

When the Body Protests

New Versions of Activism

DIANE DRIEDGER

L'auteure décrit son engagement au sein d'un mouvement pour les droits des handicapés alors qu'elle était en bonne santé. Plus tard, affligée elle-même par une maladie chronique, elle a continué activement son oeuvre au sein de l'organisme. A travers son travail, elle a découvert une nouvelle forme de militantisme: l'écriture et l'édition comme moyens de se donner du pouvoir.

To me, participating in society has always meant being active and being activist. I have always liked to see the TV footage of the U.S. black civil rights movement and the women's movement from the 1960s. In the early 1980s, I found a social movement—the disability rights movement—and proceeded to work with these organizations as a non-disabled ally. I was 20 and was enjoying seeing people who had felt disenfranchised grab hold of the tools of participation. People with disabilities were organizing to have their own voices heard.

By 1992 I had worked with the disability movement at the provincial, national, and international levels, through organizations such as the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities, Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD), and Disabled Peoples' International (DPI). At this juncture, I started having mysterious muscle aches and mounting fatigue that I brushed off to continue working in international projects with the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. I found that I was spending more time alone in my apartment recuperating after work and that I was not able to participate in as many volunteer activities. I wondered if I was getting lazy, if I had lost my zeal for causes, if it was all in my head.

Ultimately, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 1996, after four years of floundering in the chronic illness wasteland of doubting myself. Fibromyalgia is a kind of arthritis of the muscles characterized by widespread muscle pain throughout the body and bone crushing fatigue. By this time, my preferred location in the house was the bed or the couch as sitting and standing and doing any prolonged physical activity was excruciatingly painful and debilitat-

ingly tiring. All of my advocacy activities involved just those physical activities. And the Winnipeg winters were piling up in my body—my muscles did not like being cold and my limbs did not traverse snow banks gladly. My body was having a protest—something had to change.

I decided to move to Trinidad and Tobago, where I had been traveling with CCD in the past, to work with the disabled peoples' organizations there and where I had helped in the formation of the Disabled Women's Network (DAWN) of Trinidad. I thought, "I will continue to advocate for change in what little way I can, while I get well." I volunteered to teach a self-esteem and body image course at DAWN once a week. This experience was life-changing to me, as I learned so much from the women with disabilities who came to the class, who ranged in age from 12 to 80. I learned about being a woman, being a woman with a disability, and still retaining the dignity of who I was. Who I had been as a non-disabled woman was just part of the continuum of me, the making of me, a process. The DAWN women acted out scenes of the discrimination they had faced in their society and they discovered that they had hidden talents for performing.

We wrote poems, stories and essays about being disabled and being a woman. In the end, I edited a small collection of these writings and we launched *From Hibernation to Liberation: Women with Disabilities Speak Out* in 1999 (Driedger). This book was launched at the prestigious Central Bank in Port of Spain and cabinet ministers and the national media attended. The women read and felt empowered in the process. One woman actually became known as the author in her small village, rather than that "lady who walks with a cane" as she had always been known.

I knew that writing one's story had power, as I had been writing my own poetry since the early 1990s. I saw a new kind of activism—it was writing your way into peoples' consciousness, not marching in the streets. I decided to return to Canada and pursue this further. I needed to know more about literacy and theories of writing. I started

a Ph.D. in Education in Language and Literacy in 2001 at the University of Manitoba. I wanted to study how writing, and publishing one's work led to empowerment. I wanted to document this process of empowerment in a systematic way. I began to study and now I had no time to be involved in any community groups for change. My relationship to the disability movement was now at arm's length, as my arms couldn't carry any more responsibilities. I slugged it out course by course and did a lot of work lying down on my couch. I had started out feeling quite well after I returned from the sunny winters of Trinidad, but now again, the cold and snow began to take its toll on my body. I meted out energy as best I could.

Now, in 2006, I am finishing research for my creative writing, publishing and empowerment project in Baker Lake, Nunavut. I was in Nunavut on a short stint doing research on disability for the J.A. Hildes Northern Medical Unit at the University of Manitoba in 2001. I saw that the idea of writing and empowerment would work very well in the North, a place where orality had been the modus operandi for centuries. And now how did writing fit in to this society where they were looking to combine the traditional and the contemporary ways of life? People in Nunavut were keen to participate in my project.

Again, I packed up and this time went North for a month's time to teach a course with the Elders using traditional songs as our basis to encourage the adult students to write. Everyone produced several pieces of writing and the book, *The Sound of Songs* (Utatnaq), was born. In a few weeks I will return to investigate whether the students felt empowered by seeing their words in print—do they feel that people in the community view them differently now, and does that matter to them?

I see print as a way of extending the little energy I have into the “noosphere,” as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the amorphous soup of ideas and consciousness that whirls around the world. My body does not need to be physically present at all times to be an activist body. Other ways that I have begun to project physical body is through visual art. In the last year, I have created two pieces that use my image, in the way that the painter Frida Kahlo did. In fact, I see her as my twin activist, as she dealt with chronic pain and disability for most of her life. From her often-prone position in bed, she painted the subject she knew best—the reality of her body and how it appeared to her. Often, these images are raw, stark, and scary. The body is laid bare in all its weakness and despair. Yet, in the process of painting this reality, Kahlo took her body back and propelled it into the world, where it has demanded attention ever since.

I decided to paint myself into Frida's reality—in *Me and Frida Kahlo* I have mimicked her painting, *The Two Fridas*. I have become the Frida on the left, where she had painted herself in a white dress. In this painting, Frida and I are connected by the arteries of pain, by the blood of being women whose bodies are in protest. In protest



Diane Driedger, “Me and Frieda Kahlo,” watercolour on paper, 19" x 20", 2006.



Diane Driedger, “My Will Remains,” mixed media, 3' x 4', 2006.

of what, we are still unsure. Is it the stress of our societies, is it the disadvantaged position of women, which we rail against, is it the disadvantage of having a weak body in our work-obsessed society; is it the weight of global environmental degradation that has caused our bodies to revolt? In painting myself into Kahlo's picture, I continue to struggle with all these questions thinking perhaps I can find an answer in watercolour.

In my second piece of visual art, entitled, *My Will Remains*, I have created a small installation based on Kahlo's painting, “The Dream.” In this painting, Frida lies in her four-poster bed, sleeping, with vines growing over her. On top of her bed's canopy lies a skeleton. Drawing on my interest in handmade rag dolls, I fashioned one of Frida and one of myself. Then, I had Frida's four-poster bed, measuring around two feet by three feet, built by a carpenter friend. Frida then is placed in bed, with her easel on her lap, as she often painted, and I am on top of the

canopy of the bed, lying down and reading. Next to me, is a skeleton that is reaching down to Frida. This skeleton presents the “Judas figure” that was exploded at Easter time in Mexico and it is a symbol of suicide (Kettenmann). I see it as a symbol of death and the lines of life with chronic pain and immobility as blurred—death waits around the corner. After completing these two pieces, I learned I had breast cancer.

Premonitions. The artery link between Frida and I in my painting *Me and Frida Kahlo* reminds me of the PICC line that I now have implanted in my right arm to deliver chemotherapy. The plastic line goes up inside my arm and into a main artery of my heart. As for *My Will Remains*, this is a partial quote from Frida Kahlo who wrote, “My will is great. My will remains” (qtd. in Herrera 226). I continue to work lying down, and chemo is almost finished. My prognosis is good—but I must do six weeks of radiation yet. Indeed, my will remains.

Diane Driedger is a Ph.D. candidate in Education at the University of Manitoba. Her art has appeared in group exhibitions in Winnipeg and Port of Spain, Trinidad. Her latest book, Dissonant Disabilities: Women with Chronic Illnesses Theorize Their Lives, co-edited with Michelle Owen, will be published by Women's Press in 2007.

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LISA SHATZKY

The Poet Is Not Here

I am not the one who writes these words. The poet is not here. Really.
 She's out, digging a hole somewhere or maybe playing in the mud again
 while I'm here making sandwiches, answering the phone and feeding the cat.
 You have mistaken me for her. She is my Other. No, it's not Multiple Personality
 Disorder, because I know she exists and besides, I don't have mysterious bank accounts
 in different names in different parts of the city. No, not an alter-ego, because she really
 doesn't stick around any longer than she has to so we have very little contact. No, she's
 not my double, I mean, there's only one physical body here, not two, and we're sharing it,
 I think. My Other is the one responsible for the words, not me. I'm not her keeper so
 don't keep asking where she is when she's not here. I have no clue of her whereabouts,
 though quite frankly, I'm relieved when she leaves. It gives me a chance to catch up on
 things, like pay bills and clean the bathroom. You have to understand, when she's
 around, she takes over. There's no room for anyone else. She arrives unannounced,
 cancels plans I've made, ignores anything that even remotely resembles a schedule, loses
 the car keys, doesn't return messages, drinks copious amounts of coffee, and burns
 whatever's on the oven. Even the children stay away.
 Come in, if you like. I can put the tea on and we'll chat for a while.
 But don't expect the poet to show up any time soon.
 She has a way of disappearing
 when the questions come
 and she leaves all
 the explaining
 to me.

Lisa Shatzky's poetry has been published in chapbooks, anthologies, journals, magazines, and newspapers across Canada and the U.S. Most recently, Shatzky's poetry has been published in Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine and Cahoot. Her first poetry book, Wandering in Yesterday's Rain was published in 2005. When not writing, Lisa Shatzky works as a psychotherapist on Bowen Island, BC, where she lives with her husband, three children, and an assortment of animals.