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WRITING THROUGH THE BODY

Eileen DiPofi

A Review of *The Small Book of Hip Checks: On Queer Gender, Race, and Writing* by Erica Rand. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. 152. \$89.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

In her latest monograph, Erica Rand brings the intimate writing style and focus on the embodied experiences of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability that characterized her previous book, *Red Nails, Black Skates* (2012), expanding her scope beyond the skating rink and in provocative new directions.¹ *The Small Book of Hip Checks* argues for the hips as an overdetermined corporeal site where multiple histories, cultural norms, social processes, and identifications collide. Rand asserts that “as racialized and classed markers of gender and sexuality, hips bear weight and meaning, fate and contradiction” (1). With careful attention to the ways in which hips are socially constructed as texts, Rand resists essentializing discourses that assume the body always precedes its gendering. Opening outward from the hips, she explores the body as a nexus of expression and regulation. *The Small Book of Hip Checks* analyzes cultural sites at which individual bodies come into contact with the systemic forces of race, gender, sexuality, and nation, largely focusing on popular and material culture (including sports, films, memoirs, and sex toys) but also with attention to how practices of activism, public mourning, and individual resistance negotiate embodiment. In part a work of cultural analysis, and in part autotheory, Rand explores her own subjectivity within these structures of power.

However, what is most innovative about *The Small Book of Hip Checks* is Rand's attention to the embodied experience of writing itself. By structuring her book through short chapters that prioritize juxtaposition over flow, bringing seemingly disparate objects into conversation, Rand prizes an "embrace of redirection, revisitation, and interruption" (15) rather than a traditional linear argument. This approach demonstrates the unexpected insights to be gained through approaching writing as a queer practice.

Queer and feminist thinkers have long sought to foster unexpected intimacies between texts, sparking insights that might be otherwise imperceptible within normative academic frameworks. For example, Carolyn Dinshaw posits a methodology of "touching" that puts different historical moments in contact to produce "connections between incommensurate entities."² As Ann Cvetkovich observes, such a methodology enables erotic and affective intimacies to emerge between historical and contemporary bodies.³ In a similar vein, Gayatri Gopinath employs a tactic of "queer curation," which "stages 'collisions and encounters' between aesthetic practices that may seem discontinuous," revealing insights and inspiring affective responses that might otherwise go unnoticed.⁴ In *The Small Book of Hip Checks*, Rand resolutely marks her place in this tradition,

placing texts in conversation that might normally be separated to see what insights their proximity might inspire. Importantly, Rand does not reduce the bodies she studies to objects, but rather places her own body in conversation within them, reflecting on how her own gender, sexuality, and race have signified through her hips, and how, as her body has changed, this signification has, too. As such, the book balances an analysis of the intersecting processes of gendering and racialization on differently classed and sexualized bodies alongside Rand's meta-analysis of her own body as writer and social subject. Rand grounds her study through three interpretations of *hip check*: as "point of inspection," as "flirtation device," and as "sports move" (2). Respectively, these three distillations encompass Rand's concerns with the policing of bodies, embodied forms of resistance, and queer approaches to writing, commingling throughout the text to produce intimacies between writer, readers, and objects of study.

Rand's first interpretation of hip check, as "point of inspection," evidences her commitment to analyses of how bodies are disciplined along the lines of race, gender, size, and sexuality. Rand provides a plethora of short readings demonstrating how hips are sites of judgment regarding a body's conformity to normative ideals, with hips—and, by extension, other

body parts—deemed too wide, indicating feminine, racialized, and classed excess that demands regulation. Rand’s case studies demonstrate her attention to how gender policing is amplified and differentially applied “for people read as gender-nonconforming and/or trans and also Black, Brown, Asian, Latinx, and/or Indigenous” (9). Her examples range from how Debi Thomas was disproportionately penalized in comparison to her white competitors after wearing a skating costume that emphasized her hips and butt (chapter 2) to how a trans man’s breasts were interpreted differently in the disparate spaces of San Francisco and his rural hometown (chapter 11).

This argument for the hips as the locus of essentialized understandings of the body, sex, and gender culminates in one of Rand’s most poignant pieces, “Cis-Skeletal” (chapter 13). Here, she draws attention to institutionalized practices of memorializing migrants who die attempting to cross the southern border into the United States. Citing the process of the sex differentiation of human remains, which consists of analyzing pelvic skeletal structure, Rand argues that, in the face of repeated dehumanization under U.S. border policy, transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming migrants are subjected to a final act of dehumanization after death, a gendering that effaces their lived experience

even as it claims to restore a piece of their humanity.

However, always seeking juxtapositions, Rand offers her second interpretation of hip check: a “flirtation device,” movements such as the “swish,” “grind,” and “sway” (1–2) that indicate pleasurable gender and sexual performances. Even as they are disciplined by social forces, hips can thrust back, expressing euphoria and seeking pleasure, opening the body up to new possibilities. As with her first interpretation of hip check, flirty hips again exist in productive tension informed by each body’s race, gender, class, and sexuality. She successfully draws out this tension in her reading of Misty Copeland, the first Black prima ballerina of the American Ballet Theatre. Copeland’s rise as a Black woman within the predominantly white ballet world was marked by extensive scrutiny of her body. Rand argues that Copeland’s body was regulated because it did not fit a *white* ideal of femininity, its designation as excessive indicating racialized and classed conceptions of womanhood. The racialized constructions of gender produced in the ballet world demonstrate, for Rand, that “the boundaries between masculinities and femininities are messy and formed in context,” as are “the boundaries between trans and not-trans genders” (70). Because she developed larger breasts, wider hips, and a more muscular build

than her peers, Copeland was subject to severe discipline, forced to lose weight and bind her breasts. Nonetheless, in the face of persistent body policing, Rand emphasizes that Copeland enacts her own hip checks, taking pleasure in her unique body and its capacity for movement. As she writes in her book's conclusion, "the hip check, at best . . . orients toward that glorious dance floor" (114).

In similar ways throughout the text, Rand pairs her first two interpretations of hip checks, as inspection and pleasure, suggesting the complexity of even pleasurable gendered embodiment and its relation to power. But perhaps the key intervention of *The Small Book of Hip Checks* is Rand's final definition of hip check, which makes explicit the embodied experience of writing and suggests a more corporeal understanding of theory itself. Rand's third interpretation arises out of her passion for skating and sports: hip check as a move intended to throw a competitor off balance, interrupting their flow of movement and forcing them in another direction. Rand takes up this interpretation as theoretical praxis, forcing her readers to sharply veer between objects and modes of inquiry. For example, in "Queer Indirections" (chapter 11), Rand swerves between analyzing *Heathers* (directed by Michael Lehmann in 1988), her discovery of a friend's HIV status, and an

anecdote about a man inadvertently outing himself at a Dunkin' Donuts. Her jarring moves between formally and thematically disparate texts open the reader up to the queer connections between them. Rand is herself very explicit about these intentions, writing that "instead of leading you through a directed line of argument, I want to regularize interruption and practices of changing direction" (14). While initially uncomfortable for those readers used to long, in-depth case studies, for the reader who embraces the unease of Rand's rapid movements, the sense of displacement they produce proves generative. Her persistent hip checking unseats us so that we are never quite able to settle into any one mode of thinking; we are always prepared to be shifted in a new direction, forced to draw unconventional connections between objects and theorize in ways that run counter to our instincts.

Rand encourages this thinking by being very explicit about her hip checks, stating her intentions with each move. By drawing attention to her theoretical moves, Rand ensures that her hip checks are mutual engagements that do not force us into specific readings of texts but rather encourage us to think about them in new ways. Further, by offering multiple, even contradictory readings of a single text, Rand allows meanings to proliferate, demonstrating her ability

not only to hip check her reader, but also to hip check herself. A particularly well-developed example of this tactic occurs in “Clocking the Natural” (chapter 8). Here, Rand first offers a reading of how her childhood love of hula-hooping helped her to develop a femme identity, using her hips as a tool of gendered performance. However, at the end of the piece, she offers a less rosy rereading, situating the hula hoop’s prevalence in her childhood as the result of colonial histories and economic processes: “naming the toy a hula hoop links the swivel I prized in myself to brown bodies understood to inhabit a sexually inviting primitive elsewhere” (65). By reading the hula hoop as the commodification of a traditional Hawai’ian practice for American consumers, Rand is forced to evaluate her white femme gender as an imperial construct.

Rand’s self-reflexivity is what makes *The Small Book of Hip Checks* such an enjoyable read; she is true to her theoretical aim of developing queer relations between bodies beyond the hierarchical structures that exist today. She equalizes the relation between reader and author, demystifying her writing process through frequent interruptions that draw attention to her formal choices, such as in the following interjection: “that sentence you just read represents one of the rare times that I switched a verb to the

passive voice” (111). Rand analyzes the intended and possible effects of her formal choices (such as the use of passive voice), reminding the reader that writing is never a neutral act, but a constant negotiation that can both reproduce and contest existing power relations. Rand expands this critical approach by highlighting the ways in which her text fell short and had to be hip checked by herself and others. For example, she explains how she had originally conceived of using text boxes for some of her case studies, namely for a reading of Prince, whose chronic hip pain led to his eventual opioid overdose. However, after considering a review of her previous book that criticized her treatment of race, Rand came to realize that cordoning Prince’s story off into a text box violently segregated it from the body of her chapter and made the narrative of Prince’s death too simplistic. This hip check made Rand realize she “had a lot to do both in practicing and in conveying the centrality of race in [her] work, including attending to the racial politics of form and placement” (21). By sharing this weakness, Rand encourages us to critically consider the formal choices we make and the ideologies they may espouse. Rand brings tremendous humility to her text, approaching writing as an experience inseparable from our position as embodied social subjects.

The Small Book of Hip Checks, with its jerking, twisting, and nonlinearity, is a corporeal experience for writer and reader alike. Rand's wit, empathy, and care for her subjects make the experience both challenging and pleasurable, a text about our role as embodied readers and writers who traverse various social positions. *The Small Book of Hip Checks* is a piece of scholarship intended not only for scholars of gender, sexuality, and race, but for readers in any field seeking alternative modes of inquiry within their work and writing. As I suggested at the beginning of this review, *The Small Book of Hip Checks* is an important intervention into a long history of scholars fostering intimacies between "incommensurate" texts and bodies.⁵ Rand succeeds in leaving room for queerness to proliferate and in entangling the reader as an embodied subject in those relations. As she astutely observes, "queer connections

may happen when you don't expect them" (84).

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NOTES

1. Erica Rand, *Red Nails, Black Skates: Gender, Cash, and Pleasure on and off the Ice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
2. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 54, 50, quoted by Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 49.
3. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 49.
4. Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora, Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.
5. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 49.