

Skin Care for Unruly Bodies
A hydro-drama in four acts by Charlotte Rohde

Ouverture: Shedding skin

I have very sensitive skin. It is the fragile outline of my body, my semipermeable home, sometimes irritated when I am irritated, then I use expensive moisturiser from the pharmacy. Yesterday, I spent 68,90€ on skincare products.

Other times, I feel trapped within my outlines, I need to shed skin. I dig into one of the cracks and gently tear it open to reveal rosé, newly grown flesh, and slip the old skin off my arm, careful not to rip it. It comes over my hand, over my fingers, and once detached from my body it gains an autonomous form. I look at my old outline, which is now a new outline. As it is separated from me, the outline starts from here. It feels vaguely familiar, now ready to be filled with new meaning – by whom? Words of power looking for bodies of resonance.

All of the cells in my bodies are completely exchanged every seven years. Is La-Roche Posay now part of me, since it has melted into my skin? SOOTHING REPAIR MOISTURIZER: Tested on allergy-prone skin, this comforting cream helps restore skin's protective moisture barrier. I rub it on my retina screen in small, gentle circles as the writing on the white packaging recommends. I close the laptop and wait; the Letter S will be comforted by tomorrow (as is also written on the white packaging). Taking care of all my bodies, since self-care is apparently a feminist, anticapitalist gesture. I learned that from Instagram.

I reopen my laptop to write. I want to write about how fluidity and emotionality are feminist counter-methods to the rational grid. I type for a while (I put on a face mask: HYDRAPHASE INTENSE HYALURONIC ACID MASK: This hyaluronic acid mask intensely hydrates, soothes, and comforts to help improve luminosity. Rated 5/5) and realise that I am trying to make sense. Should I try to un-make sense, to apply my own counter-method, to take myself out of the grid that I'm criticising? As an act of rebellion? I feel rebellious today.

Every word I write is an extension of the rebellion in my body, a piece of shed skin, a liminal space, an ecotone between me and the other. Every letter I draw is a body, born out of my body, embodying me, putting myself out there (wrapped in a protective moisture barrier).

I wash my face. Some cells renewed themselves. I grew.

Act I: Bloodletting

As a female type designer from Germany and a recipient of a German education, I learned, especially in design school, that every decision should be rational and explained logically. German design education, very much rooted in the Swiss school and in the Bauhaus, teaches us that 'form follows function'¹ – everything has to serve a purpose.

Make a grid, twelve columns, and type sizes should be dividable by each other. Use lines and circles, but never decoration. Values such as reason, rationality, and order are deeply rooted in Eurocentric culture, having been developed as ideals during the fairly masculine-dominated age of the Enlightenment: There is traditionally no room for uncontrolled emotional forces in a man's world.

As I went through design school, I had to deal with a lot of uncontrolled forces within myself, as I am a quite emotional person. I went through the post-puberty pain of finding myself, the anxiety of not making it. All those feelings that we sometimes cannot even put into words. And it was actually very nice to separate them from my work, to have concrete values to hold on to, to be able to judge objectively. There was a clear 'good' and 'bad' in a formal sense. When I made my first business card, it said 'visual engineering'; almost proud to do something so technical, that sounded so masculine – and to surprise people that I was a female doing it, too.

Sara Ahmed, a feminist writer and independent scholar who works at the intersection of feminist, queer and race studies, elaborates: "*Emotions are associated with*

¹ This sentence, originally written by architect Louis Sullivan in 1852, doomed the ornament, and denied all emotional legitimization in design. This sentence is still the status quo in Western European design – because it is also the financially most efficient, hence most capitalistic, approach.

women, who are represented as 'closer' to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement."² Ahmed also distinguishes between patriarchy-approved emotions and those that are not. As long as you can control your emotions and use them for your benefit, and as they are happening in an appropriate space, they are allowed.³

I was proud to be able to control my emotions in my work, to produce something objectively good and appealing that would enhance my career. Only later would I learn that design is so difficult because there are no correct answers to look for, that it is about searching for the right questions to ask.

As I see it, a grid asks for correct answers. A grid is a sense-making concept of thinking and a tool that helps you to think less, once created. A grid is two-dimensional. It can function as a container for selected, patriarchy-approved emotions, but it denies a certain freedom since it is static and rigid it is conservative in its own form.

The patriarchal approach in graphic design is mirrored in the male domination of the field, especially in typography and type design. In 2018, *AIGA Eye on Design*⁴ teamed up with the German feminist platform *NotAMuse* to research the gender balance in design conferences worldwide and determined that, in Europe, on average 36% of those who appear on stage are women. This is representative, because "when a conference organizer gives a designer the opportunity to speak on stage, it's a statement that their perspective is of value to the design community. If the majority of those given the stage are men, the implicit suggestion is that the most valuable perspective is that of a [man]."⁵

There needs to be more inclusion of non-male professionals. Students need to have female role models. There needs to be fluidity and movement, there needs to be room for shifting in any direction. In nature and life, nothing is ever static. Human bodies are not static. So why should a grid be static? It is a helpful tool, but it should not become our master. I find a solution to this problem of not wanting to prioritise anyone, while we still clearly lack non-males in role-model positions, in Astrida Neimanis' text 'Hydrofeminism', written in 2012: "By venturing to feminism's ecotones, and leaping in, we can discover that feminism dives far deeper than human sexual difference, and outswims any attempts to limit it thus."⁶ Putting all human bodies, all things alive, into the cycle of water, fluids, body liquids, and looking at all animate and inanimate life as watery bodies, biotopes and ecotones in between, she no longer distinguishes between man and woman. I think, in 2020, it is time to leave gender and the sex divide behind us. This does not mean that the inequality between humans is solved – but by considering all bodies to be fluid and interconnected we might open up a more peaceful and contextualised way of achieving equality for all life in this world.

Talking about blurring the lines of our bodies and seeing them as things that are liquid and have no clear borders, I am thinking about my voice. A voice acts as a powerful tool – an extension of my body that reaches even those who cannot see me. A voice adds another layer to words that are spoken. It can enhance the implied meaning of a word or reverse it. It is half physical, predefined by genetics, and half a tool that everyone uses individually as they learn by experience and experiment with it. A voice is a liminal space between me and an other.

Act 2 – Mother Tongue

I first learned about the power of voice from my mother. When I was a child and had

² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

⁴ *Eye on Design* is an online magazine published by the professional association for design AIGA, the oldest and largest not-for-profit design organisation in the United States.

⁵ Eye on Design + notamuse, "We Surveyed Gender Equality at the World's Biggest Design Conferences – and the Numbers Are In," *AIGA Eye on Design*, November 29, 2019, <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/gender-equality-at-design-conferences-by-the-numbers/>.

⁶ Astridia Neimanis, "HydroFeminism: Or, On Becoming A Body of Water", in *Undutiful Daughters*, ed. H. Gunkel, C. Nigianni, F. Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 102.

done something that I knew she wouldn't approve of, I didn't understand why, I would hide in my room – and then she would call my name. I was expecting it, fearing it. She used my first and my middle names, I was suddenly paralyzed. I knew it was serious. My mother, the first witch I ever knew, she who created me, she whose voice was the first thing I heard. She, the first person who could bind me, but also the first person who could heal and release me, could even protect me with her words.

Voice is an important concept in feminist discourse – finding your own voice, giving someone a voice. I see a 'voice' as a performance, an expression of beliefs, thoughts and feelings that can be made in words, in writing, in singing, in painting, in poetry, in typefaces, etc.

The notion of voice is important for feminist thought, since having a voice was denied to women for such a long time. Until the late Middle Ages, it was forbidden for women to read and write, especially Latin, the language of science (since Latin was the language of God, and God made the world, all science was directly related to theology).⁷ Writing was meant for men only, allowing them to create texts and thereby carve their voices into history. It was meant to create bodies for men that would last when their physical bodies could no longer renew their cells. Max Miedinger⁸ is dead; Helvetica lives forever.

Audre Lorde, an American writer, intersectional feminist, and civil rights activist, talks about poetry as a way to channel female voices to the outside world: *“For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is the vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”*⁹

A voice needs to be heard in order to be considered. By using my voice, I can liberate myself from the taboos put on my bodies and feelings, I can create alliances with those who can relate to my voice, I learn to understand the variety of narratives around me. And how is a typeface different to a visual voice? Reaching the spectator before they can read a word, letter by letter. A visual voice, an extension of its creators' bodies. An expression of my personal aesthetics, emotionality, and stance. Every time someone uses my typeface for their work, they weave a piece of my reality into theirs – a duet, maybe a symphony of narratives. They give my voice a space, I give their words a body.

So, what does it mean to create text, type or voice as a female, as a human, as a hydro-body in a historical context, and what does it mean to do so today?

Act 3 – Deeper Desires flowing through my Hands

When I was thirteen,¹⁰ I founded my own religion. I went on a holiday to Rhodes, Greece and bought a miniature Venus statue with my allowance. Of course, it was quite a bad replica, but I liked to see this representation of something that was so much bigger than myself – ancient history, myths, gods, power. The palms of my hands would tingle when I thought about that dimension. I wanted it to be much bigger than myself. I wanted to believe in something. I also brought a little book with me to Rhodes, because I loved empty notebooks and writing things into them, making books, making bibles.¹¹ I liked the feeling of coming up with rituals, sayings and recipes. By writing them into a book, they would become sacred.

Sitting in the bus to RHO airport, 38 degrees outside, my newfound treasure, Venus, in my bag next to me, I watched the palm trees on the hills and thought about what my

⁷ Sabrina Schultjan, *Das Leben der Hildegard von Bingen. Was war Gegenstand ihrer Schriften und Erläuterungen zu „Litterae ignotae“ und „Lingua ignota“* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2016).

⁸ Max Miedinger created the world's most famous typeface, Helvetica, in 1957.

⁹ Audre Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, no. 3 (1977).

¹⁰ The use of time and age in this paragraph is rather metaphorical and not necessarily accurate.

¹¹ The word “Bible” simply comes from Koine Greek “τὰ βιβλία” (“*tà biblíā*”) and means “the books.”

religion could be about. Since I had chosen an object showing Venus, the Greek goddess of love and maternity, I wanted it to be about love and femininity – a pragmatic decision, adjusting the design to the given. I wanted to have rituals, sacred times and ritualistic objects such as an altar and a chalice. Just a few weeks before, I had had my first period and was very excited about it – would my new life as a teenager, no longer a child, begin now? It made me feel special, like only I had discovered the secret of womanhood. I wrote it down: The Venus Religion, for females only, and the core value is love. Not finding love with men – more like love as a life approach. I decided that menstruation would be sacred. I also declared feminine desires as sacred healing. And all of it was written in my notebook. It was blue and had sparkling dolphins on it.

Thirteen years later, I read the words of Helen Cixous, a French philosopher, poet, professor and one of the earliest thinkers of poststructuralist feminist theory, on how a woman needs to write herself into history, since women had long been forbidden to speak up, to write, to have a voice and were therefore (and in addition) disowned of their bodies and identities. She also argues that language in itself is a man-made construct that traps and excludes women, and she proposes a new way of writing, *Écriture Féminine*, allowing us to free our bodies and create self-narratives.

Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is, for 'great men'; and it's 'silly.' Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way; or because you wrote irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty – so as to be forgiven; forget, to bury it until the next time.¹²

Cixous makes this strong link between writing and a woman's sexuality – both forbidden and claimed by the patriarchy. Likewise, in Audre Lorde's writing, she expresses thoughts on how female desire (here called 'The Erotic') is our secret source, and is still forbidden today:

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. [...] The erotic is the nurturer or nurse-maid of all our deepest knowledge.¹³

Both Cixous and Lorde, writing in the 1970s, make strong distinctions between men and women, or men and other. In 2020, I am quite confused about this. I see a clear difference in the treatment of men and women in the overall view and my everyday life. But determining non-male humans by their biology feels too brutal, as I see all humans struggling with the patriarchy. None of us, whatever gender we perform, or which sex we are born with, chose or created the system we live in. Some might like to support it, because it's easier than rethinking; some of us, who don't fit very well, choose to fight. Returning to Astrida Neimanis, she implores:

If the fluids of otherwise gendered bodies were acknowledged rather than effaced, how might such attentiveness amplify the creative—and even ethical and political—potential of these bodies? Rather than alerting us to some “essentialist” difference between masculine and feminine (or normatively reprosexual and nonreprosexual) embodiment, such aqueous body-

¹² Hélène Cixous, “Le rire de la Méduse,” *L'Arc* 61 (1975).

¹³ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, a division of Ten Speed Press, 1978).

*writing might invite all bodies to attend to the water that facilitates their existence, and embeds them within ongoing overlapping cycles of aqueous fecundity.*¹⁴

My religion did not exist for long, but a longing to believe in something that values the body and its workings, as well as to be part of a larger context and community, never went away. I am still experimenting with writing my own narrative.

In the following and last act, I want to lay out how these thoughts, developments and experiences manifest in my practice as a feminist type designer.

Act 4 – Bathing in Symphonies

Since I was a little child, I have listened to the opera *The Magic Flute* by Mozart. I would be in the living room, skipping all the slow arias, listening to the songs with the whole choir, the whole orchestra, because I loved that feeling of ecstasy, catharsis. By exposing myself to this external carrier of emotion, I could touch my own desire, my childish fantasies could become tangible. I was bathing in the aria of the Queen of the Night.

In this opera from the Age of Enlightenment, the Queen goes through an unbearable amount of pain, having her daughter taken from her by pure patriarchal powers, because a man thinks his values of reason and wisdom are higher than hers as a mother. As a child, I was unaware of the misogyny of that story, but I could feel the empowerment when she expressed her rage by touching the highest note anyone had ever sung until then.

While I was drawing my typeface *Serifbabe*, I was re-listening to this opera, slowly understanding the narrative. Moving with the music, I channelled my emotions into my work in symphony with those of the Queen of the Night, the Queen's voice filling the liminal space between me and my laptop. Thus *Serifbabe* turned out to be a strong character with a hint of exaggeration and expressive details. She is beautiful and powerful. She is melancholic and dramatic. She is the embodiment of an emotion I had carried in me all my life, maybe an emotion I inherited. She is sensual, elegant and unruly.

Because I used *Serifbabe* as a starting point for my research about the emotionality of typefaces, I dealt with her a lot, with this embodiment of a feeling that always seemed a bit too big for my chest. A feeling like a controlled detonation, as when I listened to the Queen of the Night singing "*Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen, Tod und Verzweiflung flammet um mich her!*"¹⁵

As a result of experiments with form and emotionality, I started to draw another typeface that came out as a sharper, harder, and less conventional sister of *Serifbabe*: *Hadogenes*. Named after the largest sort of scorpion in this world, *Hadogenes* is highly dramatic and painful. Closely related to the zodiac sign Scorpio, which is known to be mysterious, powerful, cunning and sharp, and definitely not easy-going (and, as my ascendant sign, is quite present in my personality), her details are painful. Her letters penetrate each other – something that would make every traditional type designer turn in his grave. She is extremely hard to use because of her dominating character. I relate her to Sara Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy. For Ahmed, living a feminist life means that you have to create friction in everyday life, even (and especially) when you could let something pass as a joke or a slightly weird comment, by calling out the act of patriarchal power, no matter how small.¹⁶

I see the typefaces I make as my visual voice: as an ecotone between the biotope that I am and the biotopes around me. An extension of my body, my skin stretching out and dripping into another body.

Eco: home. Tone: tension. We must learn to be at home in the quivering tension of the in- between. No other home is available. In-between nature and culture, in-between biology

¹⁴ Neimanis, "HydroFeminism."

¹⁵ "The vengeance of Hell boils in my heart, Death and despair flame about me!"

¹⁶ Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

*and philosophy, in-between the human and everything we ram ourselves up against, everything we desperately shield ourselves from, everything we throw ourselves into, wrecked and recklessly, watching, amazed, as our skins become thinner.*¹⁷

Finale: A liquid dream, carefully wrapped into a towel

I come out of the shower and watch my silhouette in the foggy mirror. I have washed my hair (KERIUM DOUX EXTRÊME: For Sensitive Hair. Contains thermal water from La-Roche Posay, 10,90€) and I watch little drops of water running down my shoulders. The towel wrapped around my core swallows them hungrily. Little wrinkly signs appear and disappear on my skin, after all that hot water.

The water is evaporating and I can see my face now. It is one of these moments when you cannot wrap your head around the idea of actually looking yourself in the eye. I touch my cheek and watch my mirror-self doing it, too. Yet I feel like a displaced body in this world, not quite connected. My home does not really have a home. Sometimes, everything is quite numbed out, like someone turned the volume and the saturation down. Sometimes, nothing seems to be intense enough to mirror how I feel. I can feel myself. It is somehow an assurance that I am actually there and have practiced another ritual of pop-feminism. My sensitive skin feels thankful, nothing to shed today, embracing me a bit tighter to express affection. (LIPIKAR BALM AP+ MOISTURIZER FOR DRY SKIN: This body cream moisturizer for dry skin to extra dry skin features a unique prebiotic action on the skin microbiome.)

Wet as I am, I sit down in front of the outlines of my S again. I have been working on it for way too long. I take a sip of cold coffee (my third cup today), and as I massage my screen to stimulate blood circulation, my other body patiently staring back at me, I feel a slight sense of relief.

¹⁷ Neimanis.