Body of Words: Performance Texts

Beller | Nixon | King | Silvers
Body of Words: Performance Texts
The Critical and Kinesthetic Intersection of Text and Physical Performance

Beller | Nixon | King | Silvers

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Belladonna* Chaplet #129 is published in an edition of 126—26 of which are numbered and signed by the authors in commemoration of their performances on February 15, 2011 at Dixon Place.

Belladonna* is an event and publication series that promotes the work of women writers who are adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multi-form, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable, dangerous with language.

Belladonna* has featured over 150 writers of wildly diverse age and origin, writers who work in conversation and collaboration in and between multiple forms, languages, and critical fields. As performance and as printed text, the work collects, gathers over time and space, and forms a conversation about the feminist avant-garde, what it is and how it comes to be.

The 2011 Belladonna* Chaplet Series is designed by Bill Mazza.

Chaplets are $4 ($8 signed) in stores or at events, $7 ($12 signed) for libraries/institutions.

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Body of Words: An Introduction

This chaplet is a gathering of performance texts from Belladonna’s *Body of Words* showcase. The idea behind this evening of performance was to promote discussions of text in relationship to the performing, moving body and of the many different ways poetry can act as a choreographic tool. The chaplet is a way of documenting the textual conversation between the artists who performed.

An abiding ethos among certain dance communities suggests that language must be a last resort when it comes to dance-making. Movement is enough. An artist’s inclusion of text is an indication of movement unable to speak itself from the body. *The body should be telling stories by itself!* 

The bodies represented by this chaplet are telling stories, but with additional levels of agency and structure. These women are choreopoets, language innovators, and powerful movers who push against the boundaries of genre and form and challenge the dominant culture of performance.

When a performer speaks, vibrating the voice box (a physical and verbal axis) the moving body and its word-making are experienced simultaneously. Trisha Brown says about this sensation:

> I never stop dancing. I do stop talking...The procedure for organizing the movement, accumulating, permeated the structure and changed it. The first addition was Talking. Talking while dancing is a ventilation system for my mind. It is explicit expression in a field of muted abstraction, a format in which to assemble some of the peculiarities of my experience...the audience and I were informed at approximately the same moment of the verbal content of the piece... If a muscle could talk, what would it say? (Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961-2001)

Like Brown and many dance artists today, these four choreographers are concerned with the intersection of fields, the point at which the language body meets the body moving in public, for the public.
In her powerhouse poem ‘FIX IT,’ Sally Silvers chops and screws ideas of race, class, and the female body. She writes:

This is like writing with an ice pick
cock of the stump
 Syncopation—time’s pelvic tilt

An accumulation of single lines, tiny uprisings and rhythmic non sequiturs chip away at old surfaces to reveal a manifesto for the body in America in hope that “words will become flesh.”

Rosamond S. King’s animated poems document the body in different cultural landscapes—the way the body is often violently read. In “M” she relates the experience of being massaged by a woman who “does not speak the same language.” The poem is the body resisting discovery by the other, while self-discovering through the other’s touch, an intimate and fraught cross-cultural communication of bodies and languages.

Lauren Nicole Nixon’s poems reveal the body as a vessel for secrets. The expulsion of these secrets is presented as pleasure-filled, even erotic. These erotic/erratic discoveries of multivalent histories and the processes of their telling are put on display like fossils in glass cases.

Alexandra Beller’s patient histories explore the ways in which bodies are implicit in unlikely documents, and how narratives can be obscured and revealed by certain textual filters. When language like “the patient” or “the client” is used as a placeholder, are our bodies erased? Her rows of filtered words become poems—become limited stories of violent erasure.
Body of Words: A Manifesto

All of these rivers seem to converge at the same place.

The work as a text
The work as a body
The body as a text
The body as a work
The text as a body

The text as a work that is also separate from the work.

Ships carry heavy cargo. Words carry our heavy water meaning, into the body, into our work.

How do we confront the moving body in performance? It is a document of its history—a landscape of surface, orifice and memory.

With text alone isn’t there always the implied body? Projecting. Moving. Escaping—or trying to. We’ve seen many texts abandon bodies. We want to de-evacuate our textual worlds. We want text-bodies, body-texts.

The body is the front door to radical action.

We publish these makers' texts so they will have life beyond the live performance, so they may gather in the conversation that follows.

We want performance without boundaries. Hybrid-commoning events of conversation and resisting bodies.

We want bodies that are both themselves and quoting.

We want to hear the stories, and be present for them. To feel and to listen. To come as listeners. To go listening.

The text is here—the performance is somewhere in between here and not here.

The body: present.

Saifan Shmerer and Emily Skillings
need to know or need to neglect
underwear makes him feel guilty
it's the Che chubacabra
finally, I'll be able to employ people after I'm dead
I'll retract my whip into my colostomy
knit me a sheep
circling off ballpoints as your pasties
white powerlessness
waffle rhymes with orange squaffle
my drug habit is for sale
a freckled egg is sexy
Did I write that out loud?
I'm sure my words chose themselves well
I brake for creativity
2 cheek nation
nyuk nyuk nyuk
bull's eye for the crosshairs
when you can feel your whole body moving you can pretty much be
certain that it's from black
tits are never ahead of their time
Yankee go home; U.S. out of the world
put the soup in supermodel
all writing is prior
you're at the cottage cheese age
the Bible would be a thin volume if it eliminated poverty
the gateway drug is boredom
Ezra quarter pounder
words will become flesh
finishing my own thought was too loud
learning is not proud
pulled mink sandwich
tomorrow ate my homework
suépenis me
you go risk pregnancy & still enjoy sex
Rad v Trad
Potopresses, electrocute your DNA
appropriation = barbell poetry
the people who earn an honest living now are all Mexican
pre-nuptialed at birth
live in bait
why me: the other dark meat
subject position is the imitation of god
multifaceted ugly face this
carbon dating melanin indicators
the gun is as handy as reading glasses
build a nipple and they will come
Dalmatian America
Jennifer Lopez’s ass, Alas
poody puddy woulter is better than ghetto
creationism is racism
I’m upset’ no one’s spying on me
McWhite
Life is a wide dress
if you married outside your hyphen …
That advice part, good luck
smells like tongue to me
where’s my penis recognition software?
after I heard Jackie Wilson I didn’t need to go to church anymore
Sofa Militant
where you park your slippers
it doesn’t commit the social imagination to the abstract enough for me
when in doubt bring out an owl
Old Midnight Yeller Cowboy Killing a Mockingbird
moving the Kleenex is cherry minus
How to have lines of flight without a trust fund
that’s what you mean, you’re mean
one upmanship turf accountant

**Process notes:**

My doctor/poet friend, Tumi Johnson, wrote fictional medical histories for me based on her years working in a medical clinic. We sifted the story through a series of filters: truth, time, and sensation. We experimented with what it means when someone listening to a story has a strong filter and what it creates in that relationship when the listener fixes on what is important to them within a story.

In rehearsal, we’ve had the listener repeat an accumulation of the filtered words to obscure the story. Meanwhile, someone dances a role that we may read as the protagonist of the story. The viewer’s inability to focus on the full story (because someone is overlaying text on top of it), draws us closer to them and inspires questions, engaging us more fully in their dance and their plight. We become curious about the larger implications of the filters that exist between us. What happens when we magnify them: do they come clear or become more defined?

Text by Tumi Johnson
Patient History #1/ Denies

28 y/o woman, 24 weeks pregnant, with history of migraines, presents today with 2 week history of chest pain. The episodes began abruptly without known precipitating event. She describes the pain as a feeling of “a heavy hand over her chest,” and at its worst, is a 7-8/10 in intensity. The pain is localized to the right side of her chest and will often radiate across her chest until she feels as though she is suffocating. These episodes have been occurring several times during the week, at various times of the day, and often last for almost an hour before slowly self-dissipating. She deniers associated nausea, deniers diaphoresis. She occasionally has concurrent palpitations but no vision changes or dizziness. She has had no recent fevers or coughs, and deniers a history of heart disease. She is able to climb multiple flights of stairs without chest pain or difficulty breathing. She deniers acid reflux symptoms, and deniers recent history of lifting heavy objects. On further questioning, the patient admits to having had this pain in the past, just “never this frequent.” Her last episodes before this recurrence were around the time of her grandmother’s death from colon cancer, which occurred around this time two years ago. She states that she had similar chest pains, though not as severe, and they quickly resolved.

The patient deniers any recent stressful events, saying she has “nothing to complain about.” She works in a hair salon and enjoys her job. She admits, however, to a lack of energy with frequent sad thoughts, binge eating, and sleep disturbance, often sleeping 13 hours in the day at times, because she doesn’t have the desire to get up. She attributes a lot of this to being pregnant. When asked about domestic violence at home, patient became very quiet, and then began to cry. She admits that her husband has been verbally abusive in the past several years, but since her pregnancy, the abuse has escalated to physical violence that is often unexpected, but always at home, and usually after he has had a very hard day at work (he is a driver). She says he often slaps her unexpectedly or chokes her until she feels as though she will suffocate. She is adamant he has never punched her or hit her in the stomach because “he would never hurt the baby.”

The patient deniers active suicidal ideation, but has had fantasies of going to sleep and never waking up again.
**Hottentot**

Hot to trot in China

Hot n fraught

I seem to be getting more and more intense stares in Shanghai. I thought more people here would have TV and would be exposed to people from around the world. Evidently not. If I stay in one place too long someone will take my picture.

I am not a star

This is not a pose

I'm just standing

*Kan! Kan! A Chinese person!*

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**truth/time/sensation#1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denies</th>
<th>28 year-old migraines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denies</td>
<td>24 weeks pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denies</td>
<td>Today pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admits</td>
<td>2 weeks heavy pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States</td>
<td>Began pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denies</td>
<td>Several times a week radiate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admits</td>
<td>Various times of day suffocating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Almost an hour nausea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admits</td>
<td>Recent diaphoresis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denies</td>
<td>Recent palpitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denies</td>
<td>Frequently dizziness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denies</td>
<td>13 hours fevers or coughs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Began</td>
<td>Past several years pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since</td>
<td>Pains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Suffocate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Patient History #2/ Time

42 y/o man, undomiciled, presents with R sided pain and redness x1 day and worsening L leg pain x1 week. The L foot pain began soon after rat bite on his calf. He did not go to the hospital at that time, but tried to wash out the wound with some water. He felt that the wound got initially better, but then noticed soon after worsening pain on that leg and redness and swelling at the site. He denies any fever or swelling of his ankle or knee. Pt’s R sided pain and redness started abruptly yesterday after spending the night on heated grates. He states that the temperature was so cold the night before, and his coat had recently been robbed, so he found some sidewalk grates to lie down on, after consuming almost a half bottle of vodka. In the morning he woke up with the R side of his body (which was on the grates), swollen, red and painful, and presented today for clinic. He denies prior history of burns. Pt denies other medical problems, though he admits he has not received a check-up since he was hospitalized for pneumonia a year ago.

Text by Tumi Johnson

The worst part was my fingers. Hanging from limp hands. The way you wanted them. They got really, really cold.

Before and after I got dressed. I said thank you in your language.

You didn’t know I didn’t see you after I turned away.

Afterwards I scrubbed for a long time, trying to both get clean and dirty again.

I did not think of you at all.

I don’t look different, even with all my clothes off. I don’t feel different. Really. I do walk a little differently, but not even you would notice that.

There was shooting in the next room. But they were only pretending.

I flossed even though I had done it twice already. I wanted to be completely clean, after.

Would it have been different if we spoke the same language? Would it have been less pure?

I know you worked really hard. I noticed when you paused for breath because I tried to breathe with you.

You used your fists, elbows, heels – and climbed on top of something when you needed leverage.

You straddled me. Even though we knew you weren’t supposed to.

Maybe you wanted to see if you could leave marks. If color would separate from skin.

Mostly I remember not recalling your face.

I didn’t send you this. I remember where we met, but you and I don’t speak the same language.
M.

I appreciate your work, but I’m not sure gristle should be turned into flesh.

I like to say the body will remember. But what if the body isn’t?

You started with the feet. They didn’t tickle with you.

I learned I have knots at the bottom of my shoulders, just behind the armpits. I learned a piece of muscle in my left calf is directly connected to my clit. I learned that my back is hard.

But you knew that already.

I left my face impassive, but when you made me angry I decided I wouldn’t give you any response at all. This made you angry and you took it out on me.

I moaned once but didn’t realize it.

You touched my butt though we knew you weren’t supposed to. You straddled me even though we both knew you weren’t supposed to.

Anybody hearing your grunts would have thought.

You played with my hair too long. You said something about it in your language to the other girl and she said something about it back.

The worst part was when you touched my face. I will never give you my face – or my scalp.

My back was very hard. You didn’t find the essence.

I didn’t like facing up, so I closed my eyes. I’m sure you were smiling.

I can’t really remember your face.

---

**truth/time/sensation#2**

- Denies 1 day pain
- States 1 week redness
- Presented soon after leg pain
- Denies initially foot pain
- Denies soon after felt pain
- Admits yesterday worsening pain
- Before redness & swelling
- Recently felt
- In the morning fever or swelling
- Today right sided pain and redness
- Cold
spillage.

There is a leak at the point between your mouth and that lockbox in your closet. Somethin's drippin and you don't own a wrench/somethin is not contained and you are not minding. If you're lucky, your ears'll burn tonight, will rattle like those pipes in your basement/will hum til little bits of your story are waiting at all of their doorsteps come morning.

things are findable, you know (fossils are for displayin) and everybody knows that nothin's really hush hush these days, anyways.
we have no time/To Wallow in the Mire

If there is mud across your face, you can wipe it clean with your mama’s embroidered handkerchief. But it is troubling that you’ve muddied yourself in the first place, right?

(although wading in that lake behind the general store felt real real good under your toes/cause skipping rocks provided much more enjoyment than your arithmetic homework ever could)

And more than that, it’s a crying shame that heading to the wash basin/that rinsing it all off/is always a means to an end.

***

remember when you told me that story about how it was summer and sweltering? you got that real deep urge to stick your tongue against the icebox. that bottled fear rising in you like a hot air balloon when your tongue got stuck. then there was the gathering of the warm spit. swishing it around your mouth for a few seconds/letting it slip across the ice to loosen its grip. a sort of getaway mechanism/a practice of freedom.

Note: The title is a lyric from A Tribe Called Quest’s song “Jazz (We’ve Got)” from the album The Low End Theory (Jive Records 1991)

cause we can

when a secret leaves the body, it can move in two ways:
it can drip outta the insides kinda slow like syrup or/
it can flee real quick like a thief. like that time I told you about Mr. Dirk’s candy shop/how he turned to answer the phone and we stuffed our pockets with those soft caramels with the cream on the inside/how Tillie wimped out and decided to use her allowance money instead of being like us.
or that time I told you that we were playin doorbell ditch at Ms. Lena’s house/and I got that rolling feeling in my gut/the one where it feels like a flock of wild geese are playin inside of my belly. when your good sense decides to depart it might come back n visit or/
it might pack up for good. But right now it’s gone. You’re glad. This gives you more room to run.

(the new make-out spot is on Dill Street behind the pharmacy in that seedy old parking lot. but unless you’re a knucklehead, you know that the make-out spot isn’t really just for makin out. one time, Mr. Winters, the guy who owns the pharmacy, he caught us all out there/rows of cars all lined up and fogged up. he rapped on all the windows with his hard-knuckled knock and his pinched-face look/expeetin us to hit the road. we’ll never give in, though. and we know he’ll never tell)