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## The Fantastical Body and the Vulnerability of Comfort: Alternative Models for Understanding Body Image

*Arguing for new models of inquiry that interrogate body image from the perspective of intercorporeality, this article explores a research study conducted in a secondary school art class. Shifting analysis from the representation of body image to a tactile, sensuous, and experiential understanding of body image, I highlight the contradictions and tensions at work in understanding students' experiences of body knowledge. The article poses possibilities for thinking further about how pedagogy might work with and against the contradictions of body image.*

*Militant en faveur de nouveaux modèles d'enquête abordant l'image du corps selon la perspective de l'intercorporelité, cet article porte sur une recherche entreprise dans le contexte d'un cours d'art dans une école secondaire. En déplaçant l'analyse de la représentation de l'image corporelle vers une connaissance tactile, sensuelle et expérimentielle de l'image du corps, l'auteure met en évidence les contradictions et les tensions qui accompagnent les expériences des élèves relatives aux connaissances du corps. L'article présente des suggestions pour pousser la réflexion sur les réactions possibles de la pédagogie aux contradictions en matière d'image corporelle.*

### Introduction

The study of body image has been an important aspect of research on adolescent development. Researchers have argued that during adolescence body image begins to play a central role in how youth negotiate the contested terrain of their bodies (Driscoll, 2002; Oliver & Lalik, 2000). Such research contends that body image is a "concern" or a "problem" that needs to be reconciled. Moreover, body image research tends to represent body image as a discrete phenomenon that can be examined apart from the lived experiences of bodies and in doing so neglects to understand how body image is interconnected to embodied encounters.

In contrast, Weiss (1999) argues that individuals do not have one body image but rather a multiplicity of body images that are created through a series of corporeal encounters and exchanges. Body image as intercorporeality is an awareness of our body in relation to its gestures, movements, and positions in space. It is a responsiveness that is determined in relation with other bodies,

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objects, and the environment, in addition to the coordination and sensations of our own functioning body. This awareness in turn shapes our encounters with other bodies, thus rendering body image as integral to knowledge production and our relationship with the world.

Thus I argue that new models of inquiry need to be posed that interrogate body image as immanent and dynamic, informed through interactions and processes rather than maintained by substances and boundaries. With this premise in mind, I engaged in a six-month study into how secondary school students encounter, mediate, and understand the lived experiences of their bodies (Springgay, 2005a, 2005b, in press). The study emphasizes the complexities of body image and highlights the need to examine students' understandings of bodies from a perspective of intercorporeality. In this article, I argue for reconceptualization of body image from the perspective of the fantastical body.<sup>1</sup> I provide a brief summary of body image as equilibrium, which suggests that any movement or change to body image is in fact a stabilizing momentum. From here I offer a theoretical understanding of the fantastical body contextualized through students' art and conversations around the theme *comfort*. By way of conclusion I offer alternative models about how students might understand body knowledge. Moreover, an analysis of comfort as unattainable and vulnerable poses certain possibilities for thinking further about how pedagogy might work with and against the contradictions of body image.

#### *The Research Setting and Methodology*

The research setting was an alternative secondary school in Vancouver. Positioned in the school as an artist, researcher, and teacher, I designed and implemented a six-month curriculum for all students in grades 11 and 12 combined. Students were introduced to contemporary artists and their practices; participated in group discussions and written exercises; kept visual journals; and investigated and created performance, installation, and new media art.

Of the senior art class 13 students volunteered to be in the research study, and the classroom teacher was involved in all aspects of the research. Data were collected through a diverse range of methods including: observation collected through digital video and still images; written observations and reflections annotated in a visual journal; recorded interviews and group discussions; written assignments and students' visual journals; and student-created and researcher-created art works. A/r/tography, an arts-based methodology,<sup>2</sup> shaped continual analysis where daily reflections and material collected from the students informed the genesis of the project and navigated ongoing dialogue among all the participants.

Complexity thinking, according to Davis and Sumara (2006), maintains that systems are composed necessarily of parts that are diverse, self-organizing, self-regulating, and continually shifting in unpredictable ways. For example, bodies are composed of interconnected sets of complex systems such as cells, tissues, and organs. Each of these complex systems exists individually and in relation to each other to form and transform embodied responses and experiences. However, "because complex systems defy preconceived hypotheses mapping these responses, they remain inherently and productively elusive of predictions" (Stevens, 2005, p. 278). A/r/tography, like complexity thinking,

allows meaning to emerge more from what is absent, tacit, literalized, and forgotten than from what is present, explicit, figurative, and conscious. Therefore, the research that I highlight in this article is consistent with research understood in terms of the production of emergent possibilities and potentialities. Moreover, a/r/tography is poststructuralist in nature, insisting that no single meaning is intended. Rather, each time the work is viewed or read, new and individual meanings, purposes, and experiences are created, materializing multifaceted interpretations while simultaneously decentering the authorial voice.

A/r/tographical research emphasizes that the stories of identification are unfinished, multiple, and conflicting. Social analysis, writes Gonick (2003), “becomes a relational form of understanding in which both researcher and researched are engaged and there is no pretence that these encounters and the knowledge they convey are either transparent or innocent” (p. 59). Like other feminist poststructuralists I embrace the notion of a messy text, and as a result the images and stories shared in this study are marked by curiosity, not coherence. Although my aim is to unsettle any notion of what the adolescent bodied experience might be, it also, as Gonick so aptly suggests, “acknowledges that how ethnographic inquiry is organized, constituted, and accomplished will, to a large degree, determine the form and substance of claims it is able to make, resulting in an anxious fixing, unfixing and refixing” (p. 55). A/r/tographical research asks questions about what kinds of possibilities exist for writing and imaging lived experience. Like Gonick I reject a research model that sees theory as something to be tested and proven through research.

Although there is limited space to develop arguments for the use of a/r/tography, important for the reading of this article is an understanding that the students’ works of art and their conversations make up the research data, and so the art needs to be recognized on its own (not simply as described through students’ words) exemplifying the complexities of students’ understandings of body image. In *Places of Learning*, Ellsworth (2005) examines visual culture from the perspective of *in the making*. She positions these art forms as anomalies, places that are irregular, peculiar, or difficult to classify only when viewed from the center of dominant educational discourses. The students’ works<sup>3</sup> and their bodily-relational encounters that are the context of this article need to be considered from this perspective—not as things already made into concrete facts, projects to be taught, or metaphors for teaching and learning, but in the making—“harboring and expressing forces and processes of pedagogies as yet unmade, that provoke us to think or imagine new pedagogies in new ways” (p. 6). Similarly, *in the making* shifts our understanding of body image from that of representation to one premised on relationality. Before analyzing body image theories, I briefly look at one of the student’s videos in order to think about the rationales for a reconceptualization of body image as intercorporeality.

#### *Never Stop Thinking*

During the first few weeks of the research study, I noticed a woman at my gym wearing a t-shirt with the words “fat is not an emotion” printed across the front. I pondered such a blatant statement and laughed at the irony of a message intended to empower the individual body but continuing to imprison

it devoid of touch, sentient knowledge, and emotion. At school I asked a number of the students what they thought about the saying. They talked about how the importance of the intended message was displaced given that it disallowed what to them was a fundamental understanding of body image: feeling. The message, they argued, was meant to suggest that fat in the strictest sense should be understood from a body mass index perspective and prohibited an awareness of one's body in relation to other bodies, experiences, encounters, and the environment. It was poignantly summed up by one of the students: "It reduces the body to a piece of meat and forgets about how we live our bodies." Students showed me covers of popular teen magazines both of which had similar mottos emblazoned on their covers. Body image—at least as an emotion, it seemed—was being obliterated. If we could get rid of body image, then perhaps youth might adopt a healthier attitude toward their bodies. This I felt was absurdly wrong.

Although educators agree that body image is a complex phenomenon, they have often created overly simplistic curricular practices entrenched in the conviction that if we can teach students to be critical of the media and to understand the unreal possibilities of fantasizing and trying to achieve an ideal body, only then will we be able to repair body image. This educational praxis embraces the idea that adolescent bodies are diseased or unhealthy and in desperate need of control and restoration (Oliver & Lalik, 2000). This belief is problematic because it reduces body image to representation and does not account for tactile and emotional epistemologies (Boler, 1999). It also maintains an understanding of body image as static, fixed, and certain. Instead, as Oliver and Lalik advocate, education needs to provide students with alternative ways of living in the world: alternatives, I argue, that include vulnerability, uncertainty, and change.

Heather's (students selected their own pseudonyms) video *Never Stop Thinking* is an interesting visual example of pedagogical models of body image that fail to address the lived experiences of student's bodies in the construction of body image. In her video, Heather demonstrates the ability to critique the media as she manipulates images from fashion magazines, interviewing fellow classmates about their opinions of the media and its effects on body image. She and her friends are all too familiar with fashion magazines' air-brushing techniques and the limited possibilities of obtaining particular body types.

The opening segment to her video shows images torn from fashion magazines and placed in cardboard boxes. The women depicted in them seem to be imprisoned by fashion and standardized notions of body image. As the video sequences move through a series of similar images mostly depicting fashion models and film stars, the voice-over of Heather and her two friends alludes to the haunting reality of how youth negotiate the representation of body image in visual culture. The students are aware of the media's manipulation of body image and offer a somewhat humorous and sarcastic account of the absurdity of many of the models' poses, clothing, and body types.

In one film clip, Heather captures an advertisement for J. Lo perfume. She found an ad in a female teen magazine and the same ad in a magazine for popular music. In the female teen magazine, the model's gauze-like covering was less transparent, whereas in the music magazine, which she and her

friends believed was targeting male youth, the model was more visibly naked. Heather and her classmates could talk easily about the effects of such exploitation, the body as object, and the unreal representations of body types.

In fact their responses were almost too candid. I could not help but start to interpret their words as *schooled* in the sense that the students seemed adept at critiquing the media and the praxis of trying to achieve an “ideal” body type. Further to this was a strong understanding of how the circulation of images globally oppressed particular body types, whether it was through sex, age, or race. I recognize that these girls aged 15-17 may have already benefited from educational practices on body image; however, their responses also revealed a disturbing tension between the sterile understandings of body knowledge posed through media critique and their own lived experiences of body knowledge that they defined through comfort, feeling, and sensory experiences. Thus although I am not calling for an abandonment of body image education that includes media awareness, I wish to enable an alternative discussion of body image that examines students’ understandings of fantasy. I believe that these considerations will further enrich educational practices that include body knowledge. But first I provide a brief summary of body image theories that foster a stable yet pliable body.

#### *Body Image*

According to feminist scholars Weiss (1999) and Grosz (1994), the most salient characteristics of body image are: (a) The body’s plasticity and its ability to change continually its body image in response to changes in the physical body and/or the situation; and (b) the dynamic organization of body image offers an equilibrium that enables it to serve as a standard. Changes are then measured against this center or origin. These characteristics call attention to both the adaptability and the stability of body image, emphasizing that instability is in effect in continual renewal of a unified body image that is measured against standardized norms. For example, in Oliver and Lalik’s (2000) study with pre-teen girls, images of women provided a set of standards that they associated with being “normal.” Adopting different clothes, hair styles, or body shapes “represented one of the cultural codes or rule structures that linked them to others and provided them with a logic and set of criteria for a life well lived” (p. 56). Changes to the girls’ body image (i.e., through the manipulation of fashion) created a normalizing process. This normalizing process is always oriented toward a stable and unified body. In Heather’s video example, the girls’ conversations about the use of airbrushing techniques and the manipulation of models’ bodies illustrate an understanding of this normalizing process. No matter what style of garments are worn by a model or what features of a model’s body are highlighted, sculpted, or exaggerated, the overall effect is to comply with a standardized norm of beauty.

Another way of thinking about body image is from the perspective of body habits (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). These habits are the postures that we fall into such as sitting at a computer, driving a car, and walking. However, it is these habits that structure and bind our body. Some of the ways that we resist this boundedness is through “playing” such as clothes, decoration, and other body modification. Clothing—whether sporty or Goth—allows students to challenge and manipulate their body habits. However, as Grosz (1994) notes,

because body image is fluid, dynamic, and plastic, it has the ability to incorporate external objects into its postural model. For example, clothing, jewelry, and other accessories become part of the body's awareness and experience in the world. These objects are no longer objects, but understood as incorporations into the unified body image. Similarly, intermediate objects such as those defined as the abject (spit, semen, blood, urine etc.) are bound up with body image, resulting in the various investments accorded the body depending on psychological, interpersonal, and sociohistorical meanings. Thus over time even resistance is adopted into the habit body, marking and inscribing a set of norms that function to maintain the body's equilibrium. In the case of Emma and her friends, wearing clothing that was comfortable initially marked them as different from pop icons like Britney Spears who sport, in the girl's minds, uncomfortable low-rise jeans and belly-bearing shirts. However, the students' comfortable style of sweatpants soon became adopted as the norm.

Sociocultural models of body image, while locating the source of change as external to the body, also establish the adaptability of the body image toward unity and stability. Bordo (1997) locates two aspects of body image that are central in establishing the practice of change and stability. The intelligible body, which includes the academic, scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of the body, establishes the rules and relationships of the cultural conceptions of the body. The intelligible body is perceived of as a fixed, static, and certain body, often translated as the ideal body or a normal body. Each society, community, group, or individual has its own definition of what constitutes the ideal. So although it is virtually impossible to describe an ideal body as a particular size and shape, we do know, according to Bordo (1998), that the perfect body has tight, monitored boundaries. The ability to control and modify the corporeal schema to maintain equilibrium is a symbol of emotional, moral, intellectual, and physical power. "The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down,' firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control" (p. 294). The soft, loose, excess flesh threatens the borders of the body, the stability of the individual, and the premise that one is normal and in control of his or her life. The ideal body is excess-free, maintaining the borders between inside and outside.

To achieve this ideal body, a particular praxis is required, which is the useful body; body-sculpting, dieting, fashion, cosmetics, and body-grooming. In extreme cases of self-management, for example, anorexia, the body's desires have been rigidly contained. Weiss (1999) describes the body's maintenance of stability as the ability to accommodate slight changes in the corporeal schema over time. When the body schema becomes inflexible, the body dissolves into disequilibrium. Similarly, the letting go of self-control properly to contain and modify the body toward a unified state represents obesity. Although the useful body appears as an active body that is engaged in the process of change, it is a transformation marked by efforts to defend a static and stable corpus. It is an activity aimed at regulating and working the body to fit into a normative discourse of wholeness and unity.

It is clear from this cursory glance at body image theories that body image is defined by movement, but that this activity is oriented toward the main-

tenance and control of a stable body and is marked by borders and boundaries of containment. Moreover, excess is either something to be expelled or adopted into normalizing practices that aim to preserve stability. Alternatively, I focus on movement as fluidity, rendering body image as continual processes that are always becoming, always immanent, and that operate in resistance to determinate organization.

### *The Fantastical Body*

The fantastical body is one that conceptualizes corporeal difference through processes of creation. It is a body that is dynamic, creative, and full of plenitude, potential, and multiplicities. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conceptualization of the body as a series of processes, flows, energies, speeds, durations, and lines of flight is altogether a radically different way of understanding the body and its connections with other bodies and objects. The body, they argue, neither harbors consciousness nor is it biologically predetermined. Rather, it is understood through *what it can do*: its processes, performances, assemblages, and the transformations of becoming. Not only do they propose other models of materiality and encounters between bodies, but they also develop another understanding of desire. Desire, they contend, consists of processes, what can be produced, and the kinds of assemblages that are created. It is not a desire for something, a desire determined and organized through a norm, but a *desiring production* that makes its own connections. Grosz (1994) argues that this desire is one of articulation, contiguity, and immanent production. For Grosz and other feminist scholars, any model of desire that dispenses with the primacy of lack is worthy of examination.

Reconceptualizing desire as production (vs. lack), Deleuze and Guattari (1987) posit the *Body without Organs* (BwO). The BwO is a body without discrete organizing principles. This is not to say that it is an empty body, but that it does not organize itself according to hierarchical orders such as those associated with the functions of organs.<sup>4</sup> The concept of an egg helps to describe the processes of a BwO. An egg (embryonic) is a system of flows and intensities. It has no boundaries and represents potentiality before individualization. Its becoming is organized through various forms that could always have been otherwise: change is continual and inevitable. The BwO involves letting go of determinate properties; a deterritorialization that allows for new assemblages. This mutable, amorphous body knowledge resists predisposed patterns in exchange for assemblages that continually mutate and transform. Lorraine (1999) suggests that the BwO opens awareness to creative processes by challenging "one's sense of corporeal boundedness and one's social identity as well as one's perceptions and conceptions of everyday life" (p. 171). It is a concept that challenges the traditional mind or body dualism of Western thought by focusing on processes rather than substances, the body's becoming subverting conventional boundaries while suggesting new forms of living in the world.

Irigaray (1993) argues that touch is the first sense that continues throughout existence. For Irigaray, subjectivity is premised on sentient knowledge, a felt, fleshy, and material encounter between beings. The fantastical body borrows from the concept of the BwO, most notably its organizing principles: processes rather than substances and its refusal to be contained or determined by fixed

boundaries. Similarly, the fantastical body is material, sensuous, and tactile. Fluid, uncertain, and ambiguous, the fantastical body attests to body knowledge as intercorporeality. Changes to the fantastical body are modifications, new assemblages that challenge determinate organizing principles, interrogating bodied encounters and offering possibilities and potentials to engage actively with the world. In the following section, I turn to student art that points to the contradictions and tensions at work in understanding body image and posits the possibilities of thinking through a fantastical body.

*Un/attainable Comfort: Students' Understandings of Body Image*

*A soft fuzzy blanket lies folded on the floor. Nearby a large pillow from the same fabric invites you to nestle yourself comfortably within its flesh. A pair of slippers appears discarded, the body left to lounge on the soft folds of blanket and pillow. The slippers look warm and comforting until you notice that they are studded with thumbtacks, the fierce sharpness threatens your feet. The blanket and pillow also allude to this false sense of comfort. The blanket is stitched together so that it cannot be unfolded and the pillow, full of hard cardboard and paper, makes it a less than luxurious place for your head. There is a tension at work between the sensuousness and extravagance of the fabric, the generous size of blanket and pillow that invite the body into its folds, and the exposure to harm from the thumbtacks. The space is fraught with conflict, frustration, and pain, while simultaneously conjuring up notions of warmth, delight, comfort and frivolity. Hot red and plush. Danger, a warning.*

"Un/attainable Comfort" is an installation created by Jamie, Emma, and Maura. It operates on a number of levels attesting to the uncertain and fragmented terrain of body knowing. Jamie, Emma, and Maura are joined by some of the other female students in the class. We hover in the back of the room to talk as Trinity, with help from Emma, glues dried flowers to the skirt of her art piece.

Alexandria: When people first see it they think ... Oh ... I like it. It looks warm and cuddly and comforting, and then when you are actually closer you see you can't unfold it, it's actually stuck together.

Emma: Because in fashion magazines all those dresses, the tight jeans ... and its not comforting. But it looks really nice.

Alexandria: It's taking something that is comfortable and making it uncomfortable.

Emma: Jeans could be comfortable but not the ones that barely cover anything.

Trinity: Comfort is important especially in the world today, especially with Fashion. Things are advertised more as looking beautiful ... not so much about feeling comfortable. I think it's important that you feel comfortable in it; that's much more important than actually looking or being a part of the trend.

Emma says that particular clothes are less comfortable than others. The girls cite the fashions worn by pop stars like Britney Spears, fashion models, and even some of the more everyday clothing that adolescent girls wear—very low-cut jeans that expose the pelvic bone—as uncomfortable. Emma personally does not find these types of clothes appealing. As the girls sit in a circle discussing the latest uncomfortable fads, I notice that two of them have their sweat pants dropped well below the waist with the tops of their underwear, brightly colored thongs, peeking out at the waistband. Another is wearing pelvis-revealing jeans. As the conversation continues and in subsequent weeks

when we revisit the theme of comfort, the girls all agree that comfort is an important aspect of body image. However, comfort, I discover, is itself not a stable and static signifier. Comfort, they tell me, is the ability to choose what you want to wear based on (a) how you feel (emotions), and (b) what image you want to project.

Emma: You can dress sporty or chic then you start wearing sweat pants and it's not that you are trying to express that you are a slob but its comfortable. You just change the way you dress all of a sudden.

Jamie: There are two different ways people can dress-in whatever they feel like wearing. Or people trying to be something they are not.

Dressing differently, Alexandria explains, is dependent on moods or emotions. If you feel a particular way in the morning you will choose clothes that reflect that mood. She continues to describe moments when sweats would be more preferable to dressing up, for example, when you are stressed and have a test.

Alexandria: One day you'll wear heels and a skirt to school and the next day you're in sweatpants next day jeans.... one day you feel like dressing up and the next you don't care and I'm not going to shower today because I don't give a crap and then you just go to school.

Emma: Dressing goes with what you feel like and your mood for the day. If you're really grumpy or tired ... clothes are a statement of how you express yourself.

Alexandria: On Valentine's day, not my favorite day of the year, I dressed all in black.

Maura: Also, if you get older. Different clothes mean different things. Some of my clothes express myself when I was younger.

One might assume that the girls understood emotions as stable internal markers that exist before the signification of clothing. Yet Emma shared an example of wearing sweats, which seemed to be the clothing of choice when feeling stressed due to the pressures of school. Emma said that the opportunity to come to school in comfortable clothing shifted her mood from anxious to being relaxed. "Sometimes I just put on sweats because I'm tired, but then during the day the comfort of the clothes makes me feel less tired. I sort of feel happier."

Young (1990) reminds us that body experiences are often imagined through tactile sensation and the pleasure of cloth. The material-semiotic nature of fabric allows for both tactile sensations of skin touching cloth and sensuous bodied knowing characterized through memories associated with the pleasure of wearing clothes. Describing women's fascination with clothes, Young suggests that women's imaginative desire stems from three pleasures associated with the body: touch, bonding, and fantasy.

By touch I do mean that specific sense of skin on matter, fingers on texture. But I also mean an orientation to sensuality as such that includes all senses. Thus we might conceive a mode of vision, for example, that is less a gaze, distanced from and mastering its object, but an immersion in light and colour. Sensing as touching is within, experiencing what touches it as ambiguous, continuous, but nevertheless differentiated. (pp. 182-183)

Touch as a primary mode of perception displaces the measured and distant gaze with a desire that immerses the subject in fluid continuity and a folded relation with the world. Touch ruptures the containment of the body as unified and discrete, rendering the body permeable and porous.

Young (1990) contends that touch is a form of relating to another, a relation that is contiguous and folded, not premised on possession or objectification. Alexandria remembers a particular sweater with fondness, telling us that when she wears it, it alters her mood, making her happy. Maura concurs, describing a few articles of clothing that she still has from elementary school that remind her of past experiences and encounters. Alexandria and Maura often share clothes, a bond that Young describes as intimate and relational, "As the clothes flow among us, so do our identities; we do not keep hold of ourselves, but share" (p. 184). The encounters between beings, the relations formed through clothes, allow us to touch and enter into each other's lives. Knowing is formed with, in, and through the folds of cloth, the lived emotional experiences of wearing, touching, and being caressed. The emotional, tactile, and embodied experience of clothing is often glossed over in schools. Instead, too often teachers criticize students for wearing particular types of clothing or for spending so much time focused on something that is interpreted as frivolous and meaningless. Yet clothing offers sensuous pleasure, tactile experiences of knowing self and other, and the comfort of being able to embody outwardly emotional sentient knowledge. Instead of structuring educational practices that limit students' self-obsession with fashion, understanding it as unhealthy and inappropriate, curricular practices would benefit from acknowledging the emotional and interpersonal meaning of fashion (Springgay & Peterat, 2002-2003). Although this may seem to be a simple tautology, educators often neglect to inquire into the conditions that produce particular appeals to clothing and the emotional, tactile, and comforting experiences of clothes. Writing about dress stories, Weber and Mitchell (2004) suggest that dress can be understood as a "method of inquiry into other phenomena and issues" (p. 253), stressing the performative nature of wearing clothes. Dress as a mode of inquiry allows individuals to interrogate their own embodiment and bodied encounters.

The students describe comfort as the ability and desire to change what they wear and thereby change who they want to be. For example, the students tell me that if they dress sporty, it does not mean that they are sporty people, just that their *image* is sporty. *Image* they define as what you project on the outside, usually determined "through clothes and fashion." Fashion is more than the objects that make up its constitutive parts (clothes, make-up, hairstyle, jewelry, body art), but also how you choose to wear particular clothes, an example being the underwear craze that swept through the school (underwear showing above the waistline of pants). This outside image the students believe can be different from who they are on the inside.

Ming: If you change outfits you can be something else. So that's also to do with image and not your body. 'Cause your body is the same day to day but you change clothes and you are a completely different image.

I ask her to clarify.

Ming: Your outfit is your image. If I was to wear fishnet stockings, high heels and black eye make up I would be a completely different image I'd still be the same person the same body just a different image. You can completely change your clothes and still be your own personality. But if I was looking at you then I would think your personality would be Goth.

Ming's articulations reflect on one hand split subjectivity, where the seeing subject is limited, restricted, and objectified through the other's gaze (Young, 1990). Young asserts that women's split subjectivity undermines the integrity and agency of the self. Split subjectivity occurs when women become aware of their bodies as others see them. Young advocates that women need to overcome this split by accepting the limitations of their bodies.

I hesitate to assign such a reading to Ming's words. She and many of the other students spoke at length about the opportunities that the fluidity of body image provided. This suggests, contrary to what Young (1990) says, that change can be an interrogation, a masquerading possibility, a becoming of alternative and imaginary body schema that was created through intercorporeal—touching encounters. In this way the splitting becomes a folding: an opening that intertwines experience in and through the body.

Intercorporeality is an important aspect of students' understandings of the fluidity of the body. Ming believes that who she is on the inside does not have to be reflected externally. This is not to suggest that internal and external body images are in opposition to each other, nor is one striving to maintain and stabilize the other. Rather, the splitting of inside and outside should be understood as a fold, where experimentation and assemblage become determining factors. Change is fragmented, vague, and not assembled by any predetermined organization. It was a change of becoming, a creative flow of potentiality. Changes to body image were not efforts to achieve an ideal norm, nor to maintain a practice of a true inner self; rather, body image alterations were conditions of subjectivity in themselves. Therefore, educational models premised on acceptance of the body's limitations fail to address the unlimited potentialities of the fantastical body. Corporeal agency is found in the multiplicity of body images, which destabilize the normalizing practices of a specific body image. The fantastical body allows us to create a sense of corporeal fluidity.

The students believed that changes to one's body image were about *imaginary possibilities* that you could *be*, if even for just a moment, what that image projected. For example, wearing sporty clothes even if you never played sports allowed you to try out the image of being sporty. Similarly, if you dressed Goth you were not necessarily Goth, but were trying it out for that moment. These articulations had less to do with others' perceptions of you, but more with fantastical options that change provided. And yet this was not solely a personal change. Although change was not *for* another, it was created in and of an encounter and therefore in relation to another. Others' perceptions of you were part of shaping the fantasy of becoming. The perception provided through encounters did not split the subject, but rather opened up fantastical opportunities. Therefore, body image needs to move away from a position of splitting to one that embraces the idea of folding: an open, ruptured, fantastical body.

Instead of change toward equilibrium, change is a process that is dynamic and multiple.

The ability to change body image underscores the importance of thinking through the fantastical body as one that is not defined by boundaries. This shifts body image from a self-image defined by limited borders toward an understanding of corporeality as a process of becoming with multiple points of convergence in an infinite world out of which body images are not only formed, but also continually reworked and assembled. The fluidity of body image thus poses alternative possibilities for living in the world. Alternative corporeal schemas, according to Weiss (1999), provide “subversive tactics available for undermining social constraints on what bodies can and can’t do” (p. 74). Thus instead of perceiving the body as a set of discrete characteristics, the body needs to be retheorized from the point of view of processes. Bronwyn, the art teacher, reflects on this: “We always think that when you put something on you become it. But students don’t see it this way. There is an idea of things not fitting; a mutability, a trying things out.” Change is welcome not because one image is more important or desirable over another, but as an interrogation of what it means to live as a body in and of the world. The fantastical body provides students with unlimited possibilities, the potential of which they understand as comfort. However, comfort is not a static condition, but a process marked by its own vulnerability and new assemblages.

“Un/attainable Comfort” challenges subjectivity and the protective mechanisms surrounding the body. There is an illusion between the softness and the hardness of the pillow and the threat posed by the tacks. It creates a discordant perceptual system between what looks soft and easy to penetrate and something that cannot be opened, used, or made accessible. It is this *vulnerability* that is open for discussion.

Despite the openness to the students’ investigations, there remains a sense of literalness to this piece, especially through the incorporation of materials that lend themselves immediately to issues of representation. In fact it is the title that is most telling. It is not the notion of something being uncomfortable that the girls are exploring in this piece. Although each would describe in various ways what is or is not comfortable, their piece speaks to the idea of *comfort* as something that is un/attainable. Having used the virgule often in my writing (in the class), the students picked up on this doubleness and used it in their title to attest to the vulnerability and uncertainty of comfort. Is comfort a source of strength or power that is conditional on the basis of whether it has been voluntarily embraced, or whether it has been imposed on one’s subjective experience of the world?

The pieces all positioned on the floor invite viewers into a compromised proximity to the work without any physical awareness that they have crossed a spatial threshold. There is ambiguity between being drawn to the work, our desire to touch and experience the flesh of the soft fabric, between our visual understanding of something from a distance and the reality we face when up close. There is a relational awareness of one’s own body in position to this art piece.

Because the blanket and the slippers are on a human scale, the pillow seems oversized, looming larger than our bodies, accentuating the threat of violence,

insecurity, and the vagueness of belief in the comfort that these articles offer. In conversations with the three students, we agreed that the scale could have been manipulated even farther in both the blanket and the pillow, allowing the slippers to function as a marker for our own bodies in relation to the piece. The viewer's vantage point becomes precarious, as it is necessary almost to move over the piece to see the tacks and to pick out the stitching in the blanket and the sharp contours of the pillow. The visceral experience of invitation is pushed to a limit without even employing the human touch. There is a threat to resolution that is displaced by the realization that new knowledge and experience do not after all provide one with reconciliation. Instead of seeing new structures that simply replace existing ones, it is in the perilous penetration of instability that knowledges past and present come together and are reworked.

### *Conclusion*

"Un/attainable Comfort" became a focal point in class discussions about notions of comfort and in particular students' understandings of bodies and knowledges. Comfort, they argue, is not a bounded space, but a threshold. This threshold allows new and alternative assemblages to be created without any predetermined model of organization. The threshold differs from a boundary in that it is not a limit that holds things in place, but is the experience of being exposed, open, and folded.

Instead of understanding body image as a limit or as a splitting of self, an awareness of one's body marked by inside and outside, body image awareness through comfort and the fantastical body becomes a means to interrogate limits. Comfort challenges us to think through touch and proximity such that limits are recognizable precisely because they are unfamiliar, and it is in the uncertain terrain of unfamiliarity that body knowledges become unraveled, enabling us to imag(e)ine educational possibilities that focus on the fantastical body, rather than simply a critique of body image as something needing repair. Body image understood through the fantastical body offers insights into students' understandings of tactility, sensuality, and emotions—rupturing a place for embodied knowing in teaching and learning.

The girls' conversations and installation illustrate the tensions at work in adolescent understandings of body image. On one level, there is a split between a visible, observable, and therefore knowable outside and a hidden, private, and thus more authentic inside. The girls are clearly drawing on modernist discourses of the self that suggest there is something deep inside us, an ideal or authentic self, about which knowledge is possible. Ming's articulation of self suggests a theory of subjectivity that links discourses of recognition with those of identity. Identity is not simply a matter of self-identification, but rather is also shaped by the recognition or its absence by others. And yet comfort, so clearly defined as neither interior nor exterior and as something vulnerable and un/attainable, complicates modernist understandings of self and other, private and public. The ability to fantasize about changing clothes and thereby changing image, and the embodied interrelations of touching fabric ask alternative questions about how students might understand discourses of the body. What are the experiences that are mediated as an effect of a fantastical body? How is the fantastical body implicated in the relations of schooling? How is the fantastical body implicated in the production of "becom-

ing somebody"? As they attempt to grapple with these questions about bodies/knowledges in the making, the girls' use of art-making seems a particularly provocative choice. "Un/attainable Comfort" poses certain possibilities for thinking further about how pedagogy might work with and against these contradictions. The fantastical body allows students "to explore fantasies and fears, enact relations that would otherwise be restricted if not taboo, or temporarily dissolve boundaries, facilitating a loss of distinctiveness of the border between self and other" (Gonick, 2003, p. 182). Moreover, this type of work may open the possibility of accessing various forms of internal otherness, or as Butler (1993) suggests, the "constitutive outside." Pedagogical practices that attempt to work across the contradictions between self and other, private and public, body and image bear witness to these contradictions, inviting students to bring them together, to examine them, to experiment with engaging them differently in the world. Shifting the terms of representation, the artworks and all of their tensions and contradictions may eventually produce transforming ideas that may work toward thinking about the world relationally, where "the goal is not to undo our ties to others but rather to disentangle them; to make them not shackles but circuits of recognition" (Gonick, 2003, p. 185). "Un/attainable Comfort" enabled the girls to perform a fantastical transformation and an active reworking of embodied experience.

#### Notes

1. The impetus for theorizing the fantastical body originated during a research project that I was involved in with Linda Peterat at the University of British Columbia. This research project investigated implications and students' understandings of a secondary school fashion show (Springgay & Peterat, 2002-2003). Although I have expanded on this understanding of the fantastical body, it is imperative to note that its conception grew out of conversations with adolescents in addition to a visual experience with their textile creations.
2. A/r/tography is an interdisciplinary methodology that examines the multiple sites of visual and textual interfaces. As a methodology it proposes a complex interweaving of image and word and draws on a diverse range of theories and practices. For theoretical and conceptual arguments regarding the field in addition to examples of a/r/tographical research, see de Cosson (2003); Irwin (2003); Irwin and de Cosson (2004); Springgay (2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b); Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005); Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, and Gouzouasis (2007).
3. Images can be accessed through the research Web site: [www.springgay.com](http://www.springgay.com).
4. The BwO is not empty. Like zero, which is a number, it is a place of potentiality. Anything undivided by zeros is undefined, not absent, but cannot be articulated by any other system or number. Zero is intensive.

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