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à corps: the corpus of deconstruction

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So many idiomatic, that is to say more or less untranslatable, expressions, words, sentences. They are only to be read, to be deciphered, at the bottom of the infinite familiarity, at the bottom of the familial abyss of generations, as formidable as sexual difference. Itself. But remain apparently untranslatable, in their letter, that is to say in their body.

Jacques Derrida, ‘Ants’.¹

This special issue of *parallax*, entitled *à corps*, continues the effort initiated in the previous issue, *corps à* – an effort to explore how critical theory and deconstruction can challenge preconceptions on the body and interrogate its limits, in particular with regard to the nexus of desire, gender, race and sexuality. In the text that introduced the other issue, we focused on outlining some of the directions suggested by our decision to open up the space for such inquiry through the French word ‘*corps*’ rather its most apparent counterparts in English language, ‘body’ or ‘bodies’.² More specifically, we focused on the (un)countability and (un)translatability of *corps*, and showed how this focus allows for approaching corporeal experience differently than is prescribed by conventional understandings in Western thought and politics, that is, as informed by dualisms such as material/spiritual, body/soul, flesh/mind, natural/cultural, real/symbolic, corporeal/linguistic, etc. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the body, we suggested approaching *corps* through the notion of general writing [*écriture*]. Thinking the corporeal through text, that is, as an effect of differential traces which remain to be read, deciphered and translated, leaves – we argued – bodily experience structurally open to future inscriptions and transformative re-inscriptions. In this sense, *corps* is what remains to be thought.

As we suggested in the previous issue and continue to pursue in this one, such thinking supposes a ‘*corps à corps*’. Our reflection on *corps à corps* was spurred by Évelyne Grossman’s interview with Derrida which is included in the *corps à* issue, ‘The Truth That Hurts, or the *Corps à Corps* of Tongues’.³ Literally translated into English as ‘body/ies to body/ies’, the phrase is used in French to refer to a close encounter in the sense of a struggle or a duel, a hand-to-hand combat or attack that involves bodily contact. The expression may refer to a form of wrestling, generally without mediation or long-distance weaponry: a ‘body-to-body’ struggle. Yet, *corps à corps* also proliferates with sexual connotations. As such, the phrase may refer to sexual intercourse or love-making. As Derrida also suggests in ‘The Truth That Hurts’, whether the

context is combat, lovemaking or, indeed, the overlapping or even indistinction between the two, this locution seems to encapsulate the paradoxical nature of the relationship to oneself and the other: it speaks to the constant struggle and embrace that both separates and brings together body and bodies. In this way, besides the notions we briefly discussed in the text that opened the previous issue, *corps à corps* also raises questions related to the socio-political implications of *corps* in its plural and relational becoming. More specifically, it brings out – and enables to interrogate in a particular way – *corps* understood as divisions and units (of ‘bodies’) associated together or acting in formation towards a common direction, that is, the problematics of combatting bodies and/or forming alliances, entities or institutions (in English, these meanings may be rendered with words such as ‘corps’ or ‘corporation’). This relational dimension of *corps* also testifies to the structural necessity of translating the singularity of bodily experience beyond mere singularity. It brings about the call to translate the body into its other and in view of the other, so as to communicate it, transmit it, share it, or remember it. Yet, through this desire for exposition and transmission, translation loses in the same gesture the very singularity it is meant to translate. As such, translation supposes interruption and betrayal as its very condition of possibility – or, as Derrida puts it: ‘To translate is to lose the body’.⁴ As a result, *corps à corps* suggests a thinking of togetherness that remains irreparably marked by division and (self-)interruption.

Yet, Derrida strives to think this untranslatability in a non-negative fashion: interruption and difference are precisely what fuels the desire to translate what remains, at bottom, untranslatable. Describing his ‘own relationship to the French language’ and to those who engage with his work, he raises the following paradox:

This relationship [to the French language] is irreducibly idiomatic, as little translatable as possible, and, paradoxically, rather than discouraging foreigners, it concerns them, interests, calls upon or provokes them in their own language. That is, also, in their own way of thinking, in their own institutional and political engagements.⁵

In the same interview – and drawing from the paradox of (un)translatability – Derrida describes the transnational and translinguistic community of readers, writers and translators of deconstruction as a ‘community without community’.⁶ In his description, Derrida invokes two significant aspects: first, he points out that he has ‘many more good readers among women than among men’. Derrida not only suggests that the body or bodies of deconstruction are marked by sexual difference but also that deconstruction is essentially put in motion by sexual difference and by its attention to it. Second, Derrida notes that those who make up this paradoxical community without community are connected by a shared concern, ‘a concern with rethinking the political’.⁷ They form a body of resistance – or in resistance – whatever the institutional, cultural or political site of such resistance might be:

What links those who read my work, despite interruptions between cultures and despite distances, is a certain way of posing the question of the political and of doing so with an attitude that is, in spite of all differences, one of dissidence or resistance. This might take on very different forms, depending on whether one is in Egypt or in the United States. But they all have in common a sort of political or socio-political non-conformism.⁸

The two aspects highlighted by Derrida when reflecting on the community of those who engage with his work and deconstruction more broadly – sexual difference and politico-institutional dissidence – suggest that the body or bodies that Derrida is talking about here involve connections, formations and alliances which are marked by irreducible heterogeneity and difference. They suppose a thinking of community, translation, and transmission that strives to account for the necessary interruption or separation that propels the desire to, notably, read, write, or teach – and to do so differently. The cut that separates *corps* from itself and lets the other take place is thought of as the condition for a transformative *corps à corps*, one that involves both ‘love and violence’.⁹

In the second half of the interview, Derrida elaborates on the entanglement of love and violence in the process of translating the corporeal in relation to poetry. He explains that the body (here, the body of Paul Celan’s poem) is what is lost through the process of translation. Translation, he continues, is a violent attack, a bodily struggle, a *corps à corps*. Yet, simultaneously, he stresses that this attack is desired by the poet, because he or she wants to be read, interpreted and translated. The interview concludes with the invocation of ‘a Last Supper’:

Every poem says, ‘This is my body’, and what follows: drink it, eat it, keep it in memory of me. There is a Last Supper in every poem, which says: this is my body, here and now. And you know what comes next: passions, crucifixions, executions. Others would also say resurrections ...¹⁰

This passage is commented upon by Anne Emmanuelle Berger in the interview ‘Live Body’ included in this issue. In her interpretation, Berger stresses that the ‘call of the poem to the reader and its Eucharistic language have obvious sexual overtones’. A reader’s or translator’s encounter with a poem is unique, and this singular event is erotically invested – it is ‘an erotic *corps à corps*’.¹¹ But it is also the risk or the chance of an encounter that betrays the mortality of the body, of what in the body cannot be transmitted, reproduced, or passed on through Eucharistic transfiguration. As Berger explains:

The body of writing (or rather writing, *écriture*, as bodily trace[s]) which Derrida offers or which offers itself here is [...] a living body – and an excitable one, like the Freudian body – hence a

body promised or exposed to death, all the more alive as it is mortal, as always with Derrida, who mourns as he breathes. We are far from the Platonic and Christian (Paulinian) conception of the 'letter' as 'dead', as opposed to the animated 'spirit'.¹²

Derrida's reference to the Eucharist must therefore be understood as a dissident reading, one that emphasizes the body's resistance to communion and trans-substantiation due to its radical heterogeneity, singularity and mortality.¹³ This protestation against the Eucharistic narrative also appears in a text written by Derrida after the death of his close friend and collaborator, the philosopher Sarah Kofman, which was first published in French in 1997 under the title 'D'abord, je ne savais pas ...' and later published in English as the 'Introduction' to Kofman's *Selected Writings*.¹⁴ In a reading of Kofman's last and unfinished text on Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), Derrida analyzes the relationship between 'the body' and 'the book'.¹⁵ A book, he explains, 'always comes to take the place of the body'.¹⁶ Yet, in this reading, Derrida insists on accounting for what remains, that is, for the remainder that cannot be simply transmitted, incorporated and reproduced through the Eucharistic transfiguration into a glorious corpus. In particular, Eucharistic transfiguration is described as a movement that both constitutes and reproduces the logic of phallogocentrism. Derrida writes:

This great eucharistic paradigm was first of all, and perhaps will always remain, what is proper to man, I mean to the son or the father. For is this not a scene of men? No doubt, as long, that is, as we keep to the visibility of the scene.¹⁷

Following what he calls Kofman's 'protestations', Derrida wishes to do justice to what has been rendered invisible in this formidable scene of corporeal replacement and substitution: the mortality of the body, of *corps*, and the sexedness of sexual difference, that is, all which relates to the irreplaceability and untranslatability of bodily experience. The phantasm of the Eucharist stages a scene of communion and reproduction without remainder, without sexual difference, and without death – without interruption. Against this scene, Derrida intends to speak of a *corps* that is irreparably sexed and mortal. He does so by offering a 'new' word, a unique body of writing, *la corpse*.

I prefer the English word *corpse* here because it incorporates at once the body [*le corps*], the corpus, and the cadaver, and because, when read in French, *la corpse* seems to put the body in the feminine and to become an allusion to sexual difference, if not a respect for it.¹⁸

This translanguistic chimera – *la corpse* – opens up a space for thinking the other (of) body:¹⁹ the sexed body, the cadaver, life-death, organic and inorganic matter, the inert or the machinic, the monstrous, the nonhuman, the

animal, etc.²⁰ It points to a heterogeneous *corps* that cannot simply be spiritualized or symbolized, assimilated and incorporated by the Christian sacrificial machine of the Eucharist, nor by the philosophical tradition with which it shares many traits – starting with anthropocentrism and carno-phallogocentrism.²¹ Although Derrida, in this deconstructive reading, maintains the apparent necessity of incorporating the other – this insistence can be also found in Derrida’s other texts, for instance in ‘Eating Well’ – he also insists on what must remain inassimilable because it resists complete introjection: the irreducible heterogeneity of the singular other, all that which remains resolutely inappropriable in the form of a ‘proper’ body. But, here again, this inappropriable corporeity is also what opens up the body to its other; it propels the desire to read the body, to write, teach, or translate it otherwise. It allows for future encounters, interpretations and transformations. In opening up the body, writing and reading engender new ‘animals’, ‘new bodies of writing’, thus promising new forms for what we have called here ‘the corpus of deconstruction’.²²

In this perspective, the contributors to this issue have attempted to open up new paths for thinking the body – including the ‘body’ or ‘bodies’ of deconstruction – by offering transformative readings of deconstructive literature in relation to phenomenology and psychoanalysis, gender studies, affect theory, postcolonial feminism, anthropology, queer and transgender studies, cybernetics, neo-materialist feminism, media and tele-technology, literature, art history, digital humanities, and critical animal studies.

This special issue opens with the aforementioned interview with Anne Emmanuelle Berger entitled ‘Live Body’. The interview provides a thorough and novel approach to the question of ‘the body’ in Western intellectual tradition and its current developments, as well as an insight into Berger’s own thinking on the issues of corporeality, desire, signification, sexuality, gender, translation, and writing, as well as gender and queer studies and their institutionalization. In the following contribution, Deborah Goldgaber offers an original reflection on the notions of ‘prosthetic supplementation’, ‘originary technicity’ and ‘plasticity’ (of the body) in Derrida’s *oeuvre* and provides a comparison with how these notions figure in contemporary philosophy, namely the work of Catherine Malabou and Bernard Stiegler. The questions of prostheticity and supplementarity are also developed by Jeppe Ugelvig, who explores the relationship between virtuality and corporeity in the web artwork *Brandon* (1998) by Taiwanese multimedia artist Shu Lea Cheang, and analyzes the spectral implications of its restoration. In ‘Holograms, Hymens, and Horizons: a transqueer bodywriting’, Quinn Eades mobilizes Derrida’s work on spectre in order to facilitate a journey through a ‘story of a becoming-body’ which aims to intervene in the conventions of traditional trans memoir narratives. Eszter Timár’s contribution brings together affect theory and deconstruction by showing a queer affinity between Derrida’s reading of Paul de Man and Eve Sedgwick’s reading of Silvan Tomkins in the treatment of shame. In highlighting similarities and differences between affect theory

and deconstruction, Timár takes us through an exploration of questions of materiality and of the living body in both corpuses. In the following essay, Sourav Kargupta juxtaposes ‘accounts of flies’ in the work of postcolonial feminist historian of *sati* Lata Mani,²³ and insects swarming through Derrida’s texts ‘Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)’ and ‘Ants’, in order to examine questions of sexual and species differences in relation to the material, socio-political and archival mortality of bodies. Finally, Elissa Marder’s essay ‘Insex’ provides an incisive intervention highlighting the inseparability between sex and species differences in Derrida’s corpus. By insisting on the ‘intersexual’ dimension of text, Marder proposes a reading of the animal-word *fourmi* and shows how its proliferating effects of insecting-insexing mark the body of words and traces with a multiplicity of differential cuts. Intervening in the field of feminist and gender studies, Marder proposes to think how reading sexual difference as ‘insex’ mobilizes and deconstructs sex, gender, and species divisions.

Notes

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¹ Derrida, “Ants.” 18.

² Vráblíková and Mercier, “*corps-à*: body/ies in deconstruction.”

³ Derrida and Grossman, “The Truth That Hurts.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹ For a close reading of this passage, see “Live Body: An interview with Anne Emmanuelle Berger,” included in this issue.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Derrida is deeply suspicious of the Christian narrative of ‘resurrection’. For instance, in the above quotation: ‘*Others* would also say resurrections...’ (our emphasis). See also Derrida, “Terror, Religion, and the New Politics” or “Introduction.”

¹⁴ Derrida, “D’abord, je ne savais pas...” translated into English and published as “Introduction.”

¹⁵ Kofman, “Conjuring Death.”

¹⁶ Derrida, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹ In “Ants,” Derrida offers a similar play on the French feminine/masculine with ‘*un*

fourmi’, ‘an entirely new word’ that was inspired by Hélène Cixous, as it made its way and crept to him from a dream of hers: ‘As for *un fourmi*, it is already the adventure of reading and interpretation, it swarms [*fourmille*] with thousands of meanings [*mille et mille sens*], a thousand and one [*une*] images, a thousand and one [*un*] sexes’. Derrida, “Ants,” 18-19.

²⁰ In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida analyzes how Descartes’ definition of the cogito as thinking substance ‘excludes everything detachable constituted by life, the living body, animal life’ (72). Deconstructing the gesture of this exclusion allows for the combined interrogation of sexual and species differences, as well as that of the difference between life and death: ‘Should one not say “(the) animals,” renouncing in advance any horizon of unification of the concept of the animal, to which one would be able to oppose in turn anything else identifiable whatsoever: man, for example, or even, much more significant, the nonanimal as nonliving, in fact, as dead [*le mort*]?’ The *animort*?’ (62). Further in the text, Derrida also invokes Descartes’ treatment of the Eucharist (91).

²¹ See for instance Derrida, “Eating well.” Derrida offers other analyses of

philosophical readings of the Eucharistic body in “A Time for Farewells” (on Catherine Malabou and Hegel), “Above All, No Journalists!” (in relation to religion and spectrality) and *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 2* (with respect to animality and life-death).

²² The phrase ‘bodies of writing’ appears in Derrida, “A ‘Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking,” 347. In singular, i.e. ‘body of

writing’, the phrase appears in Derrida, “Ants,” 35, and specifically to refer to the uniqueness of *un fourmi*. Furthermore, Derrida comments at length upon Hélène Cixous’ ‘animal-words’, for instance the ‘elephantasm’, in Derrida, *H. C. For Life, That Is to Say ...*, 18.

²³ Mani, *Contentious Traditions*.

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