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# **LITERACIES, LEARNING, AND THE BODY**

## **Putting Theory and Research into Pedagogical Practice**

*Edited by  
Grace Enriquez, Elisabeth Johnson,  
Stavroula Kontovourki,  
and Christine A. Mallozzi*

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# 3

## READER RESPONSE AND EMBODIED PERFORMANCE

### Body-Poems as Performative Response and Performativity<sup>1</sup>

*Grace Enriquez*

When I was seven years old, I got into a terrible argument with my father. Even now as I recount the event, my body responds as it did then, with my heart rate accelerating and a knot forming in my stomach. I was blissfully engaged in some childhood preoccupation, when he announced he was planning to cut down the lone red maple tree in our front yard.

“What are you going to do, Daddy?” I asked, hoping I had misheard.

But my father confirmed my fears, repeating that he would borrow a chainsaw that weekend. I had no particular attachment to that tree; it was already there when we moved into the house. Every autumn I helped to rake and gather its fallen leaves, a task that alternated between wearisome and semi-bonding for our family. Still, I erupted in tears, the unstoppable, hysterical kind that children are so good at producing, and I begged my father not to cut it down. At first, he tried explaining his reasons—years later I finally understood the tree was sick—but I wouldn’t hear any of it. Eventually, refusing to negotiate with a seven-year-old whose only argument was “But it will hurt the tree!”, he stormed away.

What I couldn’t articulate at the time was that my second-grade teacher had read aloud Shel Silverstein’s (1964) *The Giving Tree* in class earlier that week. As the teacher read more and more of the titular tree’s decimation at the hands of the boy she loved, a brew of panic, fear, and heartache flooded my body. When my teacher read aloud the last scene, in which the tree (now a stump) declared herself to be happy, my mind was paralyzed, bewildered. My body, however, was primed for action. I sat cross-legged on the classroom rug, a jumble of emotions and thoughts coursing through me, begging for release. I wanted to cry, “No!” but something restrained me. Meanwhile my classmate James (all names are pseudonyms) did not hold back. “What?! How in the world can she be happy?” he exclaimed, jumping to his feet before being promptly reprimanded.

Rosenblatt (1978, 1985), in her transactional theory of reader response, writes about the shifting combination of two stances – the aesthetic (experiencing via thoughts and feelings) and the efferent (seeking information) – that readers take toward texts. When I confronted my father about that red maple tree, I concurrently drew upon my aesthetic and efferent stances with *The Giving Tree* to challenge his decision. Sipe (1999) writes, “As children embrace or resist texts ... they are forging links between literature and their own lives” (p. 127). Other scholars (e.g., Brooks & Browne, 2012; Langer, 1990; Lewis, 2000; Paulson & Armstrong, 2010; Sipe, 2008) have extended or refashioned the continuum to accommodate broader understandings and new research about reader response to dispel the binary connotation that has emerged and which Rosenblatt refutes. To that end, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) assert a third component to the aesthetic-efferent continuum in which “readers have the power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author’s topic, and they exert that power when they read from a critical stance” (p. 53). By inciting that argument with my father, I attempted to change a text initially encountered in print but ultimately existing beyond its pages, a text about the relationship between humans and trees. My classmate James attempted something similar, feeling so compelled to question the text that he neglected to first raise his hand for permission to speak. Such critical response or attempted transformation of a text is another way a reader transacts with it, since a transaction is a mutually generative experience between reader and text, giving rise to something new.

Rosenblatt (1978) concentrates on the formation of a new kind of text—a *poem*, she calls it—ensuing from a reader’s transaction and comprising the reader’s own understanding of it. This is what I want to stake and focus on: When that poem is expressed through primarily bodily (versus linguistic) means, then the body becomes the poem—what I call a *body-poem*. Indeed, reading literature is a pursuit that engages the whole body, carrying the potential to transform bodies (Sumara, 2003). Sipe (2008), in fact, discerns a particular kind of transactive poem-making with the body as a performed type of reader response.

Furthermore, the body—just like any text—is read. Others interpret its gestures, facial expressions, movements, and postures in relation to contextual and sociocultural norms (Foucault, 1980; Hagood, 2005). Since bodies, especially student bodies, are continually surveilled, regulated, and sorted in institutional contexts (Foucault, 1995), students’ body-poems are likewise monitored, checked, and ultimately classified. And when those body-poems arise from critical transactions with texts, challenging classroom and curricular expectations, their risk of being regulated increases.

Context, therefore, matters as well. Not only is it part of the familiar triad of reader-text-context (Beach, 1993) influencing the individual’s construction of meaning, it also determines what meaning holds weight. Within any context—which Sipe (1999) delineates as the reader’s immediate social context, the larger classroom community, non-school settings, sociocultural background, and

popular culture—meaning must match the authoritative discourses circulating in that context to be considered “right” and “good.”

Both James and I had encountered potent critical transactions with the story, yet our embodied performances—which I define as that nexus of psychosocial emotion and thought (Reay, 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) and socioculturally constructed discourse manifested through our physical bodies over time and space (Alexander, et al., 2005; Butler, 1990)—played out differently in the classroom. As a quiet student who did well with reading, I knew to withhold any outburst of my body-poem, performing the role of the disciplined, docile student (Foucault, 1980, 1995). James, however, was more boisterous and childhood memory plus adult reflection tells me he was ready to avoid reading when it became challenging. Certainly, our responses to reading were socioculturally constructed, assembled from interwoven cultural histories and mediated by the social contexts and circles we inhabited (Brooks & Browne, 2012). I was a Filipino American girl with a working-class, immigrant family, and James was a middle-class, African American boy. However, pointing to class, race, or gender as the primary and inherent reason for our different performances unjustly directs blame for academic failure on individuals and whole populations rather than on the complex sociocultural and institutional systems that have shaped schooling for centuries (McDermott & Varenne, 2006).

I pivot attention instead to our embodied performances of reader response, influenced by the sociocultural discourses and institutional values and norms in a particular time and place. Butler (1990) uses the term *performativity* to describe iterative embodied performances, asserting how performativity gives rise to one’s perceived identity. I believe my performativity as a student and reader prevented me from audibly challenging the text in class (saved instead for my poor father’s ears), while James’ performativity set up his embodied challenge to be exhibited in class and deemed inappropriate. Even at my young age, I knew what happened to bodies that didn’t behave as good students should: They were forced into the corner of the classroom, separated from peers, sent away to the principal’s office. They were, essentially, removed from the social fabric of the learning context and excluded from the present (and perhaps future) opportunity to learn.

My intent, therefore, is to examine embodied performances of reader response as deep, critical meaning-making transactions under surveillance and regulation in classrooms, rendering the body-poem a signifier of such transactions. By regulating students’ body-poems, we educators also regulate what meanings are valid in our classrooms and what identities students construct as readers.

### Constructing Body-Poems in the Classroom: Synthesizing the Performative and Performativity

Framing students’ construction of body-poems as meaningful transactions with texts means considering students’ embodied performances of reader response

during the immediate reading event as well as over time and space. Specifically, I blend Sipe's (2002, 2008) notion of performative response to literature with Butler's (1990) concept of performativity. Sipe (2008) identifies a particular kind of transaction in which readers act out or embody parts of the text, calling such responses *performative* to highlight the playful quality driving it. In this sense, readers actually manipulate the text in highly creative ways to produce a poem of meaning. When students display performative responses, he explains, they are actually demonstrating "their abilities as specifically *deconstructive* literary critics" (author's italics) (p. 180). Such diversion is also reminiscent of Butler's (1990) discussion of parody, which offers a sardonic critique of the construction of social norms. And yet, as Sipe acknowledges, such embodied performances are not always welcome in classrooms and can often be interpreted as class disturbances.

Sipe's (2008) discussion concentrates on embodied performance around text during a single event in time. For the regulation of performative response to take hold in a student's trajectory as a reader, embodied performance must be considered in terms of iteration and history. Butler (1997) calls this *performativity*, channeling the poststructuralist concept of subjectivity to establish performativity as any embodied act that eventually becomes repeated so often that it becomes naturalized and normalized and therefore assumes a permanent characteristic of one's identity. Yet Butler (1997) also discusses moments when one's embodied performance challenges that inscribed identity as *performative politics*. Whether the performance is successful or not hinges upon audience interpretation and effects (Enriquez, 2011, 2014; Youdell, 2006).

Thus, although Sipe (2008) and Butler (1997) use the term *performative* differently and draw from distinctive fields of study, I believe they are essentially discussing moments in which readers' body-poems aim to disrupt normative understandings and assumptions. For clarity's sake, in this chapter I use the term *performative* only in reference to Sipe's definition, and I use *performative politics* and *performativity* to refer to Butler's concepts. While Sipe (2008) focuses on the attempted re-engineering of printed text, Butler (1997) focuses on the attempted challenge to perceived identity. Both are pertinent to readers; both (one transiently and one reiteratively) are occurring through moments of critical embodied performances with printed text; and perhaps most importantly, both are subject to surveillance by normative discourses and audience expectations.

In the following sections, I use two examples of whole-class read-alouds—from a Kindergarten and an eighth-grade class, respectively—during which students' critical transactions with printed text resulted in body-poems that challenged both the text and their perceived identities as readers. For each example, students were asked to listen to a text read aloud by the teacher and then collectively discuss their interpretations of it. These read-alouds were observed and collected as data for two different classroom ethnographies. One was a year-long classroom ethnography exploring students' embodied performances as readers; the other is an ongoing multiyear study examining

teachers' use of children's literature for social justice teaching. The examples below illustrate how multiple factors shape the reader's embodied performance of reader response and the audience's interpretation of the reader's body-poem. I don't intend to criticize the teachers in these examples. Over the years I observed Mallory—a Black female in her early 30s, Charles—a Black male in his late 20s, and Leslie—a White female in her mid-30s, I was repeatedly awed at their genuinely nurturing, child-centered manner and their solid grasp of literacy pedagogy. I aim instead to complicate students' embodied performances of reader response and the construction of their body-poems as something purposeful, meaningful, and critical.

## Constructing Body-Poems in Two Classrooms

### *Regulating Bodies: Discipline and Efficiency in Kindergarten*

It is January. Classes in this urban, ethnically diverse public school resumed two weeks ago after winter vacation ended. I am poised on a tiny blue chair, my knees awkwardly bent above my waist, waiting for Mallory's Kindergarten class to return from lunch. Soon, 19 chattering five-year-olds shuffle into the classroom. About a third receive free or reduced lunch, mirroring the larger school's demographics. Some students smile shyly or wave at me, as I've been visiting their class since September.

Once everyone is seated on the rug, Mallory shows them the picture book, Tomie dePaola's (1979) *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, about a boy who loves to dance but faces his classmates' ridicule about it. Mallory, a teacher who expressed a desire to teach toward social justice, has worked to discuss and reinforce such issues with students through both the official curriculum and informal classroom interactions. Earlier that year, she noticed some students strictly demarcating boys' and girls' activities during recess and choice time. She selected this book to read aloud, hoping it will spark conversation about gender roles and equity. Abuzz with post-lunch energy, some students shoot their hands into the air and exclaim that they already know the book. Others giggle seemingly at the word *sissy*.

"Just a reminder," Mallory states, "this time is supposed to be quiet. How do you show you have a connection to the book?" Nineteen little fists with little finger and thumb extended shake back and forth, making the American Sign Language sign for "same."

"And how do you show excitement?" This time, 19 pairs of eyebrows rise above widened eyes.

"Good. So there are ways that you can show excitement and connection without talking," Mallory summarizes, then begins the read-aloud. When she gets to the part that describes how Oliver likes to read books and draw pictures, Mallory reiterates this expectation by making the "same" sign herself and telling the class, "Go like this, if you do, too."

Mallory's class is like dozens of other Kindergarten classrooms I have worked with professionally, mostly in urban, high-needs, public schools. "Acceptable" bodily responses to texts are often taught at this early age, partly to encourage young children's comprehension as they develop oral and written language, partly to assist teachers with classroom management. In this sense, a reader's ideal performativity is being fashioned by directing the body's movements to establish social discipline, efficiently prime the student for optimal learning, and congeal a set of desirable recurring performances (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1995). Luke (1992) views pedagogy through similar lenses, claiming it is "a form of *inscription*, of bodily writing and mapping" (author's italics) (p. 109) and argues even progressive literacy pedagogies that profess child-centered approaches "may be the site for multiple pedagogical technologies aimed at single bodies, alternating strategies designed to collapse them into a unitary, collective entity of the literate subjectivity" (pp. 125–126). Others have built upon this point to demonstrate how literacy pedagogies, especially in early grades, fuse to form a compliant, disciplined type of literate subject (Dixon, 2007; Kamler, 1997; Manyak, 2004). When soliciting or suppressing embodied performances of reader response, teachers reveal the authoritative discourses about reading that are circulating in their classrooms at that time and place, hoping to condition students' bodies to engage with texts as outlined by classroom and school norms. We see this immediately in the suppression and redirection of students' giggles and excited hand-raising at the book's title into the kinds of bodily expressions that facilitate classroom management and gauge whole-class comprehension over individual reader responses. As an adult in charge of so many children at a fidget-prone age, prompting students to make the "same" sign and raise their eyebrows enables Mallory to retain control over the social context, promote student learning, and sculpt a specific kind of iterative embodied performance of reader response.

### **Regulating Bodies: Drawing Parameters in Eighth Grade**

Miles away and a few years before, I sat as a researcher in a different context, an eighth-grade classroom in a different state, but still in an urban public school with an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student population. It was April, National Poetry Month in the U.S., and so the students had been reading and making meaning of texts in Charles' classroom for eight months. Like Mallory, Charles had implemented progressive, student-centered literacy pedagogy and established strong rapport with students. Additionally, many of the students "looped" with Charles, moving together from seventh to eighth grade. The school's literacy coach, Leslie, was co-leading the day's instruction. The focus was on analyzing Adam Ford's (2008) "Smile", a poem about observing the smile of a girl as she kisses a boy.

When Leslie finished the sixth stanza, the poem's turn in which the girl's smile also makes the narrator smile, the comment "gay" was uttered quite distinctly

from the back of the room where David and Tyrone sat. I glanced at the tall, muscular, popular, African American boys who were members of the school's basketball team. They were perched on the edge of table, sitting above other classmates who gathered on benches or turned their chairs around to face to Leslie. The grins on David's and Tyrone's faces were barely discernable from where their teachers stood, and the boys offered no additional spoken response. They also didn't appear concerned with my proximity to them, as I had become a tolerated insider (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) among students, a familiar presence in their classroom, reluctant to reprimand any "off-task" behavior. However, Charles, who had been standing at the edge of the room while Leslie read the poem, looked at David and Tyrone and raised his finger to his lips to indicate they should be quiet. As Leslie finished reading the poem, the comment was repeated again.

"That doesn't make him gay," Leslie responded.

"Yes, but it says he smiled and hid. That's shady." Tyrone shook his head and shuddered his shoulders. Other classmates snickered, and a debate ensued between Leslie, David, and Tyrone about whether the narrator of the poem is gay or flustered.

Unlike in many primary-grade classrooms, students' adolescent bodies are not managed so overtly while reading. David and Tyrone had learned by eighth grade that sign language and exaggerated facial expressions were unnecessary to convey their transactions. Nonetheless, they still used their bodies to convey meaning, constructing body-poems of understandings about the text. Here, their grins and shudders signified a transaction of derision.

Traces of how students' bodies are regulated during whole-class literacy instruction are nevertheless apparent. Students are still required to turn their bodies toward the teacher to indicate attentiveness. What is at play alongside classroom management is a more tacit acknowledgement that student bodies are productive sites (Foucault, 1980): Rather than overtly directing bodily responses to texts, here we see teachers establishing parameters for embodied performance possibilities. However, by signaling for David and Tyrone to be quiet, Charles delineated that their smiles and spoken response were inappropriate at that time, thus endeavoring to discipline the body into something docile, prime it for more teacher-directed ways of producing knowledge, and direct students' performativity as readers. What happens, though, when students disrupt that idealized reader performativity, responding to literature in non-compliant bodily ways? And why would they venture to do so?

### **Regulating Meaning-Making: Problems with Performative Response**

Back in the Kindergarten classroom, Mallory continues reading. At the point when Oliver first gets called a sissy, two boys laugh while another boy scowls and exclaims, "That's not funny! That's mean!"

"Shh!" Mallory intervenes. "If you think Oliver Button felt sad, raise your hand." When one of the first two boys, a dark-skinned Latino boy named Roger, sways his hips back and forth and continues laughing, as a warning she asks him if he needs to go to the other side of the rug. Roger shakes his head no, and Mallory moves on, asking the class if they can predict what will happen in the story.

"Maybe he'll be really good at dancing," another classmate offers. Roger giggles and sways again.

"Roger, you need to move now," Mallory commands and punitively points to the other side of the rug.

Meanwhile, as the debate between Leslie, David, and Tyrone continued some miles away and a few years in the past, I looked back at the poem "Smile", which was projected onto a screen. I realized that David and Tyrone were responding not to any literal mention of homosexuality in Ford's poem, but to a critical transaction the text evoked throughout their bodies. In essence, they have constructed a body-poem relying on the aesthetic synthesis of their emotions, thoughts, and memories more than the words on the page—a transaction that was working to challenge the text. Leslie's attempts to use the text to dispute the meaning the boys made were further confronted by the intensity of their embodied performance via grinning faces, shaking heads, and shuddering shoulders.

"Wait, can I give an example from real life that could help clarify the narrator's intent?" Charles interjected. "Sometimes, I see this couple when I'm coming down the hall. And they're all into each other, so I want to give them their space."

Several students giggled and looked toward Tyrone. I got what they were thinking: I, too, had witnessed this couple, Tyrone and his girlfriend, tucked between rows of lockers, attempting to steal a moment of intimacy between classes.

Leslie picked up the explanation. "It's just like that. The narrator hid because he's happy or embarrassed, not creepy or gay."

David shook his head and piped up, "It's the hiding and smiling that's creepy."

Charles tried again, saying, "Sometimes I see people kissing on the subway platform, and I remember what it was like to be young, innocent, and in love."

"Yeah, but would you be cheesing it?" David countered, squeezing his eyes shut and beaming from ear to ear, demonstrating his vision of the narrator's smile. Other students laughed again. At this point, Leslie asked Charles if they should just have the class jot their responses to the poem. Charles nodded, and they distributed sticky notes to students.

David's exaggerated grin and Tyrone's shuddering, as well as Kindergartener Roger's laughter and swaying, indicate meaningful transactions with the text, but validation from teachers did not seem possible in those specific contexts. Their embodied performances of reader response clashed with established expectations

for reader performativity and relationships between bodies and comprehension; thus, their body-poems did not constitute legitimate meaning-making transactions.

In these contexts, the boys' performances indicate body-poems that must be managed. Here, it is not just the material body, but also the thoughts, feelings, and discourses giving rise to embodied performance that are subject to surveillance. Roger's body-poem seems to signify a transaction in which the idea of a young boy who wants to be a dancer is amusing. This response, however, brushed against Mallory's intent to launch discussions about gender roles and gender equity with the book. Whether perceived as individual misbehavior or derision at the topic, Roger's embodied performance of his transaction prompted regulation in that moment. In other words, his body-poem was read as a disturbance of class activity and the instructional agenda. Moreover, his embodied performance was not merely repudiated; it was physically removed from the space where meaning-making was designated to occur.

We could, however, view these body-poems through Sipe's (2008) notion of performative response. Sipe explains that the creative, playful, humorous qualities of performative responses are

often mildly (or wickedly) subversive and transgressive; in some quarters, they would probably be considered totally off-task. They threatened to deconstruct the story into a totally free (and in some cases anarchic) play of signifiers.

(p. 174)

While Roger's body-poem did not signify sympathy for Oliver, it did signify his transaction with the text. His laughter and imitation of dancing attested to his entering the world of the text and turning a text event into a case for play, much like the very book characters who tease Oliver Button about his interest in dance. Likewise, middle schoolers David and Tyrone mocked what they believed to be a ludicrous response to public affection. One might argue that they transacted with the text by scoffing at the poem's romantic content and at Charles' analogy to reaffirm their heteromale identities, assuring themselves and their peers that males who exhibit tenderness deserve mockery.

For Kindergartener Roger, the kind of bodily responses encouraged in this and other primary classrooms, such as the "same" sign and the raised hand to signal sympathy, emphasize a connection of reader to text as the single unified pathway toward meaning-making. Similarly, the meaning that David and Tyrone constructed did not align with the meaning their teachers held. Despite Leslie's and Charles' explanations, David and Tyrone expressed a different, strongly critical way of making meaning and expressed their transactions with their bodies. Unlike Mallory, social justice teaching was not an explicit pedagogical goal for Charles, though he firmly supported it whenever opportunities to address social justice arose. However, as in the Kindergarten classroom, the middle school

teachers appeared to aim for students to construct understanding via connection to the text. As Charles attempted to use an analogy to explain the text, he also emphasized connection-making, perhaps in an effort to challenge the heteronormative masculine subjectivities the students' body-poems upheld. David and Tyrone, though, constructed meaning by challenging and deconstructing such connection-making, thereby reasserting those subjectivities.

This narrow lane of connection-making, however, limits our views of reader responses and bounds what kinds of body-poems students can construct. Jones and Clarke (2007) write about the restrictions on both teachers and students created by the normative practice of emphasizing similarities between texts and selves, contending that recognizing *disconnections* between text and reader leads to more nuanced and critical engagement with texts and society. Similarly, Johnson (2015) highlights the value of *counter texts*, which include bodily performances that offer opposing viewpoints. Roger's transaction was critical of Oliver's passion for dancing. His embodied performance of that transaction appeared to undermine the seriousness of the learning context or the social justice content of DePaola's story. Though subversively and humorously, Roger, David, and Tyrone were engaging with the text in ways that could have led to powerful classroom discussions. Instead, their body-poems were checked as teachers re-established their authority over meaning-making. Thus, Roger's body was redirected across the room, and David's and Tyrone's bodies were to return to more "controllable" and idealized performances by writing their reader responses down on paper.

The boys' type of meaning-making can be threatening, especially during whole-class activities, because it can chaotically detour from pre-established instructional objectives. Sipe (2008), in fact, likens students' performative responses to a "carnavalesque romp" (p. 86), summoning Bakhtin's (1984) understanding of bodies as the nucleus of the carnival and as the medium for subversion and humor. Like Sipe (2008) and via parody, Butler (1990) claims that the silliness of the body's actions highlights identity as socioculturally constructed. Indeed, by performing in a way that resembled the antagonists in the story, Roger was affirming heteronormative masculine subjectivities from which Oliver Button's dancing is usually excluded. David and Tyrone affirmed those same subjectivities by mocking the narrator's smile. Whereas Butler centers her examination of parody on the notion of performed identity, both she and Sipe perceive the body's role as central in exposing the discursive ideals within a context.

The "anything goes" carnivalesque quality of performative responses wrests control from teachers' instructional objectives, which typically center on logical, text-based interpretations and understandings. Roger, David, and Tyrone manipulated the texts read to them for their own playful purposes. Roger's moving of his shoulders rather than his legs and feet inaccurately reflected the tap dancing that Oliver preferred. In this sense, his body-poem *was* challenging the social justice goals that Mallory was pursuing, appropriating the content of the book for his own goals and turning it into something divergent. Though it would

have been a detour from her well-crafted plans, asking Roger why he made those gestures might have been a brilliant starting point for interrogating gender stereotypes, the very goal she sought. Reprimanding Roger and relocating him away from his spot on the rug re-established Mallory's control over his embodied performance and over the meaning he was constructing, which seemed at odds with Mallory's intentions. In other words, Roger's body was the focus, not the poem of meaning he was constructing with it. Roger's body, therefore, was monitored, and the transaction of meaning-making that influenced his body was avoided, silencing an opportunity for powerful class discussion. Additionally, incorporating Butler's (1990) examination of parody, David's caricature of the narrator's smile exposed his teacher's interpretation as not necessarily "right," just based in more experience at using a text to support a claim.

### **Regulating Reader Identity: The Problem with Performativity**

These were strong teachers, and these actions here were not characteristic of their general approach to student learning. Often, Mallory, Charles, and Leslie entertained students' performative responses to texts, sometimes joining in singing or moving their bodies along with students'. Thus, another layer of complexity must be considered to analyze why the boys' body-poems were regulated in these instances. To do this, we must recall that context is not just outlined by a particular time and place; rather, it is permeated by individual histories, institutional norms, and social relationships of embodied performance while reading.

Roger, David, and Tyrone, much like my second-grade classmate James, were not considered strong readers. Throughout the year, Roger remained one or two reading levels behind many of his classmates, a description concerning only his cognitive abilities as a reader. A student's embodied performances while reading are also at play and constantly being used to assess and identify what kind of reader he or she is, such as a "struggling" or "good" reader (Enriquez, 2011, 2014). During read-aloud time as well as independent reading, Roger often socialized with classmates and moved his body, reaching for items besides his book or leaving his seat to see what a classmate was doing. Mallory, therefore, often reprimanded or redirected him back to his text. While Tyrone was a high-achieving student, David was considered a struggling reader who often avoided reading in class. Over the year I observed him in Charles' class, David regularly arrived late, rummaged through his backpack for long periods of time, and left his chair to search through other parts of the classroom or gaze out the window. As friends, David and Tyrone sometimes engaged in "off-task" behaviors while reading, such as dancing, singing, and calling out to classmates across the room for social purposes. Though they were generally jovial boys with whom Charles had good rapport, their performativity during reading time signified a resistance to reading that contributed to school officials constructing David as a struggling reader and identifying Tyrone as a reader not working toward his potential. In

Butler's (1990) terms, their performativity as readers did not align with the quiet, still, independent, and diligent performativity of a good reader.

Along with the sociocultural norms of schools, we must consider the local history of students in their classrooms. The boys' classroom performativity and embodied challenges to respective texts were not immediately recognized as anything but familiar off-task performances. Acknowledging that they might be expressing a significant transaction with the text would mean they were also challenging the constructed identities as readers. These challenges were embodied performances and contrary to what was permissible in the classrooms, thus not signaling a purposeful attempt to establish performances as good readers. Butler (as cited in Salih, 2004), of course, reminds us that attempts at identity resignification are not always conscious or deliberate; however, they still take place as performative politics. Chances are, Roger did not purposefully think to himself that he would laugh and physically impersonate a dancer to show he was a good reader making meaning of the text. Nor, possibly, did David and Tyrone consciously decide to express physical mockery to communicate their reading skills. Yet, those embodied performances carried the potential to oppose the identities others inscribed on their bodies.

In this sense, then, the students' body-poems demonstrated their comprehension and abilities as "deconstructive critics" (Sipe, 2008) not just with the printed text, but also of the social context and possibly their teachers' goals to promote particular kinds of discussions about texts. However, their body-poems were not recognized in two ways. One possibility was that the meanings they constructed through their performances were not wholly disruptive but potentially a springboard for deeper, perhaps more difficult conversations about gender equity or heteronormative masculinities. Another was the possibility the boys were performing differently than the identities people conceived for them.

Youdell (2006) notes that any performance "is open to misfire and so might fail or do something unintended or unexpected" (p. 515). Even if Roger, David, or Tyrone intentionally set out to challenge the text and their identities, performative politics dictates it is the audience's perception, not the performer's intent, that determines whether an inscribed identity has been successfully changed (Butler, 1997). Rather than see him as transacting with the text in a meaningful way—albeit contrary to Mallory's intended meaning—Roger was viewed as performing his struggling reader identity once again, testifying to the power of the normalizing discourses that structure social spaces to construct subjects (Youdell, 2006). Thus Roger's embodied performance incited surveillance and management.

By arguing for their interpretation, David and Tyrone attempted to show strong engagement with the text, a move characteristic of so-called good readers. Reader response theory asserts that in constructing textual meaning, readers must be actively participating in the text (Iser, 1978). Thus, David and Tyrone were also engaging in performative politics, working to refute the reader identities they

held within the classroom. Their attempt failed, however, having been viewed once again as exhibiting deviant performativity as readers. The social and institutional context of the reading classroom required embodied performances to be disciplined if they diverged from authoritative discourses about classroom reading. As a result, like their bodies and meaning-making transaction, the boys' reading identities remained surveilled.

## Conclusion and Implications

By highlighting these particular examples, my intent is not to criticize the teachers but to complicate students' embodied performances as something deeper than a disruption and their body-poems of meaning as something worth considering. Readers transact with texts in multifaceted ways. Quite often, critical transactions are expressed as embodied performances that align with, detour from, or subvert classroom norms. Embodied performances can signify noteworthy ways of constructing meaning, but how such embodiment gets recognized depends not just on what is expressed and how, but also the perceived performativity of who expresses it. Viewed as performative literary responses (Sipe, 2002, 2008), embodied reader responses reveal a reader's meaningful manipulation of text that may jeopardize the teacher's instructional goals. Adding the lens of performativity (Butler, 1990, 1997), whose embodied performances get validated and whose get redirected, rejected, or reprimanded can depend on the reader's iterative embodied performances while reading. With this blended framework, performative responses risk critique when they oppose the instructional agenda, and even more so when fused with performativities that fall short of the ideal literate subject. In the end, both the reader's potential to construct valid meaning and the reader's identity get regulated.

As educators, we can pause when students' embodied responses oppose teachers' instructional objectives. We can ask our students and ourselves what performative constructions are linked to that response: What ideas, emotions, and experiences are fusing to construct that student's body-poem, and what is driving our interpretations of students' performances, our reading of their body-poems? Body-poems are both of the moment and of history, read by educators according to both a single performative response to a text and a history of performativity as a reader. Furthermore, if our literacy teaching is meant to be student-centered and help students question stereotypes and normative values, how effective is it if we continue to view students in fixed ways? The fact that the readers I spotlighted in this chapter are boys of color is certainly noteworthy as they are much more likely than other students to be surveilled in school (McDermott & Varenne, 2006). However, I repeat that limiting these matters to discussions of gender, race, or class is inadequate to understanding the interplay of student responses to texts and teacher responses to students.

To this aim, educators can also interrogate their own assumptions about social justice and critical literacy teaching and how they play out through literacy instruction. As in the examples of Roger, David, Tyrone, and my classmate James, opportunities for powerful social justice pedagogy are lost when we don't give voice to the responses that challenge our or the text's social justice missions. The focus on students' connection with the text obscures opportunities to help students question the assumptions and normative values behind their so-called deviant responses.

Furthermore, rather than strictly follow an agenda dependent on a text's literal content and students' connections to it, we can probe how we view readers' embodied performances as constructing and constructed by social identities. Regarding social justice and critical literacy teaching, Hagood (2002) writes it might be better to help readers investigate "how readers ... get produced and objectified in identities and how they construct new ways of being as they position themselves as texts" (p. 260). Understanding critical transactions via embodiment helps show that body-poems are continuously being generated by students, and that regulating certain bodies during everyday classroom literacy events based on perceived performativity hinders possibilities for nurturing the development of students' meaning-making and their identities as readers.

## Note

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## 4

## DISCIPLINED WITHIN A DISCIPLINE

## English Teachers Are Bound to Be Human Bodies

Christine A. Mallozzi

In the U.S. in 1980, the Commission on the Humanities stated, “Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question: What does it mean to be human?” (p. 1). Historical discourse around curricular humanities English (see Chubb, 1902; Corson, 1895) describes the movement at the turn of the twentieth century for English teachers to train students’ minds and shape their spirits, not necessarily to master a subject but to master themselves (Brass, 2013). If the pedagogical goal to keep students on the straight-and-narrow seems like a disembodied spiritual process, Foucault (1975/1977) reminded readers that there is no shaping of the mind and soul without the body and that no persons, including the teachers of those students, are exempt from institutional mechanisms focused on the body. This chapter will explore the material body in secondary English classrooms, specifically how the education of students’ minds, in Foucauldian fashion, is linked to the policing of teachers’ bodies as they enact sound English pedagogy. Stories from three women secondary English teachers show how the English discipline shapes teachers’ embodied pedagogies, and thus creates tensions in creating the embodiment of a “proper” woman teacher.

## Disciplining within the English Discipline

Given Foucault’s (1980) well-established relationship of power and knowledge and given Brass’ (2013) case that English studies in the U.S. was and is intended to shape students’ spirits and capacities toward good, I acknowledge a dual use of the word *discipline*. The warrant that students’ bodies and souls are disciplined (i.e., controlled through power) (Foucault, 1975/1977) within the discipline of English (i.e., domain knowledge) has weight. For example, students are expected to physically report to in-school English classes driven by timetables, curricular