

# THE FEMALE AND THE FRAGMENT(ED)

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## Abstract

In this paper, I examine how Maggie Nelson, Roxane Gay, and Jenny Boully use fragmented forms in personal essays. I argue that each of these women use fragments in order to talk about their bodies and bodily experience because the female body is essentially unknowable, or unspeakable, and as a result is best expressed through the fragmented essay form. This is not to say that there is something inherently female about the fragment, but rather that an essay made up of fragments – one that may be called lyric, mosaic, segmented, braided, collaged, or sectioned, depending on your theoretical preference – provides the space for women to talk about their bodies in a way that is consistent with their lived experiences. The fragment's inherent characteristics and contradictions enable this type of relationship to the female body.

“One image of the intellectual: a man who loses his eyesight not out of shame (Oedipus) but in order to think more

clearly (Milton). I try to avoid generalities when it comes to the business of gender, but in all honesty I admit that I simply cannot conceive of a version of female intelligence that would advocate such a thing,” Maggie Nelson writes in *Bluets*. Amy Bonnaffons, in “Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay,” summarizes Nelson's argument: “Being female makes it difficult to forget that one has a body, that one is a body” (Bonnaffons). For the female writer, the awareness of the body and its potential limitations inserts itself into the workings of the mind – the physical form of the thinker necessarily shaping the content of her thought. The inseparable nature of form and content is mirrored in the use of fragments by authors like Nelson in crafting their works about the female body. In this paper, I examine Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, and Jenny Boully's *The Body: An Essay* as key examples in which the authors use the fragmented form to illustrate their bodily experiences.



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## I. THE SEARCH FOR A FEMALE FORM OF LANGUAGE

Feminist theorists have long argued that a new form of language is necessary to represent the female experience. Dale Spender, in her book *Man Made Language*, argues that there is something about the English language that is inherently male, because the system of classification and the creation of meaning have been created, historically, by men in positions of power (Spender). Mary Daly attempts to construct a new language, to separate the speaking and writing of women from a male-dominated construction. Jean Bethke Elshtain likewise argues that despite the best feminist efforts, public discourse has never been accessible to women, and they need to create their own emancipatory language (Elshtain 611). Elshtain considers several theoretical efforts within the feminist tradition that have attempted to create “a feminist discourse that rejects domination” (Elshtain 621). The fragmented essay is not necessarily the solution that these thinkers have been pursuing. It is a form that writers of all genders use for a variety of purposes, and does not suggest a purely female usage. But it does provide an opportunity for women to eschew the traditional narrative line, based in chronology, and organize their work in a way that allows them to speak more freely about their embodied experiences.

Maggie Nelson, in *The Argonauts*, quotes Luce Irigaray on this issue: “In other words, the articulation of the reality of my sex is impossible in discourse, and for a structural, eidetic reason” (Nelson 38). Irigaray insists that there is no space in traditional discourse for her to discuss her own reality. Nelson herself expresses her frustration with the structural dichotomy between intellect and femininity, describing an incident during her book tour when she was questioned about her pregnancy. “Leave it to the old patrician white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body,” she writes, “so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, *the woman who thinks*” (Nelson 91). There is a conflict between Nelson’s pregnant, obviously female body and her perceived ability to participate in intellectual (male-dominated) discourse.

Gay, Nelson, and Bouilly are each trying to negotiate, in different ways, bringing their bodies into the public gaze and occupying the space of the woman who thinks. To do so, they must occupy their bodies as writers and, at the same time, confront their bodies as texts, which are subject to definition and comment by the public perception of those bodies. As they attempt to write their bodies, they must organize their texts in a form that most closely reflects the biological body, the fragmented form.

This is not to say that there is something inherently female about the fragment, but rather that an essay made up of fragments – one that may be called lyric, mosaic, segmented, braided, collaged, or sectioned, depending on your theoretical preference – provides the space for women to talk about their bodies and identities in a way that is consistent with their lived experiences. The fragmented form disrupts the notion that there is one, single, correct “master narrative,” traditionally a tool for propagating a patriarchal view of the world. Writers whose voices have been suppressed by this traditional narrative, like the women I will discuss here, gravitate toward a form that can more easily be trusted to represent their experiences. Bonnaffons notes the growing acceptance of the female body in the mainstream has coincided with the growing acceptance of the fragmented essay into the academy as an intentional work of literary production, rather than evidence of lack of authorial skill (Bonnaffons). Contemporary female nonfiction writers like Eula Biss, Roxane Gay, Claudia Rankine, Jenny Bouilly, Maggie Nelson, and Sarah Magnuson can and do harness the intentional fragment as a tool to express their realities.

There are several characteristics of the fragmented essay that make it suitable for this role. The first, as I have already mentioned, is the way that it disrupts traditional narratives that tend to cast women’s bodies as secondary, aberrations of the central male body. The fragment is also, as Camelia Elias theorizes, agential – the fragment dictates how it should be read and participates in a relationship with the reader, providing female writers with a new agency for their written work and their interactions with readers. It is accretive, forming a whole, but at the same time exists in pieces,



enabling it to contain the “shattering” physical experiences that these authors relate. The fragmented essay is also characterized by a lack of connective tissue, white space on the page in which the unspeakable, or the unknowable, appears as a result of the writer’s collection of fragments coupled with the reader’s projection of her own assumptions and experiences into this communal space. The female body, which has often been categorized as unknowable or unspeakable, perhaps naturally begins to occupy this space. Lastly, the fragmented essay has qualities of both boundedness and non-boundedness, as each fragment stands on its own and at the same time contaminates those around it, inserting the words of others along with the reader’s assumptions and making the female body, as Roxane Gay terms it, a “public text” (Gay 129).

## II. THE THEORY OF THE FRAGMENT: AGENCY, COERCION, CONSENT

The idea of biological body relating to textual body is clearly exemplified in Jenny Boully’s *The Body*, in which the physical body of the text is missing and must be written around using (fragmented) footnotes. The female body, the experience of the female body, is subject to this treatment as well, an approach articulated by Boully and exemplified by Nelson and Gay. The body is what Bonnaffons calls “the presence of absence” for these writers (Bonnaffons). Gay is attempting to speak about the gang rape that her body endured. Nelson is attempting to understand the experience of her changing body as it produced another body in childbirth. Boully has disappeared the body, and must deal with her own bodily experience in footnotes and metaphors. Though the experiences that these three writers examine are radically different, they are united by the fact that they are experiences that have happened to female bodies. Their bodies are both very real and at the same time absent from traditional textual representation, by virtue of these lived experiences. All three of these writers need to write their bodies in a fragmented way, in order to represent their experience occupying those bodies, their experiences as *women who think*.

The fragment is a tool for representing this experience, in part because of the complex relationship between the fragmented form and agency. In her 2006 survey on the theory of the fragment and the fragmentary, *The Fragment: Toward the History and Poetics of a Performative Genre*, Camelia Elias distinguishes between the found fragment, which indicates or at times creates the notion of a whole text of which it is a part, and what she terms the “constructed fragment,” a creation of the postmodern writer meant to imitate the function of the original “ruined” fragment (Elias 5). The fragment, in Elias’s historical formulation, exists in the liminal state between part and whole, in which it does not “belong to something else,” but is also not “in full possession of itself,” as it is part of something larger (Elias 2). Elias concludes that though the fragment is not fully self-possessed, it nevertheless has its own agency. It “coerces” readers and critics into treating it as a primary text, even though it is understood to be part of a whole (Elias 25). In doing so, it “consents” to being written and interpreted (Elias 73). It develops a consensual relationship with the reader through what Elias calls “wit,” the self-awareness that enables the reader to consent to the fragment’s interpretation as both a single entity and part of a cohesive whole (Elias 116).

The works I focus on in this paper are “constructed,” in which the author has created fragments in order to serve the paradoxical function of appearing as a standalone piece of writing and as part of a larger whole. The intentionality of the construction contributes to the agency of the fragment. The fragment is agential in that it forces the reader and the critic alike to interact with it on multiple levels, conceptualizing and interpreting it in terms of both form and content. The fragment develops a relationship with the reader that plays with its agency as a text. Elias reminds us that form is inseparable from content in the case of the fragment, writing that “any investigation of the formal features of the fragment is also an investigation into the fragment’s essence, if there is any” (Elias 27). Elias’s understanding of the fragment as something possessed of agency, with the ability to consent to interpretation, lends itself well to the consideration of why each



of these authors choose to use this form. The issue of agency and consent is vital to understanding the female bodily experience, and the fragment helps bring this issue to the forefront of these works in form as well as content.

In viewing the fragment as a form that grapples with self-possession, which must struggle to command agency, we can see why it may appeal to women who, in a variety of ways, are trying to reclaim their own agency and the ownership of their bodies. This agency is what Elias defines as the fragment's performativity, the recognition within itself of the writer's "experience of contradiction" (Elias 5). The fragment then reflects a struggle for bodily autonomy, as is apparent in *The Argonauts*, *Hunger*, and *The Body*. In their own ways, each of these female writers are wrestling with the amount of control they have over their bodies, and they do so through a form which both belongs and does not belong to itself. In this way, again, form performs content – much as we cannot think the female mind absent the body, we cannot think the content of the experience of these writers absent its fragmented form.

### III. CONSTRUCTION, REPETITION, AND ACCRETION

Jenny Boully's *The Body* provides an example of self-conscious, constructed fragments. The construction of Boully's fragmented footnotes is visible to us because of the contrast she establishes between her footnotes and what she calls "found fragments" of, for instance, her letters (Boully 62). The tension between the constructed and the found fragment again demonstrates Boully's agency in creating her text, imparting agency onto her constructed fragments that the "found fragments" lack. She offers, in footnote 151, a metaphor for her own construction:

151. By the time the bicycle was completely reconstructed, from various parts found here and there... the original bike, its chrome shiny and sparkling in the moonlight, showed up on the front doorstep, somehow, overnight; however, when the protagonist spied

it, she no longer wanted it, saying she preferred the one she had constructed (Boully 69).

There is something Boully's protagonist prefers about this fragmented whole. It is constructed according to the will of the author, allowing a space for female agency in the face of more traditional, traditionally exclusive forms. Boully prefers her own constructions, fragmented as they are, and demonstrates this preference through the absence of the traditional text.

Through a fragmented form that consents to its own interpretation, Gay's work performs her own consent as a writer. She consents to a written record of her trauma, and looks to a form through which she can command her story, and one that she can trust to contain the pieces of her experience. "If I must share my story, I want to do so on my own terms," she writes (Gay 3). In wrestling with the non-consent that defines her rape, she reclaims agency through the act of telling her story in her terms. The style of her memoir, with numbered sections ranging from one sentence to a few pages, allows her to start her narrative over with each new section, continually redefining her experience. The fragmented form of her memoir lets her come up against her trauma in new ways, as she searches for the words to confront it and its effects. From the first page, she tells us over and over what her book is about. She also tells us over and over about her rape. The very last fragment begins, "When I was twelve years old I was raped and then I ate and ate and ate to build my body into a fortress" (Gay 302). Gay is not merely reminding us of her story – she is allowing it to haunt us, the way that it haunts her. Through her fragments, we as readers are never able to fully move on from her rape.

But repetition does not always signify haunting. For Nelson, it signifies a sort of pleasure, a pleasure that "becomes accretive" by virtue of its repetition:

The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margins, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn



the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again – not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life (Nelson 112).

Nelson uses repetition or revisitation to confront a bodily experience that she has difficulty naming. In Nelson's case, however, her bodily experience is of pleasure and awe, rather than one of trauma. Her revisitation of her experiences as she builds her family constitutes the life that they have together. "*Falling forever, falling to pieces*," she writes, describing the experience of giving birth to her son (Nelson 109). The notion of falling apart recurs throughout the pages that recount her labor. The repetition of her language in this section, fragmented, fractures narrative time. She splices together her experience of labor with the death of her husband Harry's mother, written from Harry's perspective. Birth and death are juxtaposed as different visions of the mother. "You will have touched death along the way," Nelson says of labor, and her experience, through its fragmentation, indeed touches death – it is brought close to the death of Harry's mother (Nelson 134). The pain she experiences during labor leaves her outside of time, brings her to the edge of life, and this impression is reinforced by the fragmentation, which mimics her experience of "falling to pieces."

#### IV. SHATTERED AND WHOLE

The experiences that these authors have are "shattering." They go through experiences, whether traumatic like Gay's or pleasurable like Nelson's, that cannot be captured fully unless they are captured in pieces. The fragmented form thus illustrates Nelson's pregnancy and her son's birth. "To let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces," she instructs (Nelson 124). This idea of "going to pieces" characterizes the experience of her pregnancy, but also, perhaps, of her feeling while retelling her story. In order to give birth to this text, to encapsulate, in language, a shattering experience, the text too must go to pieces. In this way, the fragmented form in which Nelson writes about her experience reflects the experience itself, represented in the act of writing.

Gay also undergoes an experience that results in her falling to pieces. "In the after," Gay tells us, "I was broken, shattered and silent" (Gay 46). In order to break this silence in her memoir, she must confront the shattering, and does so through the fragmented form. After her badly broken ankle is healed, she imagines a scenario in which she may be able to easily combat the shattering of her mind: "I'm attracted to the idea that the mind, the soul, can heal as neatly as bones," she writes. "That if they are properly set for a given period of time, they will regain their original strength" (Gay 283). But she acknowledges that this is impossible, that the mind and the soul cannot in fact heal in this way. The form of her essay reflects that impossibility by refusing to 'set' according to a traditional narrative timeline, instead remaining fragmented. Like Nelson, Gay's shattering experience requires an equally shattered form. The experience cannot be made to fit a traditional narrative, or fully represented by a traditional form.

But that is not to say that the fragment cannot represent the whole of these experiences. Indeed, as we learned from Elias, the fragment is defined not simply as a piece, but also as part of a larger whole. Chapter 73 of *Hunger* begins, "The thing is, though, that loneliness, like losing control of my body, is a matter of accretion" (Gay 252). She depicts this accretion through the fragments that make up her memoir. This quote is the first sentence of its chapter, and yet she uses the word "though," which reveals that this is not the start of a story but a continuation of the information we have already received. The accretion of her fragments, and the relationship between them, mirrors the accretion of her loneliness and, physically, of the size of her body. Just as the repetition of fragments regarding her trauma leaves us unable to move past it, the fragments regarding how she moves through the world as a fat person subject us to a similar deluge – for the length of the memoir, her readers must inhabit the body that she inhabits and be subject to the opinions of strangers, fans, doctors, and flight attendants as those opinions accrete, section by section. The technique of accretion helps us to understand her experience within her body.





Bouly hides the body of her text, and similarly disguises her commentary on her own body, and her own sexuality. "Because he never said the word," she writes, depicting the aftermath of a one-night stand, "the bits and pieces of her: lipstick and rose petals, sugar-spoons and pink envelopes, ended up in the wrong pockets" (Bouly 46). The woman in this note is represented by stereotypically feminine objects, which become her "bits and pieces," that because of what this man did not say (and, of course, we do not know what, if anything, he did say), she is rearranged and taken outside of her structured whole. In this case, a consensual sexual experience nevertheless leads to a sort of shattering, a lack of arrangement that is mirrored, again, in the form of Bouly's work.

Constructed fragments work in concert to point to a larger truth – in this case, a truth about the female embodied experience – that can best be expressed in this decentered form. The arrangement of the fragments, their juxtaposition and accretion, capture something about the human experience for which we do not already have a conclusion. Sarah Menkedick, in her essay "Narrative of Fragments," argues that in our digital world, the time has passed for the traditional narrative structure. Instead, "the path to attention is paved in fragments, in so many easily digestible itty-bits." But to equate the fragments of our digital lives with the fragmented essays is a false equivalency. The digital world's fragmentation plies us with headlines, which are in fact easily digestible. The fragmented essay does the opposite. It asks for our sustained attention, our participation in reading, literally, between the lines, engaging with the fragments in order to apprehend the essay as a whole.

## V. UNKNOWABLE, UNNAMEABLE, UNSPEAKABLE

Bouly acknowledges that she can be more honest, more expressive, by writing around the body of the text. "Everything that is said," she writes, "can be said underneath" (Bouly 2). Because the body is not represented in text, we are left with what is "said underneath," the footnotes whose fragmented form leaves essential gaps in our un-

derstanding. We cannot know what the body of the text signifies, and as a result, we must put our own meaning into the space. This happens, within the text, to the actual body – "Underneath the covers, the message would always be different," Bouly explains. "Her name, sounding from his mouth, would mean whatever the dream wished it to mean" (Bouly 23). The woman's sexual body here is a shifting signifier. Underneath, when exposed, the message of the body is continually changing. The meaning of the woman's name in this scene, when used by her sexual partner to refer to her sexual body, is outside of her control. Our experiences of both the absent body and Bouly's (absent) text change based on our experience of what lies "underneath": her footnotes.

The female body to Bouly is unspeakable – it cannot be put into words. Instead, it is described through metaphor. Bouly describes what she calls her "nun-hood," about which she says: "I tried to make myself pure by giving up touching myself, that part of myself that my mother used to call a turtle and then a clam" (Bouly 27). Because she sees touching herself as impure, the words for her own body are shrouded in metaphor. She is unable to name her own sexual experience, relying instead on the euphemisms that her mother taught her. The same experimentation with signifiers occurs in note 71, which ends:

She said that I should groom<sup>f</sup> my nails.<sup>g</sup>

*f. groom as in marriage*  
*g. nails as in fuck.*

Here again, the body and female sexuality are hidden "underneath," shrouded by metaphor. They are, literally, unspeakable, and the fragment coerces the reader into interpreting the missing body from the seemingly innocuous sentence that we are given. The female body is the body that cannot be named, cannot be written, and cannot be understood as a signifier.

The relationship between Bouly's text and the female body is explicitly rendered in note 30. The note begins, "Actually, what she most desired was someone who would



pay close attention to details” (Bouly 30). The woman in this note is looking for someone to pay close attention to her, but instead becomes involved with “men who liked to (o)pen the heaviest of books and read them whorishly... forgetting the minute yet most important details” (Bouly 30). The desiring woman in this note is equated to a text, and men’s treatment of those texts is used to represent their treatment of her body, which they use “without want or love, etc.” (Bouly 30). Her body cannot be understood by those that cannot read closely. Both the body of the woman, and the body of Bouly’s text, are unknown.

The fragment is the form that confronts the unknown. “I know, precisely, and yet I do not know,” Gay writes, trying to make sense of the change that she underwent as a result of her assault. This construction, “I don’t know... Or I do,” is repeated throughout her memoir. She demonstrates through fragmentation her own lack of understanding, and is able to go back and negotiate the boundaries of her knowledge. This is, in fact, the only way she has to represent her experience. “I literally had no capacity for understanding my story as it was being written,” she says of her rape (Gay 44). As a twelve-year-old, she is unable to understand what has happened to her. The gaps in her understanding are visible to us through her use of fragmentation.

There are also, for Gay, things that are knowable but unspeakable. After negotiating the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of her trauma, she attempts to capture the story of exactly what happened to her, during her rape. But toward the end of the mostly narrative section, she is unable to continue. “They did things I’ve never been able to talk about, and will never be able to talk about. I don’t know how,” she concludes (Gay 44). The things that she experienced are literally unspeakable, and as a result they become unknowable to us as readers. We are unable to shy away from her experience, but must supply for ourselves that which she is unable to talk about. In leaving her trauma open-ended, she leaves us to grapple with trying to understand it alongside her. The question, then, is whether there is something inexpressible about what Gay has experienced, or whether the inexpressible of her trauma

is contained in her admission, and we are able to grasp it through what she has expressed.

Nelson’s work addresses the relationship between the expressed and the inexpressible. She begins *The Argonauts* with an assertion that she “had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed” (Nelson 3). She contrasts this view with the view of her partner that “words are not good enough,” that there are things that are strictly inexpressible (Nelson 4). The struggle between the spoken and unspoken, whether the inexpressible can in fact be contained in the expressed, is negotiated throughout her text. Eventually, Nelson tells us, she “looked anew at unnamable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow” (Nelson 4). The things that cannot be expressed are those that are changeable, that like Bouly’s body, can signify a multitude of meanings. Indeed, this is a text about the very things that Nelson considers unnamable: her sexual body and her maternal body. In a sense, the text attempts to unify these, as Nelson tries to see herself as *a pregnant woman who thinks* but also *a pregnant woman who fucks*, a woman who can be intellectual, sexual, and maternal within one body. These ideas are unified by her inability to express them. They are also unified by their juxtaposition. The fragmented form enables Nelson to put these facets of her identity side-by-side, despite the lack of language to unify them. Indeed, they are unified by literal *lack of language*, by the white spaces that both connect and separate her written fragments.

Though the first proposition of the text is an explicit sexual scene, and though Nelson repeats this technique of making her sexual interests and experiences specific and vivid, she admits that she is unable to confess them to her lover. “You asked me to say aloud what I wanted you to do to me,” she writes, “My whole body struggled to summon any utterable phrase” (Nelson 70). There is something about her desire in this moment that she is unable to put into words – language fails her.



Language to describe her desire fails her at another critical moment in this text. “You’ve written about all parts of your life except this, except the queer part,” her lover tells her, picking up on this unwillingness to articulate her desire (Nelson 32). She juxtaposes this moment of her silence with an equally significant one, described in the subsequent fragment: “Whenever anyone asked me why I wanted to have a baby, I had no answer,” she says, “But the muteness of the desire stood in inverse proportion to its size” (Nelson 32). Her sexual desire for her husband and her desire for her child are linked in their inability to be articulated, and it is this messy, inarticulable relationship between the erotic and the maternal that Nelson’s book attempts to describe – we are invited to experience with her the limits of the expressible when it comes to these complex emotions. “Why the partition?” Nelson asks us after the birth of her son. “It isn’t like a love affair. It is a love affair” (Nelson 44). Her text splices together a multitude of love affairs, showing us how she can experience them simultaneously and allow them to inform and augment each other. But again, these different facets of her experience must remain separate from one another, separated by the white spaces on the page just as her body, in its multitude of roles, is held as separate pieces by the social norms that dictate how her body and its relationships are interpreted as she moves through the world.

## VI. BOUNDED AND NON-BOUNDED

The fragment is, in a sense, both bounded and non-bounded. It is bounded on the page by white space, allowing it to stand on its own, but still it contaminates the rest of the text. For Nelson, this contamination is essential to her project. “Demanding that anyone live a life that’s all one thing,” she says, is “unsustainable” (Nelson 74). There is no boundary between her intellect, her sexuality, and her baby – they all coexist in her body, just as they all must coexist in her text. Nelson celebrates fragmentation from the outset in her praise of the psychologist D.W. Winnicott, whose work, she says, “has to be encountered in little bits” (Nelson 19). It is the very fact of fragmentation that makes her trust this source. Winnicott’s fragments

have been “contaminated by their relationship to actual, blathering mothers” (Nelson 19). Winnicott’s wisdom comes not only from his thought, but from the relationship his thought has with the actual experience of motherhood. Nelson calls “such humble, contaminated sources” the reason for her interest in Winnicott’s work (Nelson 20). By organizing her work as a series of fragments that contaminate one another, Nelson breaks down boundaries in the text in order to break down the boundaries of categorization that mischaracterize her experience within her family and within her body. We encounter her work in the same way she encounters Winnicott’s – “in little bits” – and yet we see the connections between the fragments in that they make up a single text.

Boundaries for Gay are more complex. Her boundaries are important to her, yet they are constantly breached. She tells us that she does not like to be touched by strangers, before recounting a multitude of scenarios in which strangers, knowingly and unknowingly, violate that boundary. The fragments of her essay likewise attempt to be bounded, separated by white space into particular chapters. But her trauma contaminates all of the sections of her story, even those in which she does not mention trauma directly. While Nelson *wants* her bodily experience, of giving birth, to permeate all aspects of her life, Gay’s experience of rape infects the way she thinks about her body in a negative way – it is inescapable. The ways in which the fragments in these essays interrelate reveals what we learned from Amy Bonaffons: as a woman, it is impossible to separate any aspect of intellectual or emotional life from the experience of having a body, of being a body.

Each of these texts has some element of communal contribution. These authors insert an outside perspective – for Gay, it is most often from a TV show, for Nelson or Bouilly, a theorist or philosopher. In introducing perspectives beyond their own, these authors make of their work a communal document. “I share parts of my story,” Roxane Gay writes of her fragments, “and this sharing becomes part of something bigger, a collective





testimony of people who have painful stories too” (Gay 40). In this way, she incorporates her readers, and our testimony. But she also forces us to think about our complicity in the way her “body is treated like a public space” (Gay 208). In writing her body into the public sphere, Gay forces us to confront how we view her body, even as we are immersed in her experience. The attitudes of the community, positive and negative, are collected into the web of fragments.

Nelson, too, acknowledges the participation of others in her work. She does not use traditional citation methods, but instead integrates her sources with italics and brief marginal attributions. This style demonstrates how her sources, who she terms the “many-gendered mothers of [her] heart,” have influenced her work, becoming seamless parts of her own thought. She also allows us as readers to participate in creating meaning. “There is something profound here,” she points out to us, “which I will but draw a circle around for you to ponder” (Nelson 65). She explicitly invites us to participate in her text, to make meaning of that which she has delineated for us. She leaves us to insert our own ideas within her fragments, and in doing so her text becomes a communal document.

Bouly also recognizes that she is taking part in a conversation. By yielding the body of her essay to our imagination, we take an even larger role in creating meaning from her fragmented footnotes. In taking the usually subordinate position, often used for delineating the words and thoughts of others from one’s own words in the body of the essay, Bouly both emphasizes the value of a secondary subject and acknowledges that the story she tells is incomplete, fragmented – that it could have been otherwise. In Bouly’s text, the master narrative is literally absent, and the work of creat-

ing the text is up to secondary voices – hers, and her reader’s. We take part in the creation of meaning through the use of white space.

## VII. CONCLUSION

We need to take in the fragments both as texts in their own right and also as part of a larger whole, a text that builds to a realization we cannot fully articulate but can nevertheless understand as a result of the accretion of fragments. “The end of a melody is not its goal; but nonetheless, if the melody had not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either,” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche. In this sense, the fragmented essay is like a melody. All of its parts retain their agency, even as they interrelate and play off of each other in order to create its meaning, to make of it a satisfying whole.

These women all undergo experiences of fragmentation, in which they have to negotiate the boundaries of their bodies, the communal nature of their bodies, the idea that their bodies are a “public space.” The fragment, with its ability to handle contradiction – to have agency and to be part of a larger whole, to speak and to remain silent, to be both bounded and unbounded – allows these women to represent their embodied experiences more fully, in a form that accurately reflects those experiences of bodily change and upheaval, to invite the reader in while still retaining control over their stories. They all have to struggle with a sense of ownership over their own bodies, and the constant occupation of a female body that is often perceived as not entirely their own. The fragmented form allows them to capture this negotiation in all of its complexity.

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