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Today, one often says “body” with the same degree of credulousness or dogmatism, at best with the same faith as, previously, one used to speak of “soul.”

Jacques Derrida¹

This issue of *parallax* entitled *corps à*, and the following one, *à corps* – its other part – explore how contemporary works of critical theory and deconstruction can challenge preconceptions of the body and interrogate its limits, particularly in relation to intertwined foldings of desire, gender, race and sexuality. In invoking the French term *corps* rather than its apparent English counterpart, the intent is to question the assumed familiarity of what a ‘body’ or ‘bodies’ are and could be: the French *corps*, singular and plural, translates as both ‘body’ and ‘bodies’ (hereafter: ‘body/ies’). This gesture of textual substitution (*corps* for ‘body/ies’) also aims to suggest that Derrida’s acute concern for the question of translation might help challenge and re-configure the conventional dichotomy between understandings of the body *either* as physical/material *or* as socio-culturally constructed.

From Derrida’s early texts onwards, the question of *corps* was prominent, and thematized conjointly with that of writing, in a way that challenged traditional dualisms. In *Of Grammatology* we find the following passage:

[W]riting, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems – conversely – to borrow its metaphors.²

As suggested by the above quotation, the metaphysical privilege of presence over absence – one of the most persistent traits of Western thought and politics – entails a conception of body and spirit (or soul) as an opposition, setting up a hierarchical relationship between the two. While it is traditionally the body that occupies the position of the subordinate, Derrida shows that the logic of the proper and of presence is as much on the side of a metaphysics of the spirit as it is on the side of a metaphysics of the flesh. Indeed, in positing an original subjective self-property, the latter position seeks to restore the body gathered in pure self-presence, understood as absolutely identical to itself and oneself, as properly ‘itself’ and properly ‘mine’.³

Against these two positions that seemingly imply opposite representations as to how body/ies are treated (denunciation/elevation), Derrida proposes to approach the problem of *corps* differently. For him, the corporeal is inscribed within the general structure of the text. What one calls *corps* is thus to be conceived of as an effect of general writing [*écriture*]. In 'La Parole Soufflée', tracing Antonin Artaud's relationship to his 'own' body as a form of originary dispossession, a *dérobement*, Derrida articulates it in this way:

Ever since I have had a relation to my body, therefore, ever since my birth, I no longer am my body. Ever since I have had a body I am not this body, hence I do not have it. This deprivation institutes and informs my relation to my life. My body has thus always been stolen from me.⁴

The experience of non-presence, which is constitutive to the body and to one's relationship to it, appears as a rapt or as a theft only from the standpoint of a metaphysics of presence – in this case, Artaud's 'metaphysics of subjectivity,' which aims to restore the 'proper' body and one's property of it.⁵ For Derrida, on the contrary, the somatic stabilization of the body is but an effect of a more originary *différance*.⁶ Bodily experience must write itself, translate itself – but in doing so, it alters itself, transforms itself and becomes other. Writing thus supposes a structural and irreducible dispersion of body/ies, a pluralizing, disseminating force: the spacing of *différance* that is constitutive of the conjoined presence of body, life and signification, before and beyond their presence 'as such'. In 'La Parole Soufflée' Derrida calls this 'a structure of expropriation'.⁷ It entails that the 'loss' of the body does not constitute an unfortunate accident happening to a preexisting body-as-presence. On the contrary, such expropriation conditions all experience and understanding of *corps*, whose presence presupposes self-differentiation and self-divisibility. In this perspective, bodily traces or marks remain open to future interpretations, translations and transformations.

This brings several theoretical, ethical and political implications for our thinking of body/ies. For instance, writing and *différance* imply a certain (un)countability of *corps*, an aspect which is made more visible in French than in English. Unlike in English where the singular and the plural are clearly distinguished (body/bodies), the French *corps* maintains the ambiguity, thus raising the problems of undecidability and supplementarity in the process of signification, and signaling potential divisibility and pluralization of the 'one'. The (un)countability of *corps* not only demands rethinking the relationship between the singular and the plural, but also points to the problematic of difference and repetition which manifests itself in the impossible, though necessary, substitution or translation of heterogeneous traces.

This insistence on the replacement of the irreplaceable, on the substitution of the unsubstitutable, or on the translation of the untranslatable – which Derrida stresses constantly throughout his *oeuvre* – implies that *corps* calls for

contradictory injunctions.⁸ The French locution *corps à corps* seems particularly instructive for the exploration of these injunctions. This perhaps explains why this expression appears in many of Derrida's texts and interviews, including the interview whose English translation features in this issue, 'The Truth That Hurts, or the *Corps à Corps* of Tongues' [*La vérité blessante, ou le corps à corps des langues*].⁹ The phrase *corps à corps* may be translated literally as 'body/ies to body/ies'. In French, it usually refers to a close encounter, to a struggle or a duel, a hand-to-hand combat or attack that involves bodily contact. It can be a form of wrestling, generally without mediation, at least without long-distance weaponry: 'body-to-body'. Yet – and sometimes simultaneously – the phrase can also refer to sexual embrace, intercourse or lovemaking. Derrida's usage of this expression also plays on the ambivalence of *corps* (singular and/or plural) in order to question the self-identity of the body/ies involved in this relation. *Corps à corps* implies that the corporeal is always-already interlocked with other body/ies. It suggests that the destination, the address or derivation of *à*, 'to', is as important as the substantive *corps* in understanding what takes place in or between body/ies. As if *corps* were better understood in *corps à corps* than in any other way. As if it were more suggestive to think *corps* from *corps à corps*, rather than the other way around. The *à* of *corps à corps* points not only to an essential directedness, address and relationality of body/ies – *corps* in relation to others, or to itself as other(s) – but also to the violence of an irreducible interruption or self-interruption – the *à* of *à-venir*, or *à-Dieu*: the apocope which interrupts (self-)relationship as co-presence, and lets the other (*corps*) take place.¹⁰ The *à* – as in the title of this issue, *corps à* – suggests both destination and interruption: it disrupts the circular logic of the specular relation between bodies, breaks the symmetry and opens to the event of the other.

Self-interruption and *différance* are thus essential to Derrida's thinking of the corporeal. They point to the irreducible heterogeneity and to the untranslatable singularity of bodily experience.¹¹ The absolute singularity of *corps* is what is lost in translation – what resists translation. Yet, as hinted above, the impossibility of translating bodily experience is not meant to preclude translation but, rather, incites it. In other words, the untranslatability of the irreducible singularity is a call to translate the body, to write (of) the body. If bodies are to have anything to do with 'life' and 'meaning', then corporeal experience remains to be read, decoded, interpreted, written and translated. Importantly, and against traditional understandings of materiality and corporeity, this also implies that material embodiments remain irrevocably open to future transformative interpretations, inscriptions and re-inscriptions.¹² Derrida develops on this in various ways in many places in his *oeuvre*. In '*Fidélité à plus d'un. Mériter d'hériter où la généalogie fait défaut*', translated by Adam Rosenthal and Rodrigo Therezo as 'Fidelity to More Than One: Meriting Inheriting Where Genealogy Comes Up Short', he explains:

My temptation – today as always, no doubt – would dictate to me two fidelities: to respect the untranslatable irreducibility of the

idiom, of course, but, at the same time, to apprehend this untranslatability otherwise. This untranslatability would no longer be a hermetic limit or the impenetrable opacity of a screen, but, on the contrary, an incitement [*provocation*] to translation – already a commitment to translate within the experience of the untranslatable *as such*. To apprehend the untranslatable, to apprehend it *as such*, is to read, to write, in the strong sense of the word, of course; it is to wrestle [*c'est le corps-à-corps*] with the idiom; but it is therefore already a trial, the first trial of the call to translate.¹³

Being faithful to this injunction and mobilizing the intellectual tradition inaugurated by deconstruction in their own unique ways, the contributors of this issue focus on different questions which body/ies in deconstruction pose to current critical thinking: questions related to sex and sexuality, gender, racialization, the relation between the human and the non-human, (un)countability, translation, representation, corporeity, technicity, language and transculturality. Without claiming to provide definite answers to the problem of *corps*, these essays intervene in the current thinking pursued in feminist, queer, transgender and critical race studies, postcolonial theory, deconstruction, bio-medical humanities, posthumanism and new materialisms, as well as the studies of literature and visual arts.

This particular issue opens with the already mentioned translation of an interview with Derrida entitled ‘The Truth That Hurts, or the *Corps à Corps* of Tongues’, wherein Derrida reflects upon his practices of writing and teaching, about the community of his readers, and explores questions related to corporeity and textuality, sexual difference, desire, politics, violence and translation. The following contribution, by Marie-Dominique Garnier, tackles the questions of (un)countability and (un)translatability by closely following the idiomatic expression ‘*faire corps*’ in Héléne Cixous’ 2018 book *Défions l’augure*.¹⁴ The question of (un)translatability is also developed by Héctor G. Castaño, who examines the relationship between body and transculturality by juxtaposing Derrida’s deconstructive body/ies-in-translation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of ‘the flesh of the world’ and its readings by Lau Kwok-ying/劉國英.¹⁵ The question of ‘flesh’ also features in the following essay, where Diane Detournay examines ‘The Racial Life of “Cisgender”’. Borrowing the notion of ‘analytics of raciality’ from Denise Ferreira da Silva, Detournay’s essay examines how the question of race figures – or does not figure – in the concepts of ‘gender’ and ‘cisgender’ such as theorized by queer and transgender studies, as well as in representations in visual arts and pop culture.¹⁶ The problems raised by social representations and imaginations of the corporeal are also at the centre of Xin Liu’s contribution. Her essay ‘The lovecidal of bodies that filter’ draws on the work of Vicki Kirby in order to deconstruct the opposition between the pure and the impure in relation to ethnicity, gender, nationalism and climate change, which she does through a close examination of the ad campaign *Hairy Nose* released in China

in 2016.¹⁷ Finally, Francesco Vitale’s contribution provides a reading of Derrida’s unpublished seminar *Life Death* [*La vie la mort*] from 1975, where the latter focuses on the multilayered questions of sex, sexual difference, death and the reproduction of life in the work of French biologist François Jacob.¹⁸ Providing a reflection on sexual difference that is irreducible to gendered somatic distinctions (‘bodies’), Vitale’s essay also interrogates the usages of scientific concepts in several strands of ‘critical humanities’ and ‘new materialism’, and advocates for a deconstructive reading of scientific texts in view of rethinking the relationship between sciences and humanities.

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Notes

¹ Derrida, “Voice II ...,” 83.

² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 35.

³ See Derrida, “La Parole Soufflée,” 223-5.

⁴ Derrida, “La Parole Soufflée,” 226. Translation modified (Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” 268).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶ As Derrida explains, ‘the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language, such as, to take only a few examples, sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture, etc. As a common root, *différance* is also the element of the *same* (to be distinguished from the identical) in which these oppositions are announced’. Derrida, *Positions*, 9.

⁷ Derrida, “La Parole Soufflée,” 234.

⁸ Derrida elaborates on these contradictory bodily injunctions as following: ‘These are contradictory gestures, an intimate, bodily struggle [*un corps à corps*]: one receives a body and one leaves one’s signature on it. This bodily struggle [*corps à corps*], when

translated into formal logic, gives rise to contradictory statements.’ Derrida, “Language Is Never Owned,” 104. Translation modified (Derrida, “La langue n’appartient pas,” 89).

⁹ See for example Derrida, *Signéponge*, 31; “Language Is Never Owned;” or *On Touching*.

¹⁰ For deliberations on à in à-venir or à-Dieu see Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.

¹¹ For a discussion of the political implications of translating the irreducible singularity of *corps*, see Derrida, “Language,” 101-102.

¹² On the (dis)articulation between text and ‘materiality without matter’ see Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon.”

¹³ Derrida, “Fidelity to More than One.”

¹⁴ Cixous, *Défions l’augure*.

¹⁵ Lau, *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding*, 79-82.

¹⁶ Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xix.

¹⁷ Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*.

¹⁸ Derrida, *La vie la mort*; Jacob, *The Logic of Life*.

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