2.1: 1.1 Mindless Behavior

Key to understanding the philosophy of yoga is recognizing its premise that when we cultivate mindfulness of our thoughts and feelings, we can choose our behaviors and move beyond the habitual action-reaction cycle, which dictates how we tend to respond to situations. A re-theorization of the writing subject as a writing yogi, a contemplative writer skilled in embodied imagining, is needed in composition studies precisely because the dominant action-reaction chain that dictates how we approach students’ and teachers’ subjectivity is unresponsive to matter, and mindlessly so. My attempts in this chapter to re-theorize the writer as a writing yogi can be seen as applications of mindfulness from the inside, then, as they pause, listen and respond judiciously in order to create a transformation of self through awareness.

Our mindless or taken-for-granted reaction to matter currently tends to follow the logic James Berlin set forward in his theories of social constructivist pedagogy, reactions themselves to poststructuralist theory. While no longer representative of the cutting edge work in our field, any inquiry into the presence of writing bodies must account for social constructivist pedagogies if only because of the boundaries they have set for what might come next, of what we can build from critical theory. In these theories, Berlin misses the ways the body secures our epistemological perspective with sweeping statements regarding the totality of social construction. Because others have persuasively criticized Berlin’s theories on these grounds (see Fleckenstein’s Writing Bodies, in particular), I will limit my comments here. Defending the logic of social epistemicism, Berlin asserts that “the symbolic includes the empirical because all reality, all knowledge, is a linguistic construct” (1987, p. 166). While no idealist, Berlin may not outright deny the existence of matter, but he seems to find enough reason to dismiss any agentive status or genuine role in construction it may have. If nature, and the body in turn, can never be known in itself because culture is always mediating it, then for Berlin nature is just another word for culture, and real agency lies in constructivist narratives:

[T]he distinction between nature and culture can never be determined with certainty. The interventions of culture prevent humans from ever knowing nature-in-itself. In other words, experiences of the material are always mediated by signifying practices. Only through language do we know and act upon the conditions...
of our experience—conditions that are socially constructed, again through the agency of discourse. (2003, p. 76)

Taken together, Berlin’s dismissal of matter for discourse reframes situatedness as an intellectual negotiation referring to cultural and historical placement. Rather than seeing the lack of certain boundaries between the natural and the cultural as liberating and as a way to complicate subjectivity via materiality, as the contemplative does, he places meaning and value in discursive constitution. In other words, Berlin, a master policer of boundaries, seems to want closure whereas mindfulness dictates openness. The body and flesh of the writer are dually edged out. Our commonplaces have encouraged a willful ignorance of matter and our pedagogies have, in turn, left the materiality of teachers and students to the domain outside the classroom.

Discourse-community constructivists like David Bartholomae have also overlooked the body’s role in situatedness with arguments about how student writers must (and can) so displace themselves from their material circumstances and enfleshed existence in order to appropriate an authoritative academic persona that will allow them the voice needed to be heard in the academy (Inventing the University). As with Berlin, the problem here is not the demystification of academic discourse but the disembodied presumption. These figurations of appropriation are incomplete without a body to literally place the process or flesh to account for it.

Berlin and Bartholomae remain touchstones for anyone interested in tracing the effects of social constructionist theory over the years, but, of course, as a field, we’ve moved beyond the initial foundation they laid. Yet, interruptions and complications of their early theories have often not moved us much closer to minding matter. Thomas Newkirk’s critiques of critical pedagogy’s heavy focus on students’ transformation address positioning more explicitly but do so mostly on a figurative level. Newkirk finds appropriation models problematic because they ask students to take on not just a discourse but to “impersonate” a whole new situatedness: when

students in their late teens and early 20s are asked to engage with texts written for much older readers. An eighteen-yearold reading Foucault for the first time must pretend mightily, appearing to possess the background knowledge, interests, and concerns of an older, invariably more sophisticated (or disillusioned) implied reader. (2004, p. 253)

Newkirk’s critique is persuasive but incomplete. He helpfully locates appropriation and ties it to the situatedness of the writer, but still he explains situatedness mostly in discursive terms: students “pretend” by faking a mindset, an attitude. When we view Newkirk’s critique from a feminist contemplative perspective, we see that in the appropriation model, we are asking students not only to take on a new discourse but also a materiality not their own, pretending themselves into other (imagined) bodies deemed authoritative or dominant, in turn, willing away their own. Newkirk thus similarly dismisses the inexorable connection between thinking and physical being.

Jane Hindman’s mixed-form, academic and autobiographical self-portrait in Making Writing Matter shows the deleterious effects of the double appropriation of matter and language when attempting to assert authority within academic writing—in her case, the professional discourse community of composition studies. Reflecting on the limits of academic discourse to represent her situated subjectivity, Hindman argues that she is not just rhetorically constructed as an alcoholic by the master narrative of Alcoholics Anonymous, but that there is a real, bodily way in which she was already an alcoholic before she ever made the choice to discursively construct herself as such (2001, p. 98). To ask her to take on another subjectivity not uniquely embodied in this way is to do great damage to her inner life and her writing identity.
and their connections to her physical beingness. It is akin to viewing Mairs’ marginality in linguistic but not literal terms.

By viewing Hindman’s critique through Haraway, we can see how the problematic tendency to will away the organic body through the process of writing is endemic to the entire university, not only our field, and how this tendency is entangled with the epistemic function of academic discourse and guaranteed by its history. Responding to Sandra Harding’s The Science Question in Feminism, Haraway argues that the academy’s reliance on the scientific method and its partner-in-power, academic discourse, has provided a patriarchal backdrop that has been used to deny the power of materiality by assessing it a limitation, forever abjecting it to the realm of the feminine. If women have been their bodies in Western culture, men, in turn, have been “freed” to adopt a transcendent and hence disembodied subject position that ensures the objectivity of the knowledge they work to produce.

Haraway elsewhere draws on Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer’s Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life to argue that this division was solidified by seventeenth century narratives of the Scientific Revolution, wherein men constructed themselves via the scientific method as “modest witnesses,” or subjects who could enact intellectual modesty by witnessing reality without implicating themselves in it. What marks the traditional modest witness is that he remains unmarked, acting merely as a “ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish facts” (1997, p. 24), according to Haraway. Rather than voicing from an invested, personal stance, he takes on the role of speaking for the object world, denying the need to voice with the world. Matter remains passive, silent, inactive—a resource from which knowledge can be made but never itself agitative in the making. This is the motivation for the will to discursivity that remains a feature of academic knowledge-making procedures, including the forms of academic discourse our writing pedagogies validate today. As we approach Bartholomae and Newkirk through Haraway, we see that our very understanding of how students come to appropriate academic discourse is based on the concomitant silencing of their bodies.

The separation “of expert knowledge from mere opinion as legitimating knowledge for ways of life … [is a] founding gesture of what we call modernity” (Haraway, 1997, p. 24), and it is one that has continued to hold sway up through contemporary times. This is evident through the continued valuation of a disembodied subject position within knowledge production and also in the writing technologies we have inherited. Because the knowledge obtained from the experimental method was disseminated through written reports, a rhetoric of the modest witness was created alongside this new subjectivity, according to Haraway’s feminist historical account. This modest rhetoric was conceived of as a “‘naked’ way of writing,’ unadorned, factual, compelling,” laying the way for contemporary academic discourse. “Only through such naked writing could the facts shine through, unclouded by the flourishes of any human author” (Haraway, 1997, p. 26). Writing, out of necessity, was seen as a technology that could be evacuated of subjective partiality, able to provide a transparent and neutral recording of the scientist’s or academic’s ventriloquist voice. Writing thus became and remains a central part of the methodological apparatus for establishing scientific fact, ordering nature through manageable chunks of transcribed knowledge (Haraway, 1997, p. 26). Observational, scientific reports and claim-driven, academic arguments may retain many differences—such as the attempt to foreground the evidential framework for a claim in arguments—but they are united in their preference for the disembodied modest witness as invoked author. Both kinds of writing value the kind of substantiated proof that takes the writer’s personal beliefs, self interests and embodied perspectives as factors that can be transcended in the pursuit of knowledge or in the recognition of the social construction of the self.

The transparent tale and the disinterested, modest observer remain features of recognizable scientific and (therefore)
mainstream academic discourse to this day. We have inherited the value of “naked writing,” or author-evacuated writing. Even in our own rhetorically-sensitive field, the emotive and experiential self, often (mis)understood to be the personal self of expressivism, is feminized, and granted significantly less epistemological agency, if any at all, than the “modest” academic arguer, the “witnessing” critical intellectual, who furnishes appropriately impersonal, substantiated evidence and displays rationality to make his claims (for an interesting analysis of how this preference plays out in our professional writing see Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition (Olson & Taylor, 1997) especially the chapters Person, Position and Style and Gender and Publishing). It is precisely these inherited notions of objectivity in tandem with deep-set Cartesian mind-body dualism that fueled early feminist disruptions of academic discourse by scholars like Tompkins, Olivia Frey and Linda Brodkey.

Tompkin’s article, Me and My Shadow actualizes the struggle between the personal, subjective self, who is to be seen not heard, and the professional, disembodied witness, called to the stand for a kind of modest testimony untainted by the body. Tompkins highlights these subject positions:

There are two voices inside me …. These beings exist separately but not apart. One writes for professional journals, the other in diaries, late at night. One uses words like “context” and “intelligibility,” likes to win arguments, see her name in print, and give graduate students hardheaded advice. The other has hardly been heard from. (1987, p. 169)

Like Brodkey in “Writing on the Bias,” Tompkins asserts that in reality the split is a false one, a separation that keeps us from recognizing the embodied and embedded personal because of masculinist conventions; or, as Brodkey says, we are blinded from seeing a biased conventional discourse that “feigns objectivity by dressing up its reasons in seemingly unassailable logic and palming off its interest as disinterest—in order to silence arguments from other quarters” (1994, p. 547). Calls to logic usher in the adversarialism Frey targets in her study of professional journals and conferences.

And we may not have advanced as far beyond these early feminist critiques as we’d like to think. More recently, Hindman has argued that our field persistently values the same kind of arhetoricity and objectivity Haraway credits as a holdover from the Scientific Revolution. While we have ostensibly given up on the ideals inherent in “naked writing,” or writing that seeks to escape ideology, we have, at the same time, refused the embodiment of the author. In Writing an Important Body of Scholarship (2002) Hindman charges professional academic discourse in composition studies with a phallocentric perpetuation of an epistemology of objectivity, the domain of the traditional modest witness. Academic discourse used and validated by compositionists in their professional writing, which is Hindman’s focus, “works to entextualize an abstract body of knowledge and disembody the individual writer” (2002, p. 100), she says, ironically constructing itself as arhetorical. Hindman points out, in short, how positioning ourselves as modest witnesses in our writing confers the “right” kind of authority to our prose, legitimizing the ideas it espouses precisely because it divorces the writer from her material existence, because it allows her to speak for the world rather than with it.

1. Our subjectivity is always first embodied. Our bodies are part of our integral selves because our flesh is intelligent and because our mind/ consciousness is diffused throughout the body and is not simply located in the brain or head. To recognize ourselves as body-minds is to see our flesh as a source of power and knowledge. It is to become embodied imaginers.

2. The greatest resources we, as body-minds, have in the quest for awareness are practice and experience. Experience advances the initial wanderings of our imagination and therefore begets wisdom and knowledge.

3. Consequently, it is only with and through the body that we can reach a greater awareness of ourselves and, paradoxically, the world around us—matter is the common thread we share with that world and others in it.
Matter is the connective tissue that unifies us with the world so that the yogi’s inner turn to the center is simultaneously an unfolding to the external. A journey that accounts for the personal does not, then, dismiss the cultural but refuses to recognize static separations between the two.

To develop mindfulness of matter in these ways entails being open to a shifting web of positioning and relationality wherein we neither ignore postmodernism’s focus on linguistic construction and representation, launching us back into early expressivist or Romantic notions of authentic subjectivity, nor do we allow the deterministic contour of strong linguistic constructivism. Aiding the feminist contemplative writer in this journey to reclaim materiality is an understanding of Haraway’s feminist subject. This subject sees her body as instrumental in knowledge-making practices, defining herself neither as a “fixed location in a reified body” or as a “body … blank page for social inscriptions” (1991c, pp. 195-197). This embodied subject shows us another way, neither squarely essentialist nor anti-essentialist, one in kindred spirit to the contemplative project.

While Haraway may not intend to write as a contemplative pedagogue, her interest in non-Western spirituality aligns her project with my own. She forwards a mindfulness of matter that allows me to explore an embodied representation of the writer within contemplative writing pedagogy, one that integrates the key understandings of the yogi and practices these with a feminist edge. Mindful yogis practice at their “edge,” the challenge place where they can embody new imaginings but do so in ways that are sensitive to their embodied realities at the present moment. In the same way, by pairing Haraway’s key points with yoga’s, I am practicing pedagogy at the edge and turning mindfulness back on itself, asking contemplative education to be aware of its feminist potential.

By dialoguing contemplative practice with Haraway’s theories of epistemology in what remains of this chapter, I will work toward a definition of writing yogis as those writing bodies that are consciously mindful or aware of their materiality, for there are surely bodies that write unaware of or unwilling to accept the terms of their embodiment. The difference is what Mairs targets; the difference produces what I have previously referred to as the embodied imagination. My exploration of writing yogis will hinge on the importance of conscious awareness and will refuse to deny the integrity of particular bodies, who are situated in time and place, but who also feel and experience their embodiment as, in part, an expression of interiority. This is the responsibility of awareness assumed by the writing yogi as embodied imaginer. My efforts in the remainder of this chapter will be extended in the following interchapters with pedagogical discussions of how to live out the theories of writing yogis through contemplative classroom practices. By following Haraway, my hope is to examine the consequences of defining writing and thinking in terms of the absence of the body and to suggest what writing yogis can do to reclaim their writing bodies and embodied imaginations within contemplative pedagogy.