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CHAPTER NINE

Lather, Rinse, Reclaim
Cultural (Re)Conditioning of the Gay (Bear) Body
Patrick Santoro

I am caught, tethered to the system of my own and others' making.
(Pelias, 2011, p. 107)

THE FOLLOWING IS AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC SOLO PERFORMANCE depicting how I have become caught in a pervasive mediated consciousness, ever navigating and negotiating body image amidst a deluge of culturally “acceptable” images of gay men and masculinity. Specifically, it represents my experience as a Bear—a member of a gay subculture generally thought of as celebrating larger body sizes and/or significant amounts of body hair—lost among the portrayals of thin and hairless gay men that have become standard imagistic fare in mainstream media. Weaving formative moments of my childhood and adolescence with those of my adult life, “Lather, Rinse, Reclaim” reveals a developing identity through time to illuminate how the media and culture, as mutually informing entities, attempt to condition my “abject” body—a lathering in which I have succumbed to shame and guilt over my uncontrollably growing, differently marked flesh. Seeking assimilation in lieu of isolation, I adopted everyday performances of self that were attempts at silencing my body for the sake of social and cultural conformity—rinsing myself in a perpetuating, exclusionary system. While I may have heeded the expectations of “beauty” infinitely outlined and enforced throughout US culture, I have come to loosen the grip culture has had over me and heed the power of autoethnographic performance as an agent of personal change—a transformative act of reclaiming the self.

But autoethnographic performance is a methodology that resonates beyond the self, positioning lived experiences of life on and from the margins as activism with the potential to create social, cultural, and political change.¹

[In darkness, projected images of shirtless male bodies appear—the repertoire of typically buff, hairless men—one slowly dissolving into the next for a minute or so. The stage still dark, I walk upstage center into the projection of bodies, wearing a buttoned-down shirt with the top three buttons undone, my hairy-chested body flooded by theirs.]

Would you die early for the perfect body?

Would you?

How early? How perfect?

A sampling of my British gay brothers from across the pond reveals that more than a decade-earlier demise would be all too sweet a sacrifice for a life of physical beauty—the privilege that comes with [Holds arms outstretched.] flying through the world on the wings of defined arms, with sinewy, gym-born musculature, in streamlined, smooth flesh, within the wonder of bodily, social, and cultural ease. [Drops arms.] While they were only 10 percent of the almost 400 surveyed, a larger number of men—48 percent—would give up one year or more for the same privilege, for the comfort, confidence, and cultural cachet of—quote—“a constant desire to look tall, lean, and muscular with clear skin and a full head of hair.”²

Ahhhh, the power, illusion, and elusiveness of perfection . . .

[Projection shifts to footage from the following described television episode, intercut with footage of men walking a fashion runway—muted and in slow motion. With stage lights up to half, not competing with projected media, I walk out of the image to downstage left.]

Once, as a child, I found myself in the viewing shadows of the daytime talk show *Donahue*, where shirtless men paraded around the stage in some beauty pageant ritual, and I sat transfixed by the image on the screen, dwelling on the differences of my husky build (thank you, Sears, for the memories!) and already-significant body hair alongside their thin, muscular, smooth physiques. I envied their perfect bodies, the physical refinement, grace, and power bestowed upon them by the overwhelmingly raucous approval of the all-female audience. I desired their bodies. As a young boy assured of his attraction to other boys, I was eager to explore what that meant, what it would look like, and how it would feel. [Beat.] I wished I could be like them. I wished I could be with them.

[Projection fades to black before shifting to an unfocused still image of a male model wearing a tight T-shirt, sleeves hugging his bulging biceps, the front reading: “NO ONE CARES WHAT YOU THINK.”³ While the image is indistinct, it gradually comes into focus as the performance progresses, approximately 30

minutes, until reaching its greatest visual clarity and impact, noted later in the script.]

But envy and desire were fleeting, turning into anger and fear. I wished that my body would stop growing like it had. I wished that the teasing at school would stop, that I could get through one day without being bullied because of my poorly behaving and oafish-looking body. I wished I could turn a blind eye to the consequences, to stop caring what others might say, do, and think. I wished that others would view my body with the same overwhelmingly raucous approval. I wished there was a way to lessen—erase—bodily difference. I wished.

[Walks downstage center.]

We live in an image-conscious society, a body-obsessed culture, where certain bodies matter more than others, and the ones that matter most are those that have been plastered across mainstream films and music videos and billboards and magazine covers, bodies that signify cultural ideals, bodies that function as enforcers of hierarchical flesh, bodies that cause fragmentation among individuals trying to decipher between flesh that is imagined and flesh that is real, bodies, apparently, worth dying for.⁴

You know the type.

The media, and its trickle-down effects on popular culture texts of all kinds, floods us with a nonstop barrage of bodies that show us how to look—from the shape of our bodies to the clothes that adorn them—knowing well that bodies are our interface with the world; that flesh is the most visible marker of bodily differentiation; that enfleshment is not without politics, power, and powerlessness; that bodies and identities and desires go hand in hand; that bodies constantly rub up against other bodies and their accompanying politics, power, identities, and desires; that cultivating a sense of self through bodily (dis)identification is never an isolated act, but, rather, relational—a sense-making process understood in the presence of other similar and dissimilar bodies. The media inundate us with a revolving door of beauty products and procedures that will purportedly provide us with transformative remedies, bringing us one step closer to a more satisfying body, a more satisfying embodiment, complete with the promise that we, too, can look and feel just as alive as the well-constructed and adapted images in front of us, that the best iteration of one’s self is yet to come, that the qualities currently missing from one’s life are [Holds arms outstretched.] simply waiting in the wings of possibility. [Drops arms.]

Though we may know better, though we may remind ourselves that their propaganda reflects an alternate reality motivated by profit, that such advertisements shouldn’t matter, that they don’t matter, that the only thing lurking within their neatly wrapped, bedazzled ideological packages are broken promises and probable heartache—“gifts” that never let us forget that with privilege comes oppression, with visibility comes invisibility, with

presence comes absence, with promise comes failure, with wholeness comes fracture, with ideals comes imperfection, with hope comes disappointment, with heroes come villains, without options comes otheredness—the effects of the system are no less real, no less consequential.

Siiiiiiiiigh.

[Walks downstage left.]

Picture it: An unsuspecting woman of size standing in line at a fast food counter, looking on at her out-of-frame meal preparation, accompanied by a caption reading: “Your ass ... It’s on backwards.” Got it? Well, so do the 438,749 who have viewed this Internet meme, including those who felt compelled to take their own shot at her by commenting:

“Soo much awkward body in this picture, makes me shudder.”

“how does this even occur in nature ... ?”

“Yeah, that’s it, go buy yourself some more fat.”

“I’VE BEEN TRYING TO DESCRIBE PEOPLE LIKE THIS TO MY FAMILY. Now, I can show them.”

“Somebody ‘fix’ it!”²⁵

As an impressionable adolescent growing up with and in a mediated consciousness of constrained rigidity, aware of right and wrong, yet too insecure to remember the difference, I disassociated from *my* overweight, five-foot-eleven-inch, 240-pound, high school body and focused on other bodies. I engaged my body in a performance of distance, avoiding any possibility of fat by bodily association. This woman became the target, fodder for one-line zingers that could be shared among friends in the mall while throwing back buckets of popcorn and Auntie Anne’s pretzels. This woman’s body became the target, the subject of communal scrutiny over dinners of burgers and fries and shakes while she dined alone in an adjacent booth. This body became the target, an object of fascination, an image of internalized disgust, while I locked myself in my room at night, stuffed myself with the evening’s leftovers, and contemplated our bodies—hers and mine—before drifting off to sleep. There is truth in what Carter, the culturally complicit character in Neil LaBute’s play *Fat Pig*, says: “People are not comfortable with difference. You know? Fags, retards, cripples. Fat people. Old folks, even. They scare us or something. ... The thing they represent that’s so scary is what we *could* be, how vulnerable we all are. ... We’re all just one step away from being what frightens us. What we despise. So ... we despise it when we see it in anybody else.”²⁶

While laughing at her, I laughed at myself, knowing full well that her presence could be my presence at some unsuspecting point in my life. While waiting for *my* supersized meal, always a guilt- and paranoia-laden purchase, I, too, could become bodily fodder for public consumption. Who’s to say

I hadn’t already? At some level, I must have been aware that my thoughts and behaviors were defense mechanisms, deflection from and projection of my own insecurities, my own present and future fears about my body. As a 13-year-old, projecting my shame onto her was an opportunity to belong and become, like everyone else, to beat others to the punch before I got punched. Yet again.

[Walks center stage.]

In a recent interview, entertainer Hayden Panettiere spoke about her struggles with body image, and in conclusion she said: “But I remember reminding myself that beauty is an opinion, not a fact. And it has always made me feel better.”²⁷ While I praise Panettiere for her uplifting insight: the reframing of her relationship with the media juggernaut and her refusal to allow an industry to dictate her understandings of her body and her sense of bodily acceptance and happiness, I yearn for more than another distilled declaration. While it is *not* unfortunate that she and so many other find liberation from their struggles with body image, it *is* unfortunate that beauty is often chalked up to being mere individual opinion, without taking the media to task as a cultural machine that addresses bodies in and as fact. Let us not forget the media as oppressor, the ultimate gatekeeper, the most invasive of storytellers spinning tales of bodily inequality—a system that, no matter how hard I try, no matter how much I acknowledge it as a myth factory, I cannot escape. And while dismantling such a time-honored tradition is no easy task, we should not let the media off the hook. Because to live in a world—with any degree of complacency or resistance—means to always live by its rules.

I know the media’s rules well, especially as they apply to commercial gay representation. Every day I feel the weight of bodies, how flesh positions one’s self along a continuum of desire, how flesh can dictate one’s desire for self and others.²⁸ Flesh is social capital for gay men, the currency of sexual longing, where bodies are no throwaway commodity, and capital *gains* [Gestures a larger body size and tugs chest hair.] are ungainly. The media’s formulaic image for gay representation is straightforward: young, thin, smooth, feminine bois—B-O-I-S. Cute, huh? The closer one is to fulfilling this bodily template, and identifying with its accompanying ideology, the more personally grounded and sexually satisfied one is. So the promise of cutedom goes.

Gay men who give in to the media’s demands, who become perpetuating puppets to the discourse of privilege, who buy into the beliefs that such a system promises, uphold a hierarchy of beauty reifying body fascism.²⁹ And they do it for many reasons. I mean, who doesn’t want to belong? Who wants to be marked as different, especially within a marginalized community? Who doesn’t want to live in a body that is recognized—and desirable? Who can always shun the persuasive messages that surround? While some bodies

conform naturally, and others go to great lengths to appear so, both parties become oppressors, everyday citizen-cops who, knowingly or unknowingly, keep gay men's bodies and their sexual desires in check, downtrodden, and in a state of bodily insufficiency and personal shame. Though there is no guarantee that men who fit this mold of [*Uses voice to indicate air quotes.*] "perfection" are actually happy, there must be validation in seeing one's self represented, in being granted a public stamp of approval. In this widely circulated, yet narrowly minded, prescriptive portrait of gay men, what becomes of the misrepresented bodies, the underrepresented bodies, the silenced bodies, the young and developing bodies who search for a sense of self but are met with and in an imagistic void, an absence of options? A corporeal crisis, indeed.¹⁰

[*Walks downstage right.*]

While viewing the video recording of my most recent solo performance, my filmed body turned profile to the camera, lit only by projector light and spawning a multiplicity of profiled shadows upon shadows upon shadows against the cyclorama, I saw ... a hump. I saw a hump on my twenty-nine-year-old mid-back. A hump *so* defined that I panicked. I panicked because, in an instant, I could envision a lifetime ahead of spinal disfigurement, of further physical detracting. [*Beat.*] I never said I wasn't dramatic. I panicked because, without thinking clearly, it seemed that my body was once again a site of trauma, marked yet again as different. And I panicked some more, horrified that my back could [*Gestures the curve with hand.*] jut out in such an abnormal-looking way. I panicked.

[*Moves body as described, the audience as the referenced mirror.*]

Before I could pick up the phone to make an appointment with a diagnosing doctor, I ran to the bathroom mirror, turned sideways, and elongated my posture, pulling my shoulders back, attempting to undo whatever I thought I saw. With the fullest stretch, I could feel tightness in my back, exactly where I saw the hump in the video. I didn't want to deal with this. I didn't know how to deal with this. Maybe I imagined it? Maybe it was a light trick, just a shadow? But I knew better. I knew of the subtle pain in my back, which I chose to dismiss. I knew what I saw. But I had to be sure. I stood as upright as possible—an elongated body of posture-perfect verticality—and slowly... rolled ... my ... shoulders ... forward ... [*Hump fully accentuated.*] until the mass of my chest disappeared into my body, no longer independently defined, but an amalgamation of flesh that united with my belly, my nipples no longer able to poke through the fabric of my shirt. With my chest's temporary disappearance, my hump became pronounced. Through this kinesthetic engagement with my postural past, I felt bodily familiarity, as not only did this position feel comfortable—natural—but it provided a release of body memory: flashes of strategically walking the junior high and high school corridors of many years ago with the intent to

dissolve my body and its then-48-inch chest into the background of other smaller bodies that I felt claimed, and that deserved to claim, the space. [*Readjusts to regular posture and previous orientation to audience.*]

As a chubby kid, perhaps like so many overweight boys, I had to deal with the stigmatized "moob": the man boob. In a strategic move to lessen my flabby, womanly chest, to avoid the ridicule, to look less apart *from* and more a part *of*, I learned to deemphasize that part of my body by turning my shoulders inward.¹¹ Since I also went to great lengths to conceal my stomach by sucking it in, it turns out that depriving myself of diaphragmatic breathing gave me no choice but to take shallow breaths through my chest and, ultimately, cause greater pain in and damage to my back. Standing in front of the mirror, my hump accentuated, my body felt at home—a position that didn't hurt as much as when I attempted to sit or stand upright. While I did not know the significance of my body's sedimented behavior until this moment, I knew that my present-day hump was the result of posturing for bodily, social, and cultural complacency and approval—the aftereffects of a disciplined body through time.

[*Walks center stage.*]

Walking the streets of Chicago's Boystown neighborhood in late summer, I stumbled upon a salon's prominently displayed banner of a young, shirtless, six-pack-sportin', smooth stud resting comfortably in a chair, his brown leather belt snugly wrapped around the jeans of his lean and muscular waist, as he tugs, with both hands, a white hand towel wrapped around his bare shoulders. He is, after all, an image of [*Uses voice to indicate air quotes.*] "perfection," the man all men should aspire to look like, and to become. Centered above his body on the vertical banner is the attention-getter: "got hair?" Below his body is the word *Restoration* and an elaborate six-part definition:

1. The act of restoring; renewal, revival, or reestablishment
2. The state or fact of being restored
3. A return of something to a former, original beauty
4. Restitution of something taken away or lost
5. Something that is restored, as by renovating
6. A putting back into a former position, dignity, etc.

No doubt this salon caters to gay men; besides the banner, its Boystown address reveals that much. And I suppose that I'm expected to swoon over this man, to locate him—his body—as the object of my desire, to heed its [*With a deepened, fearmongering voice.*] rhetorically cautionary tale that body hair is the enemy—an unwelcoming presence functioning as the polar opposite of the grandeur that is restoration.

Siiiiiiiiiiiiigh.

Will someone please tell me how I can get to Mantown? Because I am no boy, and I do not have a boy's body, though I am certainly *somebody*.

I am a *man* who defines himself as a Bear—a member of a gay subculture of often larger-sized, typically hirsute men, and admirers of heft and hair.¹² The Bear movement began out of a need “to create a new way to express and find intimacy, emotional and sexual,”¹³ and has further become a reaction to and against commercialized imagery of bodies and attitudes that seeks to paint gay identity with limited strokes—pastel watercolors of pansies and fruit. Of course, I recognize the dangers of reduction and stereotype, but I also understand the need for playfulness—fat guys, after all, are usually funny guys. Bears represent and embrace the everyday man, the man who has grown a bit too much around his waist, who has failed to groom himself as often and thoroughly as popular taste dictates, and who rejects sexuality as solely the effeminacy of boyish pleasures. Bears dance to the beat of their own drum, as Pixie Herculon, comedienne Margaret Cho, and a den of plaid-wearin', singin' Bears reveal: “No one'd call me a sissy, no fuckin' way / In Wasilla or Juneau, they'd take me for straight / In my lumberjack shirt and my working man boots / not just a beard but completely hirsute.”¹⁴

Rawrrrrrrrrrrrr!

Bears exist in and as a dual marginalization—a community of gay men perceived by both straights and other gays as outliers who resemble very little, if anything at all, of the recognizable and understood gay bodies and personalities situated center stage. As visual and behavioral contrasts to the dominant identities that exist in the media, Bears are often storied as novelty, memorable for their campy embrace of manhood and masculinity, along with their refusal to adhere to the rigid body standards placed upon them.¹⁵ Yet, as playful and nonthreatening as Bears can be, they are a threat to the larger communicative system at play. As such, they are often relegated to the margins, mainstream media choosing either to story them as comical characters and, therefore, too animated for reality, or leaving them unstoried altogether. We live in binaristic times, and Bears challenge the either/or logic, refusing the label of commonly identified effeminate fag in favor of a masculine counterimage. Since the media prides itself on polarization—a dichotomy presenting a desirable body that speaks of a less desirable one, privileging visible bodies over invisible ones—it is easy to see why Bear representation is absent. Bears don't fit—ironic, eh?—and not fitting makes representation a challenge.¹⁶

[Walks downstage center.]

Upon removing my shirt and revealing my upper body on stage¹⁷—purposefully untrimmed for over a year, chest, back, and shoulders covered in dark, shag carpeting—a female audience member came up to me in the charged space of post-performance, thanked me for sharing my story, applauded my disclosure, leaned in, and—without taking her widened eyes

off my chest—revealed in a hushed tone: “It was like seeing your winky ... without seeing your winky.” Suddenly, it made sense: My bare/Bear body and its imagistic antagonism became clearer. You see, my body is an anti-commercial body that grows and communicates ferociously, provocatively, dangerously. It may seem that my body makes a bid toward normative sexuality—that is, a non-effeminate heterosexuality—but I am a body of signifying excess, a man who “makes language like hair.”¹⁸ I am a man who, with or without consent, produces a hypermasculine, hypersexual discourse that counters the safety and innocence of the preferred gay bodies seen throughout the media: the men who manscape above and/or below the belt as if it were an Olympic sport, a training rite to keep up with the pubescent fortune and glory of the pumped and hairless Joneses. While a site of pleasure, of “woof”-inducing approval within the Bear community, my hairy body—capital H-A-I-R-Y—is *too much* for the majority—too revealing, too obscene, too suggestive, too dirty¹⁹—and it is assumed that I will either oblige to restore my body to its former state of grandeur with perpetual salon treatments or donning a permanent shirt, or resist as a public outcast enduring the backlash of criticism that comes my—its—way.

[Walks downstage left.]

The Internet was my preferred avenue for meeting men as a recently out, nineteen-year-old coming of age in the late 1990s. While I have always valued face-to-face encounters, the Internet lessened the anxiety and threat I experienced with gay men in my younger years, a transaction where I knew my body would be subject to their gaze and interpreted in ways I could not control, in ways that made it possible for them to readily dismiss me on sight. Sadly, this is not negative speculation; this is fact, having been rejected on my physical appearance alone more times than I care to remember.

I passed my time online in the various chat rooms of America Online. AOL, or AOHell as referred to by so many, was one of the first Internet providers to introduce online chat. The rooms were rarely dull, unless you lived in a remote area and it was the middle of the night, but even then they could provide some spice. While communication in a live room ran the gamut, becoming a scrolling marquee of website advertisements, casual chitchat, and sexual solicitations, public introductions many times led to private messages, which paved the way for actual dates, physical rendezvous, and, for the romantic, possible love. If I were not in a room designated for Bears, it was not uncommon to come across images of men showing off their [Uses voice to indicate air quotes.] “prize-winning” bodies, flexing muscles, grinning with lust, accompanied by profile text that made their desires known:

*Athletic man looking for younger, smooth, and fit
Not into chubby or hairy guys, so please don't bother
Gym bodies are A+++++*

While the computer allowed me a departure from my body, the ability to communicate my body as I wished—storied manipulatively through my profile description along with a tightly cropped image of a floating head without a body—I still felt the significance of the body, the body never completely lost in written text, the rigors of bodily obsession still kickin’.

Then his private message popped up. Tony was sweet, a sexy Mediterranean-looking, local Bearish guy with dark hair who liked stocky men on the lightly fuzzy side. [*Beat.*] Not all Bears like ’em fully Bearish, or Bearish at all, perhaps preferring an image unlike themselves—a more mainstream image of desire. I was certainly stocky, though anything but lightly coated in fur. Our conversations were engaged, meaningful, so full of life and the promise of genuine connection. After several weeks of online banter, we transitioned to the phone, a progression that included conversations into the early morning hours. I looked forward to our nightly time together.

With 20 or so miles separating us, he suggested dinner, naturally so, though I wasn’t ready. I could already sense his disappointment upon our meeting. I had, after all, misrepresented my body. Though he was happy to send photos of himself, to talk and share pictures of his body, I concocted a story that I didn’t have other photos, and when asked about my body, I would tell him not to be fooled by my bearded face, suggesting that everything below was only slightly furry.

A month since our first conversation online, I worked up the courage to meet Tony at a local restaurant. My mind was a mess—a wildly spinning overanalysis of consequences. So many questions presented themselves: Would he spot me from across the parking lot and drive away? Would he introduce himself and promptly leave? Would he stay through dinner out of courtesy? Would he look past the image in front of him and stay because I was still the same man he had connected with? So many answers eluded me. My conscience was guilty; I had misled him, and I didn’t know how to save face.

While dressed for the date an hour before our meeting, anxiously pacing around my apartment, I was desperate. I quickly undressed, throwing my clothes on the bedroom floor, walked my naked body to the bathroom, plugged in the electric clipper, and with buzz and vibration, placed it on my chest, inch-long hair dropping to the cold, tile floor, fashioning myself to suit Tony’s desires. Pass after pass, the hair fell, my chest looking more and more like a surgical site. There was so much hair, so I shaved faster, and more feverishly, contorting my body, able to reach only parts of my back’s dense coating of fur. I was a striped mess.

I finished just as I imagined Tony pulling up to the restaurant and asking for a table for two. I looked in the mirror and couldn’t believe what I saw: my bare skin. It had been years since I had seen the baby-smooth flesh of my body, and I was disgusted with the image of the added weight staring

back at me. It was painful—so unbelievably painful—confronting my unruly waistline, my pasty white, moley, flabby, stretch-marked skin. This was no *Donahue*. It was the most exposed I had ever felt. And I vowed never to shave my body hair again.

I never met Tony, and while he called and sent e-mails for a week, I disappeared. I went into hibernation—like a good bear—awaiting the regrowth of my body hair, awaiting my armor, my mask, because, unknown to me until that very moment, my hair had become just that: a means of shielding myself from others, and from myself. It seemed that, with or without body hair, conforming or nonconforming, mine was a body without an easy fix.

[*Walks downstage center.*]

My gay Bear body—as I have understood it in the presence of individuals both gay and straight, friends and strangers alike—is marked as different, contested enfleshment. Unless depicted in niche venues with specialized marketing (and while they do exist, they are obscure but to those who actively seek them), my body is absent from the media’s agenda. And, quite frankly, that pisses me off! I want representation in Hollywood films and television shows without one-dimensional, stereotypical depictions, without the fat joke subtext, without being relegated to a five-minute *Where the Bears Are*-type of existence.²⁰ I want a Bear to walk the fashion runway, his shirt buttons undone—if not completely shirtless—and his shameless chest hair on display. I want to see stocky, fur-covered arms, legs, and faces on the covers of non-alternative magazines and throughout their full-sized colored pages in grocery store checkout lanes, in publications that aren’t deemed [*Air quotes.*] “pornographic” and preach solely to the devoted choir, alongside their partners and their children (but that’s a cause for another performance). I want widespread images of men with furry faces to kiss, with bellies to hang on to, with masculinity that isn’t banished to dungeon-like bar backrooms and the anonymous secrecy of bathhouses—perhaps safer havens for Bears (and not just Bears) who seek to explore sexuality and intimacy in the wake of a troubling representation.²¹ I want the media and its just-following-orders minions to stop cleaning me up, domesticating me, clothing me properly, grooming me, taming me,²² claiming me—as is—unfit for public consumption and mainstream sexual desire, and undeserving of personal acceptance. I want culture to embrace my body, to abandon fear and welcome possibility, so I, too, can embrace my body *without fear, with possibility.*

[*Projected image of the model whose shirt declares “NO ONE CARES WHAT YOU THINK” has come completely into focus. I turn to face him and walk upstage.*]

But I do. I care. Finally ... I care.

After years of your well-cast spell, basing my happiness on the juxtaposition of your body and mine, of what’s yours and mine, of Abercrombie &

Fitch and Big & Tall, of dancers and linebackers, of swimmers and lumberjacks, dwelling on the differences of our bodies, hoping that one day, someday, I could—and would—fit ... no more.

After years of adopting an if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em philosophy; perpetuating and celebrating a blinding, binding discourse of destruction; enacting demeaning, unfair, and cruel behaviors on others and on myself that left me feeling ashamed, numb, and hungry for more; abusing my body because my body was denied ... no more.

[Turns to the audience, projected image slowly fading to black.]

I turn to the page—to autoethnography. I turn to the stage—to performance. I turn to autoethnographic performance—to writing and performing this collision of self and culture, to explore my body as a battleground, a site/sight of rupture and critique, at war with others and within myself. I turn to autoethnographic performance to narratively and viscerally locate the catalysts of this tug-of-war that has proven so consequential, a body muddled and weighed down by disciplining power systems in mediated multitude. I turn to autoethnographic performance to suture the wounds of fractured and fragmented remains, to re-member flesh, to initiate recuperation. In turning, I stand at the confluence of a critical and reflexive methodology—this body, this paper, this stage²³—a poetic and performative praxis of voice and body in the service of reimagining embodiment,²⁴ of learning what it means to embody without burden, without guilt, without fear, without shame, because “the story comes, after the accident, to identify the body.”²⁵ I stand—an aesthetically constructed bodily self, a self-in-process, yet so much more than my self. I am a transformative body, an intervening body,²⁶ a body of possibilities.²⁷ I stand—with, in, and by my body—summoning the heart to hope, a man reclaiming his body, reclaiming his self—all that has been lost, and all that has yet to be found.

[Projection shifts to images of shirtless Bears—hairy and beefy men. Walks center stage.]

I am a text that “does not act alone,” that “does not speak alone,” that “is not a text alone,” that “is not meant to be left alone”²⁸ but that speaks in collaboration with other bodies, other politics, others powers, other identities, other desires. Representation (or lack thereof) always comes at a cost. Body image, gay identity, and masculinity are complex topics, fraught with nuance, and while it is my intent to use my experience as a means of providing insight into their interrelationships, my goal is not—and cannot be in one performance—to claim a comprehensive investigation of each. Locating and speaking on behalf of bodies—specifically, positioning one body type in relationship with another—is dangerous, as it implies a value judgment of one body over the other, a perpetuation of the same hierarchical system of bodies that I am against. But does a body on the margins not

have a right to speak against an existing imbalance of bodily representation, to advocate on behalf of oppressed bodies, to reposition representational power? It is not my attempt to disrespect some bodies in an effort to bolster my own subjectivity and others who share a similar perspective. Nor is it my goal to offer a blanket attack against the bodies that fit the description of the cultural mainstream, bodies that may be allies to the cause, that may understand the necessity of thinking critically about bodies and representation of bodies in the media. But my narrative *is* a critique against the media itself, the culture-creators, industries, and everyday enforcers of communicative messages that oppress individuals whose bodies do not, and cannot, conform to such mythic images. If in my story I am able to allow others to think about the production of bodily privilege, to question how it is that we know what we know, to think twice about the media and popular culture texts that surround, to introspect upon their own bodies and the experiences allowed them because of their bodies, to allow another to feel less alone,²⁹ then I suppose I have done my job.

While I remain broad-framed and far from toned, I am 70 pounds lighter today than my 300-pound past—still medically obese. Some have questioned—myself included—if I am able to legitimately speak on behalf of overweight bodies, whether or not I am still able to claim a Bear identity. Though the size of my body has shifted, I am still the memory of weight. It is no easy task to abandon the hyperawareness of and critical engagement with my body that I knew for so long, and while I may always suffer from dysmorphia, I am making greater strides at what it means to live more comfortably in my body without comparison to other more prominent bodies. Weight aside, I am still an extraordinarily hairy body—an aging body that now grows with and in silver—so I speak from the perspective of a man whose body is still stigmatized, whose public life and body still revolves in and around visual signifiers of difference, but who, in the assuredness of his wiser thirties, is learning to rely less upon the trickery and deceit of a mediated, not-so-real reality.³⁰

[Projected images fade to black. Walks downstage center.]

I find myself in the men's grooming aisle of Target, on a quest for body wash ... because even without too much hair on the top of my head, there is still a lot elsewhere to clean, so much that has been conditioned, so much to recondition. There are bottles upon bottles of shower gel specifically for men—growing in number by the year—appealing to masculine sensibilities with their woody smells and their sporty packaging. Oh, masculinity in a bottle! But across the aisle, staring at me from behind, beckoning me to acknowledge its anchored presence, is where my eye is led: a display, at least ten feet long, of electric clippers—a bounty of brands and types promising me a well-groomed, *smooth* look. I am intrigued by one clipper in particular: the Braun Cruzer Body shaver for \$59.99. I pick up the box, hold it in my

hands, stare at it for a moment, study the sleek package and the image of what-seems to be an underwear model in classic-Calvin-Klein black and white, and I think about the men who will buy this razor, who believe in the promise of brawn, who will deny their naturally growing bodies for the "Perfect Body" advertised on the box.

I hold the underwear model in my hands, continue to stare, and consider whether or not to make this purchase. While I have become more at home in my body, welcome to my body, appreciative of my body, I still wonder about the ease of my identity if I looked less like Harry and more like every other Tom and Dick. I still wonder if it would be easier to wear a fictional hairless flesh instead of the hirsute one of my reality.

I hold the cultural model in my hands, continue to stare, and consider whether or not to make this purchase. While I understand the politics of body hair, the necessity for activism, I still wonder how my body would feel shirtlessly traversing the shores of a coast or while swimming at the public pool, whether or not I want to position my body as a discursive centerpiece, wishing for a moment when taking off my shirt wouldn't require contemplation.

I hold the possibility in my hands, continue to stare, and...

[*Blackout.*]

Notes

1. In an effort to honor the feel and prosody of live performance, meeting performance on the page as fully and experientially as on the stage, endnotes are used to provide citation and further explanation.
2. Ragan (2012, para. 2).
3. Image retrieved from http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m4r9d7m24K1rswm-vlo1_250.png
4. See also Giles (1997).
5. "Your ass" (2012).
6. LaBute (2005, pp. 71-72).
7. Krumboltz (2012, para. 2).
8. See Santoro (2012).
9. See Mann (1998, pp. 347-349).
10. Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia (2000) refer to the crisis of men and their perceived bodily imperfection as the Adonis Complex. Named after the Greek mythological character (coincidence it derives from myth?), Adonis is said to embody the ideal of masculine beauty. Their research includes a chapter devoted to gay men (pp. 213-225), in which they acknowledge a number of studies that reveal "gay men are more dissatisfied with their bodies than straight men" (p. 214).
11. Durgadas (1998) views overweight men as "automatically suspect: they are visibly, palpably soft and round, neither lean and lithe, nor robustly muscular, enjoying a physically questionable male status, upholdable only through boisterous clownishness or blustering bullyhood provided by sheer girth. Fat men are already suspiciously womanish" (p. 368).
12. Defining what constitutes a Bear is a precarious endeavor, as "the very undecided-identity of identity is a prominent subcultural feature of the Bear community" (Hennen,

2008, p. 96). While it is not my intent to reduce Bear identity to a singular type, privileging (a certain) physicality over another, or perpetuating the notion that Bears are merely their bodies, conceptualizing Bear identity at the physical level serves to frame how Bears represent stigmatized bodily excess and, conversely, cultural lack.

13. Wright (1997, p. 9).

14. See Sobule (2010).

15. While the Bear community appears to be a gay space of nonconformist ideology and inclusivity, an internal hierarchy still exists. The commercial image of the Bear world, or what Wright (1997) refers to as "glamor bears" (p. 9), is of mainstream appeal: muscled, moderately hairy, stern-looking, white men. Although meeting few of these criteria, I find it necessary to address the privilege of my white body, both inside and outside of the Bear subculture, in an effort to acknowledge other men's bodies and their struggles for representation and locating community.

16. See Suresha (2009).

17. See Santoro (2009).

18. Gingrich-Philbrook (2001, p. 3).

19. Warren (2009) shares his struggle with body hair: "My hair made me feel dirty. And without any way of maintaining the dirt, I always felt I had to cover my body up with the hope that no-one would see me (p. 246).

20. *Where the Bears Are* is a semi-regular scripted Web series, part comedy, part mystery, following the lives of three Bear roommates. The five-minute episodes are not presented on commercial television, but available only online: <http://wherethebearsare.tv/>

21. For an account of a gay man's experience negotiating his body in a bathhouse, as well as a brief history of bathhouse culture, see Berry (2007).

22. Sullivan (2003) uses this language to describe how television programming, such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, has stripped men of "the essence of maleness" (para. 11) in favor of a "squeaky clean and feminized version of manhood" (para. 12).

23. I borrow the linguistic markers body, paper, and stage from Spry's (2011) book of the same title, in which she addresses autoethnographic performance as a process of "putting the body on the page, lifting it to the stage, and then understanding that body and paper and stage are one another, that there is no purity of text or hierarchy of embodiment... Our bodies are inherently part of the meaning making process, how the meaning-making process is inherently tied to language and writing, and how performance operates as the dialogic process within and between the body and language" (pp. 26-27).

24. Miller (2001, p. 286).

25. Gingrich-Philbrook (1998, p. 298).

26. Pelias (2008) describes an intervening body as that which "sees performance as an opportunity to work for social justice. It is politically engaged, committed to productive change" (p. 192).

27. Madison (1998) frames "the 'possible' as suggesting a movement culminating in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of 'merging text and world,' of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces" (p. 277). See also Holman Jones (2005).

28. Holman Jones (2005, pp. 763-764).

29. Pope, Phillips & Olivardia (2000) state that, to combat the Adonis Complex, the first step "is to help men understand that they are not alone with these feelings, that millions of others share the same concerns and tribulations. It is time to help men appreciate the underlying social forces that contribute to their negative feelings about their bodies" (p. 26).

30. Whether my queer body is interpreted against the rigid cultural standards of what it means to perform "man" and "masculinity," or as desirable within the gay community,

I recognize that I embody everyday marginality, existing with/in a system of interrelated oppression at the nexus of gender and sexuality.

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