https://doi.org/10.18778/8331-397-9.11

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Cherishing the Body: Embodiment and the Intersubjective World in Michèle Roberts's *Playing Sardines*

The aim of this essay is to read short stories in Michèle Roberts's *Playing Sardines* (2001) through the prism of theories of embodiment. Situating themselves in opposition to the Cartesian body/mind dualism, with its accompanying conception of disembodied intellect as constitutive of the self, these theories refuse to denigrate the body as "the slimy site of dangerous desires" (Wolkowitz 22), "a mute container of subjectivity" (Oksala 224), or "the 'prison' that the mind must escape to achieve knowledge" (Hekman 62). Instead, they insist on recognizing the embodied character of human experience and conceptualize the body as intricately engaged with the surrounding world. As I intend to show, these views find their reflection in Roberts's stories, the purpose of which has always been, as she declared in an interview given at the time when she had "just finished" working on the collection, "to rescue the body and cherish it and love it and touch it and smell it and make it into language" ("*January*"). This self-appointed project seems to me to be consistent with the approach of embodiment theorists, who also "rescue" the reputation of the body by identifying it as an ethically productive locus of intersubjectivity.

Some aspects of Roberts's prose to be considered in this essay have already been discussed by other critics. These include, for instance, the sensuousness of the author's descriptions, her complex relationship with her Catholic upbringing, and her celebration of the minutiae of everyday life, all of which have been defined as staples of Roberts's fiction. What I wish to suggest, however, is that these apparently disparate elements not only come together but also acquire deeper significance when they are recognized as stemming from her idea of the human body as opening the way to ethically meaningful social encounters. To explain the implications inherent in this conception, I will rely on a range of philosophical ideas

gathered under the umbrella term of "theories of embodiment." Central to this will be Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of subjectivity as an essentially embodied mode of being-in-the-world. In the course of the discussion, however, I will also refer to Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty's commentators (such as Sonia Kruks and Jorella Andrews) as well as scholars who have drawn, sometimes loosely and only indirectly, on his ideas (including Elizabeth Grosz and Sandra Lee Bartky).

The argument will consist of three parts. It will begin by discussing Roberts's stories as sharing with the philosophies of embodiment their skepticism towards the Cartesian body/mind dualism. In particular, it will concentrate on stories depicting the negative consequences of privileging the mind over the body, a stance that Sonia Kruks identifies as leading to what she refers to as "antagonistic intersubjectivity" (39–42). The second part will center on scenes dramatizing the moment of liberation, which Roberts's characters experience as they move towards more positive models of being-in-the-world. Finally, in the third part of the essay, the focus will shift to these positive, mutually affirmative experiences of intersubjectivity.

Antagonistic Intersubjectivity

What lies at the core of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the concept of *le corps propre*,[1] which the philosopher introduces to emphasize the "exceptional relation between the subject, its body, and its world" ("Unpublished Text" 284). Merleau-Ponty refuses to see the body as "*one of the objects in the world*, under the gaze of a separated mind" (284, emphasis in the original). On the contrary, he sees consciousness and embodiment as inextricably interconnected, claiming that the body "is our *point of view on the world*, the place where the mind invests itself in a certain physical and historical situation" (284, emphasis in the original). Thus, as Donald A. Landes explains, for Merleau-Ponty, the body cannot be reduced to "something that I can stand outside of and simply describe, putting on a metaphysician's hat and spectacles in order to assume the privilege of a *pensée de survol*" ("Weight" 162). Rather, in the phenomenological framework, *le corps propre* should be conceived of "as a totality of external and internal perceptions,

[1] In a 1962 translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* by Colin Smith, the concept was rendered as "the lived body." In a more recent translation, Donald A. Landes uses the phrase "one's own body," justifying his choice in the introduction (xlviii–xlix). To avoid confusion, I will use Merleau-Ponty's original expression.

intelligence, affectivity, motility, and sexuality" (Oksala 213), giving rise to the idea of situated, embodied subjectivity.

What Roberts's stories clearly share with the philosophical position outlined above is their recognition of the body as the horizon of experience and their skepticism towards attempts at privileging the mind over the body. *Playing Sardines* repeatedly depicts the negative consequences of such prioritizing, outlining how *pensée de survol*, usually translated as high-altitude thinking, where the "I" assumes an interpretative distance from the world,[2] gives rise to what Sonia Kruks refers to as "antagonistic intersubjectivity" (39–42). Adopting such a position, as Kruks explains, "I cast myself as a pure, desituated subject and the other as an object that I desire to dominate" (39). The ethical consequences of such distancing can be damaging, as Roberts's stories aptly illustrate, trapping the rationally-minded individuals in solipsism, precluding meaningful communication, and resulting in "situations of inequality, oppression, or exploitation" (Kruks 39).

A perfect representation of such "antagonistic intersubjectivity" can be found in the title story of the collection where *pensée de survol* characterizes the husband of the protagonist-narrator. An architectural historian and "a renowned expert on the theory and practice of Renaissance building" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 4), the man is principally defined in terms of his "intimidating sharp-eyed expertise" (5). Although he spends long hours in Venetian Renaissance churches, his approach is cold and rational. He does not draw any aesthetic pleasure from their architecture; he studies the buildings in order to formulate purely scientific hypotheses about them: "that a particular tomb might have been designed by Sansovino; that the style of a particular capital matched the details of one in a drawing by Palladio" (5). Afterwards, he dives into the archives to find documents that would corroborate his theories (5). With his single-minded obsession with the forms of Renaissance art (and blatant disregard for its humanist values), he can be associated with "a very specific form of masculinity" that, in the words of Carol Wolkowitz, "privileges rational, abstract thought, [and] seeks to transcend the here-and-now of everyday life" (95).

The "order, harmony and proportion" that the architectural historian appreciates in Renaissance buildings (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 5) also marks his approach to human bodies, which he sees as in need of discipline and control (with the exception, perhaps, of his sexual appetite which he shows no inclination to restrain). This is reflected in the scene when the couple are invited to dine with the aristocratic owner of a neo-Palladian villa and he arrives there "faultlessly dressed in an immaculately cut suit" (8). His approach is clearly shared by their "manicured host" wearing

[2] Cf. Landes (Translator's Introduction xxxi).

a very similar suit, and the elegant director of a local museum, with painted nails, hair "swept up in a chignon," an "expertly made up" face and feet "expensively shod in crocodile" (9). The narrator herself, wearing a denim skirt and a striped T-shift, provokes in her husband a sense of disdain. It is not only her lack of decorum in clothing, however, that makes the man regard her as "unsatisfactory" (6). The list of what he perceives as her inadequacies is much longer, marking the extent of her refusal to submit her body to the patriarchal norms of feminine behavior:

> I walked around the flat barefoot; I didn't bother wearing makeup because it melted off in the heat; I drank more wine than a decorous *signora* should; my clothes were not elegant; and I had been caught mopping up the sauce on my plate with a piece of bread stuck on the end of my fork. (6)

As he attempts to correct her alleged faults, he treats her as if she were an inert object "capable of being acted on, coerced, or constrained by external forces" (Grosz 9).

Further examples of this antagonistic attitude towards the female body are portrayed in other stories in the collection. One of these is "A Bodice Rips," a narrative that reworks and satirizes the erotic excesses of classic gothic "bodice-rippers." The story centers on Maria, the only child of a stern, god-fearing industrialist who has made his fame and fortune as the inventor of "the Revolutionary Bust and Stomach Stiffener" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 133), a corset where "thin ribs of steel" replace the traditional whalebone (131) and which Susanne Gruss aptly identifies as an "easily decipherable . . . metaphor of the patriarchal control over women's bodies" (231). The idea of the corset originates when Maria comes to give her father "his customary Sunday kiss" and he is perturbed by her soft body, which fills him with "unease" and "distaste" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 133). Here, again, the female body is seen "as a passive object" that "requires careful discipline and training" (Grosz 9). The girl's unruly body, all "wriggl[ing]" and "squirm[ing]" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 133), is seen as wild and threatening and, therefore, needs to be placed in "a lattice of total control" (131). A similar account of how patriarchy turns women into objects of disciplinary control is given, this time without any humorous undertones, in "A Story for Hallowe'en," which offers an account of how "disobedient nuns would have been locked on a diet of bread and water" in a dilapidated tower at the back of their convent (174). Be it by means of a corset, a restrictive diet or physical isolation, the female body in *Playing Sardines* is recurrently disciplined to comply with socially accepted definitions of femininity. Commenting on *Impossible Saints*, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz presents Roberts as an author who demonstrates how

"girls' innate natural potential of corporal enjoyment is throttled by the dogmatic system which advocates the deprecation of the body for religious reasons" (48). Much the same is true for the 2001 collection, in which patriarchy, whether represented by authorities of the Catholic Church or male authoritarians in the family, attempts to supervise, control and contain the female body.

As elsewhere in Roberts's writing, the focus is often on women who fall prey to such machinations by internalizing such objectifying attitudes—be they Christian conceptions of the body as sinful and corrupt, or disparaging comments on their style of clothing, table manners or personal interests. As a consequence, they start to distance themselves from their bodies and to discipline them, a practice frequently recorded in Roberts's stories. The narrator of the eponymous story clearly proves to be the "strong woman" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 6) her husband claims her to be (although in a rather different sense from the one he would have wished) and finds a way to resist the objectifying script while also refusing "to feel crushed by [her imputed] inadequacies" (4). She starts collecting discarded but beautiful packaging, orange-wrappers, patterned brown-paper bags, "fragments of old tile or scraps of carved and gilded wood" (5) in what she herself regards as an act of "self-defence" (4), responding to her husband's expert knowledge of Renaissance architecture with her own "connoisseurship as a collector of rubbish" (5). Unlike him, she perceives the world around her, with its sensuous cornucopia of patterns, colors and textures, as a source of aesthetic delight, as something that she can marvel at and admire rather than study and appraise. She also refuses to submit to any coercive social practices, turning her body into a site of contestation. Both of these gestures are her ways of exercising agency, countering objectification, and engaging in what Grosz sees as "modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes" (144). Other characters in the stories, however, are not as resilient. Maria, the protagonist of "A Bodice Rips," is too young and too immature to resist the restraining patriarchal script. As her body is packed in a corset so tight that when she drops her glove she cannot bend over to pick it up, her growing-up mirrors the process outlined in Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 masterpiece, *The Second Sex*, which shows how young girls are trained into becoming inert, passive objects (283). According to de Beauvoir, in patriarchal societies, "virile beauty lies in the fitness of the body for action, in strength, agility, flexibility"; on the other hand, the female body "must present the inert and passive qualities of an object" (174). The little girl is thus encouraged to think of herself "as a marvellous doll" (283). Wearing uncomfortable clothes that deprive her of "liberty of movement" (299), the girl quickly sees herself as inferior to boys. De Beauvoir writes:

> In girls, the exuberance of life is restrained, their idle vigour turns into nervousness; their too sedate occupations do not use up their superabundant energy; they become bored, and, through boredom and to compensate for their position of inferiority, they give themselves up to gloomy and romantic daydreams . . . Neglected, "misunderstood," they seek consolation in narcissistic fancies: they view themselves as romantic heroines of fiction . . . (299)

Maria turns into such a doll-like creature, whom the gaze of "old soldiers" at her father's funeral reduces to an erotic object, "so young and so beautiful" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 133). As in de Beauvoir's account, she also escapes into a world of fantasy where dreams of restored agency are entangled with sexual reveries in which she becomes a heroine in a bodice ripper.

In the remaining stories, the reader also comes across mature women who share Maria's sense of frustration with her body. Many of them are preoccupied with their physical appearance, struggle to lose weight, and devote much of their time and energy to what they eat. Bella in "The Miracle" keeps to a diet that mostly consists of "rice cakes ad camomile tea" (158). The anonymous protagonist of "Lists" shops exclusively for low-fat products (100, 103) and, in the three months that mark the span of the story, starts a "new slimming diet" (100), attends "aerobics class[es]" (101), searches for a "diet recipe book" (102), and buys an "exercise bicycle" together with a "new leotard, sweatbands, [and a] workout video" (104). Torn between her obvious appetite and her desire to be slim, she ends up making preposterous choices, such as when she buys "large tubs of low-fat cottage cheese" (101) or considers substituting goose fat with cottage cheese when cooking goose *rillettes* (104). "Body issues" are also experienced by the protagonist of "A Feast for Catherine." Living her life according to "strict rules" (77), she needs to prove to herself that she is "worthy" of love and affection. She buys elegant outfits, which she only ever wears for her lover, and otherwise keeps deep in her wardrobe to make sure they remain "pristine" and never "come into contact with mud and dust, with cat hairs, with smelly dogs" (77). Similarly, she is also "always on a diet," determined that "she must remain slim" just as she "must not grow fat and middle-aged" (77). Dieting becomes for her one of the many "framework[s] of confinement, designed . . . by others but embraced . . . with eagerness" (82).

For Sandra Lee Bartky, all such internalized rules and routines should be seen in women as forms of "self-surveillance" and interpreted as a sign of "obedience to patriarchy" (81). As Bartky explains,

> The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil

> her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. (81)

According to Naomi Wolf, women who are obsessively preoccupied with their appearance allow "beauty" to be constructed as the foundation of their identity, which leaves them particularly "vulnerable to outside approval" (14). Such vulnerability, as Roberts's stories show, becomes increasingly pronounced as women begin to age and the gap widens between their appearance and the social expectations thereof. As a result, the older female body becomes, to quote Kathleen Woodward, "both invisible and hypervisible" (xvi). This paradoxical condition is perfectly captured by the sixty-year-old narrator of ''Fluency'':

> . . . as I knew very well from what the culture shouted at me from every angle, every advertising hoarding, every TV programme, every cinema screen, old women were invisible and should stay that way. Worse, they were obscene and disgusting if they entertained thoughts of love and sex. Women past the menopause should cut their hair and retire from the field. They should not want physical pleasures, they should not have desires. Their ageing, sagging, unspeakably ugly flesh should remain hidden. They should not be occasions of shame and embarrassment to the young. And so on and so on. (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 69)

The narrator of "Fluency" (just like the heroine of "Playing Sardines") refuses to be confined by prevailing social norms and paradigms. Moreover, in her own work as a photographer, she counters ageist prejudices by creating portraits of mature people, which she describes as "dignified, beautiful, angry, [and] tender" (69). On the whole, however, Roberts's collection portrays patriarchal culture as an arena where "antagonistic intersubjectivity" remains "a fundamental possibility of all human relations" (Kruks 39), and practices of objectification and self-objectification are everyday experiences for many girls and women.

Moments of Liberation

As argued by David Malcolm, however, "the balance of dark and light" in *Playing Sardines* is tipped in favor of the latter (24). Unsurprisingly, then, many of the stories contain scenes that dramatize the moment of liberation, which Roberts's characters experience as they move away from viewpoints based on "antagonistic intersubjectivity" towards more positive,

affirmative stances. Such scenes often accentuate what Elizabeth Grosz describes as the "ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control" (xi). In *Playing Sardines*, this happens as Roberts's characters abandon Foucauldian disciplinary practices and walk away from damaging relationships or escape self-imposed regimes.

For Maria, the eighteen-year-old heroine of "A Bodice Rips," the sense of liberation comes when she finally removes her corset. Although she is provoked into taking this step by practical reasons rather than willfulness or rebellion, the very experience proves liberating. The scene is rendered in sensual terms: "Rather than steel cutting into her through canvas, she now had a delicious sensation of thick, rich satin next to her skin, flowing over her soft flesh as smooth and cool as milk" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 137). However, what she truly appreciates is her restored sense of agency and liberty. As she runs downstairs, her movements are uninhibited, and she experiences "such a marvellous feeling" (137) that she starts running up and down the stairs again and again (137). The physical exertion makes her pulse accelerate and her eyes "sparkle" (138), producing in her a deep sense of satisfaction and release. Interestingly, the description also emphasizes a sense of mind-body connectedness as the "unwonted exercise" (138) also makes her mind "race" (138). Thus, as the story approaches its end (where the authorship of the "bodice ripper" we have been reading is ascribed to a "shameless" teenager), it is with ironic satisfaction rather than regret that Maria announces: "Life was certainly dangerous when you did not wear a corset . . . You were not in control" (148).

Similar ecstatic moments of liberation are experienced by other women depicted in the collection. In the case of grownup characters, these are often framed as epiphanies and exemplify Merleau-Ponty's concept of *le corps propre* by highlighting the embodied character of experience. In "A Feast for Catherine," for instance, such a moment arrives when the protagonist travels to Siena to meet her lover, Paul. As elsewhere in the collection, Italy is associated here with "a certain sensuality of living" (Gruss 300) and thus provides a perfect location for a romantic liaison. Its Mediterranean charm and excellent cuisine, however, also prove to offer consolation enough when the man fails to show up. As Catherine finds herself sipping a glass of cold white wine in a sun-drenched piazza, she comes to realize that her love was simply "an excuse for occasionally leaving home . . . so that she could be sure she was choosing freely to return" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 83). Her transformation as she takes off her black jacket to reveal "a sleeveless yellow lace blouse" (80) mirrors the transition, outlined at the beginning of the story, which Catholic churches undergo between "the penitential weeks of Lent," when they are "masked and veiled . . .

[and] shrouded in darkness," and Easter, when they "burst forth in candlelight and organ music, in gold copes, in streams of incense, in baskets of perfumed lilies on the altars decorated with embroideries and lace" (75), revealing that Catholicism can also function in positive ways in Roberts's fiction as a treasure trove of stories, images and symbols. Though deprived of its liturgical resonance, the Catholic reference also emphasizes the quasi-religious, epiphanic character of Catherine's experience, a quality that is further underscored when the narrator describes her moment of insight as "thoughts [that] arrived like angles tumbling from the sky" (83). With her brief, personal Lent being over, the heroine wipes off her tears and decides to abandon her diet, ordering two dishes of *carciofi*, because she cannot decide which to choose. Her *joie de vivre* is restored thanks to Italy and its sensual pleasures: the wine, the good food, the sun that caresses her bare skin, and the sights and sounds of Siena.

A similar epiphanic moment is experienced by the narrator of "Playing Sardines." Fed up with her husband's infidelities and his snobbishness, she realizes it is Italy, not him, she has fallen in love with (16). She goes back to London and although she is "penniless and homeless" (18), she has no regrets as both her intellect and her senses have been nourished during her short-lived Italian marriage. This connection between the two realms of experience which are often seen as separate in Western philosophy and culture is emphasized at the closing of the story, where the woman finds herself in Portobello Road Market and discovers that her aesthetic appreciation for the neo-classical architecture of Notting Hill has been enhanced by her familiarity with "the names of all the different parts of the houses," which she can now "recite . . . like poetry" (18). In the scene, the intellectual and the sensual come together, complementing rather than competing with each other.

A particularly interesting study of yet another similar moment of liberation is offered in "Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names," which gives a fictional account of how the French symbolist poet solved his writer's block and composed what is usually regarded as his most significant achievement, "A Throw of the Dice" (1897). The story is typically read as suggesting that it was the creation of a female *alter ego* and the practice of cross-dressing that allowed Mallarmé to overcome the creative crisis (Gruss 192; Falcus 155). However, while the ending of the story does announce that "Stephanie could write things that Stephane could not" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 27), Mallarmé's imagined journey towards poetic inspiration is far more complex, consisting of a series of steps that put the poet in touch with his body. The real Mallarmé is typically seen by scholars as a poet of remarkable "intellectual seriousness" (cf. Williams 14). In Roberts's version, this exaggerated intellectualism is precisely what

causes the writer's block and needs to be left behind. Significantly, Mallarmé's journey towards creativity begins with the poet leaving his Parisian flat to stay at his summer house at Valvins. The apartment, defined in the story as the place where the poet gathers notable artists, writers and intellectuals for his regular Tuesday evening salons, is strongly associated with erudite discussions, cerebral conversations and the concomitant social pressures. The meetings are depicted as "formal affair[s] . . . famous for the high seriousness of the discourse on offer" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 21), and both Mallarmé and his guests find them constraining: the poet has to "live up" to "a reputation of genius" while his visitors likewise feel "obliged to be really intelligent and well-informed on the latest cultural issues of the day" (21). Valvins, on the other hand, allows for "a kind of mental unbuttoning of shirt collars" (20). Released from intellectual pressures and no longer confined by their official, social roles, the host and his visitors are now faced with possibilities (signaled in the passage through the frequent use of the verb "could"): "they could be childish if they wanted; they could lie on their backs on the grass; they could doze off and say nothing at all; or they could crack risqué jokes and tell bawdy stories; they could feel peacefully and comfortably themselves" (21). The countryside, whose creative potential is suggested by its close proximity to the Seine and a forest, allows for a more relaxed atmosphere where it is not just the mind but also the body that gets refreshed, nourished and stimulated. The visitors eat and drink, they lounge on the grass, they play bowls and croquet, they go sailing and fishing. The painters work not because they have to but because they consider it "a form of pleasure" (22), and the poet is free to disappear into his study to compose when and how he chooses. As the story emphasizes, it is during the "two or three months" which the Mallarmé family yearly spend at Valvins that the poet creates his masterpiece. Restoring an equilibrium between the mind and the body proves as crucial in the process as his new-found identity as Stephanie Mallarmé does.

Affirmative Intersubjectivity

What "Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names" also illustrates is that the movement away from constricting intellectualism and towards recognizing the value of embodied experience opens the way to more positive, mutually beneficial relationships while also awakening in Mallarmé an appreciation for physical work. The first of these outcomes can be observed in the poet's attitude towards his mistress, Madame Méry Laurent.

During his brief visit back in Paris, Mallarmé realizes that he has not paid enough attention to her bodily needs and now decides to focus "on giving her pleasure" (26). Then, on returning to Valvins, he astonishes his family by volunteering, "for the first time ever in his life" (26), to do the dishes. In its playful way, the story links Mallarmé's creative outburst with his new-found appreciation for experiences that have nothing to do with intellectual pursuits or highbrow debates but are down-to-earth, sensory and corporeal, rooted in Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as "the vehicle of being in the world" (*Phenomenology* 84).

For Merleau-Ponty, "having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (84). Such an understanding of embodiment (as the experience of being engaged and united with the surrounding world) explains why it is possible to see it as offering a chance of affirmative intersubjectivity. *Playing Sardines* offers numerous examples of harmonious relations and encounters with others, frequently emphasizing the role of the senses in establishing and maintaining these positive bonds. Roberts's critics often underline the significance of food in her writing. Sarah Falcus, for instance, points to the writer's "sensual and exact descriptions of culinary preparation and consumption" (239) while Ralf Hertel talks about "her obsession with the gustatory—and particularly with French cooking" (132). Roberts's fiction, however, abounds in descriptions of all kinds of sensory experiences. While it is true that she often provides elaborate descriptions of food, her characters also talk about the pleasures of observing the world, describe their fondness for painting or photography, extol the virtues of gardening or manual work, or find satisfaction in walking barefoot through urban landscapes. What is even more important, for Roberts, all the senses seem to be invested with an ethical potential. Even vision, which often features in feminist discourse as "objectifying, denigrating, and alienating" (Andrews 168), is depicted as allowing to foster satisfying relations between people. This happens, for instance, in the case of the photographer in "Fluency," who uses her art to restore the dignity and acknowledge the beauty of ageing bodies, or of her friend, Pierre, who studies her portraits, "taking the time and trouble . . . to try to see things through my eyes" (Roberts, *Playing Sardines* 69). As elsewhere in the collection, the sensing body is represented here as open to the world, facilitating and deepening meaningful engagements with others.

Quite often in the stories, such sensual bonds link partners and lovers. In "Hypsipyle to Jason," a narrative that reimagines the affair between the mythical queen of Lemnos and the leader of the Argonauts in a contemporary setting, Hypsipyle addresses her absent lover in a story-length monologue that makes frequent references to sensory experience. His

absence, in particular, is associated with silence. Though filled with the sounds made by insects, birds, cattle, airplanes, tractors and other people, the experience is still referred to as "silence" as it is deprived of his voice—his singing, his whistling, his laughter, his jokes, his anecdotes, even his cursing, and the loud music he listens to (195). In her monologue, Hypsipyle also speaks of her capacity to hear her lover on his way back home even when he is "still miles away" (195). In a passage that brings to mind Merleau-Ponty's conception of intertwining, she describes her ears as "attuned" to her lover and insists that she is able to sense "a light alteration in the silence" as the man is shifting gear along his way (195). Their nights together are also depicted through auditory references, with Jason "whispering . . . words of love" as he holds the woman in his arms (196). This closing sentence—shifting attention from sound to touch—to describe the physical proximity of the lovers and the accompanying sense of comfort and safety, echoes a homecoming scene at the end of "Just One More Saturday Night," which pictures its female protagonist returning home, early in the morning, after a rather dissatisfying poetry reading in the fictional, provincial town of Skillet. Again, the sense of connectedness between the lovers is expressed through sensual references. Standing at the threshold of their silent house, the woman imagines "creep[ing] in" and "tiptoe[ing]" upstairs, and then pictures herself "slid[ing] into bed" where the lover's "arms would close round her and hold her tight" (171).

Another story that focuses on tactile experience and its capacity to forge deep relations within the intersubjective social world is "The Easter Egg Hunt." The narrator here is a teenage girl, who has been sent to stay with her grandparents after the birth of her baby brother. The girl deeply resents her parents' decision: she feels unloved, rejected and angry. Her grandparents, who she refers to as Mémé and Pépé, are simple people, not given to erudite discussions or profuse displays of emotion. Yet, communicating in a language of sensory gestures and bodily contact, they manage to restore the girl's confidence and appease her negative emotions. This is illustrated in a scene where the girl wakes up in the middle of the night and Mémé soothes her back to sleep. She holds the child in her arms, allowing the girl to "burrow into" her soft body, which is described as "a bulk of warmth" (124). The tactile contact has a comforting, reassuring effect even though, to an outsider, some of the woman's gestures might not seem affectionate as when, in response to the granddaughter's admitting that she wants everyone to love her the most, Mémé pinches her ear, gives her a light slap on the face and calls her a "bad girl" (124–25). However, since the child knows how to decode this bodily language, she quickly grows calm and happy:

> She hugged me tight, and stroked my hair, and waited for me to grow sleepy. After a bit she pulled my thumb out of my mouth, hoisted me down, gave me a push, and shooed me into bed. She was just the same with animals, so I felt content. (125)

Despite Mémé's brisk, no-nonsense manner, the physical proximity and tactile contact bespeak commitment and affection, offering the reader a powerful example of an affirmative, intersubjective relationship.

According to Sonia Kruks, the condition of human embodiment does not automatically warrant relations based on "universal, harmonious intersubjectivity" (27) but should rather be seen as offering people a chance to connect and communicate across difference. Since the body, in Merleau-Ponty's words, is "a third genre of being between the pure subject and the object" (*Phenomenology* 366), people can choose how they want to engage with others, with both antagonistic and affirmative intersubjectivity remaining "a fundamental possibility of all human relations" (Kruks 39). Those who withdraw from their ordinary, pre-reflective involvement in the world and retreat too much into the intellectual realm find themselves at risk of approaching "a familiar face" as if it were "hostile and foreign . . . no longer our interlocutor, but rather a resolutely silent Other" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 336). To avoid this danger, it is thus vital to immerse ourselves and participate in the intersubjective world. Offering examples of both antagonistic and affirmative intersubjectivity, Michèle Roberts's *Playing Sardines* captures the whole spectrum of human engagements and interactions with those around us. In doing so, however, the stories repeatedly warn their readers against the dangers of judging others from the position of a *pensée de survol* while also emphasizing the centrality of embodied experience in fostering affective bonds with others. Questioning the validity of the body/mind dichotomy and depicting *le corps propre* as an ethically productive locus of intersubjectivity, the stories constitute an important step in the author's self-proclaimed mission of rescuing and cherishing the body.

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