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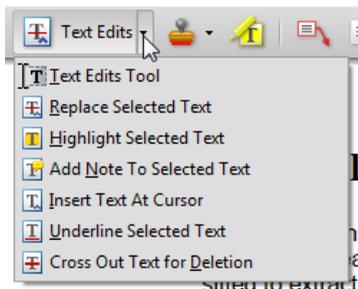
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Compositional and Critical Strategies for Feminine Writing in Performance

Benjamin D. Powell

5 *This essay celebrates the script and performance of Experiments in Écriture Féminine as markedly feminist acts that ground disciplinary conversations of adaptation and composition in the female body and in feminine form(s). This essay also argues that how these performance texts are composed and adapted are explicitly political, strategic, and*
 10 *feminist concerns that eschew masculinist preoccupations with order, linearity, and objective meaning.*

Keywords: Feminism; Composition; Adaptation; Interpretation; Feminine

15 Live performance takes many forms. Sometimes *what* the performance is communicating to an audience is much easier to discern than *how* that performance is communicating. Making meaning from a performance is a complicated process, particularly if that performance draws on forms of expression an audience may be unaccustomed to or unfamiliar with. What then does one do with a performance like *Experiments in Écriture*
 20 *Féminine* that specifically draws on theory that critiques the tradition of making a *correct, customary, or familiar* meaning out of texts and bodies? Brianne Waychoff and Kari-Anne
 AQ4 Innes give us clues: Error. *Erreur. Faut. Hope. Possibilité.* Although I was a respondent for the show when it was presented at Bowling Green State University in spring 2010 and at the National Communication Association annual convention that fall, my analysis and interpretation of *Experiments* is more exploration than evaluation. To help locate myself
 25 in the vast terrain covered by Waychoff and Innes's script and essay, I trace *Experiments* through three main questions. Number One. How do feminine modes of composition and interpretation affect the way(s) performance communicates to an audience and why? Number Two How does the explicitly feminist act of grounding the *place* of

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performance in women's bodies add to, enhance, or potentially renew disciplinary conversations about the politics of performance?

AQ2 Number Three. “[*The Seamstress sews in the shadows.*] —R. Bowman, 2003, p. 36” (Bowman and Bowman 213). In “On the Bias,” Ruth Laurion Bowman and Michael S. Bowman weave together a particular genealogy of performance studies that tracks the movement from Oral Interpretation to Performance Composition. Text from performed scripts, definitions from dictionaries, and sewing patterns combine with theory to create an essay whose formal elements metonymically reflect the arguments put forth by their analysis. Waychoff and Innes’s script and performance resonates much like “On the Bias” as a model for composing a mode of inquiry that poetically enacts the representational logic of their object of study as their mode of analysis. Bowman and Bowman use weaving, patterning, and alteration as their metonym, whereas Waychoff and Innes use *écriture féminine* as theirs. Significant to both is the movement away from more dominant or linear narrative paradigms toward the unfamiliar, particular, and circular models of constructing meaning. Put another way, both essays privilege feminine structures over masculine ones. *The Seamstress sews in the shadows.*

Both the script and performance of *Experiments* activate or produce the effects they are talking about as they talk about them. Hallucinatory excess is produced by the contradictions, repetitions, pulsations, and overflows that compete simultaneously for attention but offer no fixed place to locate meaning. By activating particular theoretical concepts of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, Waychoff and Innes rewrite the female body and feminine form over, against, and through themselves. *Two lips touching, never becoming one, touching not kissing, more than two, the woman has many.* The overflowing excess of the female body emerges as the site of invention for *Experiments* but never fixes the body as a vessel; the bodies in *Experiments* are wellsprings. In *Heuretics* Gregory Ulmer cites Barthes’s exploration of place and location, which notes

places then are not the arguments themselves but the compartments in which they are arranged. Hence every image conjoining the notion of a space with that of storage, of a localization with an extraction: a region (where one can find arguments), a *vein of some mineral*, a *circle*, a *sphere*, a *spring*, a *well*, an *arsenal*, a *treasury*, and even a *pigeonhole*. (33–34 original emphases)

Instead of locating place in a meaning that can be trusted to repeatedly signify the same thing, *Experiments* simultaneously uses the female body as the place where meanings coincide and as an underlying feminine logic to inform the process of extracting meaning. How the script and performance are composed reveal crucial information about the ways we could read either. Waychoff and Innes go to great lengths to remind us over and again that narratives of feminine writing rely less on unifying logics or generalizations, and emerge more in proportion to the pluralities and differences of the female body. Barthes calls this ability to appreciate and draw out the plurality that constitutes the text *interpretation* (6). *Notice that the back is bare, naked, which you did not notice before because you were drawn to the eye.*

Stigmata: One of the most striking aspects of watching *Experiments* is the complex relationship that develops and builds between the women's bodies and their *écriture féminine* index. What feels insignificant or maybe even odd the first time they perform the repeated movement sequence grows into a complex and hallucinatory interpretive refrain that expands, alters, and exceeds the index they continually draw from like a well. The particular actions of their female bodies performed at a particular time and in a particular manner then strategically repeated again and again is a political act of/as textual composition. The "soft" labor of women's bodies is all too often rendered invisible and insignificant in relation to more "hard" labor forms associated with masculine or male bodies. Waychoff and Innes explicitly mark multiple forms of women's bodies softly laboring in the movement sequence by composing different actions of the body itself—twirling legs, hair in hands, knees on floor, fists in crotch—and softly performing those seemingly similar actions differently. The paths carved out by the bodies onstage form a series of *systematic marks*. Barthes writes that there is

no other proof of a reading than the quality and endurance of its systematics; in other words: than its functioning. To read, in fact, is a labor of language. To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename: so that the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor. (11)

Similarly, the pattern of actions performed onstage are systemic marks of Waychoff and Innes's readings of *écriture féminine* composed in such a way that the *how* of the performance serves as the *what* of interpretation. The political act of rendering the labor of a woman's body visible is matched in the equally political act of composing the performance, of privileging one action over another in a particular moment of performance. This political economy of performance composition might also be called *adaptation*.

In "Adaptation," Paul Edwards summarizes the core dynamic of Linda Hutcheon's argument in *A Theory of Adaptation* that adaptation is a critical and political act. He writes that

an interest in the adapter's creative process (a story of writing that includes questions of motive and influence) relates to what she calls "the politics of intertextuality" (xii). What historical circumstances cause an adapter to replay a tale about religious martyrdom during the Reign of Terror in the key of Nazi atrocities? What personal circumstances drive us to make stories about real or fictional others resonate with, even allegorize, stories about ourselves? (373)

Waychoff and Innes use their performing bodies to create critical space for engaging *écriture féminine* as both a method and a theory. The play of denotation against connotation at the beginning of every new "sequence," the paradoxical nature of corporeal and linguistic citationality in their representational strategies, and the literalizing of the theoretical metaphors in their patterns of speech and movement are just a few examples of how Waychoff and Innes adapt *écriture féminine* in specific and

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particular manners that emphasize and imagine a complex performativity of both the female body and femininity. Perhaps more significantly, rethinking performativity in such a way imagines a future moment for the discipline to reclaim feminist practice in our collective discursive practice(s). The adaptation and patterning of feminist practice and theory that Waychoff and Innes sew into *Experiments* establish a crucial tie between the politics of everyday life and the politics of performance. Rather than solely focusing on what the performance says about everyday life, Waychoff and Innes explore how performance communicates back to the everyday. They mark their structures of communication as political acts by constructing meaning in particular, historicized, and material manners. Perhaps the most satisfying element of *Experiments* is its continued insistence on treating performance as more than a conceptual permission slip. Instead, Waychoff and Innes use the act of composing and performing to demonstrate what makes performance unique as a theoretical and practical mode of creating and communicating ways of knowing. *The texts that flee. The message is sent. Improper, unfinished, continually moving. Puffs of air.*

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