

**Christina Halliday**

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## **Dancing the “True Story”<sup>1</sup>**

*(prelude)*

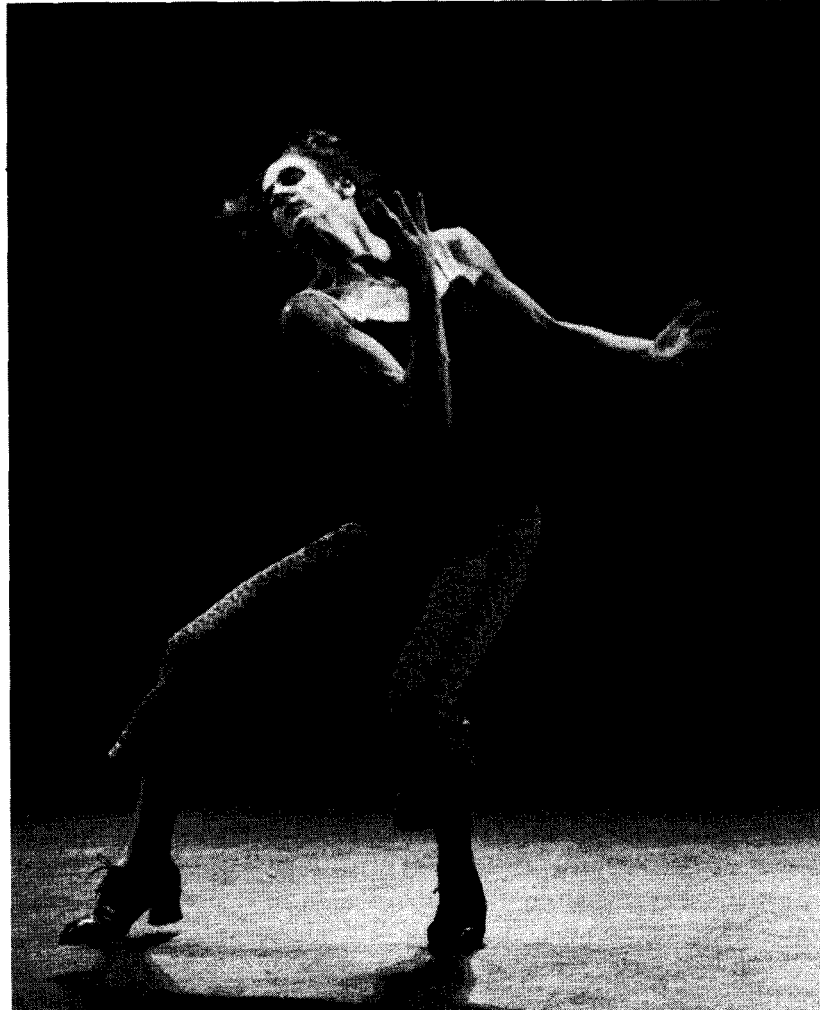
To speak of housework, or childbirth, or sexuality, or rape in the form of the essay represents, in each instance, a crumbling of the fortifications erected by a masculine world against the feminine world. But still, in each instance, the sensual reality of these phenomena are stripped away so that they may enter public discourse. (Griffin, 1995: 165)

*a true story of the sensual reality of mothering and becoming a mother.  
this story is not a stripping away but a solid, breathing, fluidly moving  
insistence of Peggy's body (my body) in discourse, subjectivity, and making  
sense of*

*you and me, Veronika  
our dance together  
and my own search for names  
which has gone something like this*

*At the beginning:*

*She performs the adolescent girl practising names for her new mother. Long arms gesturing wildly—“she wrote down the woman's name”—now cutting the air away, palms flat down—“crossed it out”—now waving hands softly, painting something onto the space in front of her—“and wrote ‘mom’ instead.”*



*"a true story," Choreographer and Dancer: Peggy Baker. Photo: Cylla von Tiedemann,  
Courtesy Dance Umbrella of Ontario*

*She playfully throws her left arm over her head. The danced word for “mom”: she didn’t call me “mom” for a long time. instead she called me “Dad!” urgently and in high-pitch. “D” for Dad a heavy crushing weight. a surge of electric sharp to my mother-heart. in the gentle liveliness of her calling eyes and mouth and hands I put my own hand softly to the warmth in my chest and said, “Veronika, I am your mummy.” my hand the healer. performing a resuscitation. a resurfacing.*

*She performs the rigid gesture for the name “parent”: anxious. haven’t experienced a delicious deep sleep since her arrival. because the responsibility to guide another life is too much. its too much and I know this because the ugly moth-wings of my breath are always fluttering nervously at my shoulders. because I can’t protect her from crashing planes, people who kill, disappointment and sadness. because I can’t be sure she will always be with me.*

*She performs the serene, contented, dance-word for mother, “woona.” want to find this and capture it for myself. own it and nourish it but not perfectly—that would require too much. no. it is an imperfect word, a word formed with the breath and body of a child. it has mystery in it and formlessness and potential. to help me breathe, a deep, comfortable, pulsing.*

There were five pieces on the program for Peggy Baker’s performance series, Interior View, including “*a true story*.”<sup>2</sup> All of the other dance pieces were very thoughtful, evocative movement interpretations of the piano playing of Andrew Burashko, who appeared on-stage with Baker. *a true story* stood out for me from amongst the other dance pieces on the evening’s program. It drew me into a process of interpretation, inquiry, and sensing in a way that was different and possibly not surprising. That is because I am also becoming a mother in all the many ways I perform mother in my everyday, lived and discursive relations with my child, partner, extended family, friends, writing, and research in education.

*a true story* is a performative exploration of becoming a mother, and more specifically, of the formation of mother-subjectivity, as a lived, embodied, and socially-negotiated experience, both limiting and liberating. The story that Baker tells in this performance is about an adoptive mother coming into the role of mother in almost mid-life and to an adolescent girl. It is a story of this new mother and daughter searching for a way to name their relationship with each other—and, in particular, of the adoptive mother’s process of “trying on” different senses of herself as mother (parent, mom, stepmother). It is a story about the lived, embodiedness of the mother-child relationship and how this embodiedness shapes the adoptive mother’s sense of herself as a woman and as a mother in a profound and meaningful way.

*a true story* is also a danced exploration of the threshold between word and gesture, discourse and embodied life, sound and silence, names and what in our

experience eludes naming. The exploration itself creates a sense of the non-separation of these categories in experience and knowing.

*a true story* is a narrative told three times and in two different ways. First, as danced gesture. Second, as gesture occurring simultaneously with spoken words. And finally, Baker concludes the piece by again moving in silence and "telling" her tale of becoming a mother through danced gesture. The title of the dance performance itself, which is also an element of its theme, performs the first transgression of dualities. *a true story* is an evocation of opposites (truth vs. fiction) as well as a simultaneous joining of opposites (truth and fiction) with its own complexity in meaning. By claiming that there is such a thing as "a true story," the title of this dance performance participates in the calling into question of the distinctions between true or "real" experience and fictional representations of experience. Further, the claim to tell a true story also compels the questions: Is a true story ever really true? And, what are the dimensions of truth in a story? *a true story* adheres to this posture in the interrogative by juxtaposing two modes of narrating "a true story" of becoming a mother: a story told in spoken words and another in danced gesture.

This juxtaposition of stories represents a second way in which *a true story* transgresses dualities and proposes a sense of relationality in experience, knowing, and representation. *a true story* asks: Which of the stories performed is true? The one told in danced gesture or spoken word? Does one story, perhaps, relate more truth than the other? By exploring two modes of knowing and representing the experience of becoming a mother, and by suggesting that each mode has its own relationship to the "real" experience, *a true story* searches for what can be learned about mothering, knowing, and subjectivity through a comparison of this discursive difference. Moreover, *a true story* opens up the category of mother and the experience of becoming a mother to multiple interpretations and modes of knowing. Mother-subjectivity emerges as an unstable category—a position from which to tell many "true" stories.

In this article, I examine how *a true story* performs the instability of the categories of "mother" and "true story." Drawing on Judith Butler's (1993) formulation of the role of performance in producing the effects of discourse—these effects being, naturalized, material aspects of selfhood such as gender and sex—I examine *a true story* as a performance of the instability of "mother" and "mother-subjectivity" as naturalized categories. To support this exploration, I look closely at the self-conscious attention to the body and gesture in *a true story* for how this attention evokes a sense of embodied life, and specifically the profound sensuality of the mother-child relationship. Turning to phenomenological explanations and accounts of the body in experience and knowing, I suggest that the danced story in *a true story* creates a discursive context where language, as a way to name and know the experience of mothering, is inadequate. Rather, the dance of embodied relationships and expression captures the ambiguity and complexity of becoming a mother. As a result, the danced story in *a true story* emerges as a space of critique and

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production in the dance—a space where the performance of ‘mother’ is open to reformulation, resignification, and profound meaning.

### The Performance of discourse

*She says that this is a story about a woman who has adopted her new husband's adolescent girl. She says that the girl is ecstatic with her new mother and practices various names for her—that is, the adoptive mother's actual name but also ‘mom!’*

*A jutting movement with the left arm, over the head, with the torso definitely following and the pelvis only making a gesture to follow. This performed with an active, happy, playful smile. In fact, her whole body is smiling.*

*She says that the young girl's interest and concern with names and naming sparks a similar process in the woman. She begins to think about the names that she now “owns” as the adoptive mother to this girl. For example, “stepmother”:*

*Both hands and arms punching downwards repeatedly, and then the whole torso moving to the side in a gesture that seems angry and hurt.*

*And then “parent”:*

*Standing very tall. Both long, long arms held out to the side, palms and hands flat. The posture is imposing. It says, “Stop. Don't go there.” It says, “This is a limit and a boundary.”*

*a true story* can be thought of as an explicit performance of the performativity of the subject position “mother.” Because it is a danced and bodily performance of the performativity of mothering, where the articulations of the body are emphasized aesthetically and juxtaposed with a story of becoming a mother that is more typically discursive, a true story critiques the relationship between discourse and the language of the body. In so doing, *a true story* presents the possibilities for play and resistance that such a critique might encourage. It suggests a telling difference between embodied knowing and discursive knowing, by paying attention to embodied life versus what can be known through language and names.

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler considers the relationship between performance and subjectivity, and performance and materiality, to focus on discourse itself as performative. Her concern is to develop a reconfiguration of the concept of “construction” as a signficatory practice that delimits and names the “real” or the “natural.” She argues that sex (as natural) and gender (as the constructive and constitutive force) are the important categories to think about

in terms of this problematic. This is because to think of gender as the constitutive force that constructs and names the real, material body (sex) similarly posits a foundational or pre-existent domain in relation to discourse and signification. This reproduces a set of binary relations that typically find themselves implicated in current theoretical debates about discourse and the body.

Butler understands performativity to be, not "a singular or deliberate 'act,'" but a "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993: 2). Within this context, sex is conceptualized as a performance, a "regulatory norm" that operates in a "performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (2).

What this means for the relationship between materiality and discourse is that they appear together. Sex, often posited as a material category, is "not a site or surface" but "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (Butler, 1993: 9). This "process of materialization" is a performative one—a collection or repetition of acts that sediment what become naturalized categories—sex, heterosexuality, woman, mother. But for Butler, the body is always in excess—not an excess that is an outside to discourse, but an excess that is constitutive, a force on the threshold of the performative "process of materialization." Butler argues that because the performativity of discourse is necessary to materialize naturalized categories, performativity itself is "a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (2).

Butler identifies gay, male, drag balls—represented in the film *Paris is Burning*—as explicit performances directed at undermining the regulatory regimes that materialize sex. Because these explicit performances highlight the failure of discourse to produce coherent and stable effects, Butler argues that they provide spaces for ambivalence where the materialization of the material can be mimed, reworked, and resignified. She states:

There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the "we" cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed. (1993: 124)

In her view drag performance is a mode through which hegemonic categories—male, female, heterosexual—can be opened up for critique and re-reading.

*a true story* is not a drag performance for obvious reasons as well as less obvious ones. Most importantly, Baker is not seeking to have her performance on the theme of becoming a mother evaluated on the basis of how “real” or effective it was (as in the case of the drag balls depicted in *Paris is Burning*). As an example of choreography by a highly trained, professional dancer/choreographer working within the technique and discourse of modern/contemporary dance, what *a true story* wants is far away from the desire to approximate a “real” mother on-stage.

However, as a performance of the performativity of being a mother and mothering, *a true story* does create a space of possibility and subversion for the subject of the dance and the viewer. That is, a place of possibility where one is both implicated in the regimes of discourse that subjectify (mother, woman), as well as performing where the performativity of these discourses break down.

*a true story* thematizes those moments where the performance of discourse breaks down by juxtaposing two stories—the story of an adoptive mother and child searching for ways to name their relationship to each other (mom, stepmother, woman, parent) through words, and this same story of names and naming told in the silence of Baker’s dance of gestures. The latter is the story of our embodied and lived relation to names, naming, and children—interpreted with and through Baker’s body. It is the story of how “mom” feels in the exuberance of a young girl’s address. It is the story of the difficulty, physically, in occupying the position of “stepmother.” These embodied repetitions of names and naming provide their own resonances in meaning. In the context of “a true story,” they are meant to extend, exceed, and re-work the discourse of motherhood. Our embodied relation to names and children emerges in “a true story,” as the space of possibility and critique—that place where the performance of becoming a mother and mothering can be reformulated and resignified.

### Embracing the embodied “Woonaa”

*And then, the woman in the story is woven into another story.*

*She says that not long ago, the woman went to visit a friend with a very small boy. At this friend’s house the woman had a bath and the boy walked in as the woman emerged from the bath naked.*

*She performs the boy exclaiming ‘Mummy!’ and the mother of the boy laughing and saying kindly, ‘No, she is not your mummy. She is a woman.’*

*She performs the boy exclaiming again, reaching up to the woman, ‘mummy!’ ‘No she is a woman.’*

*She performs the boy embracing the woman’s naked legs—saying slowly and deliberately—‘woonaa.’*

The woman in the story drying off after a bath. The small boy who happens upon her. His effort to name. In words and danced gesture, *a true story* rehearses, over and over, the effort to name and what challenges this effort to name. That is, lived experience. To search for ways to put words to experience is a commonplace dilemma.

What is unique (but not new) in *a true story* is that it is a dance performance with an explicit, nuanced, thematic and discursive attention to the expressive life of the body. As such, it foregrounds a phenomenological sense of identity and identity-formation. In other words, *a true story* asks us to consider that the formation of mother-identity—and how we locate ourselves in language more generally—is an effect of a performance and practice of the lived life of our mothering bodies in relation to our children. By calling attention to the lived life of mothering through idiosyncratic yet highly meaningful danced acts—the performance of an adolescent girl's exuberant, full-bodied address ("mom"), the performance of a small child's embrace, and the force of tension in the body when performing 'parent'—embodied meanings emerge as the necessary, productive, but also poignant echo in how we make sense and name the experience of new motherhood.

To explore the hermeneutic effects of this embodied echo in meaning, I want to focus on a specific moment in "a true story." That is, the moment in the piece (in the story) when the name "woona" emerges for the woman as the name she wants to embrace in her new role as mother. This is the performance of a name formulated in a lived, embodied conversation between a child and two adults. It is a name spoken by a child—imperfect, somewhat unintelligible, unfinished. Its sense is elaborated in danced gesture—giving it its own unique and powerful pulse and kinesis. This moment in *a true story* rehearses where discourse performs, producing naturalized effects, and where discourse meets lived life, embodied life, and struggles to produce names and subject-categories. This moment in *a true story* focuses on the other constitutive force in how we name—our lived, in-relation, embodied experiences. And because this moment is explicitly danced and performed, it helps us linger longer in the place of embodied experience—of gesture, of affect, and the inter-play of motion and sensibility, where the known (what we can name) is given another kind of sense.

I must make a point here, since I have implicitly introduced it, of outlining how I imagine bringing concepts from phenomenology and post-structuralism—in the guise of Merleau-Ponty and Butler—into conversation. These two theorists might seem at first to have nothing to say to each other. In fact, Butler (1993) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) share some similar commitments in terms of thinking about the relationship between the lived body and discourse, more broadly defined as the realm of the social.<sup>3</sup>

Butler says of her project in *Bodies that Matter* that she is neither "presuming materiality, on the one hand" nor "negating materiality, on the other" (1993: 30). She argues that "bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure;



endure illness and violence; and these ‘facts,’ one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction” (xi). Her aim is to “free from its metaphysical lodgings” the either/or of the matter versus discourse binary in debates about the body, identity, and language by claiming that the body and discourse appear together. Further, discourse materializes and produces the body. The body can only be made sense of as an effect of discourse—it is, in relation to subjectivity, how the “one’ becomes viable at all” (2).

The difference between Merleau-Ponty and Butler resides in a matter of emphasis. Merleau-Ponty (1962) offers an explanation of the lived body as a socially constituted phenomenon in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty’s foundational argument here is that the body is our insertion into the world—that is, it is because we live as sensing, acting, moving bodies that we have a world, and meaningful experience, in the first place. Of the relationship between the body and knowing, Merleau-Ponty writes:

The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things. (320)

Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) point is that the body and the world it inhabits are wholly relational and mutually specifying. This world would include the world of discourse, of language, of symbols. I believe that these two theories of the body and the social are not so very far apart from each other. Like Butler (1993), Merleau-Ponty proposes that the body and discourse as a social category appear together. Merleau-Ponty’s crucial difference of perspective, however, is his inclination to suggest that the material materializes discourse on some level.<sup>4</sup> How does *a true story* thematize and perform the appearance of the body and discourse together? To address this, I want to return to the small body and the woman in “a true story.”

*This incident with the small body made the woman in the story think about the girl and names. She performs the names, “mom!,” “stepmother,” “parent” and then performs putting these names away, and choosing “woona” instead*

*Woonaa:*

*Facing the audience, body proud and gentle at the same time, she draws her thumb down the centre of her face. She lets her other hand travel over her solar plexus and lets it rest there, where the breath comes.*

At this juncture in "a true story," the small boy is trying to make sense of the physical presence of the naked woman standing before him. He recalls, from his still small repertoire of names for describing lived experience, the word "mummy." And this is what he names the naked woman. His actual mother, drawing from her more sophisticated repertoire of names, corrects her son—encouraging him to call her friend "woman." But the child is not physically able to make this name yet. He has not learned to hear the word "woman" nor is his mouth able to shape the world correctly.

Lending his whole body to this expression (as Baker dances it) he calls the woman "woona." This word, this danced articulation, is not only physically marked by the imagined body of a young child and the real body of Baker, but also has a sensibility to its meaning that is derived from and enriched by an imagined encounter where two adults address a child's perception of a woman's naked body. "Woonna" is language in its embodied, nascent state. It is this sense of the word "woman" as "woona" that *a true story* relishes performing. The sense of an embodied echo in naming and the possibility of a new name for a mother. The sense that meaning, names, and language are all anchored in our lived life and embodied experiences. The sense that the lived practice of mothering, in particular, formulates a unique subjectivity for a woman.

Mielle Chandler (1998) offers a perspective on mother-identity as being a deeply relational subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Butler in the area of gender and performance, Chandler asserts that "To be a mother is to enact mothering" (273). Mothering is a "multifaceted and everchanging yet painfully repetitive performance" (273) that promotes an:

ongoing in-relation of wiping up vomit and taking temperatures, rocking to sleep, being interrupted, taking a shower only when the baby is asleep and then doing so very quickly lest it wake up, the act of being so in-relation to and with that one wakes up as one's milk begins to let down a minute before the baby wakes up to nurse, constructs one as something both more and less than an individual. (273)

Chandler (1998) asserts that any theory of subjectivity is one that must acknowledge the relationality that constructs our sense of ourselves and others. However, in the case of the practice of mothering where one is involved in the "dressing, undressing, dressing, undressing, dressing, undressing and painting of face (or, rather, the washing of paint off of face) of another..." (274) it is a matter of degree. The practice of mother is a performance of a subjectivity that is so profoundly in-relation to another that the mother *'is simultaneously more and less than one'* (274).

Although she does not explicitly take this up, Chandler's (1998) powerful meditations on the lived, banal experiences of mothering speak to their embodied nature. They are, from my perspective, phenomenological medita-

tions. Merleau-Ponty (1962) provides a theory for identity as phenomenological and in-relation, the theory of being-in-the-world, which complements and extends what Chandler describes and what *a true story* tries to evoke both discursively and thematically.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) parallels the task of defining “being-in-the-world” with a search for a theory of subjectivity, of the “I,” that is between the psychic (or empirically psychological) and the physiological. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty is concerned to avoid describing the “I” as simply mental/subjective consciousness or simply a connection of the “I” with the body as object. Merleau-Ponty writes that “as soon as there is consciousness, and in order that there may be consciousness, there must be something to be conscious of, an intentional object...” (121). Further, Merleau-Ponty asserts that “consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (138).

What this suggests is that there is no “I” apart from its embeddedness and relationality with and in the world of things, and further, that this embeddedness and interplay between self and world is grounded in our bodies. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) simplifies this complex idea when she says that the body provides “a structure, organization, and ground within which objects are to be situated and against which the body-subject is positioned” (87). In some respects, our bodily-being-in-the-world as anchor for and ground of our perception and consciousness is also at a basic level on the order of sense-making. Our being-towards-the-world and the way the world meets our being is a complex embodied dance of, as Grosz suggests, “sense-bestowing” and “sense-making.”

*a true story* proposes that motherhood, and the subject position “mother,” is an enacted, embodied relationship that exceeds and disrupts naturalized, sedimented categories—those of mother, parent, stepmother. This discursive disruption occurs in the reflexive, aestheticized attention to the mother-child-body-word in making meaning. Precisely because Baker first performs *a true story* silently, as a dance of the body that can tell its own peculiar, evocative story, there is a recognition in the piece that the construction of mother-identity cannot escape the body in action and in-relation. The part of the story about the child naming the woman “woona” suggests that there is indeed something about the lived relation between woman and child and mother and child that informs a mother’s subjectivity and sense of herself—something about my mother-body receiving the outstretched arms of my child, about the tension held in my body as I look into the wide eyes of my toddler who is emphatically saying “No,” about the smell of her new skin and the pain of her little hands pushing me away in the midst of an embrace—that *a true story* wants the audience to engage with in their sense of what mother is and what mothering means.

'The woman took on the motherless  
no  
the motherless  
no  
the birth mother absent daughter  
of her lover  
when she was 38 and the girl was 13.

At the wedding  
the girl took the woman to be her father's wife  
and her own mother

Mom! Mom! Mom!  
You're my mom!

The girl would write down the woman's name, cross it out and write Mom  
instead.  
The girl would write down the woman's name, cross it out and write Mom  
instead.  
The girl would write down the woman's name, cross it out and write Mom  
instead.  
The girl would repeatedly write down the woman's name, cross it out and  
write Mom instead

Well, you're probably my real mom anyway.  
The girl would write down the woman's name, cross it out and write Mom  
instead.  
The girl would write down the woman's name, cross it out and write Mom  
instead.  
The girl would repeatedly write down the woman's name, cross it out and  
write Mom instead

Well, you're probably my real mom anyway.

The woman felt herself to be  
a parent  
A parental unit she joked.  
A stepmother she thought.

The woman went to visit a friend  
a close friend, now far away, and the mother of a small boy.  
One morning, the boy watched the woman dry herself after a bath.  
Mama! he cried, recognizing a body like his mother's.  
No! laughed his mother she's a woman.

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Mama!

No! laughed his mother she's a woman. Woman.  
Woonna? Asked the boy grasping the woman by the legs.  
Woonna! he called reaching to be picked up.

Woonna said the woman scooping up the child.  
Yes, Woonna.

The woman thought about her husband's daughter.  
She thought about the names: parent, mother, stepmother, mom.  
And then she put down the names  
and chose instead Woonna, instead.

—Peggy Baker, (text for “a true story,” courtesy of Peggy Baker  
and the Dance Umbrella of Ontario)

<sup>2</sup>I attended this performance presented by “Peggy Baker Dance Projects” in November 2000 at the Betty Oliphant Theatre in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I am indebted to Peggy Baker for very generously (and informally) speaking to me about her artistic work and this dance performance piece in particular. I am also grateful for the loan of a video of *a true story* from the Dance Umbrella of Ontario (DUO) and for other information and literature both DUO and Peggy Baker provided me about this piece.

<sup>3</sup>Butler's (1993) account of the ontology of subjectivity. Suzanne Monique Jaeger (1998) argues that a more adequate account of personal identity can be constructed by looking at the “bodily character of dancerly activity” through the lens of Merleau-Pontian (1962) phenomenology. Butler's explanation of the relationship between the body and discourse can be extended through this work.

<sup>4</sup>Merleau-Ponty's (1962) work is not about arguing that our physical presence and our specific capacities to sense shape *all* discourse and meaning. He would agree, for instance, that at some point the meaning of language is produced by virtue of its movement and operation in a system of signs and referents. In this way he can be aligned with poststructuralists and structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Jacques Derrida. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is directed at “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with philosophical status” (vii). Moreover “To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (ix). His project is, therefore, to investigate the place of making sense—of the relationship between the lived body and the realm of discourse—before reflection and abstraction.

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