

Corporealities: Body Limits

*Bodies don't take place in discourse or in matter. They don't inhabit 'mind' or 'body'.
They take place at the limit, qua limit....*¹

Jean-Luc Nancy

Above all, no body, no body proper has ever touched – with a hand or through skin contact – something as abstract as a limit. Inversely, however, and that is the destiny of this figurality, all one ever does is touch a limit.²

Jacques Derrida

I

The thresholds of bodies, “real” or “imagined”, always have the potential to unsettle. Treatments of corporeality proliferate in literary and cultural studies, especially in the last twenty years or so, while questions of embodiment persist in philosophical discussion. At the same time, metaphorical bodies loom large: humanities scholars have shown renewed critical interest in ideas of the body politic, past and present, and the various excisions and exceptions that determine its changing shapes. But if, as we argue, the interest in the body is always ultimately provoked by its uncertain limits, discussions of corporeality tend to be carried, more or less subtly, by the reassuring promise of the material body as solid content.

In this issue of *Word and Text*, we bring together contributions that resist notions of bodies as self-evident and instead investigate their limits. The two thinkers who headed our Call for Papers provide useful beginnings here. Jean-Luc Nancy has done much to offer ways of conceiving of bodies not as vessels but as limits: as skins which, while they describe spaces in their various folds, are by definition permeable, open and indefinite. The body, for Nancy, becomes the important site for developing his concept of finite thinking as “a thinking of the limit as that on which, infinitely finite, existence arises, and to which it is exposed.”³ Thus in Nancy’s work the body itself becomes a provocation to rethink the conceptual limits we so often assume to coincide with its apparent ends. Jacques Derrida’s late work, meanwhile, can be read as showing limits as bodies: here, conceptual limits, such as that between “man” and “animal”, cannot police the two-dimensional, idealist division they proclaim; instead, they are *limitrophies*, plural, heterogeneous, multiply folded and changing frontiers. The question here for Derrida is not just one of limits as distinctions more complicated than binary logic allows, but of how limits come about and how they are maintained. Limitrophy, thus, “[n]ot just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit,

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 17, emphasis in the original.

² Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 103.

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, “A Finite Thinking,” in *A Finite Thinking*, trans. by Edward Bullard, Jonathan Derbyshire and Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 27.

around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it.”⁴

Thinking bodies as limits rather than units has profound political implications. It offers resistance to racist and (hetero)sexist discourses that inscribe their ideologies on bodies in order to present them as sites of tangible truth; it also challenges scientific and philosophical discourse that claims to offer ultimate body knowledge. Bodies as limits can become resources for resistance in historically specific ways, and they can act as symptoms of cultural conflict and change. Further, they offer ways to consider those areas of contemporary life that are increasingly sites of the multiplication of limits: where relationships between bodies and machines are increasingly complex, and the links between the two increasingly obvious, what does this mean for notions of the body? *Tekhne*, Derrida notes, is perhaps always an invention of limits; how then, are the limits of bodies invented today?⁵ How are they kept in place? Who/what polices the boundaries? The contributions in this issue address these and other questions in literature, autobiography, photography and phenomena in contemporary culture traced through news items and reportage, medical reports, advertisement and consumer products, as well as in philosophy. If writing, as cultural production, takes place at the limit-as-body, perhaps this preoccupation is one they all share – that, and the rest, the material remainder so easily overlooked and trodden on.

II

In a letter to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, dated June 28, 1643, René Descartes expresses his concern that “the human mind is incapable of conceiving very distinctly, and simultaneously, both the distinction and union of body and soul”.⁶ If the *Bahnung* and *Brechung* of the Freudian unconscious in the late nineteenth century mark an irreversible breach in the mind-body dualism of the Cartesian *cogito*, it is already beset with this anxiety from its seventeenth century beginnings.⁷ Two articles in the first section of this special issue address this distinctly early modern discomfort and yet obsession with the body and its limits. J. A. Smith investigates how the flexible use of the word “quick” in the period’s drama and poetry, which denotes the living body and speed, Christ’s resurrection and sexuality, opens up ways for recognizing a radically apocalyptic mode in early modern literature. Joel Swann argues for the importance of George Herbert’s poetry within the early modern fixation on a human body in parts. Eyes become such a liminal part, as they both structure and unsettle an increasingly tenuous link between human and divine in Herbert’s religious idiom. The final article in our section on corporeality in “earlier” modernity, Elizabeth Lowry’s “Embodying

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 29.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. 1, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 298.

⁶ René Descartes, “Letter to Princess Elisabeth”, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond Clarke (London: Penguin, 2003), 153.

⁷ See Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII (1920-22), trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 3-66. See also Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans., with an introduction and additional notes, by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 246-291.

Essence: Corporeality, Dualism and Rhetorical Invention in the Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century Female Spirit Mediums”, suggests that while patriarchal discourse places women firmly on the side of the body, women were able to claim a position of relative agency as ideal spirit mediums. Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz’s challenge to Cartesian dualism, Lowry shows that the ideal “vessel” also becomes the site of defiance against the constraints placed on it.

In the very different context of the contested memorialisation and historiography of the Civil War in the American South, Grosz’s feminist anti-Cartesianism is again put to productive use, this time in conjunction with Kristevian abjection. In the article that heads the section on corporeality in 20th and 21st century literature and culture, “Poop, Pie, & Politics in *The Help*: Rescuing the (Literary) Body from Political Obsolescence”, Stephanie Rountree asks challenging questions about how contested body limits in the power struggles represented in the novel relate to the cultural battles over Black History in America and the redrawing of its boundaries in the Southern archive. If shit in *The Help* is a weapon employed in an intersubjective struggle for dominance and identification, then what are the dangers in condemning a controversial and popular book like *The Help* to the dung-heap of scholarship? From the abject, Emma Creedon’s article turns to aphasia: in “The Relationship Between Surrealism and Corporeality in Sam Shepard and Joseph Chaikin’s *Tongues, Savage/Love* and *The War in Heaven*”, Creedon revisits surrealism’s obsession with the limits of the sayable via the body’s resistance to speaking. The final article in this section, “Technological Appendages and Organic Prostheses: Robo-Human Appropriation and Cyborgian Becoming in Daniel H. Wilson’s *Robocalypse*” turns to current theoretical debates around originary technicity and brings these to bear on the science fiction novel. Marija Grech reads *Robocalypse* as blurring the boundaries between living limb and dead prosthesis in ways that challenge the limits of the human.

The third section of this special issue turns towards treatments of corporeality beyond literature. In a meticulous reading of the role of auto- and hetero-affection in Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology of the body, Eftichis Privolakis draws attention to the “uncanny “inter”” of “a line or limit” that “divides and differentiates the ego from its own self by introjecting into it an essential possibility of exteriority”. He thus argues that Derrida’s famous development of Husserl’s work is already present in the latter’s; rather than simply proposing a phenomenologically “pure experience” of auto-affection, Husserl is already gesturing towards the notion of an originary hetero-affection. From the phenomenological otherness of touch we move to the uncanny familiarity of plastic. Jennifer Whitney, in “Beauty Made Plastic: Constructions of a Western Feminine Ideal”, draws on Roland Barthes’s early cultural criticism of the Western love for a world turned plastic. She shows how the Barbie doll in our cultural imaginary simultaneously retains the traces of a racially white, heteronormative, misogynist and middle class Victorian beauty ideal whilst increasingly pointing towards a “posthuman” destabilization of the limits between flesh and plastic. Becky McLaughlin’s “Gothicizing Apotemnophilia: Live Burial, Secret Desire, and the Uncanny Body of the Amputee Wannabe” addresses body limits in the most literal sense: here, a desire for amputation as recorded in fiction, reportage and medical literature is read in provocatively Lacanian terms as a Gothic narrative of resistance against normative identity.

The issue draws to a close with a revised translation of Hélène Cixous's "Shit, No Present: Faecetious Serrano". Here, Cixous argues, the theme of faeces, as encountered in an exhibition of Andres Serrano's photographs, comes into its own as "plain shit" beyond the literary: accordingly, Serrano's work presents the imperative to "reinvest what is shat in unadorned fashion, without keeping it in the eroticocomical register of a Rabelais or a Shakespeare." Meanwhile, Cixous, in her own inimitably eroticocomical register between literature and criticism, takes on the theme of shit at the limit, both by alluding to the Derridean theme of the remainder, and by drawing attention to the way in which shit divides: "All that is, is by division, as we've known since the Bible, it is God who began by dividing in order to begin. First it is the creative division. Later the God *makes* [fait] the creatures. *First* the animal creatures. Then the humans. The God divides. Divides himself." If this translation of Cixous's piece is another such being-by-division, it is also one that preserves as much of the French remainder of the text as possible. Laurent Milesi, in his notes, indicates French puns and word-play to the English reader, in a manner that is, like Serrano's work, "straight and to the point".

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