



Acting Up

Writing as Labiaplasty

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Alison Pullen

Macquarie University, Australia

Abstract

Woman. Active. Passive. Erased, In writing and thought.

Keywords

Writing, woman, feminine, activism

I write to speak. Writing extends me, it reaches well beyond the confines of myself. At a very basic level, I would like my writing to speak from me, of me, when I am able to.

Spaces have been created for embodied writing, leaky writing, dirty writing, feminine writing ... yet I am asking whether this is a place that is assigned to women and what are the terms of being in the organisation studies community? Do we need to be more subversive, transgressive? Are we at risk of losing this space unless writing becomes activism, until we change the regulatory systems that assign this place for us and hold us accountable for our writing? This activism starts by speaking of writing, and women's place within it. This activism arises from relations between us – it is not something we do in isolation except that I am writing this text alone, but I am constantly imagining you in front of me. I am working through how what I write will be received, and whether I should edit myself. I am also mindful that much confidence stems from writing this text by myself. Speaking these words, speaking me, breathes, lives, connects. Writing exposes, and with this exposure, we get cast in a sea of risk, insecurity and vulnerability.

There is a need for radical engagement with women's bodies and their relationship with writing. Given the power of women's writing, what can we do to challenge and change the systems that govern us? Women's bodies as sites of radical transgression through writing differently. For writing to touch, we need to establish the affective sociality between writers and readers – it touches by promoting an ethico-political relationship between us. This again seems quite simple until we remember the context in which we write, and when we remember women's place non-place, presence absence and abjection in the system? How can we create relationships of mutual care, respect,

Corresponding author:

Alison Pullen, Department of Management, Faculty of Business, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia.

Email: alison.pullen@mq.edu.au

sociality between us that work differently? But are these risks too much in the context of the neo-liberal university?

When we write, we write against a system that affects us in terms of what and how we write. Structural inequalities make writing differently very difficult to achieve. We don't just write because our writing gets caught in the systems of power and control of academia – the gatekeepers that manage me (and my metrics). Writing differently, writing in embodied ways, violates the writer because academic writing requires some level of conformity. We should just write, write the self as many of our mothers have showed us. But, increasingly, we are disciplined and regulated by neoliberal universities: what counts as academic writing? Do our papers meet the metrics? What are our outputs? Oh, feminist writing doesn't get published easily, what should we write about instead? Those of us who find ourselves in business schools are experiencing a mainstreaming of our critical agendas. If writing attacks the system, will it get published? Should we play the game? What are the norms of the fields in which we work? Gatekeepers appear again, they are everywhere. Norms write themselves on my body through their conduits – reviewers, editors – us. After recent experiences, I keep asking, 'Why do we tolerate such violation?' 'Why do we reproduce such violence to each other?'

We are socialised as young girls to either not talk of our bodies or to use euphemisms to talk about normal body parts and functions. During my mother-in-law's 80th birthday lunch at Dee Why Beach, Sydney, in January 2016, my nieces and I started talking about our flowers and in my case lockey (don't ask, but you can guess! 'Dry your lockey!' I hear my grandmother screech. It was only in my adult years that I put the lock and key together). This reinforces how women's bodies are private, a source of shame that must be discussed through abstraction.

In a piece in *The Conversation*, Kirkman and Fischer (2016: n.p.) write about how women 'need the right words to seek help for conditions down there'. Down there, the dark, deep contingent which is curbed with fear, loathing and a source of danger:

Women's bodies – inferior, abject, malfunctioning, leaky, covering, CONTAINMENT, disgusting. A source of shame.

We contain their fleshiness, their leakiness. And, it is the same in organisation studies. Men's bodies are the norm by which women deviate from and this deviation requires correction.

There has been much talk of women's writing, body writing and even leaky writing as an activist project, but how can we progress writing as embodied, feminine, if we don't have the language to talk of women's bodies? It seems that we take for granted that women are able to do this writing? When they are able, there are certainly many barriers and constraints to face. I want to suggest that we start with the importance of context for women writing in the area of gender and organisation – the journals, publishing houses, universities and our own self-censoring. These institutional pressures are formed by, and further reproduce, patriarchal culture. This culture makes it harder to write – women's writing needs to write against this patriarchal culture which many of our colleagues do their best to uphold in the name of academic integrity and standards ... and perhaps the homosocial networks that some women like to be involved with.

But, when I think of my body with all the sensations that it involves, and my vagina, labia, vulva, they do not seem silent to me; until I become socially and culturally co-opted into rendering them silent. Women's writing is the same ... it invokes the body, with all its leakiness, and yet I write over this materiality to accommodate the institutions who publish my work:

DOWN THERE must be CONTAINED – YOU MUST WRITE ON THE LINE. BE POLITE. DON'T SAY FANNY, VAGINA ... SWEET SMELLING FLOWERS IS WHAT WE WANT.

Subsequently, it appears that as a female academic, I only exist by the violence conducted to me. Malabou (2011) has sought to address her own erasure as a feminist philosopher in philosophy in that she is only present through the violence done to her. I am here because of my erasure – and I am involved in this production. When other breaches the norm, we must erase ourselves:

WE MUST NOT SPEAK OF **DOWN THERE**. KEEP THESE WORDS ASSOCIATED WITH **DOWN THERE** AWAY FROM THY LIPS. Gently. Quietly. The vagina is powerful and must be repressed.

You don't want to read about the blood that drips down my leg, the pungent odour of being sexually aroused, the gashes and scars of childbirth, the grey hair, the skin imperfections that develop in the Sydney heat. In redressing this abjection, we need to talk about vulvas, vaginas, labia. In these mundane yet vivid practices, I start to feel how bound to tradition we are. Perhaps, in the public discourse of what counts as women's writing, the performativity of such transgressive rendering of the body must be culled.

As Malabou (2011) writes of the meaning of the feminine: 'the body of woman, its morphology, the anatomy of her sex organs ... so the link between the feminine, woman, and the woman's sex organs appears to be a reality that cannot be undone' (p. 15).

Women are judged by others and by ourselves and we continue to engage in a long history of correcting, containing, pacifying our bodies through hygiene management, corrective surgery and so on. With writing it is no different; we tidy up our embodied writing which leaks – we edit, cleanse, correct and say what other people want us to say. Our need for designer journal papers forces us to write them using various corrective strategies. Please clarify, please define, please frame, please explain ... please execute, please repeat the main points. We are engineered by each other.

But so too are our vaginas.

We have known for some time that increasing numbers of women seek labiaplasty (Kobrin, 2004: n.p.; Nurka, 2012: n.p.), in some desire for the normal (Sen and Abrams, 2010). This desire for the normal in writing is the male standard. We desire the male standard. Writing for women thus becomes labiaplasty. Instead of enabling writing that bleeds, after Diprose (2002), and which leaks, disrupts, deviates, I conjure that various cosmetic functions work to favour normalisation of writing practices ... to fit in, to make the contribution, to position the facts, the arguments but to do this in a pared back fashion within the confines of 8,000 words.

Ussher (2013: n.p.) discusses the desire for labiaplasty which emerges from mounting social and cultural pressures and illustrates this with images of perfect major and minor labia evidenced in porn to airbrushing in swimsuit sales brochures. Barbie labia has apparently become the norm to which many women desire. A girl's plastic doll acting as a model for women's bodies? Ussher (n.p.) states, 'The real issue here is women's dissatisfaction with their bodies'. This leads me to ask whether we should challenge the unrealistic images and expectations that maintain women's desire to perfect ourselves?

When I think of writing – women's writing – as labiaplasty I write,

Cutting.

Modification.

Correction.

Smoothing.

Grafting.

Crafting.

Tightening.

Pulling.

Perfection.

Normalisation.

Heteronormative.

Malabou (2011) starts her book *Changing Difference* with the meaning of the feminine and introduces the ‘two fleshy lips and two delicate folds of skin that surround the entrance to the vagina’ (citing *Le Robert, Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 2011: 5). Drawing on Irigaray (1977), and discussing Derrida’s deferral of her, Malabou introduces the ‘space of the lips’ when Irigaray ‘thinks woman starting from a sort of self-touching without self, without mastery or conscience, a space of withdrawal and separation without ego’ (p. 15). These lips keep ‘women in tact with herself’, an ‘auto-eroticism’ (Irigaray, 1977). While Irigaray acknowledges the risk to woman by the male sexual organ, what is important here is that there is no way of ‘distinguishing what is touching from what is touched’ (p. 16). Similarly, the surgeon’s knife cuts, violates in the name of perfection. The surgeon is no longer separate from woman’s lips. For Malabou, the lips are ‘logical, ontological, and physiological motif of an altering contact’ (p. 17) and continues,

Women’s lips are as much those of her mouth as those of her vulva. But the vulva is better than the mouth at incarnating the existence of lips that cannot open by themselves, lips which, prior to penetration or expulsion (humors, blood, birth), are simply next to each other, split, Siamese, acritical. (p. 16)

Given such thinking, labiaplasty penetrates, alters and mutates woman. The lips, writes Malabou (p. 17), ‘suspend the opposition of me and other, activity and passivity’. Writing as labiaplasty then mutates women’s writing and it renders woman mute. Suggestively, I end: Where is she?

Reflecting

I am writing ‘Reflecting’ after the above text had been reviewed by *Organization*. I was reluctant to submit this piece to a journal, I still am. Before discussing the review process, I will recollect the process of writing this text for delivery. ‘Writing as Labiaplasty’ was born in one sitting. My intention was to say something on writing differently and I had no prior ideas regarding the direction, form or content of the piece before sitting down to press my fingers on the keyboard. But, I wanted to write text that would not, could not, be edited. Reflecting many months later on the process of writing, I remember that I wanted to convey the difficulties of the act of writing against mainstream writing practices. I sat down at my computer at 9 a.m., after the morning school run, and stopped typing at 2.50 p.m. I was completely immersed in the process, not moving at all, Ted and Rupert (our family’s dogs) looking strange because my normal routine had not been executed. Towards the end of the duration of the writing, I located relevant citations that surfaced in the text. In keeping with the idea of dirty writing (Höpfl, 2007; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008), the idea was not to edit the text but to let the unsanitised, leaky text be.

There is a story to tell of the times between writing the text and writing this reflection and which reveals how the process of writing and speaking of writing throws up common constraints for writing and the activism associated with it. The text was first read and was written for the Writing that Touches stream at the *Gender, Work and Organization* conference in 2016 that I convened with

Sarah Gilmore, Nancy Harding and Mary Phillips. This was a safe space to speak and I remember feeling secure with knowing my place within the stream and a conference that I was familiar with. However, this text also presented a deep vulnerability. On the day of my presentation, I read the text to the audience and it was warmly received; I felt a deep sense of relief that the reading was over but also that others could connect to the text. Especially, Deborah Brewis related the art of American artist Stephanie Sarley whose surreal humour and visceral photographs of fruit attempt to bring attention to women's vaginas and society's aversion to women's sexuality (Lefebvre, 2016). Carolyn Hunter discussed not having the language to speak of women's bodies ... because they are always othered and presents women with an inevitable trap that we reproduce by failing to speak about our bodies on our own terms. The reading was both angry and vulnerable, confident and timid, and I have never been more grateful for the table skirt which masked by lower body, the table top propping me up in the chair in quaint Keele Hall.

After six weeks, I read the piece at an Acting Up panel organised by the editors of *Organization*. Before the panel, I felt different than I did at *Gender, Work and Organization* as there is something about the scale and mainstream nature of *Academy of Management* conference that made this reading different. I wondered why I had agreed to do it and proceeded by cutting out parts of the text starting with the most exposing passages first. The session started very early, and without coffee I went to the panel discussion knowing that I would be the fourth speaker and that I had a long time to wait. I started feeling cut, I had CUT my vagina out and this made me angry and more nervous than I had experienced before and I also know of the power and emancipation of living the personal as political. Yet, I did not know most of the people in the room, despite seeing wonderful friendly faces, and I did not trust people with my text. At the end of my session, there was a long silence that seemed to go on forever and then the silence was broken with a nervous laughter from one participant. The chair of the session asked the audience whether they had any questions. I remember screaming inside: 'this is not the time for fucking questions, let's talk about why there was laughter in this room. Was he laughing at ME?' There was further silence and I broke it by saying 'you don't have to ask me questions'. It was at this point that a woman spoke strongly of her experiences of trying to get her paper on the experiences of miscarriage published. At this point, I felt both compassion and deep thanks for saving me from the uncomfortable space that had been created. Emily gave me legitimacy and I was full of gratitude because personal writing is often sanitised in the spaces in which we speak.

In May 2017, I read this piece at a wonderful diversity and methodology conference at Copenhagen Business School but, yet again, I was quite nervous, feeling out of place. Moreover, there were men in the room that I really didn't want to talk to, men who perpetuate the very institutions that I am critical of and who disrespect, even violate, women, women's research and writing. But, the reading was done and I welcomed big hugs from the strong arms of women and dear friends. I felt guilty because this time my reading took space away from other speakers and because its delivery disrupts.

These readings and subsequent discussions have reinforced the ways in which women write differently, whether it is labelled activist or not, feminist or not. Heather Höpfl's writing always encouraged ways of writing from the margin, the power of women's writing on the margin and the centrality of the maternal in women's writing. I am always remembering Heather at these readings and this remembering seems to surface an urgency for speaking out, naming and disrupting. This text presents my embodied response to writing as activism, writing that I hope will take shape in a feminist community that continues the mobilisation of affective solidarity that combats sexism (Vachhani and Pullen, unpublished manuscript). This writing while personal and abstract (in the sense that it can present different meaning to different people) acts as a small episode of resistance in the communities of women who work, often invisibly, to create

safe spaces to work, live and write, and developing different ways of working and caring for others in the university.

Through the review process of this Acting Up piece, the reviewers requested clarification of whether I am interested in gender or women in writing. I am interested in women's writing and the ways in which women's writing is shaped by and reproduces gendered relations within it. The feminist management and organisation literature (see, for example, Fotaki, 2013; Gherardi, 2003; Harding et al., 2013; Lewis, 2014) have established an important body of work some of which sets out to challenge phallogentrism and stand against scientific writing (Phillips et al., 2014). While there is much talk of the disembodiment of organising and organisation, the body has been forever present albeit in the male worker, ideal form (Acker, 1990), or women's bodies as disruptive to the status quo (Gatrell, 2011; Vachhani, 2014). Yet, the contained body that doesn't leak informs much of the discourse around bodies in organising, even though the leaky body is natural (Young, 2005). The sexualised, gendered, leaky body has the capacity to disrupt organising (cf. Dale and Burrell, 2000) and perhaps this is why organisational attempts to contain neuter bodies is commonplace (Höpfl, 2000). I am informed by literature on writing about writing – the ways women's embodied writing can disrupt conventional texts. As reviewer 2 so beautifully explains that 'I thought that your drawing on Diprose to argue that cosmetic functions work to favour normalization might also reflect on how we pay homage to that normalization through our writing and speaking'. This normalisation governs me as I write this; it governs the reviewers and editors of this journal. To organise against normalisation is a task that I have attempted through embodied, almost pre-reflexive, writing ... the kind of writing that we look back at and wonder: 'where did that come from?' But even this writing comes from the normalising gaze of being able to write as an 'established' academic (Benschop in the editorial letter) and having the confidence to enable these words to be published because they return to me, I will be read in relation to this piece. This writing as labiaplasty piece will be archived in the research records of my university and presented to the Excellence in Research for Australia framework, it will be sit as a line on my CV and read every time I apply for a job or funding. I am defying the normalisation of the institutions that want to erase me, as I become a metric.

Writing is political – this writing reclaims a space for me, and possibly others. This piece defies the vulnerability I experience, the insecurity that speaks to me to silence my thoughts, especially at the level of responding to the thought-provoking reviews which encompassed a commitment to understanding my text – and understanding me. This knowing is central to the containment of women, women's writing, and this piece of writing that I present here is as much about not being able to know, know myself – or you the reader knowing me. The embodied encounters between us rest on unknowing, suspending ourselves in open, generous relationships with each other and which resists the epistemic violence between members of our community. Hopefully, these ways of relating challenge the normalisation of our own bodies in relation to others. One reviewer eloquently wrote of the 'experiential and epistemic complexity' women face, as 'we only dare to know because we are told what to know, and reminded of the limits of our knowledge. We are told to know our place, awaiting penetration' (cf. Höpfl, 2007; Vachhani, 2009).

Writing this text has, through its reading and review, mobilised meanings as it has taken life away from the confines of my safe writing space. This piece raises questions about the cultural differences in thinking through labiaplasty and discussions of female genital mutilation; the popularity of pussy power and, as one reviewer noted, the imagery of the vagina dentata featured on anti-Trump banners and the symbolic and discursive meanings of "this pussy bites back" on a global scale' (reviewer 2). There are many ways in which I can give direction to the initial text but it would move away from the embodied writing that was done. My writing takes one step towards embodied writing, feminist writing – putting myself on the line to name and speak in the academy

and this journal. What remains critical is the political and ethical mobilisation that arises from this writing to change the terms that we are given – to rupture the epistemic containment that continually oppresses. However, as one reviewer stated, ‘Are we speaking/writing in the wrong places?’ And, of course there is no answer, but it is time to reflect whether speaking against our academic institutions that house us will achieve change. As I move towards closing, it appears that instead of standing against the masculine, the space created by women for women stands in its own right rather than claiming space to write and speak through its attack on the masculine. In this way, I cannot be erased despite attempts to do so and despite the seduction of my own body to erase me.

Returning to my question in the original text, ‘Where is she?’ I am still asking this question, but I ask it less tentatively and with the support of others to have given me legitimacy to explore writing as a form of activism, and this writing is done unapologetically.

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Author biography

Alison Pullen is a professor of Management and Organization Studies at the Faculty of Business and Economics, Macquarie University, Sydney and Otto Mønsted visiting professor at the Department of Organisation, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. Alison's work is concerned with analyzing and intervening in the politics of work as it concerns gender discrimination, identity politics, and organizational injustice.