

Conversations about Body
Panel Presentation at 1998 WSPECW
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Karen DePauw, Sharon Guthrie, Gail Whitaker, and I were invited to be part of a panel discussion about the body. But this was not the typical panel discussion. First, we took a rather unstructured approach in that we did not prepare formal presentations. Second, we were seated in a circle with the conferees arranged concentrically around us so that we could have an interactive discussion about the body.

As the token biomechanist on the panel, I knew that my grounding was inadequate for such a conversation. So I thought it would be a good idea for me to enlarge my perspective on the body. My preparation tended to cluster around three themes: 1) the "reality" of the body and the danger of over-reliance on objective "reality," 2) personal interpretations of body, and 3) embodied knowledge. Although my roots are in quantitative biomechanics, I have long been an advocate of qualitative methods as well. That is, I have imagined *quantitative* and *qualitative* as poles on a continuum, and I have presumed that there is a best location on the continuum for a given movement context. But regardless of the position one takes on this continuum, there is the underlying assumption that the body is real and that it can be measured objectively (with contextually variant levels of precision). After I attended the "Gender as Performance" conference at Chico State, I had to add an orthogonal continuum to my conceptual scheme. What is "real" must take broader meaning in view of transsexuals' interpretations of gender, theatrical theorists' discussions of role playing, and costume-performance artists' descriptions of confused reactions from their audience. Now I am less certain about measuring the "real" given that we are all likely to be demonstrating some degree of "performance" or "illusion." And now I see "quantitative realists" as extremists who may be perpetrating an unbalanced "reality." As for the second and third themes, my best sources were, respectively, Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* and Mark Johnson's *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*.

What follows are brief reflections on my perspectives and contributions on three issues that took prominence during (and after) the session:

The term "body Nazis" comes from the Dilbert cartoon strip. I have appropriated this term and applied it to exercise science: Biomechanists and exercise physiologists often act or appear to act as body Nazis. That is, we send the message that there is a "correct" or "optimal" way to move or to be fit. Then we identify the "defectives" and put them in a psychological prison camp. As we administer plenty of torture, we imply that there is an exit – all the defectives have to do to gain their salvation is to use our services to perfect their bodies. Of course, this rarely works, and even when it does, it is temporary and contingent on extremely hard work and the right genetics. Naturally, the prisoners may have adverse reactions to the guards. And many will become obstinate when they discover that there is no real exit. The consequence is a bunch of unhappy, lumpy, clumsy people who are basically resigned to their fate. If our goals, as movement professionals, are to help people become happy, healthy movers, we will first need to recognize the existence, the evil, and the attraction of body Nazism. (After all, there is greater appeal in being the guard than the prisoner.) Then we will need to construct and embody alternative models of health that are actually healthy.

One of the better metaphors that I have seen for the body is from Susan Bordo. She refers to one's body as a Siamese twin – it is not me, but it goes everywhere I go. This seems to be an accurate characterization of how many of us experience mind-body dualism. As a consequence of believing that we are not our bodies, it is relatively easy to ignore or abuse them. If our bodies nevertheless tag along with us as we lead our lives, then it is logical to think of them as drags on who we really are. Intellectually we know that a more integrated approach to the mind-body is necessary for good health. Psychologically it is difficult for women in our culture to have a well-integrated perspective. [Many women who are movement professionals seem to have a stunning resonance with the concept of the Siamese twin.]

The third issue that I raised in our discussion had to do with embodied knowledge in general and containment in particular. Johnson argues that, from an early age, we are aware of our bodies as containers: We put certain things in our bodies (e.g., food, air) and other things emerge (e.g., food wastes, air); we are contained by our physical surroundings; and we use our bodies to move items in and out of receptacles. Taken together these experiences coalesce into an unconscious schema with powerful ramifications for the ways that we organize and interpret our actions in the world. For our group, two entailments of this embodied schema were especially salient: First, all containers have a certain size and an outside surface. In our culture women are unrelentingly pressured into being thin/small and adorning our exteriors in proper ways. We know that and we rail

against it, yet we rarely discuss the ways in which we are complicit by virtue of our institutional positions. And to a person, we may have been underestimating the power of the cultural messages because we have not been aware of the unconscious container schema that serves as a docking point in each of us for these messages. Second, an object can be a) centered within a container, b) on the periphery but inside the container, or c) outside a container; and an object within a container will be bounded in ways that objects outside are not. Once upon a time sportswomen were marginal within or outside the cultural container. As we have sought to become more mainstream, we have unknowingly forfeited various freedoms. Now most of us are conflicted between wanting the status/sanction/etc. of the center and the unbounded joy we recall from our days as outsiders. Part of our discomfort may come from our embodied sense that an object cannot be both contained and uncontained at the same time. Sometimes it seems as if we are trapped inside the body-as-container metaphor.