

Sport as Living Language

bpNichol and the Bodily Poetics of the Elite Triathlete

Good poetry gets the writer's tongue in your ear, breathes into it,
& makes the whole body squirm with the pleasure of it.
—bpNichol, "The Pata of Letter Feet, or, the English Written
Character as a Medium for Poetry" in *Meanwhile*

Biopoetics as Performance Theory

Although my title may, at first glance, appear to propose an odd juxtaposition, a deeper consideration of the link between sport and art underscores the profound ways in which two seemingly disparate domains not only illuminate, but are imbricated in one another. Such cross-fertilization, although often obscured, is by no means new. The long tradition of the Cultural Olympiad typically held in conjunction with the Olympic Games, for example, derives from an understanding of their mutual heritage. The charter of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland proclaims: "Sport, art and culture are the traditional pillars of Olympism." The museum highlights the ways in which "Olympism is not merely a matter of sports competition but rather a philosophy of life whose roots are deeply embedded in our history" (International Olympic Committee). Recent scholarship in the areas of cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and particularly in the relatively new field of biopoetics provides a scientific rationale for the "embodiment of mind" (Lakoff and Johnson 7). In their monumental study *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson propose a phenomenological shift in understandings of the human condition:

Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. This is not just the innocuous and obvious claim that we need a body to reason; rather, it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment. (4)

Such a hypothesis generates new paradigms that assert and capitalize on the ways in which sensory experience is fundamental to conception and

abstraction (Lakoff and Johnson 37-8). Similarly, biopoetics, an aesthetic and philosophical theorization of art as evolutionary, emerged out of an expanding understanding of the transmission of influence within natural selection.¹ In *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*, Brett Cooke explains that biopoetics “intends to study the creative arts, human-made beauty” (6). For Cooke, the making, appreciation, and valuation of art is an “adaptive” function and should therefore be conceived as “one of the products of natural selection” (4). “Art and evolutionary psychology,” he continues, “make available to each other an immense array of highly useful data, of lived facts and reactions to them,” yielding a fruitful paradigm for understanding how explorations of the body in both sport and art can help us interrogate, deconstruct, and formulate socio-cultural ideologies of gender, genre, and sensing the world (5). Witnessing sport in performance enables spectators to identify with athletes on a visceral level through empathy and the projection and generalization of sensory experience. Art also represents a domain in which fears, dreams, wins, and losses are played out as a result of this same ability to elicit emotional and sensory response. Moreover, the two create opportunities for experimenting with new ways of being and experiencing the world. In this study, a biopoetics approach to understanding sport and art is an apposite lens for expanding the field of performance theory.

Drawing on the poetry of bpNichol, the writings of Gertrude Stein, as well as Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity, I aim to elucidate a long-overlooked corporeal category: the body of the female elite athlete. The female triathlete in particular is a powerful incarnation of gendered embodiment that illustrates the extent to which gender ambiguity deterritorializes hegemonic conceptualizations of both female and male bodies. Mirroring the tripartite nature of triathlon, this study elaborates a new biopoetical triumvirate of performance, that of sport, gender, and poetics. I examine the somatic and experiential conception of poetry espoused by Canadian avant-gardist bpNichol (1944-1988), and his 1968 phonodisc *Motherlove*, to elaborate a framework within which to read the female triathlete’s body and athletic performance. I contend that like avant-garde art, the body of the female triathlete is capable of inscribing the permutations of identity construction and being in a processual becoming.

bpNichol’s experimental poetics reveal and revel in the sensory aspects of language through performance both on and off the page. Fusing various media, Nichol produced work that he described as “borderblur.” Borrowing the term from Dom Sylvester Houédard, Nichol explains that borderblur

is “poetry which arises from the interface, from the point between things, the point in which poetry and painting and prose are all coming together” (*Meanwhile* 134). As poetry of the interstice, Nichol’s art is liminal and always on the verge of becoming-other (prose becoming-poetry, becoming-cartoon, becoming-performance), and is ripe with potentiality. From children’s books, poetry, and fiction to musical scores, comic strips, and collage, Nichol’s oeuvre is expansive and multiple, challenging formal and thematic conventions of all kinds. His collaborations were equally dispersed, particularly as a member of the poetry troupe The Four Horesmen.² Nichol’s blurring of generic borders calls attention to the surface of the text, to the material and physical properties of language as process-oriented and enlivened. Nichol liberates the word from semantic, grammatical, and syntactical strictures into a felt-sense, a borderblurring performance.

Consider, for example, Nichol’s sound poem, “Pleasure Sweets,” appearing on *Motherlove*, as an orgiastic poem of bodily *jouissance*, punning explicitly on the multiplicity of the orchestral “suite,” as well as the adjective describing taste, and the noun naming that which tastes sweet. Nichol’s characteristic use of the pun in poetic resounding is based, according to his essay “The Pata of Letter Feet,” on art as perpetuation: “When we pun we make merry, wed letter to letter to spell anew. When we mean our making we make our meaning” (*Meanwhile* 371). The poem begins with an aural/chant-based reciprocal flow between “pleasure” and the French form “plaisir”—the distinction between which Nichol distorts in an acoustic ripple effect through tapping his hand over his mouth as he speaks. The poem is an ode to the pleasure of linguistic play to create new meaning. Not only does the juxtaposition of English and French here underscore Nichol’s fascination with translation as the basis for artistic creation, but the sonic distortion in the poem’s construction is, of course, part of the poem’s meaning and signifies the process of the perceiver’s translation. In other words, the ambiguity created by breaking apart words visually, sonically, or otherwise, liberates the reader/listener from the strictures of meaning, allowing his/her role in the making of signification. The French word meaning to read, “lire,” can be heard and seen (albeit in approximate transposition) within “plaisir,” ripe with its suggestion of reading and writing the body. Appropriately, the verb “hear” and its homonym “here” can also be detected in Nichol’s acoustic transliterative repetition of “pleasure/plaisir.” The sensuality of this process can be “heard” in the undertoned “please her” contained within Nichol’s utterance of “plaisir.” The concept of “pleasing her” as it re-sounds through

“pleasURe,” in Nichol’s assertive pronunciation of the “u” and “r” distorts, and then equates, “please her” with “pleasing your” own body textually and sexually. The result is an orgiastic excess of meaning.³ Hence, as readers, we are vocalizing the acoustics of sexual climax. By creating an interplay of sensory experiences that connect creator, created, and perceiver, Nichol’s aesthetic liberties expand the reading process, reducing the gap between reader and writer. He emphasizes the body itself as a site of meaning and language as a site of sensation, thus generating an embodied poetics. Drawing from principles of cognitive science, Lakoff and Johnson argue that “[b]ecause our conceptual systems grow out of our bodies, meaning is grounded in and through our bodies” (6). In light of such claims, Nichol’s art emerges as an instructive aestheticization of the body’s ontological role. Like the erotic play that Nichol evinces in his poetry, the female athlete ascertains an “evident pleasure in her own articulate body” (Brubach 4).

Significantly, because it occupies a subjugated position within a socio-cultural patriarchy, the body of the female athlete encodes a narrative that contests normative codes of gender. As Judith Butler contends: “The body that one lives in is in many ways a body that becomes livable only through first being cast in a culturally intelligible way. In other words, the cultural framing of the body precedes and enables its lived experience” (4). Through her own bodily performance, the female athlete simultaneously mirrors, resists, and overwrites identity and autonomy in ways that are similar to the representational experimentation of avant-garde art. In so doing, she personifies her own emergent bodily poetics. Like any art that forces us to expand our thinking, the body of the female triathlete can help us “stretch our capabilities . . . [by] prod[ding] our flexibility, thereby enabling us to take advantage of new situations,” as Ellen Dissanayake argues in a discussion of the experimental novel. “Indeed,” she continues, “it is very likely that we seek out novelty in the arts so as to practice our cognitive abilities to adapt, thereby contributing to our inclusive fitness” (19). As she affirms her presence through her own “sound, figure, rhythmic mobility,” the female triathlete effects her own textual-corporeal performance piece in which her being resounds. The body of the female triathlete offers a particularly suitable site for the denunciation, renunciation, and morphology of the gendered body, and has the potential to provoke substantial shifts in how we experience, perceive, and live in our bodies, as well as for illustrating the validity of performativity for understanding the relationship between language, the body, and textuality.

Athletics as Activism

Emphasizing the similarities between men and women, my argument is grounded in a feminist perspective that seeks to dissolve binaries and embraces an anti-essentialist possibility for contradiction and multiplicity. As Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin assert, sport is a productive means of supporting feminist ideologies. Although female athletes once needed the help of feminist activists in the US to pass Title IX of the Education Act of 1972, Heywood and Dworkin contend that “[a]t this historical moment, feminists need athletes to help advance agendas such as equal access to institutions, self-esteem for all women and girls, and an expanded possibility and fluidity within gender roles that embraces difference” (51).⁴ The athlete, like the artist, enacts a corporeal performance that mandates and produces socio-cultural change. Through such enactment, the body of the female athlete becomes legible as subversive text. Lakoff and Johnson expand on this notion of embodiment:

The fact that we have muscles and use them to apply force in certain ways leads to the structure of our system of causal concepts. . . . What is important is not just that we have bodies and that thought is somehow embodied. What is important is that the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization. (19)

As it perpetually reshapes itself through the three disciplines of swimming, cycling, and running, the body of the female triathlete expresses the potential for ideational expansion and flexibility.

As never before, the female athlete is now a viable and recognized role model for both young boys and girls. Over the past decade, and in the wake of Title IX, she has become widely culturally endorsed, having been reclaimed and celebrated for years by feminist theorists and women’s rights and sport activists such as Butler, Susan Bordo, Hélène Cixous, Heywood, Dworkin, and Julia Kristeva. Despite a certain degree of recognition, however, the female athlete is not immune to the effects of competing in what continues to be a male-privileged domain, where she is forced to confront often demoralizing, ideological, physical, and practical limitations. Media coverage for male sports, for example, still far exceeds that of women’s sports, ultimately resulting in less funding and structural consistency for women’s athletics. Given this backdrop, the gender ambiguity symptomatic of the elite triathlete should be seen as liberating, as a cultural and sociological means of resistance to hegemonic gender norms and means of self-expression. Butler aptly notes the enormous potential for sport to yield the “de-gendering of society”:

When we witness muscularity and contour, the corporeal effects of a ritual of athleticism, are we not for the moment seduced by the need to know which gender it is? Is it an especially sleek man? Is it a particularly well-developed woman? And yet, what we also witness here is the very contingency of this categorization, its non-necessity; at that moment, we enter into precisely the kind of epistemic crisis that allows gender categories to change. (7)

In much the same way, the ambiguity resulting from the shifting and blurring of linguistic registers in avant-garde art also posits “the very contingency” of generic categorization as do the biopoetics of the athlete in and of performance.

In Cixous’ famous essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she urges her reader to embrace the principles of *Écriture féminine*, a French feminist and gendered form of writing that was further popularized by such thinkers as Kristeva, Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray. *Écriture féminine* celebrated the female body as a creative and linguistic site characterized by a plurality and circularity which was antithetical to the phallogocentric language system. Illustrating Cixous’ mandate to “[w]rite your self. Your body must be heard,” the becoming-woman of the female triathlete celebrates multiplicity and multidimensionality (250). Cixous calls for a feminine subjectivity that is rooted in the body—a body that is necessarily abundant and plural and, in so being, configures a multisensual rhizome in its denial of closure. She insists:

a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues. . . . These are texts that work on the beginning but not on the origin. . . . Rather it’s . . . starting on all sides at once that makes a feminine writing. A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty, thirty times over. . . . a feminine text can’t be predicted, isn’t predictable, isn’t knowable and is therefore very disturbing. (53)

Reading the body of the female triathlete as text underscores this unpredictability. It hinges, as Cixous argues, on the notion that *Écriture féminine* lies “very close to the flesh of language,” in which flesh actually becomes language. It is precisely this threshold that athletic performance occupies (54).

All bodies contain and enact narrative scripts and yet the body of the female athlete is metalinguistic. Hers tells the story of how phallogocentric language itself functions, how it conditions and fixes meaning and identity in ways that are essentializing. The success of the female athlete is, after all, framed within dominant, masculinist discourse. Athletic success by a woman is often converted into masculine success as the traditionally male characteristics of drive, determination, strength, and power strip the female athlete of her femininity. Or do they? When “she” becomes her own “he,” are the decades of resistance work so powerfully carried out by her athletic mothers

and sisters compromised? Is the rise of the female athlete as “cultural icon” a harbinger of a post-gender world, or is she a symbol of unprecedented embodied female agency?

By garnering the very gaze that has historically relegated her sex to the passive stance of “observed,” the body of the female athlete calls attention to itself not because it adheres to standards of beauty, but because its ambiguity—its musculature and fitness, for example—work to deflect the gaze. Hers is a body that exceeds normative bounds. Quoting Ann Hollander, Holly Bruback points out that “muscles on women seem to serve a purpose. . . . they are a way for women to take up space, as men do—to add physical substance, which, ‘makes everyone take notice and listen to what you have to say and pay attention to your existence’” (3). In much the same way, Nichol’s solo performances, as well as those performed as part of the poetry troupe The Four Horsemen, effectively “added brawn” to language, forcing audiences to “take notice” of the physical and material properties of the word. Jerome McGann refers to these properties textually as bibliographic and linguistic codes, but, for the purposes of this study, they might be explained as the musculature of the text. In *The Textual Condition*, McGann argues that a text is necessarily a social construction in which all areas and materials of production have a function beyond their immediate ones, which are fundamentally semiotic. “We must attend,” McGann urges, “to textual materials which are not regularly studied by those interested in ‘poetry’ to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to ‘poetry’ or ‘the text as such’” (McGann 13). For McGann, every text (and I would argue every utterance) is a “laced network of linguistic and bibliographical codes” that are its material musculature. (McGann 13).

Moreover, a combined meditation on the physicality of language and sport not only entails a consideration of their co-extensive materiality or “musculature,” but also of the erotic. Allen Guttman points out that in ancient Greece, the erotic aspects of sport were endorsed, mobilizing participant and spectator arousal in turn: “In Modern times that same eroticism has been feared, deprecated, and denied” (1). Critics would rightly point out, however, that this tendency is a far cry from the media’s continued sexualization of the athlete, and that women’s wilful involvement in it (such as Olympic swimmer Dara Torres and synchronized swimmer Heather Olson being featured in the September 2000 issue of *Maxim*, or Anna Kournikova’s suggestive cover pose on a bed for the June 2000 issue of *Sports Illustrated*) merely serves to

perpetuate a patriarchal subordination of her body. While I certainly agree that such sexualization is problematic, I also agree with Elizabeth Ben-Ishai who argues that the eroticization of the female athletic body can be used as “a tool of resistance insofar as the muscular woman who commands sexual attention is ‘manipulating’ the dominant culture to serve her own ends—to render her strong and capable body desirable and acceptable in our society” (Ben-Ishai). Heywood also suggests that such a tendency is not entirely negative, and that such an eroticization of the female athlete merely focuses on but “one dimension of the human experience, as a quality that emerges from the self-possession, autonomy, and strength so evident in the body of a female athlete” (“Athletic” 5). This eroticization of the female athlete, I propose, is not putting the integrity of athletics in jeopardy. Rather, it is contemporary socio-cultural understandings of sexuality, which are premised on a passive concept of women and their bodies rather than promoting gendered subjectivity as a function of active, autonomous self-construction, that are at fault here.

Significantly, the female athlete’s building of her body through sport is a manifestation of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as “becoming-woman.” In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari elaborate the notion of “becoming-woman” as a minoritarian state of being that enables a transcendence of dualisms: “To become is not to progress or regress along a series Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree” (239). For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizomatic model of understanding is based on alliance and inter-connectedness, and is set in contrast to the traditional arboreal model of comprehension based on cause and effect. “A rhizome,” they suggest, “has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and which it overflows” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). Thus, “becoming-woman” represents a marginalized language which operates ontologically within the dominant discourse, and so is ideally positioned to subvert that very hegemonic foundation. Taking the writing of Virginia Woolf as exemplary of “becoming-woman,” Deleuze and Guattari assert:

When Virginia Woolf was questioned about a specifically women’s writing, she was appalled at the idea of writing “as a woman” *The only way to get outside dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermesso*—that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all her work, never ceasing to become. (276-77, emphasis added)

The perpetual nature of sport is a function of goal-setting and competitive drive, and naturally this process translates to the athlete’s body. Like Woolf’s

writing, which “never ceas[es] to become,” an athlete’s body “is always in the process of being made, it is never quite the ideal that it seeks to approximate” (Gumbrecht, Leland, Schavone and Schnapp 2).

Correspondingly, Nichol’s work is perpetually “becoming-genre” as it distinctly relies on the medium of the body, and therefore similarly integrates different states of being and various sensory perceptions. In Nichol’s estimation, “poetry has its physical reality, its metaphysical reality, and its ‘pataphysical’ reality and, in my experience as a writer, it’s at the interface between the eye, the ear and the mouth, that we suddenly see / hear the real ‘pata of poetic feet’” (*Meanwhile* 354). His pun, which suggests the mobility of poetry, its ambulatory resonances through multiple senses, signals an indebtedness to Gertrude Stein’s conception of a “continuous present” in transformative becoming, an ongoing translation of signification in the creation and appreciation of a work of art.⁵ For both Stein and Nichol, thought and language are habitual through learned associations and can therefore be endlessly shaped and reshaped. This organicism is of course consistent with a biopoetics configuration of art as adaptive and the mind as embodied.

The very structure of a triathlon depends upon the body’s flexibility and adaptability, its disposition to becoming, for instance, as it crosses thresholds between sports, challenging division through performance. The triathlete must transform herself quickly and with fluidity during each “transition zone,” from swimming to cycling, and then from cycling to running. Both transitions must be made with the same athletic prowess employed in each individual discipline. One’s entire race may be determined by the efficacy and gracefulness of one’s transitions: moments of change possess their own aesthetic dimension. As such, the tripartite structure is fundamentally anti-binary. As Butler argues, “[W]omen’s sports . . . not only take place at the *cross-roads* of conflicting ideals, but constitute one of the most dramatic ways in which those conflicts are staged and negotiated in the public sphere” (7, emphasis added). Not surprisingly, the physique of an elite triathlete often mirrors this tendency in a pantomime of gender fusion, an embodied collapse of normative gender roles. Male triathletes typically subject themselves to exhaustive training in order to maintain a low body mass, which is advantageous for biking and running in particular; most elite male triathletes are therefore typically smaller than the average man, their stature more in keeping with the average female’s. He practises regular body hair removal and dons a one-piece racing suit (virtually identical in design for both sexes) as well as a unisex helmet, which serve to enhance the androgynous look of the

triathlete. Similarly, the very low body fat, musculature, and even hormonal effects of intense training, as well as the aforementioned sexually ambiguous clothing of the elite female triathlete, constitute a performance equivalent to “becoming-woman” that challenges patriarchal incarnations of femininity and expands the legibility of the female body. In both the artistic and athletic practices, identity is self-constructed and self-interpreted. Similarly, both the triathlete and the artist in performance are capable of inscribing the challenge of their own making and unmaking.

Embodying bpNichol

In an essay on the sound and visually oriented poetics of bill bissett, bpNichol describes an aesthetic of becoming that might just as convincingly have been a description of his own work:

thru it all he does continue and thru it all the continuing re-examination of
language of the forms of being the page as a visual sonic field the poem
as an extension of the body the insistence of what is inside you and how it
changes from moment to moment thru chant. (*Meanwhile* 70)

For Nichol, too, the poem is an extension of the body and is made perpetually anew. In the same essay, Nichol also notes the heavy reliance in Canadian sound poetry on chant as an extension of a preoccupation with breath introduced by the Black Mountain poets. Under the direction of Charles Olson and his 1950 essay “Projective Verse,” Black Mountain poets conceived of the line as a unit of breath, as Olson writes: “And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes” (616). The space of the page then becomes typographically charged as a terrain on which to map the breath line—what Olson calls “composition by field.” The organic shifting of breath, both the Black Mountain poets and Nichol suggest, fuel sonic performance of the poem.

Just as Nichol’s art and conception of borderblur is breath-based in its execution on the page and in performance, so is the propulsion of the athlete’s body, which hinges on a fundamental regulation of the breath; oxygen uptake is a significant measure of athletic capability.⁶ In both Nichol’s art and in sport, breath can be seen as the abstraction out of which all potentiality emerges. Another of Nichol’s texts, *zygal: a book of mysteries and translations* (1986), opens with a concrete depiction of this very respiratory organicism. The initial pages of the collection feature a sequence of photocopied impressions: the first shows Nichol’s own nose and closed mouth, which become nose and parted lips in the next impression, and culminate in an open exhale

and even potential scream in the third, where both teeth and tongue are exposed. The poet, in these preliminary pages, breathes proverbial life into the poems that follow, but also accentuates the omnipresence of the breath, the compositional element of each and every poem and that which yields the voice: "I am this noise / my voice says so" (15).

Nichol's sound poem "Pome Poem," recorded on his collection *Motherlove*, thematizes and enacts the perpetuity of becoming as an intimate relationship to language. The poem is a chant-based exploration of variation and is based on the theoretical premise that all aspects of the writer's being contribute to the process of writing. The poem's title emphasizes the subjectivity of the poet in the poem; the "me" in "Pome" is a sonic embodiment of the poet's body and body of work. Nichol's aesthetic suggests that writing is flexible enough to accommodate being many things at once. It is necessarily expansive. As in the case of the athlete, performance is mobilized by breath, and for Nichol, breath begets chant and phonic transliterations. "[E]very kind of writing has its own texture," Nichol argues, "its own overtones, its 'sound.' If I want access to the full range of what is possible in composition then I cannot exclude any of those sounds from my compositional field" (*Meanwhile* 371). For Nichol, these sounds result in the making of a poetry that is organic, kinetic, and, as Gertrude Stein would say, "lively." As in her still life portraits, Stein's plays address the tension between performance, or the processual, and stasis. Whereas in the former, Stein seeks to make the fixed come alive, in her plays, she renders "continuous movement" "placid as a landscape" ("Plays" 81). Stein affirms, "In the poetry of plays words are more *lively* words than in any other kind of poetry and if one naturally liked *lively* words and I naturally did one likes to read plays in poetry" ("Plays" 69, emphasis added). Fundamentally, Stein's plays and Nichol's poetics are an aesthetics of instantiation.

"Pome Poem" begins with Nichol chanting: "What is a poem is inside of your body, body, body. What is a poem is inside of your head, inside your head, inside your head."⁷ In this apparent dialectic of mind and body, Nichol locates the poem in continuous movement from body part to body part sequentially, and yet simultaneously suggests that the poem, as embodied conceptualization, exists and is created in all parts of the body at once. Moving through the poem in a Steinian repetition with difference, Nichol draws awareness to the body part echoed in chant and inserted in the line "What is a poem is inside of your—" repeated four times (and in four-four time) for insistence. Articulating the principles of repetition as insistence, Stein claims: "The question of repetition is very important. It is important

because there is no such thing as repetition. Everybody tells every story in about the same way. . . . But if you listen carefully, you will see that not all the story is the same. There is always a slight variation" (*How Writing is Written* 494). For both Stein and Nichol, this variation is a function of insistence that, in the continuous present, is never the same. In his own essay on Stein, Nichol explains, "[i]t is this very difference in each moment that must be conveyed if one is to have a complete description" (*Meanwhile* 201). In the work of both artists, such insistence and variation demonstrates how consciousness functions experientially.

The poetic transliteration in "Pome Poem" moves in a lively echo from body to head, fingers to toes, belly to heart, eyes to nose, ears to mouth, and finally from voice back to the body to create a full circle. Nichol's pleasure in the textual body is evident in the proliferation of meaning and levels of signification that arise from his linguistic play. For example, he locates poetry in the body, rendering it inextricable from the sensorial and the corporeal. Poetry is therefore equivalent to that which is inside the "heart," inside the "eyes," and then the "nose." As Marjorie Perloff has noted, Stein anticipates Jacques Derrida's notion of "différance," and so is consistent as a line of influence for Nichol, but certainly Nichol's experimentation can be explained by Derrida's testifying to the power of the written word and his theorization of perpetual difference and deferral.⁸ Moreover, Nichol's famous emphasis on the letter "H," which is illustrated by his forceful pronunciation of "heart" (significantly, a word which contains the verb "hear"), enables him to play with the zygol structure of the letter which, when turned on its side, becomes the subjective pronoun "I" of "eyes," marking the insertion of the poet himself in the poem. The movement from "H" to "I" foregrounds the perfect narrative sequentiality of the alphabet:

The alphabet is a narrative—that movement thru your ABC. And any word you write is a displacement of that primary narrative. So that all writing always deconstructs some given even as it notes another given down. (392)

As in the becoming-other genre that characterizes his conception of "border-blur," the perpetual becoming of language as described by Nichol is analogous to the triathlete's progression from discipline to discipline within her sport. She blurs the borders between swimming, running, and cycling, but she also continually reshapes the textuality of her own body through a drive for improvement and goal-setting in a commitment to her own becoming.

The fourth body part in Nichol's poem's sequence is the "nose," and its pun on "knows" underscores the body's epistemological power. As the itemization

moves in succession from “nose” to “ears,” with its playful punning on “here/hear,” Nichol summons consciousness in a Steinian “continuous present,” to an awareness of the poet’s own body and that of the reader/listener in perpetually being “here” now. This emphatic present moment is reinforced by the progression from “ear” to “mouth”; Nichol pronounces the latter by stressing the “ow” of “mouth,” which resonates fully with the suggestive “ow” of “now.” From the line “What is a poem is inside of your mouth” Nichol moves logically to “What is a poem is inside your voice.” With anatomical veracity, “voice” emerges or “becomes” as a culmination of “ears,” “nose,” and “mouth”; it is living force inseparable from the sensory organs that produce it. In this instance, of course, “voice” refers to Nichol’s individual style as well as to the poet’s literal speaking voice. Nichol’s bodily classification comes full circle when the line following the four-time repetition of “voice” becomes a repetition of the opening line of the poem, insisting: “what is a poem is inside of your body.” At this point, Nichol shifts the poem’s attention from the body to emotions. Again in a quadruple repetition, Nichol moves from “What is a poem is inside of your happy,” to “inside your woe,” and, finally, to “inside your loving.” Nichol’s linking of body and emotion reinforces his earlier characterization of the epistemological powers of the body—to feel is, after all, a certain kind of knowing, one that may be intuitive, but one that knows nonetheless. Significantly, the poem ends in breath: “What is a poem is inside of your breathing.” The culmination of the final chanting of the word “breathing” is hypnagogic, and progressively breaks down until it becomes the thing itself in a profound example of the erasure of distance between experience and representation through the medium of the body. The word “breathing” disintegrates until it eventually becomes panting—the rise and fall of inhalation and exhalation itself depicted as a narrative sequence trailing off into silence. Similarly, the breath of the triathlete in performance contains the narrative of her aerobic fitness, her ease and her struggle. As in the eventual silence of Nichol’s poem, even the soundless breath of the athlete is loaded with meaning, and persists in Derridean “différance.”

“Pome Poem” forces the reader to see, taste, smell, hear and breathe the poem across perceptual boundaries, merging a theorization and practice of generic borderblur with synaesthesia, allowing the reader/listener to experience and internalize a rationale for Nichol’s artistic practice. Such experimentation forces us to speak, read, write, and think in expanded ways. With the same propulsion against confinement, the embodied female triathlete, with her elasticity among three competing sports in one, inscribes

its perpetual becoming, the in-between of her own making. With strong shoulders and biceps from swimming, overly developed quadriceps from the bike, and a contradictory leanness from running, the elite female triathlete performs an androgynous contradiction. More precisely, she embodies and stages a contestation of the borders of gender, not just physically, but also linguistically by destabilizing what it means to be “strong,” “powerful,” “fast,” and “competitive.” Understood traditionally as masculine qualities, strength, power, speed, and competitive drive become “de-gendered” by the female triathlete who “outperforms” language, as it were. Heywood and Dworkin’s conception of gender characteristics is anti-essentialist:

[M]asculinity is not at all the property of men. It’s a quality, spirit, bright within that shines and shines and shines. Why can’t we own that spirit, fire, shining grace that is and always has been with us? When and where will individuality, cockiness, wills to power be seen as part of us, our blood our teeth our bones? (*Built to Win* 98)

Through the multiplicity of her sport, the female triathlete’s perpetual becoming-swimmer, becoming-cyclist, becoming-runner enacts the Deleuzian and Guattarian becoming-woman, and exposes “the very contingency” of her categorization. Butler celebrates the problematizing of gender that tennis great Martina Navratilova heralded; her athletic accomplishments resulted, in part, from her “assuming a muscularity and strength that were, for women, quite anomalous” (6). Our cultural appreciation of Navratilova’s athleticism, Butler proposes, “allows the category of ‘women’ to become a limit to be surpassed, and establishes sports as a distinctively public way in which to enact and witness that dramatic transformation” (7). Through the muscular medium of her body, Navratilova offers an alternative to the dichotomy of gender.

Enduring Experientially, Engendering Triathlon

To recognize, celebrate, and marshal the complexity of the contradictions that characterize the female triathlete is also to acknowledge how she is, in part, a product of the very hegemony that oppresses her. Sport, like literature and other artistic media, is but one arena in which a contestation of the codes that hinder sociocultural and humanitarian progress occurs regularly. Through the creative act—whether that be the building of a body or the writing of a poem—the power of the ambiguous, the blurred border, comes into focus in a proliferation of meaning. Both Nichol’s poems and the female triathlete’s performance exhibit a borderblur, a dynamic and overlapping

relationship between the text and the body that foregrounds ambiguous materiality or morphology as a site of organic becoming. In much the same way that Nichol liberates the word, the image, and the sound byte, the morphology of the androgynous female triathlete is rife with prospects that necessarily destabilize normative dichotomies of gender. In this in-between space or “borderblur,” the aesthetic legibility of a woman’s body expands as do conceptions of masculinity. What it means to *look* like a man or woman must also change. Such “gender parity,” according to Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization, can only occur by passing *between* the dualism of gender (276).

Always eluding representation, the athlete’s body perpetually recounts its making and unmaking, its winning and losing, its breakdown as well as its execution. The athlete’s body encodes the dramas of the playing field, the connected detachment of performance, the intimate distance between the creator, the created, and the spectator, and the shifting in and between these seemingly disparate categories. The body of the female triathlete, which is embodied by her sport, is somewhere *between* densely muscular and rigorously pared down. Unlike most endurance athletes who spend hours at aerobic threshold to ensure his or her welterweight, the female triathlete benefits from a certain amount of mass, strength, and power, assets on the bike and during the swim. The body of the female triathlete depicts the elements she faces at every turn. Hers is a story of shouldering the current, triceps burning in backward extension while armfuls of water disappear behind her. Hers is the narrative of an uphill grind, hip-flexors hammering against asphalt, the gears of her bike echoing her heart beat. Hers is a body that soars, hitting the ground only between strides. To many male triathletes, however, her body is a symbol of his own shortcomings—as she seeks to pass him, he refuses to move over as the rules dictate. His pride tied to her wheel, the curve of her calves a testament to his own lack. Seeking to overtake him as she knows she can, she gets disqualified for drafting: he continues to confine her. The body of the female triathlete is a living, breathing contestation to normative definitions of gender—a beautiful fortress of alliance and liminality. Like Nichol’s borderblur poetics and the conceptual and theoretical indices it fragments, the embodied female triathlete is a liberating insistence of becoming-woman.

Furthermore, the processual transition of the female triathlete at the thresholds that join this trinity of sports effects a metaphor for evolution in which she gives birth to herself. Emerging from the water, she struggles to strip off her wetsuit, the thick amphibious skin giving way to her sleek

musculature, enabling her to reshape the mechanics of her flight to glide, now avian and aerodynamic on her bike. When, from its whirring momentum, she unclips her pedals and racks her bike, the triathlete finally touches down, bipedal and erect in the continuous forward motion of her run. Lakoff and Johnson remind us that “Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move, and manipulate, and the detailed structure of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience” (17). By increasing the range and flexibility of our thinking and embodiment, the female triathlete enacts a biopoetics that is legible by way of bpNichol’s performative art of becoming.

Deleuze and Guattari’s minoritarian state of “becoming-woman” enables a transcendence of dualisms that emphasizes the potential for a more complete conception of self, regardless of gender. Nichol articulates this very “becoming-woman” in his nine-volume poem *The Martyrology*:

what comes forth from my mouth
 born from the woman in me
 handed down thru my grandma, ma & lea
 is what marks me most a man

w’s omen
 it turns over & reverses itself
 the mirrors cannot trick us
 (*The Alphabet Game* 8)

Nichol’s art is an art of beginnings, where “becoming itself becomes” (Deleuze and Guattari 249). “Becoming,” Deleuze and Guattari affirm, “is a verb with a consistency all its own. . . . It must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming woman” (239, 277). Similarly, the female triathlete is a becoming in duration, a kaleidoscope of her own making, exhibiting and performing her interaction with the world through her own bodily poetics.

NOTES

- 1 Additionally, the contributions of sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, in particular his 1975 publication of *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, are crucial to the emergence of biopoetics.
- 2 The three other members of the Four Horsemen are Steve McCaffery, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera.
- 3 “Pleasure Suites” gestures to Gertrude Stein’s poem “Sacred Emily” in which, through estrangement, there is a recognition of the materiality of textuality—the sounds, the

shapes, the very feeling of pronunciation in one's mouth are all aspects of the same sense of linguistic play with which Nichol is engaged.

- 4 Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a United States law that banned sexual discrimination from any education program or activity receiving federal funding.
- 5 Stein's configuration of contemporaneity is derived from her interpretation of William James, particularly his conception "of time as a continual flow of present moments" ("How Writing" 482). This becomes Stein's own notion of "continuous present" as coined in her 1926 essay "Composition as Explanation." ("Plays" 5)
- 6 An athlete's fitness can be measured by quantifying his/her VO_2 max, which is the volume of oxygen (in milliliters) he or she can consume while exercising at maximum capacity.
- 7 A complete audio recording of this poem can be heard on line at the UbuWeb archives. My transcription is taken from this recording.
- 8 Marjorie Perloff notes: "Long before Jacques Derrida defined *différance* as both difference and deferral of meaning, Stein had expressed this profound recognition." (http://www2.english.uiuc.edu/Finnegan/English%20256/tender_buttons.htm) Accessed April 26, 2009. See Derrida's essay "Différance" in *The Margins of Philosophy* for a detailed explanation of the term.

WORKS CITED

- Ben-Ishai, Elizabeth. "Autonomous Bodies, Autonomous Selves: Resistance and the Politics of the Body." Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. Vancouver, BC. 6 June 2008. Conference paper.
- Brubach, Holly. "The Athletic Esthetic." *New York Times Magazine*. 23 June 1996. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "Athletic Genders: Hyperbolic Instance and/or the Overcoming of Sexual Binarism." *Stanford Humanities Review* 6.2 (1998). n.pag. Web.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *New French Feminisms*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. Cambridge: U of Massachusetts P, 1981. 245-264. Print.
- Cooke, Brett. "Biopoetics: The New Synthesis." *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*. Ed. Cooke and Frederick Turner. Lexington: Icus, 1999. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. Print.
- Dissanayake, Ellen. "'Making Special'—An Undescribed Human Universal and the Core of a Behaviour of Art." *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*. Ed. Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner. Lexington: Icus, 1999. 27-46. Print.
- Dutton, Paul. "bpNichol: Drawing the Poetic Line." *St. Art: The Visual Poetry of bpNichol*. Ed. Gil McElroy. Charlottetown: Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum, 2000. Print.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich, Ted Leland, Rick Schavone, and Jeffrey T. Schnapp. "The Athlete's Body, Lost and Found." *Stanford Humanities Review* 6.2 (1998): n.pag. Web.
- Guttman, Allen. "Sport, Eros, and Popular Culture." *Stanford Humanities Review* 6.2 (1998): n.pag. Web.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. Print.
- Heywood, Leslie. "Athletic vs. Pornographic Eroticism: How Muscle Magazines

- Compromise Female Athletes and Delegitimize the Sport of Bodybuilding in the Public Eye." *Mesomorphosis Interactive* 1.1 (1998): n.pag. Web. 20 Apr. 2009.
- and Shari Dworkin. *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. Print.
- International Olympic Committee. "About the Museum." The Olympic Museum Lausanne. N.p., 2009. Web. 20 Apr. 2009.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic, 1999. Print.
- McGann, Jerome. *The Textual Condition*. Princeton : Princeton UP, 1991. Print.
- Nichol, bp. *The Alphabet Game: A bpNichol Reader*. Toronto: Coach House, 2007. Print.
- . *Meanwhile: The Critical Writings of bpNichol*. Ed. Roy Miki. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2002. Print.
- , narr. "Pome Poem." *Ear Rational*. Membrane Press New Fire Tapes, 1982. *UbuWeb Sound—bpNichol*. Web. 10 Sept. 2009.
- . *Zygal: a book of mysteries & translations*. Toronto: Coach House, 1986. Print.
- Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry*. Ed. Paul Hoover. New York: Norton, 1994. 613-620. Print.
- Plimpton, George. *On Sports*. Guilford: Lyons, 2003. Print.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Geography and Plays*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993. Print.
- . "How Writing is Written." *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Bonnie Kime Scott. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990. 488-495. Print.
- . "Plays." *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures 1911-1945*. Ed. Patricia Meterwitz. London: Peter Owen, 1968. 58-61. Print.
- Wilson, Edmund O. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975. Print.

