

A Corporeal Civics Education

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In Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, we encounter a homeless woman marked as a mother by the dolls she carries.¹ Aereile Jackson appears in a film about capitalism; the end credits identify her only as “former mother” (Can one be a mother when her children have been taken away, Sharpe asks). She haunts Sharpe’s meditation on embodied existence for black women and girls. For Sharpe, the “former mother” highlights the aftereffects of slavery on black women and girls and their “un/children.” Standing in for “the womb that produces blackness,” Jackson’s suffering is incomprehensible; she is the “abjection by, on, through, which the system reimagines and reconstitutes itself.”² In other words, Jackson, in Sharpe’s analysis, is reduced to a “racialexualgender” Black object.³

In Plato’s *Symposium*, we meet a female philosopher who draws on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth to contour the production of ideas.⁴ Though privileged with a name, Diotima, like Sharpe’s “former mother,” is hollow. Whereas the “former mother” is only her body, Diotima is suspiciously disconnected from hers. Plato conjures her character and then has Socrates speak for her. As contemporary readers of the *Symposium*, we have no way to know whether Diotima is, in fact, a mother, or is still raising children. Does it matter?

Though not texts in the same register, the *Symposium* and *In the Wake* underscore a perennial problem for feminists—what to do with the body, our body, in a society marred by colonial, racist, and patriarchal histories.⁵ This essay is about what it would mean to take seriously these bodies, our bodies—female, male, trans, black, brown, and other— as we write and think about education for democracy. Those of us who write about political agency and democratic education often look for spaces within our educational architecture where students are afforded the means and opportunity to affect their school and community. We tend to write about democracy as a way of life (democracy

as agency), inspect the grammar of education for signs of this life, and then carve out room for it to grow and keep growing.⁶ Agency, at its most robust, is framed as “the capacity to act with others in diverse and open environments to shape the world around us.”⁷ Accounts of political agency within democratic education that frame agency as the “capacity to act” assume the existence of a corporeal body. One cannot act without material means to do so. But the body is always in the background, never the foreground

Feminist and new materialist philosophers who begin with a theory of the corporeal argue that agency is a given; it is not granted, gifted, or acquired. Rather, agency is an aspect of the biological, corporeal animal, and education is the means by which humans intentionally expand their capacity for intelligent action as response-able members of the body politic. For these philosophers, to pay specific attention to the material efficacy of bodies is to focus on the ways in which the corporeal body acts, transforms, and participates in relations of power.⁸ “[L]iving matter structures natural and social worlds before (and while) they are encountered by rational actors.”⁹ Helping the young to make sense of their capacity to act and be acted upon (civics education), is bound to fail until we take seriously the corporeal materiality of human life. Until then some bodies (women, trans, black, brown) will continue to fertilize the ground on which other bodies (generally white men) demonstrate their agentic capacity to refuse, speak up and be otherwise.

What happens to women when we perpetuate theories of agency which presume agency is the product of education, socialization, and institutional organization? We become philosophical apparitions. In this essay, I focus on Diotima and the ways in which she is silenced via her disembodiment. I demonstrate how we might attend to the disembodied bodies in texts in order to initiate a conversation about a corporeal civics education. Drawing on feminist and new materialist accounts of political agency, I explore Plato’s *Symposium* to re-think our modern ideas about the efficacy of bodies in civics education. Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz, our task as civic educators, I argue, is to historicize the fluid and dynamic bodies we inhabit and construct.

THE SYMPOSIUM

The Symposium is a dramatic series of speeches about the relational education that happens in a troubled democratic society. Dramatically set in the same year as the Siege of Melos and during Pericles' rule (and thus at the height of an imperial Athenian democracy), the Symposium tracks the conversation of a group of love-struck, entangled, and semi-sober men as each man attempts to honor Eros. Though chock full of sexual imagery, it is a mistake to read this text as only about what happens between the sheets or due to the whims of the heart. The text depicts a gathering of prominent democratic citizens who construct the boundaries of public life. The speeches of these male citizens tell us something important about the role desire, sex, and bodies play in the composition of the democratic public.

In short order, Phaedrus lauds Eros for his benign guidance in gifting humans a sense of shame and honor. Pausanias distinguishes between a vulgar and noble love to justify the democratic benefits of a pederastic relationship. For Pausanias, the vulgar and common kind of love is attached to the body, which is associated with the female, while noble, heavenly love emanates from the soul and is purely male. Eryximachus, a doctor, waxes on about the balancing effects of love, likening medicine to farming and music where health comes from harmonious order. Aristophanes recounts a tale about human nature and three original humans—one male, one female, and one androgynous—with multiple sex organs such that when Zeus cut each in half the new two-legged humans set about tracking down their other half. Agathon argues that love is the ultimate teacher of anyone who desires to learn. It is the youngest, happiest, and most beautiful of the gods and responsible for all good things that befall humans—which brings us to Socrates, who takes exception to Agathon. Socrates first questions Agathon to prove that love is not sufficient in and of itself but is oriented toward need and therefore insufficient. Then, disavowing knowledge of love himself, Socrates recounts what he learned about love from a “wise woman.” Enter Diotima.

Though most characters in Plato's dialogues are drawn from Athenian society, Diotima is a fictional character and the only woman in Plato's corpus

of dialogues to play the part of philosopher. Much, therefore, has been made of her feminine presence. In “Why is Diotima a Woman,” David Halperin offers three reasons she must be a woman. First, if she were a man, that would mean Socrates was educated by a pederastic lover, rendering hollow Plato’s challenge to traditional pederasty practices as well as Socrates’ rebuffs of Alcibiades. Second, Diotima’s status as a woman allows Plato to make her an impartial teacher of his erotic doctrine. Third, Diotima’s sex is necessary given her teachings on “male pregnancy” and the reproductive experience. Furthering the conversation, Rachel Jones draws on Halperin, Luce Irigaray, and Hannah Arendt to argue that Diotima’s emphasis on birth contains resources for a relational pedagogy. As such, Jones argues, we ought to read her as more than just a masculine textual construction.¹⁰ In other words, because Diotima gives voice to the generative capacities manifest in pregnancy and birth and challenges the dominant ideal of the autonomous self and passive one-directional education, Diotima’s speech is a feminist corrective to relational pedagogy, or so Jones argues.

I am sympathetic both to Halperin’s contention that as a figment of the male imagination Diotima “does not speak for women: she silences them” and to Jones’ resuscitation of Diotima’s educative use of the body that births. Yet, what are we to make of a female textual construction who draws on the bodily experience of childbirth (experience that relegates women to an earthly love via her children) to argue that psychic birth offers a pathway to immortality for men?

The question of the male pregnancy has elicited heaps of attention over the years. Focusing on Plato’s use of *kuein* (to bear in the womb) and *tiktein* (to beget), J.S. Morrison, E.E. Pender, and Kenneth Dover all agree that for Plato male and female sex organs have a symmetrical purpose. Ejaculation is birth for men.¹¹ Thus, there is nothing untoward about the notion of male pregnancy. Feminists, meanwhile, have focused on the disavowal of the mother and her labor in any reading that equates childbirth with the production of philosophy. As Andrea Nye puts it, “She [Diotima] is the spokesperson for ways of life and thought that Greek philosophy feeds on, ways of thought whose authority Plato neutralized and converted to his own purposes.”¹² More still, Adriana Cavarero famously argues that Western philosophy begins with matricide and fantasies of

male self-birth, the Symposium being a pernicious example.¹³ And then there are those who disregard the whole conversation about bodies and birth because Plato's theory of the Forms is a theory of the incorporeal.¹⁴ Plato plays with gender because gender doesn't matter, says Angela Hobbs.

Yet as Stella Stanford points out, though the Forms demarcate the metaphysical context for Plato and the Symposium, it is not the "ultimate context for those who do not subscribe to his metaphysics."¹⁵ In fact, Hobbs misses the feminist critique all together. By virtue of being female, Diotima cannot participate in the relational pedagogy of democratic citizenship, i.e., pederasty, and the form of love she is most attuned to is common at best—or so say the men gathered in the Symposium. Neither Diotima, whose account of love is parroted by Socrates, nor Socrates bother to consider her corporeal lot. Nye gets it right—she is the foodstuff for philosophy. When one eats or feeds on another, they consume part of or all of another being's body. Though it is possible for the nourishing body to live and be consumed, it loses, nonetheless. As the breastfeeding mother nourishes her baby, she loses both time and calories that could otherwise be hers. Other sources of food are not so lucky: the cow that becomes a steak on your dinner plate gives its life.

Let us return to Diotima and the philosophical hay she/ Plato makes out of childbirth. Speaking of labor, she recounts, "whenever pregnant animals or persons draw near to beauty they become gentle and joyfully disposed and give birth and reproduce; but near ugliness they are foul faced and draw back in pain; then they turn away... and because they hold on to what they carry inside them, the labor is painful" (206d). Continuing to expound on male pregnancy a bit later, she tells the group that when one is pregnant in their soul, which appears to be a male affliction, he will seek out bodies that are "beautiful, and noble, and well formed... such a man instantly teems with ideas and arguments." He then "conceives and gives birth to what he has been carrying inside him for ages... And in common with him he nurtures the newborn; such people, therefore have much more to share than do parents of human children and have a firmer bond of friendship, because the children in whom they have a share are more beautiful and more immortal" (209c).

Although it's possible to imagine a woman in Plato's dialogues and to read Diotima's speech as a corrective to passive educative practices within the male relationship, it stretches the imagination to suppose that she would propose men feed on her embodied, material experience. I have a hard time believing anyone who has experienced labor would describe it as lacking pain so long as one is in the presence of the beautiful or equating the care for a child with the care for an idea. Though childbirth is not excruciating for everyone, regardless of one's take on the beauty of the moment, the body undergoes major physical trauma to grow and give birth to another human being.¹⁶ More still, I can leave my idea on a page, but I cannot simply leave my infant. Ideas and human children are materially different. The birth of a human child makes demands on my body that the birth of an idea has never made. An idea may spur you to write, keep you awake, or inspire you to eat differently (for instance someone contemplating veganism may change their habits), but it does not physically kick your bladder, do summersaults while you try to sleep, or scream for hours because you ate spicy food. The material experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are not equivalent to the generation of knowledge. When an idea keeps me awake, I roll over and jot down some notes. When my infant keeps me awake, I use my body to attend to her body and in so doing exhaust my capacity to think philosophical ideas.

Pregnancy and childbirth are philosophically and materially generative—anyone who has experienced or witnessed childbirth cannot but share in the awe. What strikes me as off about Plato's staging of Diotima is the crux of Platonic philosophy: as a woman talking about childbirth (and not a man puzzling over the proper ordering of knowledge), the absence of material considerations and matters of the body indicate Diotima's lack of agency. She is barred from both the realm of appearance and ideas.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISEMBODIED WOMEN

The absence of women's bodies does violence to the project of democracy insofar as it forcefully renders silent (chokes, strangles) the experience and knowledge of women. As productive but absent, the embodied processes of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are divorced from bodies that carry

this knowledge to fertilize the associative links of democracy. Following Kristie Dotson's work on epistemic oppression, Kate Manne notes that a woman can be silenced in numerous ways: you can put words into her mouth; you can make her eat her words; you can "train her not to say 'strangle' but rather 'choke' or better yet 'grab,' or best of all, nothing."¹⁷ To silence someone is to stifle what she was going to say (or has said), to train her to say something different, or to simply kill her.

Diotima is silenced in two ways. First, rather than inviting her to the party, Socrates presumes to speak for her. Second and more generously, assuming Diotima couldn't make the party and Socrates aimed to give her credit for her ideas, we would be remiss to overlook the ways in which Diotima's absence renders women the givers of life and men the caretakers of ideas. Though silencing can render someone voiceless, it also casts that person into a particular social script. Manne explains that people are people only when we can cast them into social scripts: "for only another human being can sensibly be conceived as an enemy, a rival, a usurper, an insubordinate, a traitor... in the fullest sense of the term."¹⁸ In other words, we place fellow humans into social scripts which allow us to organize, make sense of, and act on our world. Without social scripts, it would be quite difficult for us to tell stories about our journey through this life—narrative requires genre. The socially situated way of envisaging people posits agency less as the god-like ability to organize one's world and more as a capacity to jostle for position. In vertical social structures with men at the top, explains Manne, women are cast as givers. "In the form of service, labor, love, and loyalty," her personhood is owed to others.¹⁹ Social scripts are, therefore, necessary trappings of human life, but the social scripts currently propagated in a sexist, racist, colonist, and anti-corporeal society make inhumane demands on others situated down the vertical axis, such as women, via constraints on their ability to respond and act.

Though Manne argues that to "do justice in our theorizing to both agents and social structures, and also to the complex ways in which they are intimately related, with material reality, we must" understand agency as constituted at least in part by one's material environment, her analysis is suspiciously silent on the

implications of corporeality.²⁰ This is all the more suspect for the corporeal fact that women are cast as givers because of their biology. When Simone De Beauvoir said, “woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her into subjectivity...[while] Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles,” she was attending to the inescapable facts of the corporeal on our theories of human agency. Beauvoir was concerned about the ways in which the facts of corporeal existence are used to trap and determine women (and not men). She has the opposite issue from Manne; she acknowledges the constitutive elements of the biological on the social and thus wants to find a way to toss the corporeal and free the individual. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, both egalitarian feminism (Beauvoir) and social constructionists (Manne) pivot around opposite poles of the same problem: what to do with the body. For Beauvoir, the female body must be overcome/constrained, and, for Manne, the body is the natural base over which ideology/social scripts are laid. In both cases, the body is singular and irrelevant to political transformation.

To recap, as the giver of life, Diotima is too important to kill or strangle. Her body, willing or not, is the bearer of political transformation. So, Socrates does the next best thing. He neglects to invite her, parrots her ideas, and then takes her children (insofar as ideas and babies are equivalent for Socrates/Diotima) to use for his own philosophical purposes.

A CORPOREAL CIVICS EDUCATION

What if Diotima had been invited? What if women and bodies in their plurality had been taken into consideration? What if Plato’s Diotima had tied birth, natality, and the production of knowledge to a squirming, unruly, body who/that necessarily tests all bonds of friendship and sanity? At the very least, our notions of self, agent, and person might be less encumbered by conflicts with our corporeal existence. Perhaps, we might even have less trouble grappling with the plurality of dynamic, embodied agents. The distance between ancient Athens and contemporary America is vast. Women are philosophers, and we often get invited to the party. Moreover, feminists, like Elizabeth Grosz, have helped us see that “the specificities of bodies must be understood in their

historical rather than simply biological concreteness. Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only bodies—male or female, black, brown, white, large or small—and the gradations in between.”²¹

A corporeal conception of human agency takes seriously the agentic capacity of the body itself. The body, more than a vehicle for agency, is a constitutive component of the capacity to render another entity capable and to “affirm an individual subject’s existence through concrete action.”²² For new materialists like Elizabeth Grosz, corporeal agency is “a freedom of action that is above all connected to an active self, an embodied being, a being who acts in a world of other beings and objects.”²³ For Grosz, freedom/agency/autonomy, or the ability to act on one’s desires, is attained rather than bestowed and is better described as an embodied ability “to make activities one’s own.”²⁴ Sharon Krause, finding new materialism not properly attuned to the self, connects a new materialist notion of corporeal agentic capacity with liberal democratic theory. She argues that, whereas new materialism correctly speaks to the function of bodies and material assemblages, political theorists like Bernard Williams squarely prove agency must include some concept of the continuous self. To be an agent, one must have some sense of self, and this is not tantamount to rational thought or liberal conceptions of autonomy. A corporeal conception of agency does not cede sovereignty to a mind/self. To include a sense of the non-sovereign self in our definition of corporeal agency acknowledges “that there is indeed something to be affirmed through one’s actions, a self (however partial or evolving) that precedes any particular deed. It also implies a subject with sufficient reflexivity to be capable of recognizing herself—her character, her identity—in her actions and effects.”²⁵ Though I find sufficient resources to explore the role of an evolving, continuous self in new materialists like Grosz, Krause expertly stakes out the boundaries of corporeal agency for democratic politics.

Democratic politics requires grounds by which we can hold responsible persons and actants that produce undemocratic consequences. A robust conception of the corporeal, that is embodied agency, charts what is distinct for humans (note this does not make humans exceptional nor does it make them the only actors on the scene). Rather as a socio-material phenomenon, where

the arts of the self can and do lead to political change, corporeal agency erects a link between our material bodies and a self who/that thinks and tells stories. Until we know more about the material assemblages that render us capable, corporeal agency enables us to mark out the agentic capacities of embodied humans without diminishing the agency of other animals or engendering ontological hierarchies. Civic education that aims to generate innumerable active publics that can solve problems big and small needs curricula that facilitates students' ability to communicate, compromise, and form purposes. It also requires an abiding commitment to corporeal agency.

As a woman who draws on the experience of the body to explain her theories of knowledge creation, Diotima offers us a way to think about the productive and democratic consequences of corporeal agency. In her disembodied glory, Diotima demonstrates the ways in which our bodies prefigure others' expectations of us. She is positioned as the giver—cast into this social role because of the body she is presumed to inhabit. She is essentialized. Given Diotima's apparition-like state, we cannot know how her body contributed to her insight. We are left to presume Diotima inhabited a female body that had some experience with childbirth. Absent talk of the dynamic bodies we inhabit, bodies are liable to become Sharpe's "racialesexualgender" objects.

Agency has a bodily life. When agency is assumed to be the product of education, something one acquires only after they learn how to make rational choices or act in accordance with societal norms, then agency becomes a tool of the powerful. And when our visions of civic education stay silent about the role of our bodies in our determining the kind of experiences we seek or are introduced to, then oppressive social structures persist under the guise of democracy. Insofar as democracy is agency, both must be embodied. Failure to take stock of the material bodies that think thoughts and associate in the public will result in the re-casting of Diotima as Sharpe's former mother.

A corporeal civics education would connect the disparate elements of sex education, civics, and character education under the banner of teaching students to make sense of their embodied capacity to make activities their own. It would invite students to understand the material dimensions of embodied

activity. Bodies are dynamic, fluid, limited, and dependent assemblages through which we navigate this world.²⁶ The curriculum would dedicate more time to puzzling over our obligations to accommodate and understand the complexity of embodied social life. What is it like for you to inhabit that body? What is it like for me to inhabit this one? In classes like biology, students would deconstruct the category of nature, moving past essential categories and puzzle over the socially situated categories of flesh, body, and sex. In courses on human health and sex, instead of talking about consent as a rational activity that precedes sexual activity, students would study the ways in which what we agree to and desire is connected to what is happening with our bodies. In tandem, they might also puzzle over the embodied consent presumed in a democratic republic. In sum, the body and mind would unite via an explicit effort to historicize these/our bodies across the curriculum.²⁷ Diotima would take center stage.

A disregard for the interplay of material capacities of bodies and the linguistic construction of society in the theoretical space of democratic theory is dangerous. The productive absence of embodied women does violence to women and other marginalized social groups insofar as their experiences moving through the world, and therefore their agency, is continuously re-constructed in the hegemonic imagination. As a figment of the male imagination, women are bereft of their material bodies and of the social impingements that constitute their operations in the world. Thus, pedagogies of mutual and democratic education that are built on silenced women, even those that imagine a desirous, active female participant, condition women's entanglements under the legalistic checkbox of consent and silence them as they re-cast women into a degendered and disembodied democratic drama. A better way forward is to attend directly to the ways in which our bodies and social structures render each of us a political agent.

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2 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 29.

3 Sharpe, 43.

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5 See, Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

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7 Boyte and Finders, "A Liberation of Powers," 130.

8 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press Books, 2010), 19.

9 Coole and Frost, *New Materialism*, 20.

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17 Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4–5.

18 Manne, *Down Girl*, 153.

19 Manne, 173.

20 Manne, 74.

21 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, First Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19.

22 Sharon R Krause, "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics," *Political Theory: An International Journal of Political Philosophy* 39, no. 3 (June 1, 2011): 299–324.

23 Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 147.

24 Coole and Frost, 152.

25 Krause, "Bodies in Action," 302.

26 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999).

27 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 1990), 148.