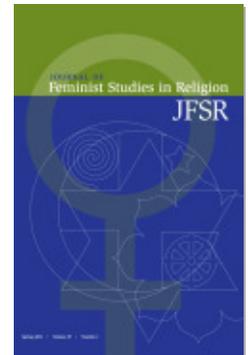
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UNSETTLING BODIES

Mayra Rivera Rivera

Redeeming the body or questioning the body—these are familiar goals for many feminist theologians. But *becoming* flesh? Feminists have argued for decades that the devaluation of flesh contributes to the subordination of women and thus we work to rescue the body and materiality from patriarchal deprecation. For feminist theologians, this also entails liberating the divine from confinement to imagined realms of immateriality. Yet feminism also questions “the body” wherever it serves to anchor definitions of “woman” based on biological determinism, persistently criticizing the axiom “nature is destiny.” Thus we attempt both to reclaim the epistemological and spiritual import of corporeality and to unsettle cultural representations of body—especially in relation to “woman.”

Sharon Betcher’s essay offers feminists an invitation and a challenge to rethink the implications of body-talk. Betcher suggests that “body” fosters an illusion of completeness and wholeness easily naturalized, normalized, and deployed as part of cultural systems of representation and capitalist production. In such systems, bodies are defined as visible, individual units, thus excluding from “normal” all those who do not conform to its increasingly narrow aesthetic and productivity standards. Such standards clearly jeopardize persons living with disabilities. But the stakes are high for everyone, because the fear of falling outside the limits of the normalized body—an ever-present possibility for all human beings—shapes our experiences of corporeality. This anxiety is evidenced by the scarcity of cultural discourses about and practices to deal with pain and mortality, as well as by the proliferation of discourses and practices aimed at shaping the body to fit accepted standards.

Betcher suggests, in my reading, that if “body” names a coherent unit amenable to representation and normalization, feminist challenges to the idealist foundation of kyriarchy are better served by embracing “flesh” rather than “body.” Flesh here names a “lived capaciousness”; it is dynamic and fluid, exposed to others in its irreducible vulnerability. Having engaged in a fair amount of theological body-talk, I recognize the conceptual difficulties of holding together the critique of the cultural and political production of the normalized body, on the one hand, and the articulation of alternative discourses of corporeality, on the other; and I welcome the opportunity to think about these in relation to body and flesh, respectively. I offer here an initial attempt to build on Betcher’s suggestions, by revisiting some aspects of my previous explorations of Latina theorizations of corporeality as a way to ponder the implications and possibilities of the proposed approach.

In the variegated intellectual traditions that constitute Latina studies, theorizations of corporeality commonly emerge in tandem with explorations of the

legacies of colonialism in the Americas. There are very concrete reasons for this: colonial-sexual violence against African and indigenous women indelibly marked the bodies of many of their descendents. Greed, violence, and enslavement *literally* became incarnate. They have left “memories in the flesh” that seek theoretical articulation.¹

The corporeal effects of colonial histories cannot be separated neatly into physical and cognitive elements. For the genealogical traces of colonial-sexual violence are experienced in conjunction with the materialization of gender arrangements also introduced by colonial power. These new structures served as tools for “the organization of relations of production, of property rights, of cosmologies and ways of knowing,” all of which would have lasting effects in local and global understandings and experiences of embodiment.² The justification of colonial power arrangements depended on complicated physiognomic scales—depicted in charts of scientific/aesthetic representations of “types of bodies”—purporting to make character legible from visible bodily traits. In those regions of Latin America where it was hard to locate physiognomic traits within one of the defined “races,” the number of categories in such scales of being multiplied to absurdity, attributing great significance to barely noticeable differences.³ The colonial obsession for classifying body-types intensified colonized people’s vigilance of their own appearance in an effort to hide those physical traits related to lower rungs of the social/ontological ladder. We can see, then, the aesthetic representation of bodily norms and the anxieties thus produced as precursors of contemporary globalized systems—where technologies offer more effective ways to represent physiognomic scales as well as to bolster illusions of conformity by offering means to hide markers of perceived deviance. The images of bodies thus produced are never simply external to ourselves; their very power depends on their capacity to shape our desires and compel us to see ourselves through and conform to them—to incarnate the ideal body. The vitality of flesh is thus harnessed and disciplined—even when flesh itself provides the raw power for such discipline, as it does in “fit-ness” regimes, for instance.

In response to the codification and the organization of humanity based on

¹ This is a modified version of Luce Irigaray’s phrase “memory of the flesh” (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984], 191).

² María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1007): 186–209, quotation on 186.

³ For a list of more than twenty “crosses” of races in Peru (attributed to a “Dr. Tschudi”), see “Races of South America and Mexico,” *American Quarterly Register and Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1848): 206–7, http://books.google.com/books?id=JEBZAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA206&lpq=PA206&dq=%22races+of+South+America+and+Mexico&source=bl&ots=z71LrzhbN4&sig=VExPrURffJQITMj6qFOnDjtTxTI&hl=en&ei=zRwMTMKqAaPknQfF3u2JAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22races%20of%20South%20America%20and%20Mexico&f=false.

bodily traits, feminist theology shall continue to uncover the ideological character of body-talk, historicizing how one becomes a woman (Simone de Beauvoir), not only in relation to patriarchy or sexual politics but also to broader networks of power, including, as Betcher points out, globalized capitalism and its politics of health. This analysis entails attending to the ways these lines of power reinforce one another, inflecting “body” as a category of analysis and as a cultural ideal. But the aim is not simply to describe the configurations of power that have affected bodies, but more significantly to seek new possibilities for corporeal becomings. For Latina theorists, developing alternative visions of corporeality entails challenging models that occlude the complexities revealed by the analysis of colonial history. Critiques of the myth of the stable, whole body, of illusions of racial or cultural purity, and of the assumed reducibility of people to their visual identity are all part of this effort to think beyond the normalized body toward an evolving constitutive multiplicity.⁴ To be sure, corporeal multiplicity is not simply a harmonious combination of discrete traits or types—as it is often represented in celebrations of postmodern culture—but rather the always-unfinished confluence of difference within the self, fraught with conflict and pain.

To attend to corporeal self-difference and pain, Betcher suggests that we turn to the flesh—for the harmony of aesthetic representation of the body too easily occludes those aspects of experience. I think the work of Gloria Anzaldúa shares this concern as well as the interest in developing what Betcher calls “pedagogy for pain.” As Suzanne Bost argues, there is a close relationship between Anzaldúa’s writings on pain and her theorizations of “mestiza consciousness.”⁵ In various essays and interviews, Anzaldúa alluded to her lifelong struggles with illness and pain—heavy menstrual bleeding at a very early age made her, she observes, “abnormal”; later symptoms of diabetes significantly shaped her engagement with the world. In a passionate account of her struggles to come to terms with illness, Anzaldúa observes, “though modern therapies exhort you to act against your passions (compulsions), claiming health and integration lie in that direction, you’ve learned that delving more fully into your pain, anger, despair, depression will move you through to the other side.”⁶ Pain is a path to knowledge, she asserts, thus pushing against the

⁴ For instance, genetic chance may produce bodies whose physical appearance not only reveals but also conceals parts of one’s biological heritage. See, for example, Mayra Rivera Rivera, “Thinking Bodies: The Spirit of a Latina Incarnational Theology,” in *Decolonizing Epistemology: New Knowing in Latino/a Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Ada María Isasi Díaz and Eduardo Menéndez (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

⁵ Suzanne Bost, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s Mestiza Pain: Mexican Sacrifice, Chicana Embodiment, and Feminist Politics,” *Aztlán* 30, no. 2 (2005): 5–31.

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift . . . The Path of Conocimiento . . . Inner Work, Public Acts,” in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 553.

unspoken cultural agreement to reject any thought that might seem to welcome suffering. Indeed, the “ailing body is no longer a hindrance but an asset, witnessing pain, speaking to you, demanding touch.”⁷ For Anzaldúa, pain “is an extension of mestiza agency, a process of incorporating and dis-corporating different elements in the formation of a fluid, nonunitary subject,” as Bost describes it.⁸ The difficult process of staying in one’s body requires not only rewriting received scripts but also shifting consciousness through daily practice—“enacting spiritual activism.”⁹

Corporeal pain, difficulty, and failure are undeniable effects of patterns of social discrimination. However, Anzaldúa’s writings on pain cannot be reduced to denunciations of oppressive systems. While not clearly separating the suffering produced by unjust social relations—for which she uses corporeal metaphors of woundedness—from pain that results from the vulnerability and exposure of the flesh, Anzaldúa does not equate pain with victimhood or fatalism. Nonunitary subjects have the ability to experience several things at once, and thus hold together pain and joy, failure and hope—and creatively transform those experiences. Exposing social structures and practices that inhibit corporeal flourishing reveals possibilities for unsettling them, thus opening spaces where new relationships may emerge. Yet the envisioned goal is not the elimination of the tensions of corporeality in order to produce a coherent, whole body. Instead, we are seeking visions of redemption capable of embracing the fluidity, dynamism, and vulnerability of the flesh.

To theologize from the site of the flesh entails attending not only to the historical and social determinations of bodies but also to that which exceeds representation and yet also gives impulse to corporeal transformations: their unruly materiality, their mysterious spirituality. It is perhaps in relation to these un-objectifiable elements that theology should talk about the spirit. Anzaldúa’s attention to the dynamic intertwining of body and spirit in processes of incorporating and dis-corporating suggests a compatibility between this aspect of the body as she envisions it and the movements that we have been describing as flesh—even though she uses “body” to refer to both “spirit body” and “physical body.”¹⁰ I have proposed elsewhere that a theology that truly embraces flesh and materiality may need to speak of spirit-flesh, to emphasize the inseparability of these concepts, where the hyphen marks a boundary of distinction that does not tend to separation.¹¹ Spirit materializes in flesh; flesh (*carne*) is indispensable for the spirit’s incarnation—not as an exceptional event, but rather as an

⁷ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁸ Bost, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s Mestiza Pain,” 13.

⁹ Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift.”

¹⁰ Reflecting on the reception of her work, Anzaldúa lamented that most missed the “spiritual/mythical/poetics aspects” of her writing (*ibid.*, 10).

¹¹ I develop this proposal in dialogue with Latina writings on body and spirit in Rivera, “Thinking Bodies.”

inherent dimension of corporeality. Spirit and flesh flow into one another, each transfigures the other. Spirit is not conceived here as a simple being; it does not presuppose completeness or absolute separation, but instead moves in the flux and disruptions of flesh.¹² Being *in carne*, permeating and soaking all flesh, the spirit does not eliminate the ambiguities of our corporality: ephemeral and tangible, fragmented and manifold, neither whole nor deficient. Pain, difficulty, and failure are not antithetical to the movements of the spirit; we do not dream of pneumatic bodies liberated from flesh.

An important question remains for me: How shall we conceive the effects of “the body”—the organized, aestheticized, objectified unit to which we are compelled to conform—on the flesh? To theorize this connection seems crucial in order to avoid the naturalization of flesh as if unaffected by body and history. I referred above to the “incarnation” of colonial regimes in order to emphasize the material/corporeal effects of ideological constructs and the practices they support. Yet, if we use flesh to emphasize the elemental aspects of corporeality, shall we speak of bodies then as the objectified “form” of our social engagements—as the ways in which we are read and/or as the “other” that we are compelled to become (and often partly become) even in alienation from our own flesh?¹³ May we think of bodies as the materialization of social structures and flesh as the ever-changing materialization of spirit in finitude? Shall we, can we, distinguish between these processes? I need to ponder these questions beyond the limits of these pages but I am hopeful that this dialogue may offer resources to strengthen the sense of relational multiplicity not only in visions of corporeality but also in the feminism that embraces them.

EMBRACING LIMITS, QUEERING EMBODIMENT: CREATING/CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR DISABILITY THEOLOGY

Deborah Beth Creamer

I am grateful for Sharon Betcher’s reflections, particularly the ways in which she honors Nancy Eiesland’s legacy while simultaneously encouraging us to imagine new directions for feminist disability theology. Not only does she provide a rich center point for this roundtable discussion but she also invites

¹² Betcher has persuasively argued that Christian theology too often portrays the spirit as the agent that produces perfection and wholeness. See, for example, Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

¹³ In her reading of Simone Weil’s work, Inese Radzins argues that for Weil, slavery, broadly defined, is an alienation from one’s own flesh produced in relation to the homogenizing force of “social matter” (“Simone Weil’s Material Christianity: The ‘Compatibility’ of Marxism and Christianity,” presented at Simone Weil en son époque et dans la nôtre, conference, Angers, October 31–November 2, 2009).