

Embodying Mêtis: The Braiding of Cunning and Bodily Intelligence in Feminist Storymaking

Mêtis, as an embodied intelligence, illuminates a shadowy tangle of body-values, body-denials, and body-power (Dolmage, 2009, p. 8).

I am a feminist scholar with a background in lifewriting (Metta 2010). In a recent research project I have sought to engage with contemporary feminist materialist scholarship by reviving the concept mêtis, embodied intelligence, as derived from the qualities inherent in the Greek goddess Metis. In this paper I re-read earlier writing of my own experiences of domestic violence in terms of mêtis, arguing for the usefulness of this concept for enlivening feminist stories of resistance and survival. In particular, I aim to show how different ways of thinking, writing and living can be revealed through the re-invigorating of the qualities of an ancient heroine. In its focus on Metis/mêtis, this paper is aligned with the emerging body of work on feminist materialisms (Grosz, Howie, der Tuin, and Alaimo & Hekman) and with the ongoing project of feminist myth making (Dorpenyo, 2013; Hawhee, 2005; Larrington, 1992; Cixous, 1991; Atwood, 1988).

Metis, the mythological feminist figure

Metis, the Greek goddess, appears and disappears in different versions of the Greek creation myth.

In the original text *Theogony* by Hesiod (the Greek poet in the period between 750 and 650 BC, writing a century after Homer), Metis was the first wife of Zeus before he became the king of all gods. Metis was known to possess all the qualities of a great leader, with wisdom, accurate foresight, strength, and a special kind of intelligence. Zeus impregnated her and ingested her in order to possess all her powers. As a result, Zeus was able to exercise sovereignty. The story is told in this way:

Now Zeus, king of the gods, made Metis his wife first, and she was wisest among gods and mortal men. But when she was about to bring forth the goddess bright-eyed Athene, Zeus craftily deceived her with cunning words and put her in his own belly, as Earth and starry Heaven advised. For they advised him so, to the end that no other should hold royal sway over the eternal gods in place of Zeus; for very wise children were destined to be born of her, first the maiden bright-eyed Tritogeneia, equal to her father in strength and in wise understanding; but afterwards she was to bear a son of overbearing spirit, king of gods and men. But Zeus put her into his own belly first, that the goddess might devise for him both good and evil. (translated by Evelyn-White, 1914, p. 886-900)

Metis's presence, marriage and consumption by the sovereign god would guarantee the invincibility and eternity of the supremacy of the Olympian.

In an alternative version written in the fifth century BC by the playwright Aeschylus, the goddess Metis was mysteriously left out, with Prometheus taking her place. In this version, Metis is completely absent, her presence and legacy conveniently erased from later versions of Greek mythology and philosophy.

Twentieth century Greek scholars Detienne and Vernant (1978) lament the elision of Metis from Greek mythology by Aeschylus, arguing that she was a significant figure who “occupies a particularly important position in the ordering of the world” (p. 57):

She is the first wife of Zeus, the wife he takes to his bed as soon as the war against the Titans is brought to an end and as soon as he is proclaimed king of the gods, and thus this marriage crowns his victory and consecrates his sovereignty as monarch. There would, in effect, be no sovereignty without Metis. Without the help of the goddess, without the assistance of the weapons of cunning which she controls through her magic knowledge, supreme power could neither be won nor exercised nor maintained (p. 58).

Detienne and Vernant argue that it is because he lacks *metis* that Zeus finds that, as a king, he is dependent upon the guile of Prometheus (1978, p. 59), and that while *metis* as a quality has been central in Greek culture, historians of ancient thought have failed to pay adequate attention to it.

In all events, they have often tended to neglect this other aspect of Greek intelligence which is writ large in myth, in the deification of Metis, Zeus’ first wife, the goddess without whose help the king of the gods would have been unable to establish, implement and maintain his own supremacy (p. 47).

American classics scholar Norman O. Brown argues that Metis was both a threat to Zeus and an indispensable aid (1952, p. 133) and that *mêtis* is “an ambivalent concept”: we can interpret the dangerous aspect of the abstraction of Metis as “creative ingenuity” and as “a force making for cultural renewal” (1952, p. 133-4).

I read *mêtis*, in all its variety, as bodily intelligence and cunning which exists and operates in multiples and in constant movement, shifting, oscillating, fluctuating, metamorphosing, adapting and responding; its power lies in its capacity for metamorphosis, making it a dangerous threat which is impossible to seize.

The importance of *mêtis* in the establishment of supreme power is clearly evident in Greek mythology. In my own desire to re-claim Metis/*mêtis*, I suggest that Aeschylus’ elision of the goddess Metis parallels the elision of *mêtis* in Western philosophy. Furthermore, I argue that the goddess Metis remains a useful figure for contemporary feminist scholars.

Feminist materialisms: Re-thinking feminist knowledge-making and methodologies

My project to reclaim Metis/*mêtis* sits within the emerging body of feminist materialisms that respond to the call for new feminist frameworks that re-establish

the relationships between the material, corporeal, lived and social conditions of women's bodies and lives, and feminist theory and philosophy. I now draw from the works of Grosz, Howie, and den Tuin and Dolphijn to establish the case that this reclamation project of Metis/mêtis in feminist storymaking, in its bridging of the discursive and the corporeal, is an example of feminist materialist methodology.

Howie (2010) argues for a feminist theory with "adequate epistemological bite" and that for feminism to move forward we need to find "a way to bring together the somatic, living and experiencing body with critical social science" (p. 2-3). She calls for a "theoretical reorientation toward the condition and objects of experience" as a way of "bridging feminist theory in the humanities and empirical research in social sciences" (p. 3). The new genealogy of feminist materialisms is not concerned with "representation, signification and disciplinarity" but is "fascinated by affect, force and movement as it travels in all directions" and, hence, it looks for "how matter comes into the agential realism and how matter is materialised in it" (der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, p. 169).

Feminist materialist methodology provides an important epistemological framework for positioning and framing bodies as agential and active entities capable of resisting the operations of ideologies and the forces of power. I argue that this is particularly important in reframing women's experiences of domestic and sexual violence as well as their responses to them. As power is not simply a discursive force, the operations of power are enacted on living bodies and are felt and experienced somatically and materially by bodies in ways that are often beyond language. That is, the struggle for resistance, survival and freedom is equally felt and embodied in the realms of the corporeal. By establishing and tracing the presence of Metis/mêtis in my own narratives of domestic violence, I seek to exemplify the importance of reframing/reclaiming the agential body in the materialist project, which is to bridge the gaps between the material conditions and experiences of women and the feminist thinking whose emphasis has been primarily on discursive constructions of reality (Baxter, 2007; Lazar, 2005; Gavey, 1989).

To be clear, along with Hames-Garcia (cited in der Tuin, 2011, p. 273), I see the body as "something more than an inert, passive object on which ideology inscribes meaning, but rather [as] an agential reality with its own causal role in making meaning".

Here I want to turn to Grosz's recent work on new materialisms where she introduces the notion of "becomings" as "a series of imperceptible movements," "forms of change," and "evolutionary transformations that make up natural, cultural and political life" (2011, p. 1). In addition, she posits that freedom "is not a transcendent quality inherent in subjects but is immanent in the relations that the living has with the material world, including other forms of life" (p. 68). As will be explored in sections below, Grosz's notions of becomings and freedom are particularly useful in my project of reclaiming mêtis in feminist storymaking,

Feminist Myth Making: Thinking through Myth as Feminist Methodology

“Myth is like an organism which undergoes incessant transformation and renovation”
(W. Jaeger, cited in Brown, 1952, p. 130)

Jaeger’s description of myth is of particular significance in this project of feminist myth making. Like Jaeger, I posit that myths are alive, organic and open to multiple and polyphonic interpretations and transformations. In doing so, I propose that the mythological figure of Metis and her embodiment of *mêtis* can be taken up as a useful and important feminist icon and metaphor to reclaim female power. As Jacobs (2012) writes:

Myth is a riotous and sprawling web of inexhaustible meanings... Like dreams, myth is always dynamic, engaged in working something out, always transforming, eluding, regressing, and transgressing (p. 20).

I recognise that my project follows in the long tradition of feminist myth making by scholars and philosophers. French feminist philosophers Irigaray and Cixous, for example, offer two of key feminist myth making genealogies. Irigaray’s rereading of Greek mythology has been an important feminist strategy to expose the ways in which the feminine has been excluded from the masculinist symbolic economy. In her work on matricide and her reading of the Oresteia, she writes:

The mythology underlying patriarchy has not changed. What the Oresteia describes for us still takes place.... The social order, our culture, psychoanalysis itself wants it that way; the mother must remain forbidden, excluded (as cited in Jacobs, 2012, p. 61).

She argues that, “Our imaginary still functions in accordance with the schema established through Greek mythologies and tragedies” (as cited in Jacobs, 2012, p. 19).

In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous reclaims the mythological figure of the Medusa to create a powerful space for women to regain and reconnect with their forbidden bodies and sexuality through the feminine libidinal economy and *écriture féminine*. Cixous (1986, p. 229) urges that women must:

write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreak partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse (italics in original).

In focusing on Metis/*metis*, I am in good company. The myths of Metis and *mêtis* have been taken up by other feminist scholars (Brady, 2010; Eltantawy, 2012; Tarpley, 1993; Holmberg, 1997; Schumm, 2011), as well as a number of scholars in the fields of rhetorical studies (Dolmage, 2009; Hawhee, 2005; Dorpenyo, 2013), environmental studies (Lowan-Trudeau, 2012), Jungian psychology (Zweig, 1997; Bolen, 1984) and even digital technologies (Underwood, 2012).

Mêtis, bodily intelligence and somatic cunning

In the task of reclaiming *mêtis* in feminist storymaking and knowledge-making, I propose that we need to begin with the Goddess Metis' elision in traditional Greek mythology and philosophy. In Western philosophy originating from Plato and Aristotle, the body has occupied a precarious place. Aristotle claimed that "the rule of the soul over the body is natural, [which makes] the male by nature superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled" by the body (cited in Dolmage, 2009, p. 3). The masculinist tradition of privileging of the mind over the body has long been challenged by feminist scholars. Central to the resistance to this masculinist tradition is the importance of embodied writing and the corporeality of knowledge-making, a position taken up by feminist scholars such as Cixous (1986), Grosz (1994), Braidotti (2002), and Lim (1990). Lim (1990) writes:

Kristeva's postulation of the semiotic female principle articulates what many writers, male and female, have acknowledged, a principle, spirit or agent in the self which is *preverbal, alogical, ungraspable*, but whose violence to existing symbolic systems is the self's most significant because most transforming act upon 'reality.' This is the principle which acts upon *the material subject* to produce the 'auto' in autobiography, transforming a life to the specificity of a subject (p. 156) [my italics].

Similarly, Grosz (1994) argues for the centrality of the materiality of experience and reality:

Flesh, a raw, formless, bodily materiality, the mythical "primary material", through corporeal inscriptions (juridical, medical, punitive, disciplinary) is constituted as a distinctive body capable of acting in distinctive ways, performing specific tasks in socially specified ways, marked, branded, by a social seal (p. 118).

Hawhee (2005) takes up Detienne and Vernant's original study of Metis to further emphasise *mêtis* as "a corporeal category", and that mythological figures like Metis embody "a somatic cunning" (p. 46). With *mêtis* as a bodily intelligence and 'somatic cunning', we can create new understandings from the material conditions of women's lives and lived experiences.

Embodying Metis/mêtis: Metamorphosis and Hybridity

As a Chinese-Malaysian-born Australian woman subjected to twelve years of domestic abuse, I have had to learn to resist both colonising forces and the erasures implicit in being the subject of sexual violence. Understanding the metamorphosing powers of *mêtis* has been particularly important in helping me understand my own capacity for resistance.

In my autoethnographic text (Metta, 2010) I have created the metaphor of the *triple braid* to represent "the positioning of permeable and shifting marginality, and the hybridised identities, that function to problematise and destabilise categories, binaries and hierarchies of cultural and discursive spaces" (Metta, 2010, p. 57). In that text I wrote about learning to thrive in hostile environments by engineering multiple hybrid and chameleon-like identities:

I have to learn to grow a new skin, a new identity, which I have quickly adapted to exist in the many different worlds I live in. Like a chameleon, I have learnt to camouflage my identity as an adaptive and survival tactic... (Metta, 2010, p. 205).

In unbelonging, I seek to create alternative identities that shift with my environments and allow me to exist and flourish within foreign spaces and places, and to subvert and resist the colonising and marginalising forces that exist in each environment (p. 110).

Returning to these earlier writings, I can trace the presence and operations of *métis* through my embodiment of hybridity and the *triple braid*.

Carton (2002) argues that the postcolonial autobiography has the role of attempting to “recover the hybrid voice as an act of strategic disruption to an otherwise totalizing discourse of globalisation that, indeed, claims to represent hybridity and speak in its name” (p. 183). I would add that a feminist, *métistic* postcolonial autobiography can offer the additional role of thwarting an otherwise totalising masculinist discourse of power, control and domination through the elusive, fluid, unpredictable, but tactical and resourceful agency of *métis* which cannot be contained, copied or consumed.

The concept of *métis* has been taken up by *Métis* scholars like Richardson and Lowan-Trudeau in their work with Indigenous people in Canada. Here, *Métis* refers to the *Métis* people, a collective term commonly used to identify Indigenous people of Canada who are of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry.

Drawing from Bhabha’s notion of the “Third space”, Richardson (2004) proposes the third space as ‘Metis Space’ and a “site of Metis stories”, and where the decolonising interventions of identity, sense of belonging and sharing stories can take place (p. 57-8). As Bhabha describes the third space:

Its unity is not found in the sum of its parts, but emerges from the process of opening a third space within which other elements encounter and transform each other. Thus, identity is not the combination, accumulation, fusion or synthesis, but an energy field of different forces (as cited in Richardson, 2004, p. 57).

Lowan-Trudeau (2012), a *Métis* scholar in environmental education, draws from the work of Steinburg on the concept of *bricolage*, and the work of Chambers, Donald and Hasebe-Ludt on the notion of *métissage*, to provide a useful integrated and blended methodology in his work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Bricolage involves taking research strategies from a variety of scholarly disciplines and traditions as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation. Such an action is pragmatic and strategic, demanding self-consciousness and awareness of context from the researcher. The bricoleur, the researcher who employs bricolage, must be able to orchestrate a plethora of diverse tasks (p. 116).

Chambers, Donald and Hasebe-Ludt describes *métissage* as “a way of merging and blurring genres, texts and identities ...a creative strategy for the braiding of gender, race, language and place into autobiographical texts” (as cited in Lowan-Trudeau, 2012, p. 117).

This curricular form of *métissage* shows how personal and family stories can be braided in with larger narratives of nation and nationality, often with provocative effects. The metaphor of the braid (exemplified by the Métis sash and sweetgrass) and the notion of the *métissage* researcher as the weaver of a textual braid are integral to *métissage* praxis because they provide a certain unity of vision regarding the relational ethics guiding the work (Donald, 2009, p. 8).

It becomes clear to me that my own storymaking project has been a work of a *bricoleur* who employs *métissage* methodology.

My encounter with Metis/mêtis

In discovering Metis/metis almost a decade after beginning to write my autoethnography, I experienced the moment of what I would call *embodied rupture* and *mythological enlightenment*. I was propelled into a different way of knowing that was deeply corporeal, mythological and metaphoric, and as a result, am able to gain new insights into my life experiences. How is it that an ancient Greek goddess can have such significance to a Chinese Australian woman living in the twenty-first century?

Rupture

The moment of rupture,
the moment of being
resuscitated, the edges coming
together;
is this the moment of
mythological enlightenment?
I have been swallowed
whole,
slowly digested,
stripped of my bodily
intelligence—my cunning
—my power—my laugh.
Swallowed
whole.
All of me
now unites, with the edges of me
returning home. I
now feel the
entirety of my being. My mêtis,
my body.
She has come home.

In light of my encounter with Metis/mêtis, I am proposing that the masculinist operations of 'swallowing women whole' can be read as useful metaphors for acts of violence against women as well as sexual violence and rape. Zeus' forceful seduction of Metis and his act of impregnating her can be read as an act of rape - an attempt to own her body, to seal the bond/ bondage to claim the ownership of her body. Zeus ingested her pregnant body whole so he could own Metis, her powers, her body and her fertility, and hence, all her future generations. Since he could not give birth, Athena was birthed through a hole in his head, a powerful metaphor for

male desire to consume and control female genealogy and heritage, and the fear of female power and agency.

Domestic violence, through this mythological lens, operates as the balancing of power, as a socio-cultural and political apparatus, as seen in the myth of Zeus and Metis, to restore the 'masculine sense of order' through tactics of discipline and punishment, and ultimately, through the *installation of fear*. One act of violence is all you need to install permanent fear and the state of unpredictability.

The usefulness of *mêtis* in re-reading narratives of domestic and sexual violence lies in its ability to disrupt the dominant masculinist order of control and domination through its blatant elusive and subversive power. Finding *mêtis* allows us to trace narratives of resistance and resourcefulness, stories of cunning and bodily intelligence in women's experiences and narratives. We no longer need to read women as simply helpless victims of male violence and domination.

Tracing *mêtis* in my own narratives of domestic and sexual violence has given me new insights into my own experiences, which were mostly inarticulable. I now see that I was being slowly 'swallowed whole'. The trauma that my body experienced in a twelve-year period of abuse has found new and renewed expression and meaning. I first wrote about these experiences in 2004. In re-engaging with this writing (Metta, 2010), I return again and again to a complex, organic and messy tapestry where memory, metaphor and mythology continually interact and interweave. The storymaking simply defies closure. I now read the irrepressible forces that ultimately would not allow me to be swallowed, ingested or owned as *metis*, bodily cunning and wit. Reclaiming *mêtis*, I connect and embody the fullness of my power as a woman, a daughter and a mother.

Reading my experiences through the lens of a mythological goddess being 'swallowed whole' unleashes a different way to make sense of the bodily experience of what I had seen, in 2004, as *a malignant cancer that invaded the body... eating away my integrity and dignity*. With the *edges of me* returning, the senselessness and madness of my experience are beginning to make more sense. This is as close as I have come to fully understand what had happened to me. My body now vibrates with renewed energy, power and insight. I continue to unpack more memories and past writings.

I became trapped in a vicious plot of voicelessness, violence and guilt so brutal and yet so familiar. ... Day after day, month after month, year after year, the little girl in that photograph so full of life, spirit and hope was systematically stripped bare. I tried again and again to escape but I could never cut the cord, the imaginary umbilical cord through which the legacy of the voicelessness, violence and tragedy from the past penetrated my present psyche and my body. I lived in the cycle of violence and control that seemed so foreign and yet so familiar in its secrecy. I became this man's possession—my thoughts, my feelings, my experiences and my body were no longer mine. The control, like a disease that penetrated every cell, tissue and organ in your body, penetrated every aspect of my life,



systematically isolating and alienating me from my family and friends and ultimately, isolating me from myself (Metta, 2010, p. 116-7).

How does one survive after the experience of being 'swallowed whole'? How does one return from that? How do I resuscitate my own bodily intelligence, cunning and power back into my life and my writing? How does one revive Metis/mêtis into contemporary feminist lifewriting and storymaking?

Messy bodies

My body calls out to me
She waits patiently with unspoken knowing
Knowing the moment of rupture will erupt
Sending the residual layers of
Undiscovered awareness into awakening

Awaken, she calls to the over-tamed creature
Metis as she lay silent
Abiding the moment when she breaks through
The layers of oppression
The slow execution of silencing

What was it like to be swallowed whole?
Do you remember?
What was that moment of rupture like?
Electrifying! Thunderous! Earth-shattering!
The moment of making full sense of what has happened to you

She gave me the vocabulary
The words dripping in blood and mucus
To utter from deep below
A low resonating utterance that broke through permeable membranes
The moment of Becoming

The moment when everything become clear
The moment of absolute clarity
As the last of the residual masculine fog clears
My Metis returned
Fully present.

Putting the body on the line

An Intimate Beast

She shivers in shame as
A feast of porn feeds the beast
Merely a piece of red meat
Upon which his selfish desires feast

His secret fantasies rule his world
They fuel his bile and creed
Relentless and cruel while
A woman's heart bleeds

His charms and smooth tongue merely mask
A shaky character beneath
His glib words and sly eyes cleverly
hide

An unfaithful heart underneath



His beastly hunger
Insatiable and vain
No sooner are his desires met
Out he preys again

On the Web, he spun his web
Around her sacred body
Offered her to the eyes of strange men
Like a priced possession to win envy

She is now free
She no longer fears
He who gets caught in his own web
Beware, my dear.

(Metta, 2013, p. 486-7)

Reclaiming *métis* involves reclaiming the body and allowing the body to speak in her own terms. Spry (2011) describes the body as “evidence” in the process of performative autoethnography from which meaning is derived from the act of “reading and writing the body” as “a cultural text” (p. 19-20). My own embodied writing and recovery-work necessarily involved *putting the body on the line*.

My body is weak
She now carries the evidence of the brutality of my past,
my hidden secrets, my darkest moments
She aches. . .
She screams at me. . .
She wants all the brutality to stop.

Yet she is patient.

My *uncontainable, permeable* body speaks,
But only in her own terms
She is unbound, unfixed.
My permeable body changes shape, form and texture.

My *rhizome* body
Sheds her old bark, stripping away
Re-sprouting, re-shooting
Re-aligning

My body is silent but she is no longer silenced.
She is in solitary confinement but she is not alone.
In *stillness*, she breathes
Through the membranes *between* herself

(Metta, 2013, p. 497)

Reclaiming *mêtis* as a *bodily intelligence* allows us to reclaim the *female body* in feminist storymaking and knowledge-making. *Mêtis* becomes a powerful metaphor in storymaking for tales of extraordinary, cunning and messy bodies, and female bodily intelligence and power. I can now name my body as a *mêtis* body.

My *mêtis* body

She knows the secret to
boundless pleasure.
She pleases nobody else,
her desires body-deep, blood
gurgling,
carrying potent fluids
lubricating her permeable membranes
so
her skin breathing, flesh gyrating
to her rhythmic beats.
Orgasmic vibrations
imploding,
deep groans of pleasure as the
chameleon-like snake Medusa
laughs,
writhing her slippery body through
the gates of gods and sons. Untameable,
she remains in her-story,
a version with which
she can only shock, with ever-so slight
flicker of her hand, she
always manages to slip
between your hairy masculine fingers
like quick sand through
the grip of your iron fists,
and then she disappears
under the shadowy guises
only to invade your nightly dreams
turning them liquid.
Her messy, slippery shadows, her
poisonous stare, to stone you turn;
her bodily secretions

<p> makes her indigestible. out of her old skins, again and again, her babies </p>	<p> she births herself my birthplace, my birthright </p>	<p> Slithering born out of her Medusa womb </p>
<p> the great inheritance of Metis My body of Metis. </p>		

Conclusion

The process of reclaiming *mêtis* in my own life and writing has been an extraordinary journey, one that has allowed the edges of me to return home. My experience suggests that when a woman rekindles an awareness of the quality of *mêtis*, when she reconnects with her own powers and her cunningness, she must first bear the full brunt of her traumas, the full impact of her disembodied life. She must risk the dangers of bearing witness to all that she has experienced; her body becomes the witness that exposes the hidden, dark secrets, the raw and violent truths. To break through silences and silencing, through centuries of deep histories written to erase her, she must speak in her own voice, a full-bodied voice. Her body may be brimming with cunning eroticism, sexuality, sensuality and possibilities. She must confront. She must shock. She must return to her cunning. She must recover and return *fully present*.

*Mêtis resides in our breath-work,
 our shadow-work,
 she slithers in between words and
 forms the slippery shadows of breath;
 captured in the rise and fall of the breath and
 the sweeping of the body—
 body-consciousness, body-work;
 she is elusive as the breath, which
 cannot be controlled or captured;
 in her shadowy resourcefulness,
 she escapes the tyranny
 of thought, logic and grasping.*

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