

Boka En

The My absent_present queer body in academia



Boka En is currently finishing their PhD on negotiations of knowledge as well as inclusions and exclusions in and across LGBTIQ activism and academia at the University of Vienna (and they have been ‘finishing’ it for a while now). They miss offline encounters in the academy, and they are grateful that clubs in Austria have re-opened (with COVID restrictions).*

Before you begin

More often than not, academic institutions are treated as spaces out of space, home only to mystical minds whose disembodied presence haunts papers and classrooms alike. At the same time, the God trick (Haraway 1991) of disembodiment is not equally available to all body-minds in academia. Scholars doing critical intersectional research (see some of the sources below) have shown that while some (that is, straight, white, middle-class, cis, male, en-abled) bodies easily fade from view, others (that is, not those) are instead often subject(ed) to hyper-visibility and hyper-surveillance.

In this contribution, I explore how putting ~~one's~~ my body on the line can be an intervention in academic spaces, and how marginalized body-minds² may sometimes not have much of a choice in the matter in the first place. In doing so, I also seek to point to some of the ambivalences and intersectional power relations that enable my – specifically *my* – body-mind to emerge as both a tragedy and successful, both absent and present.

My contribution does not purport to play a God trick (Haraway 1991), nor does it lay claim to mystical, unimpaired self-understanding (Butler 2005), nor does it seek to represent all queer body-minds, nor all queer body-minds that are ‘like mine’ (according to what? whom? which criteria?) (Kazeem-Kamiński 2021). Rather, it is an attempt to share parts of a partial experience, hoping to offer points of dis_connection that you may_not relate to.

About the video

I invite you to engage with the video in whatever way you feel is right. Watch it once, twice, not at all. Pause, skip ahead, rewind. Whose body-minds do you choose to make absent_present? Which points of dis_connection do you experience?

² There are certain contradiction in my use of ‘bodies’ vs ‘body-minds’ that I’m aware of but cannot resolve at this point.

You can find a description and transcription of visible and audible elements after the link to the video.

The video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYBCixOUxqo>

Video description

The screen is black. There is the rising sound of distant voices in the background – children playing, the hustle and bustle of a public park.

The following quote appears in a white font:

What activism is for me is when you aren't ashamed. When you just take the liberty, insolently, of being the way you are. You know? And then I'm ashamed to be ashamed sometimes, but yeah ...

– a participant in my PhD project

The background noise continues and will until the end of the video.

The video crossfades to a still downwards shot of an earthy ground, dotted with sunlight and shadows of the overhead canopy. There is a small green plant in the lower right corner. A leg of a park bench extends from the top right corner to the centre of the screen.

Voiceover (with a slightly lower-pitched and a slightly higher-pitched version of the same voice, sometimes overlapping, sometimes switching from one to the other, sometimes jarring against each other).

I'm sitting on a bench at the campus of the University of Vienna in the afternoon sun. I am wearing conspicuous make-up (or so I think) and a crop top. There is a long silver earring dangling from my left earlobe, and the stubbles of my beard, which I shaved this morning, are becoming increasingly visible. They certainly feel hyper-visible to myself.

The shot of the ground fades into a sideways view of a light-skinned, flat-chested, slim torso lying on a bed, breathing softly. It is bathed in blue and red light. There is a tattoo on the ribcage that reads, 'Queer as in fuck/love you', where the words 'fuck' and 'love' are entangled in each other, 'love' being upside down compared to the rest of the sentence.

One line after another of overlaid text appears and disappears again:

breathing

getting ready

there

not there

not

The camera starts moving, tracing more of the torso, lingering on the body for about 20 seconds.

Voiceover (with lower-pitched and higher-pitched versions as before, talking over and against each other):

‘Welcome to our course’, I say. ‘My name is Boka En. Yes, that is not the name that’s in the online course directory.’

Overlaid text:

Are you a boy or a girl?

I’m the lecturer.

The image fades into a still shot of various items of white clothing strewn across a red surface. During the next few seconds, other still shots replace the first one. First, a large palette of about forty different eyeshadow colours, powder, several jars of glitter and a make-up brush on a black surface. Then, a small, vertical wooden board with holes and openings that hold various earrings as well as necklaces, among them dog tags with the non-binary as well as rainbow flags on them.

Overlaid text:

The person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body. I remember as an undergraduate I had white male professors who wore the same tweed jacket and rumpled shirt or something, but we all knew that we had to pretend. You would never comment on his dress, because to do so would be a sign of your own intellectual lack. The point was we should all respect that he’s there to be a mind and not a body.

– bell hooks: Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom

The image fades into another shot of the aforementioned body, in the same setting as before. This time, it’s a close-up tracing down the person’s hairless arm. There are four or five woollen, colourful bracelets around their wrist. Their fingernails are painted black and white.

Voiceover (with different pitches, as before):

I often teach on genders and sexualities and intimacies. And I want to put myself on the line in that teaching. I want to not just be the institutional role that I am assigned, not just the spectre of a disembodied mind floating through aca-

demic un-space. I want to become tangible as flesh and blood. I don't want my body to disappear.

The image fades to another outdoor shot. There is a thin sliver of grass on the left hand side, the rest is taken up by grey tarmac and a blurry brown shape on the right, possibly part of a park bench. It is a sunny day, and the tarmac is painted with shadows of the canopy as well as a lamp post and a bin.

Voiceover (overlapping and switching between pitches):

Anger and joy and shame and anxiety and relief and disbelief and grief and ...

If I put myself out there, who is this I that I put out there?

If I put myself on the line, what is this line I straddle?

The image fades back to a close-up of the body, moving along the skin. It is not clear what part of the body is shown.

Voiceover:

Straight line

Stairwell to heaven

A big pot of happiness at the end of the rainbow

Overlaid text, one line appearing after the other and disappearing again:

Over the rainbow

Overing* the rainbow

The rainbow is over.

* Sara Ahmed: On Being Included – Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

It becomes clear that the image is of the torso again, showing it sitting up from the side.

Voiceover:

Did you know that a jellyfish can make it to the moon and back?

Did you know that I am sometimes told that I'm an inspiration?

Did you know that sometimes, I just want to lie low?

The image fades to an upwards shot of the crown of a broad-leaved tree taking up most the screen space. It is sunny, and the canopy gives way to a cloudless sky the

right-hand side. A blurry brown shape takes up the top left corner, possibly the back of a park bench.

Overlaid text:

... social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy. There is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time. While all can, in theory, enter, it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being 'out of place'. Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders.

– Nirmal Puwar: Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place

While the text is still shown, the image fades over to another close-up shot of the body, possibly a leg.

Voiceover, while the text is still shown:

Space. The final frontier. But whose space? Whose frontier? This is not just a story of failure or pain. I am not a tragedy. What are the conditions under which my body can emerge as successful, I wonder. On whose conditions can my body emerge as successful.

During the voiceover, the image fades into another shot of the park. This one is more horizontally oriented, with the grey tarmac taking up the bottom-left two thirds of the screen, and trees and shrubs as well as a low wooden fence on the other side of the tarmac. A pigeon is walking slowly across the tarmac path.

After the voiceover has ended, the image fades over to another slowly moving close-up shot of the body, starting from a nipple and tracing down along the chest.

Voiceover:

What are the conditions under which my body can emerge as successful, I wonder.

Overlaid text:

deep-sea angling for recognition

Voiceover:

On whose conditions can my body emerge as successful?

It is not enough to put my body on the line. It is not enough to put *my* body on the line.

The image fades over into a shot showing a shaved armpit, still in the blue and red light.

Voiceover:

Bodies take up space too.

Overlaid text, one line after the other:

too much

too little

The image fades into a downward close-up shot of two slats of a park bench that stretch from the top left to the bottom right corner. There is a gap between the slats, and grey tarmac underneath.

Voiceover:

If I put myself on the line, what is this line I straddle?

The image fades to a close-up of the body – it is unclear which part.

Voiceover:

Straight line

The image fades to a close-up of an earring consisting of three long silver strands that lie on the side of the person's neck. The person seems to have a slight beard stubble.

Voiceover:

Stairwell to heaven

A big pot of happiness at the end of the rainbow

The image fades to a close-up of part of the tattoo mentioned earlier. The words 'queer as in' can be read.

The image fades to another close-up of the body – it is unclear which part.

The image fades to black.

The following text appears in white:

not over

Sources (of inspiration)

This contribution has been influenced by a number of inspirations, some of whom I hope to be able to trace back and acknowledge at this point.

The interactions, verbal and not, I've had with people; particularly with:

- Michael En, David En-Griffiths, Leonore Lerch, Felix Pilz, and Mercedes Pöll;
- the participants in my PhD project, whom I unfortunately can't name at this point;
- students that took part in my courses and thus helped me develop my own thinking and feeling.

Michèle Cooke's and Michael En's courses at the University of Vienna, which helped me work on engaging with academic projects in less constrained ways.

Various art performances at brut Wien, particularly Dark Revolutions by the que_ring drama project.

And some other, more conventional sources whose role in my creating this contribution I would like to emphasise:

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Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Barker, Meg-John, and Alex Iantaffi. 2019. *Life Isn't Binary: On Being Both, Beyond, and In-Between*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Clare, Eli. 2017. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York and London: Routledge. – which I listened to as an audio book narrated by Robin Miles.

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