

## **Abstract**

What constitutes ‘knowledge’ that we acquire, and how do we acquire it? Through Donna Haraway’s theoretical reconfigurations of objectivity in conversation with D.W. Winnicott’s theory of transitional phenomena, I explore constructions of knowledge creation, particularly as exemplified by my personal history as a swimmer and swim instructor. How does authority factor into knowledge creation? Is there knowledge gained through pain, pleasure, and eroticism? These personal and theoretical explorations leave me with more questions than answers as I wade through concepts of viscosity and fluidity. Viscosity, or the degree of resistance that a substance or ‘thing’ possesses, is a fundamental underlying theme; resistance serves as a key component of care and attentiveness and as a method by which objects reclaim participation in their own observation. Can fluids and water be viscous in their resistance? How does water serve as a metaphor for femininity in its resistance to observation or mastery? This viscous project utilizes resistance and fluidity as structural tools to weave personal narrative with theoretical understanding. My goal is not a finished product of answers, but instead a body of work dripping with questions.

Viscous Knowledge  
Water, Gender, and Learning

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## Introduction

I have had the same recurring dream about tsunamis since I was a high school student – a massive, roaring, navy blue wave looming so high that it surpasses my line of sight. I watch the wave grow and grow, deciding if I will dive headfirst into it or futilely attempt to avoid it. In my dream, the wave never crashes.

As I have been discussing, exploring, and questioning many of the theoretical texts that I attempt to converse with in this work, these sessions of knowledge creation seem to resemble this massive wave. I would sit with my advisor, Christian, and my friend and thought partner, Jazmyn, and we would begin to warm up, gently stretching our minds to understand and question the topics at hand. Things would begin to build, and suddenly I would be completely lost in our discussion, swept up in the movement of theory as it is defined and understood by the practical, distinctions between practical and theoretical becoming as blurred and viscous as the sticky dichotomies I will discuss in further chapters. Our discussions would leave us with new sets of questions, new areas to explore, moments of clarity swimming in depths of murkiness.

These thesis sessions, like my dream waves, never crashed – there was never one catastrophic moment where things made sense or came to an organic conclusion. I found I could reach stopping points and attempt to synthesize, but the satisfactory (and destructive) crash of the tsunami never came. Thesis sessions became as much like the waves of my dreams as workouts;

much like how my wave gained momentum but never crashed, my workouts would include a warm-up before a sustained aerobic effort, often with no final or grand finale.

This body of work, a viscous interweaving of personal narrative and theoretical conversation, is my wave, the workout. It is my intent that this introduction warm you up, prepare you for the exercise ahead that we will be doing together. The wave is building, but like in my dreams, it will never break. This work is followed in sets of questions, constellations of thoughts that are explored and later revisited in an effort to make better sense of those questions. Definitive (destructive) answers were never my goal, and the questions that remain may leave this wave poised at its highest crest.

I began year-round swimming at four years old. My parents put me in a winter team program for kids under age six at the YMCA the winter I would turn five, and the only requirement of the program was that you could swim one length of the pool without stopping to grab the wall or the lane-line. I had actually never been able to complete that task when my mom signed me up, but I remember my dad looking at me and saying, “You can do it – just don’t stop. Simple.” I swam and competed year round from that point until halfway through my first year of college.

I arrived to the Mount Holyoke swim team entirely burnt out. When I quit halfway through my first season with a shoulder injury from overuse and a pissed off attitude, I was unsure of how I was going to keep myself involved in any kind of swimming community – a community that had helped me through some of my most painful moments growing up. A second-semester senior, who told me that she also had quit the swim team after her first year, invited me to help her with Project SPLASH, a project that she was starting in conjunction with some of her academic work – a project that would provide free, one-on-one swim lessons to

children with disabilities in the Pioneer Valley once per week. She needed volunteer instructors, and she was hoping just to get the program off the ground in her last semester. She was hopeful but unsure of how the program might turn out, and she was definitely unsure of what might happen to it after she graduated.

After a few weeks working as a volunteer instructor, this senior invited me to shadow her responsibilities as head coordinator of the program in the hopes that I would take over after she graduated. I did, and have since been running the program, more recently along with a captain of the swim team as co-coordinator. I took great satisfaction and pride in watching this senior's first brilliant skeleton of a program gain flesh and blood as our numbers of participants nearly tripled in size, and funding, equipment, and publicity grew. I have continued to teach students for the past four years, serving as a substitute at least once for almost every student in the program and working continuously with some of the same students for years. Working and learning with these students rehabilitated my relationship with the pool, and it became a fascinating arena to contemplate how and why water was a unique space for knowledge creation.

These lessons, then, were the initial inspiration for this work, the production site for some of the questions that guide this exploration. In watching my students learn and changing my methods of teaching to fit what we needed, it seemed to be a practical place from which to engage in discourse around knowledge creation, fluidity, dependency, viscosity, and objectivity. But in contemplating some of the questions that have arisen in my time with Project SPLASH, I have found that my own years of experience in the pool are just as much a component of my contextualization of water and learning. Athleticism, pain, care, and growth have become crucial aspects to this work, both as they relate to the teaching of swimming and to the practice of swimming.

As you will see in the chapters that follow, I am and hope to be constantly engaged in discussions around what knowledge is validated, to be taken seriously, and considered ‘real’ or proven. Reflexivity in observation and academic work is not just a Foucaultian<sup>1</sup> confession of an observer’s privileged or subordinated identities, but a constant flexing, pushing, and contemplating of one’s own memories and experiences in conversation with the observing or theorizing being done. To simply uncover and discuss my own narrative would be incomplete and self-serving, while a work of dry theory devoid of personal context would be dishonest. You can then expect to wade into a blend of the two, a blend that hopes to deconstruct how these two ‘categories’ of knowledge, personal narrative and theory, would ever have been entirely distinct in the first place.

I start with an exploration of viscosity that serves to influence the entirety of the work. What is viscosity, and how do we understand it, materially or immaterially? I use Nancy Tuana’s piece “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina” to develop a working definition – or rather, set of questions and inquiries – around viscosity as both a sticky, material substance that resides in the undefined space between solid and liquid and as a quality of resistance, be it literal or not. Viscosity serves as the water that runs through each of the proceeding chapters, particularly serving as a starting point for discussions of objectivity and knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault wrote in his *History of Sexuality, Vol. I* of the role of confession in the construction of discourse surrounding sex and sexuality, particularly in the Victorian era. Instead of considering the time period to be the critical age in which societal standards dictated a silence around sex and repression to sexuality, he looks at the Christian (particularly Catholic) practices of confession to be ones in which discourse around sexuality is *created* instead of stifled (Foucault, 18-19). His work explores the eroticism in the act of confession. Andrea Smith has written of people using verbally and performatively ‘owning their privilege’ in activist spaces as an act of confession: “The benefits of these confessions seemed to be ephemeral ... the sayer of the confession could then be granted temporary forgiveness for her/his abuses of power...” (Smith, 2013). Smith’s interpretation is one that I find to be particularly relevant in practices of reflexivity in philosophical or anthropological research.



Who creates knowledge, how is it created, and what is done with it? These three questions are fundamental in my first chapter as I set Donna Haraway and Karen Barad in conversation with one another, interlocking and drawing distinctions between Haraway's situated knowledge and Barad's agential cut. As Haraway reconfigures objectivity to be a way of partially knowing an object through an embodied lens, Barad determines the agential cut to be a way for observer to temporarily objectify the object of study, drawing a particularly contextualized distinction between observer and observed in that space/time. By exploring these two theorists in conjunction, I am able to bring in memories of my own knowledge creation in the water and my experiences creating knowledge collaboratively with my students. With both theory and story, I am able to explore vision and liminality as key components of a constantly shifting inquiry into objectivity.

I then pick up threads of dichotomies and oppositions introduced in my first chapter with the relation between solidity and fluidity to discuss the concept of the spectrum as a theoretical framework in Chapter 2. Jacques Derrida and an incorporation of logocentrism then becomes a way in which to critically question the spectrum and any conceptualizations of it as a de-binarizing or deconstructive concept. How is this gendered? Logocentrism becomes a framework with which to understand not only a binary gender system but also how assumptions that one could produce disembodied knowledge is masculinist. This second chapter is as much an exploration of psychoanalytic concepts as it is an attempt to stay afloat in my own personal gendered experiences and identity.

In my third chapter, I bring D.W. Winnicott into the conversation, exploring his concepts of transitional phenomena. Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst known for his work on object relations, describes ways of learning for babies and toddlers, particularly their use of one specific

object with which to understand and interpret the world. His work on playing and experiencing brings a new element of practicality to the theories of both Haraway and Barad, providing for an extensive study of water, pool water or settled water, as a transitional object. How can it serve as one? What is learned abstractly when water is the site of learning? And how does this concept of the transitional phenomenon shift when it is applied to water that is deemed ‘overwhelming,’ such as the tsunami, as opposed to water that is ‘rehabilitating,’ even though any water could drown you?

I then expand on viscosity as resistance through concepts of compassion and care. As I work with students, modeling water as a transitional object, I practice forms of compassion, and Winnicott and Eva Kittay create a conceptualization of compassion that is as much resistant as it is caring. What sort of resistance do we need to grow, and how did I experience such resistance in my own swimming career? In this chapter, I question the independent, self-sufficient hegemonic model of personhood, understanding it to be as much of a fallacy as the entirely disembodied thinker that I unpacked in Chapter 1.

These conversations then turn from compassion to pathologization, pain, and pleasure in my final chapter – an inquiry into knowledge of a different sort. Here, I explore my own history of athleticism in conversation with Foucault’s writings on pain and euphoria. Particularly, as Foucault inquired into communities of sadomasochism, he explored the relation of pain and euphoria to the undoing of the self. How are pain and pleasure inextricably intertwined, and what sort of knowledge comes out of experiencing pleasure through pain? Water again serves as a very particular tactile space, as I dive into questions of drowning and the resistant viscosity of wanting to experience a final submersion. How does drowning, or even more so the desire to drown, represent the inextricability of ‘emotional’ and ‘intellectual’ knowledge? How is agency

negotiated in the often-feminized desire to drown oneself, the strength of tsunamis, floods, or other water deemed ‘dangerous,’ and masculinist constructions of risk-taking and physical control?

It is through that trajectory that I take you, and it is there that I leave you – full of new questions, shifting perceptions, and (hopefully) even more confusion than that with which we started. I cannot promise any one definitive answer or conclusion to these theoretical concepts and personal narratives, but it is my hope that each reader will find her own methods to wring out the questions in my writing to its fullest potential – a new depth each time.

## 1

**Viscous Clarity: The Resistance in Water**

As described by Nancy Tuana in *Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina*, “Viscosity is neither fluid nor solid, but intermediate between them. Attention to the *porosity* of interactions helps to undermine the notion that distinctions, as important as they might be in particular contexts, signify a natural or unchanging boundary, a natural kind” (Tuana, 194). Her rejection of the dichotomy between realism (existence of things is maintained in separation of our discourse surrounding it) and social constructivism (things exist only as our discourse allows) establishes a viscosity, a rejection of the solidified boundaries between nature and culture, organic and cultural, that remains in a flowing, yet not entirely fluid, state. I am fascinated by this state as a material-semiotic thing; what is a quasi-solid(-liquid)? Are there distinct elements within quasi-solids that are singularly solid or singularly liquid, or is the entirety of these quasi-states existing in this liminality? Water, the elemental basis of many natural disasters and a substance which possesses the capacity to exist within three physical states in temperatures that are natural to our human existence on this Earth, seems to have a unique relationship both theoretically and practically with the quasi-solid, and thus serves not only as an access point into the material semiotics of this liminal existence but as a substance to be reconsidered as to its levels of resistance.

As Tuana explains porous viscosity, she describes dual, instantaneous reactions between two (semi) distinct categories; each of the two acts upon each other simultaneously and further

establishes each other through their interaction. Does this mean, in the case of the quasi-solid, that solid and liquid remain within the quasi-solid as distinguishable categories – as if to stand in the doorway with one foot in one room and another foot in a separate room means that your entire being is half one room, half another? Or does the doorway stand as a space within itself? Tuana says that, “... ‘viscosity’ retains an emphasis on resistance to changing form, thereby a more helpful image than ‘fluidity,’ which is too likely to promote a notion of open possibilities” (Tuana, 194). Thus, in Tuana’s understanding, boundaries are not absent but flexible, inextricable from movement. I find that this conceptualization of the quasi-solid is in pleasant tension with the physical reality of water; (liquid) water is not the antithesis of solid, as a quasi-solid is neither the singular presence nor absence of solid or liquid. However, for a quasi-solid to *be* a quasi-solid, it has some of the same resistant elements that constitute solidity in the first place. The fluidity is constant movement, a lack of contain-ability unless acted upon by an external source (container.) So why does fluidity, as Tuana says, have this “notion of open possibilities?” Water may absorb solid, literally as the solute dissolves into it, as in a saline solution. If water has this open possibility to carry a solid, it is not an antithesis to solid, yet it is distinct from the solid – as is the quasi-solid.

Fluid must be made solid to enter into academia, as quite literally, you cannot cut fluid. What is this cut? In Karen Barad’s terms, the ‘agential cut’ allows for a local or temporal separation between subject and object, allowing for a situationally useful sense of removal when studying something (Barad, 133). But both metaphorically and physically, to cut requires solidity; if you cut, you create a binary. Water elusively slips through our fingers, unable to be contained unless held within a solid. Luce Irigaray in her piece “The Mechanics of Fluids” states that, indeed, “Fluid – like that other, inside/outside of philosophical discourse – is, by nature,

unstable. Unless it is subordinated to geometrism, or (?) idealized” (Irigaray, 112). I am struck by Irigaray’s use of the word ‘subordinated.’ To solidify fluid (water) is to cut the substance, create an equation in which the whole of water is the sum of its parts. But what makes fluidity (water) elusive is that it clearly is more than the sum of its parts, as we can never understand it without the use of external assistance (solid). Irigaray postulates that in fact, the ‘whole’ cannot exist in discourse without a cut/sectioning, as the term is entirely meaningless until the possibility of there not being whole – something being cut out – is presented. She says:

Thus the ‘all’ – of x, but also of the system – has already prescribed the ‘not-all’ of each particular relation established, and that ‘all’ is such only by a definition of extension that cannot get along without projection onto a given space-map, whose between(s) will be given their value(s) on the basis of punctual frames of reference (Irigaray, 108).

Therefore, water does not exist in discourse without relation to solid. In fact, water then is viscous, as it possesses in any given temporality: solid, liquid, and gaseous form. If water exists as ice, its potential for existing as water or steam is not lost – it actually is always a present threat. Thus, while the water will temporarily exist in a solidified form, the water *itself* is not a solid.

Perhaps then, to reconfigure Tuana’s theories of porous viscosity, it is not that viscosity stands in distinction from solidity or fluidity. Such a reconfiguration would acknowledge im/material ‘things’ as existing in varying degrees of viscosity. Solidity (and all other states) exist in temporality, so the solid is moving, the fluid shows resistance. Take, for example, the resistance of water. We return again to Tuana’s claim that fluids have a “notion of open possibilities” (Tuana, 194) by observing speed. While a body of water may feel to have little resistance if the body moving through the water is moving slowly, a body that hits water at high speed will feel remarkable (almost solidified) resistance. Similarly, an ocean’s wave acts in pleasant tension and resistance with the solid body of the surfer; the surfer bends and moves the

water in her ride, yet she also puts herself in danger attempting to conform herself to the wave already crashing. In this case, both movement and quantity provide sights of water's (temporal, local) resistance. Thus, if things exist in varying degrees of viscosity, these degrees are contextual. You could theorize that things might occupy a spectrum of viscosity, yet spectrum itself is viscous, as things constantly flow in their physical state. I will return to this dissatisfying metaphor of the spectrum in Chapter 2.

Such a reconfiguration recognizes the agency that moves through fluidity, the resistance that fluidity has to containment and thus mastery. Fluid does not stand to be observed on its own; to study fluid, one must change its degree of viscosity (create temporal solidity) or contain it in a solid structure. For example, we hold our water in a solid container to understand its properties, giving us enough of a pause in movement to observe the water without it slipping through our fingers. Otherwise, we can freeze our water, solidifying it into ice, allowing us to study it in this state. However, one must work quickly, as the ice holds the threat of melting at any given point, unless controlled by a surrounding freezing temperature. Thus, can you ever really study the water (fluid) in its 'pure' form? Or if fluid is just a degree of viscosity, does its temporality mean that fluidity does not exist in a 'pure' form, anyway? In this understanding of fluidity as viscous determined by literal and metaphorical resistance, water then takes on viscous properties.

If fluid arguably cannot be studied on its own without a change of state, I struggle to understand how this would not serve as a metaphor for the nature of observation at large. To observe something *is* to change it through the gaze of the observer, and water (fluid) serves as a physical representation of such change. In fact, 'change' is a term that implies that before the observer observed, the state of the thing studied was original, existing in its true state. This is precisely the realism that Tuana resists. Perhaps "... [Science's] *historical lag in elaborating a*

“*theory*” of fluids, and ... the ensuing aporia even in mathematical formalization” (Irigaray, 106) that Irigaray speaks to in “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids” can be attributed to the fact that fluidity draws direct attention to this change. Water, or other fluids, when objectified through observation, physically demonstrates the symptoms of its objectification: it is held in a solid container or turned into ice. Donna Haraway’s ‘god trick,’ or a scientist’s attempt at (assumably) dis-embodied observation of a subject that they then understand to be truthful, physically comes unraveled at the observation of water. We (visibly) try to master it to understand it, and even still, it escapes our solidification – we even have better maps of the surface of the moon and Mars than we do of our Earth because of the ways in which the knowledge of our oceans dribbles through our fingers (NASA). Is this because water is uniquely resistant of objectification, or is this behavior symbolic of all im/material things? In other words, this tidbit about our inability to map the surface of Earth because of our oceans demonstrates the degree to which water quite clearly changes when objectified – when water is in an amount that massive, thus powerful enough to be unable to be solidified, we simply *cannot* know it. This leads to two further constellations of thoughts:

1. If water makes us incapable of mapping a surface, this implies that all maps are situated or contextualized as well. The observed surface that a map charts is as changed by such observation. Accuracy of a map, or what makes it ‘better,’ is thus a very complicated concept. Literally, maps are projections of a space, and they can be used as a guide or source through which people orient. Allow ‘map’ to stand as any other declaration of fact as evidenced by observation, and the danger of Haraway’s god trick becomes apparent. Without acknowledging the situated-ness of the knowledge gained



from observation, people orient themselves with the use of this knowledge, assuming it to be absolute truth.

2. What is about water that is unique? Compare it to, for example, dirt. To understand a cup of water, you *have* to contain it in a literal cup, or freeze it, or observe it as it spills and spreads across a floor, etc. To understand a similar portion of dirt, it does not need the same containment. This is not to say that dirt does not also change because of our observation, but, unlike water, we can create maps via satellite of dirt whereas we cannot of oceans. But does this not mean that our maps of dirt are as ‘accurate’ as our (unknown, unable to be created) maps of water? Should they be treated in the same regard? And why is it that we still assume we can map, understand, or know dirt in a way that we actually recognize we cannot do the same with water? Perhaps it is the actual solid materiality of the dirt, and the material fluidity of the water, that creates this distinction. But such a distinction would then be profound: there *is* something fundamental or necessary in materiality, as a purely philosophical or immaterial understanding of solidity and fluidity ignores a crucial component to their existence.

Thus, the risk in containment of fluidity or temporal solidifying of fluidity is not in these acts themselves – in fact they can prove quite useful – but in conflating these acts with the “truth” of fluidity. How could we ever truly know fluidity, and how and when can we transform fluid to be an object of study? By studying fluidity, do we not transform it? And, as demonstrated by the second thought constellation, by studying fluidity, what does it mean to transform fluidity immaterially versus materially?

Resistance stands as a key component to viscosity; viscosity lies in the intermediacy between solid and fluid, and when it is measured in substances, it is literally, “the tendency of a

liquid or gas to resist by internal friction the relative motion of its molecules and hence any change of shape...” (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus, in trying to understand ‘knowledge,’ particularly Haraway’s situated knowledges, viscosity is an important tool. The knowledge gained through a reconfiguration of objectivity, one that disavows traditional notions of observer being an impartial, unobtrusive expert who seeks and creates disembodied knowledge, is viscous. When Barad’s agential cut is enacted, and a temporary, local separation between observer and observed is created, it draws attention to the viscosity of the interaction. Resistance articulates this viscosity; the observed literally resists the gaze of the observer, observed and observer are not in an entirely fluid relationship with Barad’s agential cut, as there must be some resistance and solidity for the distinction between the two to be constructed. But what kind of ‘knowledge’ does this viscosity produce? How does learning in the water become viscous?

Karen Barad’s ‘agential cut’ works again here in conversation with Haraway’s god trick. She describes ‘intra-action’ as a re-conceptualization of the seemingly binary divide between previously existing things and representations of those things. Intra-actions are relations between observer and observed, representation and represented, that in their doing constantly establish the binary or distinction between these two categories. An agential cut, then, in comparison to the Cartesian cut, does not violently separate object from researcher, but creates a local, temporal vantage point from which to observe (Barad, 133). This seems to be in conversation with Donna Haraway’s conceptualization of situated knowledges and partial truths; she draws upon the metaphor of vision to describe the situated reality of sight, which has very finite limits but seems to lend itself to what she calls that “... god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway, 581). Thus far in my understanding, Barad and Haraway seem to be working in tandem insofar as there is a sort of useful, albeit dangerous, knowledge to be gained from defining a relationship

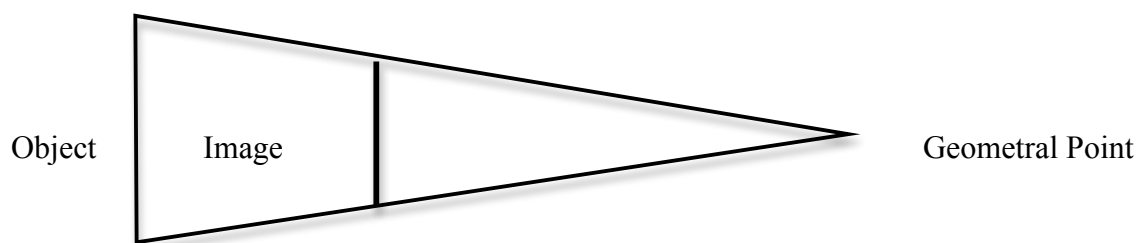
between subject and observer. Haraway says, "... our insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision ... and not giving into the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment and second-birthing allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity" (Haraway, 582). In this way, Haraway's 'usable' objectivity is inherently viscous. If the observation is recognized as embodied and contextualized, then it both leaves potential for the resistant measures of the observed to be accounted. In other words, a conceptualization of knowledge that does not privilege vision as an ultimate and a disembodied knowledge is one that is resistant to these hegemonic academic standards.

*I am an 8-year-old at the Brandywine YMCA in Wilmington, Delaware. I'm standing in a portion of the pool with about a three-foot depth, surrounded by my swim teammates. Coach Stan tells us to let all of the air out of our lungs, as much as we can, and sink to lie face down, like starfish, on the bottom of the pool. I imagine my lungs to be like a flattening toothpaste tube from which air is escaping as I exhale and extend flat on the tile floor. After what feels like a very small eternity (about 45 seconds), I shoot back up to the surface. Coach Stan tells us to do the same drill, this time with our backs to the bottom of the pool. I try to flatten out my lungs again like a toothpaste tube, squeezing out every last bit of air, but once I'm submerged, I look up to see the surface line of the water staring back at me. In a panic, I scramble back up to the surface, panting, to see most of my teammates spluttering as well. Coach Stan tells us that it's okay, most people can't hold their breath as long on their backs. He says people don't like having the depth behind them.*

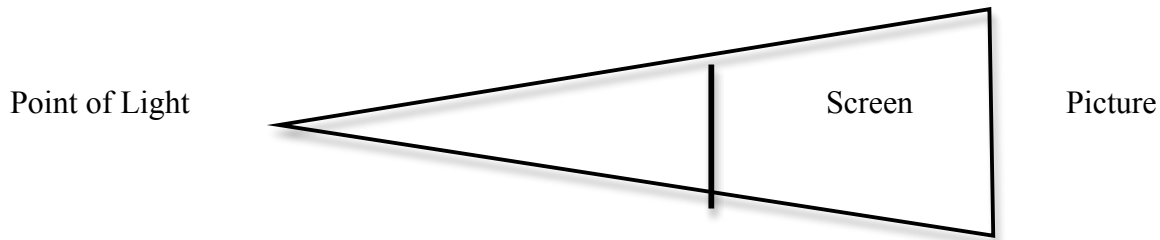
Why vision? As human animals, our sight is so limited, providing at best the span of about 180 degrees. And yet, vision becomes an apparatus for violent separation, the fallacy of disembodied knowledge. If you can see it, you can understand it entirely, and thus you can

master it. Is this why it is a common phenomenon that people can hold their breath longer when looking down at the bottom of a pool than looking up? What acknowledgment of the god trick occurs when a person sees the surface line of the water? When we carve out a pool, we clearly solidify all six sides of the three dimensional rectangular prism; five of these sides are defined by cement structure. The sixth, the surface line of the pool, was also of masculinist design – it is created in relation to the other five sides. Should the sixth side also have been of cement, it would become clear why viewing it would be discomfoting – the viewer would be entirely entrapped, locked in a cement coffin. We can break through the surface line when we swim, so theoretically we should not be scared to see it. But the surface line also represents the negotiations between the water and its containment; the water moves, levels itself, becomes choppy as it interacts with moving bodies, and to visualize its existence is also to visualize its danger. When viewing the surface line, we view a certain apparatus, the configurations that we have completed to make the fluidity behave in a way that we find suitable.

Earl Jackson, Jr. references Lacan in his chapter “Graphic Specularity” of *Strategies of Deviance*, summarizing the ways in which Lacan has laid out the paradigm of subject/object relations in visual representation and how it can be understood through film. Jackson recreates Lacan’s three triangles that mark the relations between subject and object in the visual field, or rather, two triangles that when superimposed demonstrate the creation of the gaze. Jackson describes:



... A vertical line bisecting the triangle is marked “image,” the form in which the object appears to the subject: The potential for undermining the certitude of this subject lies in the reversibility of the terms in any act of vision. The fact that the subject can see the object is due to the light reflected off the object, which light envelopes the subject as well, making the subject visible to others:



The “photo-graphed” subject experiences this reversal as a traumatic discovery of lack, the perilous determinant point of desire (154-55).

In this case, the seer, the one making the (incorrect) assumption that he is not being viewed in return, is separating himself from the object that he is viewing – taking himself out of his own relation to it, only to find that this is a fallacy. To return then to the swimmer holding her breath and looking up towards the surface line of the water, is she thus experiencing what Jackson describes as the “traumatic discovery of lack?” Does the surface of the pool act as the screen, in Jackson’s diagram? If this is true, and she is projected as object onto the screen, fear of entering the water would be conducive to this model. The objectified water cannot entirely be contained, nor would we want it to be: in the pool, the water still (thankfully, as it is not a cement coffin) has an acting surface line; when turned into ice, it runs the risk of melting.

I am reminded again of the children that I teach to swim, the majority of whom are reluctant to enter the pool by way of the metal ladder. It is safest for someone to enter a pool on a ladder by turning *away* from the water, facing the pool deck, and slowly backing down into the

water. Most of the children I teach have the initial instinct to walk forward into the pool, precariously placing the heels of their feet on the steps of the ladder and using it backwards. Why is this? What fear is there of the agency of that which we cannot see?

In ritual, liminality serves as the space-time when a person enacting the ritual transcends from being in ‘this’ world to being in the ‘other’ spiritual world. Thus, liminality is between, the doorway that stands between two rooms, the third space that exists between two known planes. I have asked before, is straddling a boundary between two spaces comprised of just components of the two spaces that add together to create a whole, or does this boundary itself become its own third space? This of course ties back to viscosity, should viscosity stand as its own state as opposed to just a conglomeration of solid parts and liquid parts. Viscosity is a liminal space, causing it to always be in motion, a push and pull of solidity and fluidity – a fluidity and solidity that are only definable because the other exists. Is the surface line of the water also a liminal space, then? Liminal spaces are uncomfortable, as their existence is marked by confusion. To experience liminality is to partially leave a space while in other ways remain tied to it, making the experience of submerging oneself in water to be temporarily uncomfortable. The act of swimming in cold water is tolerable should you do it for an extended period of time, but the act of *entering* the cold water is for many incredibly unpleasant.

Why use liminality as a concept at all, if it seems to be a direct synonym for viscosity as I have defined it? Liminality is all about the hovering between, and thus deconstructing, two distinct spaces, and viscosity is the sticky, resistant deconstruction of solidity and fluidity. I specifically bring liminality into this discussion, then, precisely because of the stickiness of viscosity. The materiality of each concept provides nuance for such deconstructions of polarized spaces. Liminality, particularly as understood in its uses as an anthropological or cultural term, is

tied to concepts of ritual, otherness. The person exits their body, the world that they are in, and enters into the other realm. While liminality specifically highlights the process, the transgression, the crossing, it still can employ the concept of immateriality – the person will return once again to the ‘right’ form. Liminality’s temporality and fleeting nature is highly tangible. In contrast, viscosity’s stickiness is not fleeting but instead nearly impossible to clean up. Viscosity as a concept is no more grounded than liminality, but perhaps it is viscosity’s origins as a physical science term and liminality’s as one from anthropology that provides my initial misconception. A relation of viscosity to liminality, then, is as much an attempt to deconstruct distinctions between spaces, between fluidity and solidity, as it is between nature (science) and culture.

*I spent over sixteen hours per week in the pool during high school, swimming twice per week before school, every day after school, and each Saturday morning. However, one practice in particular still stands out in detail, a morning swim at 6 A.M. during March of my senior year. We averaged about 3,500 yards at morning practices, a little less than half of what we would swim in the afternoon practice. Morning practices were typically before sunrise, making them very dark and very cold, as they were outdoors. In many ways, morning practices were mindless, just putting in the laps, getting some extra mileage in before the day began. One morning, however, we did a fast-paced, “test” set. This was rare, as the morning was time for longer, stretched out aerobic sets. We saved our sprinting, our individually timed tests for the afternoon. This set included, in its climactic point, four repetitions of 200 yards (eight laps) timed. These were meant to increase in speed as the set continued, finishing with a 200 yard sprint at a time equivalent to one we might swim an actual race. While this is a common training technique, it is nearly impossible to swim at ‘race speed’ in practice, as you are swimming with significantly less adrenaline.*

*I went into the first 200-yard repetition without much intention, and I continued the set in the same way. I was carrying out the motions, doing what I was supposed to do, but I was mentally unfocused, feeling still half-asleep. By the third and fourth repetitions, I was swimming times that actually were comparable to my racing speeds. Often when sprinting, swimming seems to be as much a mental exercise as it is a physical one. I would have to exert far more energy into mentally making myself engage with the painful act of sprinting than the literal activity of making my arms and legs move at fast speeds, contracting my muscles to pull greater quantities of water with each stroke, etc. This set was peculiar in that this was not the case; my mind-body was sprinting, producing lactic acid at a rate too high to be able to clear it, something that would make me jittery and sore for the rest of the day. There was a physicality to it that made me feel very in control, but there were also ways that this specifically did not feel in control, as if I could not figure out how I had gotten to where I was. It was just as painful as other sets that I swam, but it was also significantly more satisfying. My mind and body were working as inseparably as they always do, but perhaps in this set I was not obsessively (futilely) trying to mentally control the physical pain that I was experiencing as I normally did during tough sets.*

Liminality is as much physicality as it is a mental or spiritual situation on/at an imposed border. If again we think of the two rooms adjoined by a doorway, with the doorway representing the liminal space, then the doorway is a self-imposed boundary. Otherwise, what marks the difference between one room and another? Thus, liminality is the constant movement of crossing through the doorway, making it anything but a stagnant space. Swimming daily is a ritual – a spiritual action in which I engaged regularly – that allowed me, through movement, to enter a third space, distinct in physicality and mental experience from the rest of my life. While it is arguable that physical activity of any sort is a multifaceted tool of temporary ‘transcendence,’



submerging oneself in water comes with a unique set of physical changes: different experiences of oxygen, gravity, spatial awareness. What does the entrance into a physical environment such as the water of a pool, so distinct from the air and solid ground of the pool deck around it, signify? Perhaps this distinction only stems from our manipulation of the water, the creation of the surface line through the five other walls of the rectangular prism.

## 2

**Liquefying the Spectrum of Gender**

*It's my first day wearing a binder. I've borrowed it from a friend for whom it is a little too tight. It seems to fit okay – I adjust myself again and again, contorting in the mirror. I pull on an undershirt, button an over shirt. Well, fuck. I was hoping I wasn't going to like this so much.*

...

*I peel the binder off to take a break for the few hours that I'm reading in my room before I leave for class. My ribs seem to swell with their first unobstructed breath. I'm surprised to realize that I'm not unhappy that my breasts are there, waiting for me. I gently press my fingers into the red grooves that the binder made in my skin.*

...

*"No I mean, like, you're just Maggie. You know? Like I don't see... you're a woman."*

*I'm talking with a friend who has taken it upon herself to give me some notes on the way I present my (fluid? viscous?) gender and the way she reads it. I can feel an unidentified sadness start to pool in my chest. On an intake of breath, I can just subtly sense the binder, and I'm reassured to be held together, solid, in this moment.*

To objectify a thing in the phallacy of disembodied seeing genders the thing; the seer is masculine – just as Descartes' disembodied thinker is masculine<sup>2</sup> – 'separating' himself from his

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<sup>2</sup> Cartesian Dualism, or the philosophical theory radically dividing mind and body that comes from Descartes' conceptualization of the mind as not only distinct but also on a higher plane of existence than the body, privileges logical thought over emotional, physical, or material

body, a feat of which the menstruating, hormonal woman would presumably never be capable. Fluidity is thus inherently gendered as well, rendered feminine by its inability to contain itself and inability to be known. Does water stand as metaphor for femininity? How does femininity factor into reconfigurations of objectivity?

Freud wrote in *The Question of Lay Analysis* that “We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology” (Cited in Kristeva, 2005). Here we are again at vision: in this dark continent, we cannot see, and thus we cannot entirely know. To return again to my second thought constellation on page 12, what is it that makes our maps of land more ‘knowable’ than our maps of water? While all of our maps (knowledge) are not without the context and reflexivity of the seer, why is it that we proudly assume mastery of a light continent and not of a dark one? Thus, how could this dark continent possibly not be wet? From Genesis, we are to see that before there was light, there was wet darkness. We cannot map our Earth because of the wet depths of our dark oceans. Carol Gilligan writes of Freud’s dark continent, “The theme of conquest, in love and science, implies the overcoming of nature. But the image of the dark continent, marking the presence of mystery and danger, also suggests the shadow that is cast by the figure of the conqueror” (76). Referencing here also the racist and colonial implications of the “dark continent,” a term used by Henry Stanley to refer to the

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experience. This false boundary creation and privileging of the ‘rational mind’ is masculinist not in that it is directly of or related to ‘men.’ What makes the Cartesian Cut masculinist is that it allows for the fantasy of a thinker (seer) who is entirely separate from his body – a separation not even fathomable if your body is female, non-white, disabled. While the white cisgendered man could also not become disembodied from his vision, societal standards allow him to engage in this fallacy. A ‘masculinist’ theory thus utilizes compartmentalization, such as of body and mind, or mastery, such as that of mind over body, without critique or reflection of such practices.

continent of Africa<sup>3</sup>, once unknown to European imperialist powers, Gilligan's attention to the shadow of the conqueror as blocking his own attempts at mastery brings us back to Haraway: to assume that you can conquer (know) something in its entirety, without it resisting you or hiding under your shadow, is a god trick. Femininity/fluidity's resistance of our masculinist control of it posits it as this dark (wet) continent.

I mentioned in my brief excerpt about binding my chest the protection and containment I felt when wearing the binder, particularly when feeling confused and invalidated in conversation with a friend. I am curious of the link between this comfortable 'solidity' and viscosity. 'Genderfluid' is not a new concept, but fluidity serves not just as a metaphor for understanding non-normative genders in a binary society. If fluidity is posited in binary opposition to solidity, as opposed to existing within a viscous, porous relationship, then the concept of genderfluidity being in opposition to binary thought is paradoxical itself. Why did I experience pools of sadness of having my gender read – correctly, incorrectly, or at all – by a friend? Why is it that the only thing that held me together at that moment was my binder, one of the typically key components to visual determination of another's gender? In gender/sex, through all of its biological, material, and performative elements, exist the same self-imposed boundaries of the materiality of the pool or other manipulated containment of water, making it a site of both literal and metaphorical comparison. As I discussed in the first chapter in regards to vision and the 'concrete coffin,' or the containment of the fluidity of water into the solid concrete of the pool structure, my binder served to be the solid that contained the fluidity of gender. Just as water cannot be measured without containment, the binder serves as a *visible* container, which then makes gender measurable – the binder is a visible identity category.

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley, Henry (1878). *Through the Dark Continent*. Dover Publications.

I would like to revisit the concept of the viscous spectrum again from my brief mention of it (P. 14) in the context of viscosity standing as some sort of intermediate between solidity and fluidity in this gendered context. In exploring viscosity, I have already addressed how it stands at the often confusing, blurred, and indefinable boundary between solid and liquid; viscosity serves to deconstruct the dichotomy between the two. In that way, as I have mentioned previously, a spectrum becomes a dissatisfying metaphor, particularly spatially, as in all of its two-dimensional limitations, it still polarizes solidity and fluidity and keeps their status as distinctive categories in place. Jacques Derrida posits a framework with which to inquire into these binaries, one in which he deconstructs logocentric understandings of language and writing. He describes how writing has through hegemonic discourse been seen as inferior to or derivative of language – and how language and thus writing serve as crucial interpretations of external knowledge or an external reality. He says:

External/internal, image/reality, representation/presence, such is the old grid to which is given the task of outlining the domain of a science. And of what science? Of a science [in which] ... the originality of its field – an originality that inaugurates – is that the opening of the “image” within it appears as the condition of “reality;” a relationship that can longer be thought within the simple difference and the uncompromising exteriority of “image” and “reality,” of “outside” and “inside,” of “appearance” and “essence,” with the entire system of oppositions which necessarily follows from it (Derrida, 33).

In Derrida’s framework, our constructions of knowledge creation and production, that is, language and writing, fundamentally position an externality and internality as defined by reality, and they create an entire system of conceptualization that is dependent upon (hierarchical) dichotomies. Thus, a critique of logocentrism becomes crucial in understanding viscosity, as I find that Derrida’s deconstruction of dichotomies is viscous. A deconstruction of dichotomies does not destroy the categories of distinction entirely, yet it does depolarize them and thus move them from a two-dimensional plane. Derrida does not put ‘image’ and ‘reality’ in a spectrum, but instead challenges the distinctions of these categories entirely. How is this gendered?

The gender binary is, like gender fluidity, not a new concept. However, I find colloquial conceptualizations in progressive communities of gender as existing on a spectrum to be, through a Derridian model, as much re-establishing the gender binary as any other framework. If I understand Derrida's deconstructing of dichotomies to be viscous, then I would consider myself to be as much 'genderviscous' as I am any kind of genderfluid – and furthermore, viscosity has inherent implications on gender. In fact, if I conceptualize gender to be truly viscous, and thus not dichotomized, why would I attempt to identify my gender identity at all? Not only can Derrida be applied to gender dichotomies, but also logocentrism can be seen as masculinist in and of itself, as explored at length by Luce Irigaray in her discussions of *phallogocentrism* – the prefix phallo referring to, in this case, the phallus. If logocentrism, and thus the hierarchical dichotomizing of theoretical concepts into good/bad, light/dark, masculine/feminine, etc., fundamentally relies upon categorization, it enacts a standard of mastery or control; reality exists, and image stands as its inferior attempt to represent it. In this model of logocentrism, the entire concept of 'image' would *inherently* require Haraway's god trick, or the view from nowhere – there is no alternative should reality be posited as entirely external to image (viewer or observer). If the view from nowhere is masculinist, as discussed with Descartes disembodied thinker, would logocentrism not then be masculinist as well?

If the metaphorical link between fluidity and femininity is that both resist containment for the purposes of observation, then the discomfort in the binding situation that I described previously would come not from being gendered in one specific way, but from being told that my gender was perceived as in the same way as this friend has always seen me. Thus, the concept of time becomes much more relevant than any kind of solid, contained identity in and of itself. How is resistance calculated or perceived as a unit of or through time? In other words, I

have spoken before about how, as water can exist in liquid, solid, or gaseous form within the temperature ranges that are appropriate to our existence on Earth, it always holds the *potential* for change. Fluidity similarly has that potential for change, as it is constantly in flux, actively (as opposed to passively) filling containers that confine it. This potential is what holds the factor of time, as there is certain slowness or fastness to change that makes it resistant to hegemonic standards. Time even makes the viscosity (resistance) of fluidity/femininity threatening, as it is precisely the potential, not the change itself, which makes them unable to be mastered. I would rather that my gender be read as indefinable and even risky – and living it can in fact be risky – due to its lack of consistency as opposed to read any sort of ‘correctly,’ as there thus would be no form of correct, would there?

Temporality is thus a crucial factor to the framework of logocentrism. In logocentric dichotomies, time becomes a factor in polarizing two terms through foundationalist obsessions with finding the root or origin of the concept itself; in any dichotomy, the marginalized term is established first, and the dominant term is then constructed in relation only to the marginalized term. However, as the term created second establishes its dominance and the first term’s marginalization, it attempts to erase the creation of the first term altogether. In the case of reality/image, the establishment of such a dichotomy necessitates that reality exists first with image being created second. However, the entirety of the reality/image dichotomy is created after the establishment of image, not reality, and thus in our attempt to establish a reality that precludes image, we erase the formation of reality *after* image. The viscosity that is the deconstruction of dichotomized concepts is as much spatial – not existing on a two-dimensional plane spectrum – as it is temporal.

## 3

**Knowing Through Fluidity: Water as Transitional Object**

*Our family of five first started attending the North Graylyn Crest Pool when I was a toddler. Before I learned to swim on my own without any assistance, I would play in the baby pool of Graylyn, sitting and crawling around in the one-foot deep warm water while my mother or sister supervised from a lounge chair a few feet away. My mother, a quilter and painter, gave me some of her old paintbrushes – some large ones that had been used to paint the walls of our living room, some smaller ones from her own art – and I would ‘paint’ the concrete sides of the pool with water. I would dip the brushes carefully into the pool, brushing and covering all of the nearby dry concrete.*

*I learned to swim young enough that I can hardly remember not being able to swim at all, although I can absolutely recall the feelings I associate with becoming better acquainted with the water and our relationship changing – a process that I believe is still ongoing, even after learning to swim over 18 years ago. I can remember ‘painting’ the sides of the baby pool; I can remember when it was challenging to swim 25 yards without stopping; I can remember when I learned how to do handstands, dive off of the diving board, and turn the water into a performance space; I can remember when swimming a whole mile without stopping turned from being a challenge to an addiction.*

D.W. Winnicott wrote about what he calls transitional phenomena, or the space and time in which a baby learns to distinguish the inner (themselves) and the outer (external to



themselves), particularly as it relates to their mother and her breast. Winnicott writes about what he calls:

...the third part of the life of a human being [in addition to the inner reality and outside] ... an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated (Winnicott, 2).

Winnicott is saying, thus, that transitional phenomena are the *process* of interacting and determining distinctions between self and other. His theory then situates knowledge as a constant, kinetic process; there is no finality to inner or outer reality, as these boundaries are only defined by a certain experiencing of the world. Again, we are brought to the potential for change and an acknowledgment of the knowledge stored in that potential. This radically decentralizes selfhood, as if we are constantly experiencing the world and re-establishing what we understand to be external to us, there is no one certainty to what ‘us’ really is.

This third space of experiencing is inherently viscous. Experiencing is the act of finding distinction or separation between inner and outer, thus making it temporary. If experiencing happens constantly and is an *act* of distinction, then the boundaries between inner and outer will constantly be redefined and understood as experiencing continues. Viscosity, or the ‘in-between’ of solid and liquid, is also constantly in motion; solid and liquid are only defined in relation to one another, and the viscous holds qualities of both in temporality. Thus, it is always moving – solidly resistant to pressure, yet fluidly in motion, and constantly negotiating between the two. Transitional phenomena are viscous, then, as they are the infinitely repeating act of boundary creation and recreation.

Perhaps this is similar to what Donna Haraway is referring when she describes partial perspectives and situated knowledge, or the ways in which objectivity must be re-understood to be deeply situated in the relationship between the observer and the observed. If all distinctions are temporary and experiential, then any objective knowledge is temporary and experiential. Not dissimilarly to how Karen Barad's agential realism is the strategic or pragmatic making of objects as external to the self, the third space of experiencing is useful. The baby experiencing, making distinctions between herself and the external, no matter how fluid such distinctions may be, is creating knowledge. The knowledge that she is creating is both personal, allowing her to make connections and getting her what she needs, and participatory, giving her access to relationships with others continually in the process of experiencing themselves.

Winnicott also develops a theory specifically on the transitional object, or a child's comforting item that becomes at once an extension of themselves and their first experience distinguishing themselves from the external – a medium through which understanding can be explored, as the object, “gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity” (6). Winnicott describes the transitional object as a relatively common human phenomenon, an object that a child is nearly obsessed with and takes anywhere and everywhere. I can think of my own transitional object, my “Night-Night,” a tattered, soft blue blanket that is now so destroyed from being dragged behind me that it is nothing but scraps of material.

How does water for the swimmer, or the child learning to swim, relate to the transitional object? Is water itself a transitional object? Of course, the transitional object is personal and specific to each child, meaning that any mundane object could theoretically be any other person's transitional object. Given Winnicott's relatively extensive description,<sup>4</sup> I can easily

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<sup>4</sup> 1. The infant assumes rights over the [transitional] object...

think of water as a transitional object of my own, an object with which I learned to understand the world, found comfort, found anger, and claimed ownership. Clearly, this is an extrapolation of Winnicott's work: I did not learn to swim entirely without assistance until I was four years old, an age at which I had already had my Night-Night years. However, the act of sitting in the warm water and painting the side of the pool was an experiential method of distinguishing – who was I, in relation to the water and the concrete?

*I have worked regularly with the same student for a few years now. We see each other once per week for only about thirty minutes, so I knew going in that building a relationship was going to be a slow process. After ten swim lessons together, I thought that we had made some headway, but I was trying to be realistic. She wouldn't put her head under the water or her face in the water for more than about five seconds. We had gone from about two to three sentences of verbal communication per week to maybe ten or twelve, and we were working together on best practices of overall communication when we were in the water. I would verbally tell her what we were going to do, I would show her with my own body, and then we would both do it together, side-by-side. Each week, it seemed to work for both of us, and we began to trust each other.*

*After well over a year of working together, I thought that maybe it was time. She was improving with her swimming so quickly; treading for longer periods, swimming full backstroke, blowing bubbles with her face partially submerged. I decided we would try to get her to put her head in the water, all the way under. At this point, she would put her face in, the back of her head in, everything but completely submerging herself under the surface. This was something*

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2. The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated.
  3. It must never change, unless changed by the infant.
  4. It must survive instinctual loving, and also hating and, if it be a feature, pure aggression.
  5. Yet it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own... (Winnicott, 5).

*that her mother had told me was not going to happen, something the student had shown her reluctance towards from day one. I knew that. I knew that she wasn't going to like it, and I knew that there were efficient and safe ways to swim without submerging your head. But I tried anyway.*

*I tried teaching her to dive from the side of the pool – she would put her hands over her head in a streamlined position, and then jump feet first. I tried teaching her feet first surface dives, where you go from a treading position in the water to shooting yourself vertically feet first down to the bottom of the pool – nope. I even tried getting her to jump off of the diving board, thinking that the height and bounce of the board would get her to jump fast enough and hard enough that she would surely submerge entirely – believe it or not, she managed to teach herself to jump off of the diving board into a crouched position, one where her feet/knees/legs broke her fall and actually kept the very top of her head dry. It was as if she jumped in the water already treading. I have never seen anything like it.*

*As a last resort, I pulled out the pool rings. You throw these to the bottom of the deep end, diving down to retrieve them. We had our goggles on, the rings were waiting for us in the depth, and we were ready. She was going to put her head under the damn water. I went and got the first ring, diving down and snatching it up. I came up and she giggled.*

*“Maggie!” she laughed as she usually does when I go underwater, frequently shocked at my willingness to submerge myself. I told her that it was her turn to go retrieve the next ring. She looked me right in the eyes and said, “Oh. No thank you, Maggie.” Polite, yet surprised, as if she almost couldn't believe I'd asked her to do something so foolish.*

*“Okay,” I said, and I went down and got it myself.*

I am curious as to whether or not this is navigating the concept of (visualizing) the surface line in these swim lessons, as even when she wears goggles, she closes her eyes so tightly that she would not be able to see anything. She can swim to save her life, as dunking your head is not a necessity to keep yourself afloat. Is she uninterested/uncomfortable/scared of the depth of the water and the life under the surface, or is she scared of the surface line and the liminal space that it occupies? Even further, why was I so determined to have her put her head under water? If I could admit that her swimming was proficient enough for safety purposes, and she had made clear to me in multiple ways that she was enjoying our lessons just fine as they were, why was I so insistent that putting her head underwater was necessary? What did I serve to gain from such an ‘accomplishment?’

The transitional object works here as a method by which to understand all of our interactions together – myself, the student, and the water in which we are swimming. If I used water as a transitional object for many years, then how could I possibly be teaching swimming than with any other assumption or hope that my students would do the same? The object, water, although no longer an item that I use on a daily or twice-daily basis to interpret the world, will always be a transitional object to me. My student had negotiated her own relationship with the water and continues to negotiate it every time that she swims, but initially I saw this relationship as rejection – rejection from my skills as a teacher and rejection of the water as the transitional object that I saw it to be. Thus, her relationship with the water (and mine) is just as viscous as the water itself. I can imagine that she has been submerged underwater before, be it in the bathtub, shower, or another pool at another time. There is trust, shared experience, knowledge that they (she and the water) have created together, a certain fluid trust that allows her to explore, try new

things, and jump in. But her discomfort is sturdy, and she solidly resists the materiality of submersion. So what does it mean then to call these interactions ‘knowledge production?’

When my student and I work together in this example, we are actively negotiating power, risk, and control. In my efforts to teach her, particularly when that means insisting that submerging her head is a necessity to her learning, I am providing for her a certain sort of pedagogy that is transactional. I am asking her to take the knowledge that I am giving her and use it, absorb it, master it. In doing so, I am asserting my own dominance as instructor and providing a system of learning that is compartmentalized at best. To learn viscosly, to deconstruct the concept of ‘packaged’ knowledge that exists for consumption by the unknowing or ignorant, is to also work within a space of discomfort. Learning viscosly thus includes that same potential for change, the same instability that I discussed in my chapter on gender (P. 28-29). With that potential comes also the potential for pain – for example, how could one learn in the water without negotiating the reality of drowning? Each time that we swim, we navigate the boundaries of drowning, we attempt to understand what is dangerous, what is at stake. For my student to submerge may be to negotiate this drowning, but she is as much negotiating when she does *not* submerge; she is not remaining ignorant of drowning because such viscous learning also deconstructs the dichotomy of knowledge and ignorance.

While I will further flesh out the knowledge of drowning in my final chapter, this concept of viscous knowledge being one that includes pain and discomfort is crucial as it relates to the transitional object and Winnicott’s third space. If Winnicott’s third space is one in which the external and the internal are navigated, and the transitional object is the device through which this occurs, then they specifically describe interactions with reality. Other psychoanalysts,

including Freud most notably,<sup>5</sup> posit this meeting with reality as castration, an external force that limits. Winnicott, however, considers the meeting with reality, the third space, as creative *through* all of its discomfort. In fact, to return again to the metaphor of the container as discussed with the chest binder in my chapter on gender, swimming, or any transitional object, serves as a container, giving parameters or boundaries to this wide expanse of creative discomfort. Such solidity allows for the fluid (viscous) knowledge to be measured, quantified, stabilized. My instincts to get my student to do what I asked and absorb blankly the knowledge that I was attempting to give her are not simply misguided, but impossible. She will have to navigate drowning regardless of whether or not I presume I can do it for her, and it is our job together to collaboratively find ways to work through the uncomfortable creativity of meeting reality. What other methods are there for her to swim? How can I best provide care for her?

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<sup>5</sup> In Freud's early work, he specifically focused on theories of castration anxiety in boys, or the concept that an outside, external force (in this case reality) would come in and stop or remove any sense of power that the penis supplied. The penis represents freedom, ownership, individuality, selfhood – traits that would thus be staunched after a meeting with reality, or castration (Temperley, 66).

### **Viscous Resistance as Compassion and Care**

I first heard activist understandings of independence and its relevance to feminist and disability justice movements articulated by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha at The Five College Disability Studies Conference in her keynote presentation. She spoke about the concept of dependency; what are our needs, and what does it mean to rely on others for assistance in regards to ‘functionality?’ What does it mean to be dependent upon institutions in contrast to interdependence within communities? Eva Kittay, Bruce Jennings, and Angela Wasunna’s article, “Dependency, Difference and the Global Ethic of Longterm Care” explores interdependency in depth, starting with questions as to the concept that any individual could actually *be* individual. The authors write, “... an ethics of care emphasizes the relational character of human life, the relational nature of self-conceptions ... and the inevitable human dependences and interdependences too often ignored in theories that begin with adult moral agents pursuing their own conception of the good” (Kittay, et. al, 453). The completely independent, consistently able-bodied human is a god trick. Even in addition to the many ways in which able-bodiedness is situational, contextualized, and unstable over time and injury, the concept of independence assumes the fact that the act of observation has no impact on the observed – a single actor has no impact on the world upon which he acts. Such independence would assume that we could all be a world of actors and never affect one another, passing like ships in the night.



While the politics of independence were seemingly new at the time that I heard Leah speak, the idea of communities of care and interdependence were not. As a queer woman, a Bipolar woman<sup>6</sup>, I knew at the time what it meant to be in communities of care and to need to maintain them. My engagement in teaching and in swimming itself is motivated by this interdependence; I know that I hold a unique relationship to my students, to the water, and within myself. I feel comfort in the water, and I have felt such comforts for as long as I can remember. This ‘comfort’ fits the colloquial usage of the word (“she seems *comfortable* in the water”) and a more literal usage, as I feel a sense of calming comfort from submersion. As it translates to teaching swim lessons, this means that I can transmit my knowledge of water safety and stroke technique. More importantly, I present swimming as a potential tool for my students to use when they want to find a sense of calmness, a means of communication, a place for meditation, or any other form of healing. But why teach a program specifically to children with disabilities? I knew before starting with the project and have been reminded over my time by families that there is a need for this sort of attentive, one-on-one swim lesson in the geographic area. There is a need for care, so I fill it. However, my place in community with my students is precarious; we are all divergent from the norm, but in very different ways. My interactions with the water are inseparable from my Bipolar brain, but how and in what ways am I ‘allowed’ to claim community with my Autistic students? How do I, and how do my students, depend upon swimming as a space or transitional object?

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<sup>6</sup> You may note here that I have chosen to use the word ‘woman’ when describing myself in this context. Ordinarily, and as you may have guessed after my chapter on gender, I might not describe myself as a woman. However, not only does my viscous identity in many ways align itself with womanhood, but I also have specifically chosen to align myself with a larger historical context for womanhood in this instance. As I will discuss, women have long been relegated to roles of care giving, and in discussing here my own womanhood as it intersects with other marginalized identities, I use the word ‘woman’ to place me in that same caregiver identity – an identity that I navigate in my work teaching swim lessons.

In *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, Eva Feder Kittay writes about the politics of mental disabilities, particularly as they interact with theories of dependency and disability rights movements. She speaks about the failings of liberalism, a theory that insists that a voice, freedom, and autonomy are fundamental and necessary (and realistic) for all. She says, “Liberalism invokes a notion of political participation in which one makes one’s voice heard. It depends on a conception of the person as independent, rational, and capable of self-sufficiency. And it holds to a conception of society as an association of such independent equals” (Kittay 258). Liberalism as a method for establishing equality and determining rights for all fundamentally excludes the personhood of those who are dependent. Kittay goes on to reconfigure personhood, saying:

I propose that being a person means having the capacity to be in certain relationships with other persons, to sustain contact with other persons, to shape one’s own world and the world of others, and to have a life that another person can conceive of as an imaginative possibility for him- or herself. It is a definition that brings our relationships (real and imaginative) with others to the center of any conception of personhood. We do not become a person without the engagement of other persons – their care, as well as their recognition of the uniqueness and the connectedness of our human agency, as the distinctiveness of our particularly human relations to others and of the world we fashion (Kittay, 266).

According to Kittay, personhood *is* dependence; or rather, as all humans do require care despite the fact that it is in varying degrees over the course of their lives, it is futile to create a conceptualization of personhood that does not give respect to such dependence. She is radically redefining notions what it means to ‘owe’ someone, or reciprocity in dependent relationships. When she speaks of relationships, I assume that Kittay writes them to be broadly defined and outside out of traditional notions of what is ‘acceptable’ friendship, romance, or nuclear familial bond – or a human-human pairing. Interspecies relationships are crucial to concepts of dependency and care, the relationship between water and me included. If personhood

fundamentally assumes relationships, then dependency is redefined to be simply another type of relationship, not stigmatized by societal standards.

If personhood is defined by dependence, then dependence itself is fundamentally viscous as well. Dependency is transient, and it ebbs and flows given context, situation, parameters. Like Winnicott's third space, dependency is constantly redefined by boundaries that shift and are defined by both physicality and immateriality – bodily needs, mental and emotional health, goals and aspirations, societal standards of functionality. Dependency blurs the line between 'self' and 'other,' yet it also undoes the dichotomy of public/private. In a traditionally outlined nuclear family, a certain level of dependency is acceptable, yet such notions of acceptability are lost if dependency is displayed in public. It is not just the consistently able-bodied, independent human that is the god trick, but is the *public* independence that is the god trick. Thus, it is my interest to explore how dependency or need is communicated and interacted with in the water, a viscous setting. Water is an active participant in our swim lessons, as much a contributor to the relationship as it is a setting or location. Communicating with my students, as communication can be anywhere, is far from limited to our verbal vocabularies. Donna Haraway writes, "Science has been about a search for translation, convertibility, mobility of meanings, and universality – which I call reductionism when only one language (guess whose?) must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions" (Haraway, 580). What language do we speak, or even create, in the water together? This viscous dependency creates a knowledge that cannot assumed to be translated into hegemonic standards of production and value.

*The summer after my first year in college, I tore my ACL from a fall while bouldering at a rock climbing gym in Philadelphia. While traversing the gym, my hand slipped off of a rock and I fell on my left leg, knee hyper-extended. The fall was only about four feet, but it was*

*enough to tear my ACL and lateral meniscus. After a trip to the Temple University Hospital and a week in a leg immobilizer thinking perhaps it was just a sprain, I saw an orthopedist who told me I had to have surgery. I moved out of the apartment I shared with my older brother, Peter, and moved home with my parents. I did not want to leave my brother; I did not want to be without the use of my leg; I did not want to move into my old house; and I did not want to be back in the California town in which I went to high school.*

*I was completely dependent upon my mother in the months following my surgery. During the operation, the surgeon repaired my meniscus as opposed to trimming it, the usual course of action. This meant that instead of going the typical post-operative time of one week without walking, I had to wait a full six weeks before I was allowed to bear any weight on my left leg. I used crutches and a full leg brace from my hip to my ankle to keep my knee in a locked, straight position except for daily, mandatory stretching.*

*What I remember most from this time of dependency, and my mother has shared with me that it is her most potent memory as well, is the times I was bathed. The shower in my house was located in a bathtub with a sliding glass door. My mother would go to work in the morning and drive fifteen minutes home at the start of her roughly 50-minute lunch break, in which I would get myself to the bathroom and sit on the edge of the tub, naked. I would slide one leg into the tub and then gently lift the other to slide it in as well, finally standing up on my one 'good' leg. My mother would then come in with a metal chair from our backyard and put it in the bathtub behind me. I would sit on the chair and take my brace off, and she would take the brace and turn on the water. While I showered, she would make us lunch, coming back to check on me regularly. She would then turn the water off, help me stand on my one leg, take the dripping chair from behind me, and help me with the process of sitting on the edge of the tub while I slid*

*my legs over the side. After, she would help me get dressed and (hopefully have time to) eat a bite of her lunch before driving back to work.*

My mother spent what would have been the recovery time from her job to take care of me – another form of labor. Where is the value in her work? For what is she being compensated?

Kittay writes about the intersections of compensation and dependency, describing:

Those who are dependent ... cannot reciprocate the care that they receive. In our dependence, we cannot pay back our caregivers and compensate them for their labor. Another must do so. I have called this form of reciprocation *doulia*, after the doula, a contemporary postpartum caregiver who cares for the mother so that the mother can care for her new infant (Kittay 270).

Kittay makes a few remarkable claims with this presentation of a *doulia* model: 1) caring for those who are dependent is valuable work, which implies that dependency is not shameful, 2) any person could (and will) become dependent at some point in their life, and they will need care during this time, and 3) valuable contributions to society must be drastically reconfigured from the neo-liberal, capitalist model – for *all* involved in a dependency network. The configuration of lives in terms of output and product, and an assumption that there will be a baseline product that any unit should be able to consistently create, is Haraway's god trick again.

Kittay's *doulia* model rests on assumptions that humans in dependency networks need "care," but I am left wondering what care really is. What might be deemed the basic components of care – being fed, bathed, sheltered, having health and medical needs provided, and assisted in some sort of daily recreation – can still easily be co-opted to be the basics of a neo-liberal, capitalist model. These are things that we must do to literally stay alive, but they also are some of the bare minimal functions necessary to sustain production of labor elsewhere. A *doulia* model such as Kittay's already takes issue with the fact that this care work is not seen to have the same value as other forms of labor (or even is not seen as labor at all). However, what I have yet to

identify in this list of ‘basic components of care’ is the concept of listening or being heard. Care is communicative, in all of the many ways that care (and communication) may be carried out. As mentioned earlier, Kittay has redefined personhood to include relationship and dependency, with relationship being constructed expansively and not limited to societal standards of ‘appropriate’ interactions. Care, then, is as much the idea of ‘being heard’ as it is necessity for life – or perhaps being heard in some capacity is a basic tenant to survival.

I can think of this listening care or attentiveness in regards to what I give and what I need. For example, when students are verbally communicating with me, sometimes they will begin to tell me stories. The stories will continue with their thoughts and imaginations, but sometimes the speed that they tell these stories and lack of grounding for me, the listener, will leave me confused. They will continue as if I am in their minds with them, and clearly I am not. Part of my care is making the effort to ask them to go back, explain that one thought, walk me through the story one more time. It is easy to nod and encourage them to just finish their thoughts without engaging myself in them, but it takes effort to provide resistance, have them slow down and explain things to me while actively participating in the content of what they are saying. This verbal example serves as a metaphor for examples in the water – it is not just the water itself that can and does provide resistance, but I do as an instructor. My students rely on me to make decisions in the water that will keep them safe, and the students and their parents rely on me to push them and teach them in ways that will help them grow. This idea of growth is imperfect; is the goal so that I will teach the students enough to be able to swim on their own, and never need me? Or is the goal so that they may be able to do more in the water, have more options, so that they can find even more ways to communicate with others or me.

Understanding active listening as a form of resistance when working with my students has led into even further explorations of resistance. If viscosity is a measure of resistance, then it is resistance that actually makes care a viscous concept or act, and it is, like any knowledge creation, not without discomfort. If my students and I learn together when I teach them, provide care for them, and I engage with tools of resistance, then the work we do will of course help us create knowledge together. But this knowledge is one that actively resists the neo-liberal standard of mastery; I am not providing my students with packaged, clean answers that they can take and digest. Resistance here becomes a pedagogical tool – one that will necessitate a kind of learning which is at times painful, just as I discussed in Chapter 3 regarding transitional objects and castration anxiety. Again, like in Chapter 3, I am negotiating a situation where my authority over my students cannot be denied. Although we are working together and I am not ‘giving’ them knowledge, I am still the one who knows how to swim, the one in charge. How can I acknowledge these power relations and provide care as an act of love? Sometimes, the love that I provide to my students may be things that cause them challenge, discomfort. Resistant acts can be asking a student to slow down and try again, they can be asking a student to speed up and take a risk that they are hesitant to take, they can be putting the student in a situation (such as, the diving board) that causes them to experience fear, trepidation, or any other emotion.

So then how is water factored into the *doulia* model, and thus the concept of care/attention? What does the environment do to attentive interactions? In regards to communication, swim lessons (or other opportunities for tactile knowledge creation) allow for multiple forms of speaking and learning to happen simultaneously. I speak to my students verbally; we speak *with* the water when we learn our limits in it such as if we can float and when we will sink; I speak physically with my students when I hold them around the waist, or hold

their hands, or tread in the water hands outstretched as they prepare to jump in from the side, a promise through body language that I will not let them drown. Our obstruction to communication is minimal – the students can communicate with me in a variety of ways at almost any point during a lesson, and there are few chances for me to ‘hide’ things from them. They can see my tattoos, they have access to my body, and I will never be ‘wearing the wrong shoes’ for the activities we want to do. Does this mean that the students thus have more access to the water, as well? If I serve as a transitional object for them, the means with which they understand, explore, and know the water, then the more unrestricted access they have to me – the more access they have to the water.



## 5

**Learning to Drown**

*In high school, I used to find that swimming particularly difficult sets was best if I could get myself 'over the hump.' This 'hump' is not the halfway point of yardage; instead, I found this hump to be the point in which the very excruciating pain of severely pushing your body became repetitive, grounding, and euphoric. When I begin tough swim sets, I feel every individual part of my body; specific muscles hurt, my lungs ache, and I am acutely aware of the fact that I am pushing my heart to pump faster and faster. Thinking back to when I was swimming eight practices a week, I remember that the worst sets would keep you there – you could spend an entire two and one-half hours extremely mindful of how unpleasant the workout was at each step. But the best sets, typically the most physically challenging, were the ones in which I could get into a rhythm. I would not be trying to control the pain, trying to make myself feel better, or trying to pretend like it was not happening; I would allow the pain to become habitual, allow myself to become enveloped in it. Swimming is a very repetitive act – swim down the lane, flip, push off the wall, swim down, flip, push off the wall, swim down, flip, push off the wall. I always coupled this repetitive movement with repetitive phrases and sentences that I would say to myself, meaning that I could talk to my pain as I went. It is not that these sets would make the pain any better or go away, but they would allow a sense of satisfactory euphoria through the pain. I became addicted to this feeling: yes, the endorphins and adrenaline of highly competitive*

*athletics, but also this grappling with pain, even when the pain manifested itself through gasping for air, startlingly fast heart rates, dizziness, and sometimes even throwing up.*

When I reflect on my own obsession with pain, I recognize it as one that produced knowledge. These intense workouts and phenomena of ‘pushing my body to the edge,’ or further than it had previously ever been pushed, were methods in which I created knowledge with myself and the water. In Haraway’s terms, this knowledge was highly situated; obviously, I was developing bodily-induced knowledge in the context of my own mental health and drive. Clearly, this knowledge is personally valuable, as it allowed me euphoric calmness, an understanding of my bodily limits that I could apply to a variety of other situations, and a chance to practice disciplined repetition. However, what makes this knowledge valuable beyond self-benefit and gain? I believe that this pain calls for an exploration of euphoria and eroticism – their inextricability and the countercultures that they create.

Foucault wrote of sado-masochism as a practice that recognizes the pleasurable possibilities beyond those of a purely ‘sexual’ nature, or an exploration of pain and the erotic. He says:

The idea that S&M is related to a deep violence, that S&M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body – through the eroticization of the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of *all* our possible pleasures – I think *that’s* something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on... The practice of S&M is the creation of pleasure, and there is an identity with that creation. And that’s why S&M is really a subculture. It’s a process of invention (Cited in Eribon & Lucey, 327).

He claims two fundamental positions here: first, that eroticism and pleasure can come from other means than those that are traditionally considered sexual, and second, that there is knowledge,

and a creative knowledge at that, that is created through this eroticism. Lacan writes of ‘jouissance,’ or exactly this place of messy boundary and distinction where enjoyment is transgressed. Marc De Kesel and Sigi Jottkandt describe how, “Initially, [jouissance] is no more than the French translation of ‘Genuss,’ the word Freud uses to refer to an intense satisfaction at the level of the ego...” (De Kesel and Jottkandt, 121). That said, De Kesel and Jottkandt go on to flesh out Lacan’s Seventh Seminar commenting on, “...*a change in the relation between enjoyment and desire*, or, more specifically, of the predominance of enjoyment over desire. ... The center of gravity lies no longer in desire itself, but in its *transgression* ... The ultimate ‘sense’ of desire ... comes to lie in a *transgressive* gesture” (De Kesel and Jottkandt, 125). Jouissance as boundary-crossing thus represents the often indistinguishable realities of pain and pleasure; to dichotomize the two is to perform Haraway’s god trick and assume a neo-liberal standard of compartmentalization<sup>7</sup>. Jouissance is viscous in this transgressive crossing not because it fetishizes the transformation of pain to pleasure, but because it blurs the boundary between the two – just as viscosity represents the blurred boundary between solid and liquid.

This deconstruction of the dichotomy between pleasure and pain brings us back to the concepts of logocentrism discussed in my chapter on gender. Fundamentally, a society with a hegemonic culture that not only dichotomizes the two but also centralizes pleasure with pain as the lesser or even evil supplement is one that is built upon these logocentric constructions of knowledge. What ‘kind’ of knowledge does jouissance create, and why would it establish possibility of an aligned identity or subculture? Foucault claims that the innovative nature of

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<sup>7</sup> Just as neoliberalism privileges the entirely independent worker, such systems also privilege compartmentalization, or the creation of different categories with which to separate what are deemed to be distinct, clean phenomena. Take, for example, academia’s rigid rules around disciplines and the categories under which projects and schools of thought may fall.

S&M and finding pleasure adjacent<sup>8</sup> to pain is precisely what creates such an identity. In a society where, while bombarding individuals with regular violent images, the hegemonic culture is one that values anaesthetization<sup>9</sup>, reclamation of pain becomes the basis of a marginalized identity. Biomedicine as an institution, particularly as supported by the legal system, is designed to provide the least amount of suffering and the lowest amount of danger for all individuals. Least harm is the model, despite the fact that the actual experiencing of pain itself is not necessarily unhealthy or unsafe. Thus, reclamation of pain, or a viscous undoing of the boundaries between pleasure and pain, would fundamentally involve an undoing of the self – a concept about which Foucault was particularly interested in his theorizing of S&M. The self becomes radically de-centered when one submerges into the viscosity of pain-pleasure, because if the boundaries of what distinguish pain and pleasure are blurred, so must be the boundaries that define a distinct, encapsulated self. Such a rejection of any hegemonic culture would in and of itself be seen as countercultural, but this case has specificities in the realm of beauty and health standards.

The rejection of hegemonic anaesthetization through athleticism and physical activity does not require a certain type of body; not only do different athletic disciplines strengthen more specific muscle sets or areas of the body, but also people of all body types and abilities can participate in such a rejection. Pushing oneself to the point of euphoric pain can happen through

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<sup>8</sup> I specifically used the term adjacent in this situation and want to highlight its usage given logocentrism as a spatial metaphor. In discussions of central and secondary dichotomized terms, a distance is put between the first central term and the second, literally marginalized, term. To put them adjacent to one another is to acknowledge not only their reliance on one another for existence but also the blurred distinctions between them.

<sup>9</sup> Here when I refer to an anaesthetized culture, I am referencing our legal and medical systems that attempt to eradicate pain and damage to the highest extent. A system that attempts to create a society with the least harm possible is capitalistically advantageous – the hyper-specialization of our medical system allows for patients to see multiple specialists and thus spend more money, pharmaceutical companies that advertise the benefits of their drugs attract patients.

a variety of techniques or abilities. Therefore, while an ‘able’ body, or body that is hypothetically able to complete all functions of an athletic discipline, is not necessary for this rejection, it can end up being the fantastical ideal for a participant. For example, when I was swimming, I obviously could not swim as fast as an Olympian. Although the Olympics were never my goal, I had a marker, or threshold, in mind of what was any sort of tangibly possible, and I had visual representations of bodies that had accomplished them. What made Michael Phelps such a star at the 2008 Olympics was that he beat Mark Spitz’s medal record and did something that had physically never been done before. He thus was able-bodied in that he was functioning in a world that was designed to accommodate bodies like his – able-bodied in that he was meeting the highest standard of achievement in his sport. Even further, he set the standard of what dictates able-bodied, as he was changing and adapting the highest known level of achievement in his craft. Thus, despite the fact that groups such as the Navy Seals and elite athletes worship a relatively mainstream physical ideal – ‘perfectly’ able-bodied, thin, muscular – they simultaneously participate in a countercultural lifestyle in contrast to anaesthetization.

*When I teach swim lessons, I try to let students take the risks that they want in the water, within reason. ‘Within reason’ refers to a mix of what the student can do and what I can comfortably recover them from. For example, when I work with children who cannot swim at all without either the help of my hands or a flotation device, I do not allow them go off of the diving boards. However, I do allow them to jump off of the side of the pool. Some children that I work with want to take big risks – not just the diving board, but even jumping off of the side. I have had children take off the flotation device, ask me to step back and let them do it alone, and jump in off the side without the ability to keep themselves afloat. If the student asks to do this, I allow them to. That said, I also allow them to sink, and experience all of the sensations and emotions*

*associated with sinking, for a pretty long time (about 15-20 seconds) before scooping them up from the bottom. Some of the students who experience this once never try it again until they are more confident in their swimming. However, I have had multiple students who have come back again and again and again – they want to experience the drowning as many times as I will let them.*

Choosing to take a risk can be a thoughtful process; often times I find myself weighing possible outcomes before deciding to take a plunge. What sort of knowledge is gained when one experiences the results of a risky decision, and what knowledge is there in making the same decision again? Risk-taking is in some ways considered a staple of child development, yet in other ways, children who take excessive risks (and the standards of what risk-taking is ‘excessive’ can be highly contextualized and shifting) are often pathologized. Fiorenzo Ranieri describes how, “The child, and later the adult, will activate ‘risk-seeking’ behaviors aimed at managing mental mechanisms that are not fully developed” (182). Compensation for another source of lack, weakness, or neglect seems to be a constant theme in contemplating why a child would take consistent risks. What is this, if not a form of knowledge? Instead of understanding these risks as coping mechanisms or methods to avoid other forms of knowledge, the children – in the case of sinking into the water – are constantly immersing themselves in a tactile understanding of drowning. Is this the same kind of countercultural pain that I discussed previously? Are these children not pushing their bodies to the limits? How do I inhibit their abilities to take their bodies into euphoric pain? I am the one who draws the line being flirted between sinking and drowning; I shape the parameters of the learning experience to be one that does not end in death.

Hegemonic discourse on risk then brings us back, yet again, to our discussion of the spectrum. In a pathologization framework, the risk spectrum is established out of ‘no harm’ and ‘all harm (death)’ distinguished as polar opposites – risk is measured via two-dimensional location on such a spectrum. Taking a risk is then a highly quantifiable decision-making process, and it is one with gendered consequence. How is risk-taking, and succeeding or failing, considered to be a masculine act? In that risk taking is quantifiable, ‘succeeding’ from taking a risk (or having an outcome with maximum physical or social accomplishment and minimal discomfort or damage) could be seen as mastery of the task itself. Not only did the risk-taker master the knowledge of the potential risk *of* the task, but they also mastered the task itself. Similarly, a new set of expectations arises for the risk taker; if you refuse to take risks, you will be labeled a sissy. How does this misogynist expectation then work in conjunction with or against the hegemonic model of doing things with the least harm possible?

This masculinist reading of risk-taking exists in a complicated relationship to the often-feminized phenomenon of drowning. To reconsider the risk spectrum, the concept of conscious self-destruction is one that instantly be pathologized – a miscalculation of risk altogether. What is it about drowning in particular that is read as feminine? I am struck particularly by concepts of fluidity, ease/languidness, and submersion. If drowning – not unlike other forms of suicide, but particularly so because of the materiality of submersion – is the act of surrendering control, then this posits water as a looming, powerful force. Consider Anne Sexton’s poem, “Imitations of Drowning:”

Fear  
of drowning  
fear of being that alone,

kept me busy making a deal  
as if I could buy  
my way out of it  
and it worked for two years  
and all of July.

This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying  
went on and on in water as white and clear  
as the gin I drink each day at half-past five.  
Going down for the last time, the breath lying,  
I grapple with eels like ropes – it's ether, it's queer  
and then at last, it's done. Now the scavengers arrive,  
the hard crawlers who come to clean up the ocean floor.  
And death, that old butcher, will bother me no more.

I  
had never  
had this dream before  
except twice when my parents  
clung to rafts  
and sat together for death,  
frozen  
like lewd photographs.

Who listens to dreams? Only symbols for something –  
like money for the analyst or your mother's wig,  
the arm I almost lost in the washroom wringer,



following fear to its core, tugging the old string.  
 But real drowning is for someone else. It's too big  
 to put in your mouth on purpose, it puts hot stingers  
 in your tongue and vomit in your nose as your lungs break.  
 Tossed like a wet dog by that juggler, you die awake.

Fear,  
 a motor,  
 pumps me around and around  
 until I fade slowly  
 and the crowd laughs.  
 I fade out, an old bicycle rider  
 whose odds are measured  
 in actuary graphs.

This weekend the papers were black with the new highway (Sexton).  
 Sexton's navigation of fear and desire in this context is a viscous one; in her blurring of the boundaries between fear and desire as logocentric, dichotomized concepts, she explores resistance. Sexton writes of death by drowning as an overcoming, one that invades her thoughts, mind, and life. However, she also actively immerses herself in it, allowing death as a dream to become almost an obsession. In this deconstruction of dichotomy and embrace of drowning as it is – not with an attempt to own it, beat it, or master it – Sexton aligns herself with the Foucauldian undoing of the self. Drowning is thus transgressive, boundary crossing, from a two-dimensional spectrum of risk to a three-dimensional, dangerous new space.

And now here, entirely submerged, we return back to the tsunami through which we started this journey and about which I have dreamt for so long. The tsunami is powerful, it

demands respect, and in it, one can be overtaken. In fact, this dreamt tsunami stands, symbolically, as the very deconstruction of material/immaterial, self/other. The literal tsunami, as a bulk of water, is an overpowering force, yet it viscously represents the pathologization of drowning, of final submersion. Submersion into what? If the tsunami's overwhelming power is that of suicide, then the un-stillness of the water demands the navigation of the (dichotomized through hegemonic discourse) categories of self and water; when I am submerged, the god trick that I was ever entirely separate from the water at all is revealed. These reconfigurations of objectivity through viscous resistance in my chapters have created, instead of a satisfying crash of the wave, an even larger, and still growing, body of water – transitional phenomena that shift and expand as I learn with and through them. I can dive into it, as I suggested at our start, and lean into the drowning, or I can attempt to outrun it. Or perhaps, there are other options?

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