

edited by jeffrey jerome cohen and gail weiss

THINKING THE LIMITS OF THE

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Thinking the Limits of the Body

SUNY Series in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art
Mary C. Rawlinson, editor

Thinking the Limits of the Body

edited by

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss

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Introduction

Bodies at the Limit

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss

Poked, probed, sliced, prosthetically enhanced and surgically diminished, transplanted, and artificially stimulated, the body in contemporary culture is the volatile subject of both textual and material fascination. The explosion of technologies and methodologies that claim to give us better access to “the truth” of the body have made the body more visible and yet more elusive. Intricate mappings of human genes have reduced the body to a series of secret codes to which our geneticists alone hold the keys. Performance artists use their bodies to challenge our understanding of corporeal signification. As a signifying power that does not refer back to a simple origin, the body revealed in the work of Orlan, Annie Sprinkle, Bob Flanagan, Cindy Sherman, and other “flesh artists” belies the stability of conventional formulations of subjectivity. Critical race theorists, queer theorists, and disability theorists have shown us that the body is as problematic when it is marked (e.g., by its race, sex, class, ethnicity, age, abilities, etc.) as when it is un(re)marked and viewed as natural or universal. Clearly, the body is well on its way to becoming the interdisciplinary subject of study par excellence. But what are its limits as concept and category?

“The body.” The term suggests a bounded and autonomous entity, universal but at the same time singular, atemporal, and therefore unmarked by history. To think the limits of the body is to interrogate this abstract, strangely dematerialized vision, appealing as it may be in its Cartesian simplicity. If we take the notion of limit seriously, we must ask to what extent our continual invocation of “the body” limits our very attempts to think beyond its pregiven ontology, its supposed unity. Just as Martin Heidegger maintains in *Being and Time* that every attempt to question Being already presupposes a certain understanding of Being, when we inquire into what “the body” means, we must recognize that both the question and any possible answers to it always unfold against historically contingent, yet nonetheless powerfully enduring frames of interpretation.¹ Moreover, if, as Heidegger argues in “What Is Metaphysics?,” “every metaphysical question always encompasses the whole range of metaphysical problems,” then to ask about the status of “the body” is also to examine all those other aspects of existence to which the body is intrinsically related (Heidegger 1993: 93). These include language, perception, agency, culture, textuality, desire, and intersubjectivity. Any investigation of the body in relationship to these intertwined phenomena is further complicated by Heidegger’s second point, namely, that “every metaphysical question can be asked only in such a way that the questioner as such is present together with the question, that is, is placed in question” (Heidegger 1993: 93). Here, Heidegger suggests that we cannot interrogate the body without

also interrogating our own implication in the phenomena we are examining, a reflexivity that affects the very process of questioning itself.²

With these complications in mind, how can we simultaneously acknowledge the weight of the traditions that have shaped the very questions we are now asking about the body and, at the same time, critically position ourselves to read this body at its limits? Clearly we cannot put these interpretative frames behind us or simply move beyond them. Is there, however, a middle space between the body as a set of historically predetermined constructs and possible futures where the body (and therefore we ourselves) can be otherwise? Gloria Anzaldúa calls such a space *la frontera*/the borderlands, a “place of contradictions,” a landscape of “shifting and multiple identity and integrity” (Anzaldúa 1999: 19). She recognizes that to dwell within the borderlands “is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element” insofar as it requires that we refuse both to abandon history and to embrace uncritically the future (Anzaldúa 1999: 19). Rather than conceptualize epistemological and geographical frontiers as that beyond which nothing further exists, however, Anzaldúa emphasizes that these limits are their own centers, enriched by the clash of multiple cultures, multiple languages, multiple ways of thinking the world.

Following Anzaldúa, thinking the limits of the body demands that we be attuned to the conflicts and tensions that enliven the body’s own borderlands, and not seek to diminish or negate them in the interests of a specious clarity, a monologic history. Thinking about historicity from within the hermeneutical tradition, Hans-Georg Gadamer reminds us that the labor of interpretation always involves a movement backward and forward in time. This process, he argues, necessitates a “fusion of horizons” wherein past and present comprise an ongoing dialectic, ensuring that neither the past nor the present can be viewed as fixed. “In fact,” Gadamer tells us,

the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence, the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves. (Gadamer 1982: 273)

As with Anzaldúa, this fusion preserves rather than eliminates difference. It requires an awareness of the body’s own otherness, its inassimilability to what Kaja Silverman calls the “dominant fiction,” in this case cultural narratives which determine in advance the contours of corporeality.

Simply put, limits need not foreclose. We are interested in what limits produce (a Deleuzian middle—a combinatory space of multiplicity), what they make possible (unexpected futures, altered horizons, new pasts), what they incor-

porate (their own disavowals, their abjected others), as well as how the limits are themselves constructed in and through particular cultural matrices which they cannot escape but always exceed.³ Limits, in other words, are grounded in desire, indeed, in multiple desires. Deleuze and Guattari describe desire as infinitely connective, as ceaseless movement toward new heterogeneities. As Elizabeth Grosz observes, in Deleuze and Guattari's account, desire "is what produces, what makes things, forges connections, creates relations, produces machinic alignments . . . desire is an actualization, a series of practices, action, production, bringing together, making machines, making reality (Grosz 1994: 195). In opposition to an understanding of desire as lack (e.g., a craving for something one does not yet have), Deleuze and Guattari view it as active, as impossible to contain within *any* social structuration: "Desire's turbulent restlessness defies coding into signs, significations, meanings; it remains visceral, affective, which is not to say that it is in any way reducible to physiology" (Grosz 1995: 196). Always embodied, it can never be limited to or by discrete bodies. On this model, desire exhibits its own agency; the body, marked by multiple desires, becomes as we shall see, the site of multiple agencies.

Desiring bodies always inhabit a borderlands between liberatory expansion and tight social circumscription. They are always articulated within and responsive to specific, delimiting cultural frameworks such as "the straight mind" described by Monique Wittig, the habitus discussed by Pierre Bourdieu, or the disciplinary regimes examined by Michel Foucault. These hegemonic matrices produce and classify bodies binaristically and hierarchically, engendering such foundational divisions as normal/abnormal, licit/illicit and permitted/forbidden (Foucault 1990: 83). According to Judith Butler:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1993: 3)

Disavowals and abjections produce tangible limits for the embodied subject, demarcating the body from what it is not. Yet, as Butler eloquently points out,

these attempts to establish “clean and proper” borders between bodies always ultimately fail. This failure occurs not only because those who have been designated as subject can refuse the margins assigned to them and infiltrate the centers from which they have been excluded, but also because all subjects, all bodies, are fundamentally impure (their morphogenesis having occurred through a series of repudiations that simultaneously sustains and destabilizes them).

Butler’s account challenges any attempt to establish an impermeability between inside and outside, forcing a reconceptualization of the very notion of limit. Rather than continuing to view limit merely as something that operates externally, dividing one body from another, we must also recognize that limits are chiasmatic, sites of reversibility in which, like the Möbius strip, inside becomes outside and vice versa (Grosz 1994). The body is, in other words, a crossroads, a space of limit *as* possibility.

The very act of drawing a limit is, moreover, neither ethically nor politically neutral. Without question, limits foreclose possibilities even as they open them up. The “zones of uninhabitability” discussed by Butler take on a special force when they are materialized as slums, ghettos, resettlements, refugee camps, or mass graves. Corporeality is limned by violence. We must therefore be sensitive to the lived consequences of limits, which are never merely abstract. While we will never get away from the abjections that make identity possible, it is also crucial that we continue to challenge self-imposed and other-imposed limits that are arbitrary, unjust, and oppressive. As Elaine Scarry has argued in her work on torture, our bodies not only have the capacity to make the world, but also to unmake it (Scarry 1985: 50). And indeed, it is through acts of oppression that the world-destroying effects of limiting bodies are most poignantly realized.

Corporeal Connections

The imbrications of body and world, self and other, limit and possibility have animated recent work across the disciplines. The following chapters sketch a cartography of what we take to be the very best efforts to think the body at its limits, a collaborative project that seeks transdisciplinary points of resonance and divergence. Because the body encompasses communities (social and political bodies), territories (geographical) bodies, and historical texts and ideas (a body of literature, a body of work), we are especially interested in how disciplinary metaphors materialize specific bodies, and where these bodies break down and/or refuse prescribed paths. Postmodern theorizations of the body often neglect its corporeality in favor of its cultural construction. *Thinking the Limits of the Body* demonstrates the inseparability of textuality, materiality, and history in any discussion of the body. More specifically, the limits of the body are most evident precisely at the points where dominant cultural discourses, elemental resistances, and different temporalities collide.

These collisions have produced a plethora of responses that range from a questioning of the body's humanity, a celebration of the body's pleasures, and the often violent effacement of the body itself. "The Future" predominates in many of these explorations of corporeal limits. Indeed, the future has become the fantasy field in which contemporary problems of embodiment are articulated. Theorists of artificial intelligence have offered us visions of a disposable body, a creature of Consciousness unhampered by flesh. Dreams of a cyborgian future occlude the possibility that we have always been "posthuman." The chapters in this collection, by contrast, insist that the past and the present provide equally fecund domains for an exploration of the body at its limits. The danger of investing all of one's hopes or fears in the future (as utopia or dystopia) is that, on the one hand, we may fail to recognize the ways in which our conceptions of the future are themselves a function of the present and the past, and, on the other hand, we may also fail to recognize the transformative potential that is already latent in both.

In "Histories of the Present and Future: Feminism, Power, Bodies," Elizabeth Grosz argues for a reconceptualization of the past in its relation to the future. Traditional, historical understandings of the past view it as exhibiting particular patterns and structures that are in turn replicated in the present and, ultimately, in the future. On such a view, the past is directly related to the present and the present in turn provides the framework for what will come. Grosz claims that this model fails to do justice to the dynamic, openended nature of both past and future. Instead of viewing the relation between past and future as grounded in repetition, Grosz argues for the creation of "histories of the future" through a continual rewriting of the past. Drawing from the work of Bergson, Deleuze, Derrida, and Irigaray, she maintains that both past and future are realms of openness, contingency, vectors of possibility which feminism must mine from one moment to the next. By mapping (and remapping) this largely uncharted territory, feminist theorists can provide new formulations of power, knowledge, and the corporeality of sexual difference.

Gail Weiss's "The Body as a Narrative Horizon" explores the role that the body plays in situating human narratives. Philosophers Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair McIntyre, Mark Johnson, and others have claimed that we structure our lives narratively: discrete episodes take on specific configurations (constellations of meaning) to produce coherent experiences as well as a distinctive sense of self. Critically examining these accounts, Weiss asks: "What role does the body play in these narratives? How might the notion that we live our lives narratively need to be reconfigured to do justice to the body's (often invisible) contribution to these narratives?" This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the body is a narrative horizon for all texts, and in particular, for all of the stories that we tell about (and which are indistinguishable from) ourselves. As such, the body grounds our quest for meaning, and, in so doing, establishes our accountability for the quest itself, an accountability that includes our failure to complete the quest.

Together, Grosz's and Weiss's chapters foreground the temporal and corporeal horizons that have functioned as an "absent presence" in contemporary identity politics. In *Dermal Boundaries*, Linda Kauffman and William A. Cohen turn our attention to the body's own less visible horizon, namely, the skin. Linda S. Kauffman has long been interested in woman artists like Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle who perform their bodies as an antiaesthetical art. "Cutups in Beauty School" analyzes the work of Orlan, whose ongoing project transforms cultural understandings of beauty and pathology. Through public plastic surgeries, her face has been reconstructed to cite famous icons of femininity. This medical transformation of her flesh exposes how arbitrary, unnatural, and unattainable cultural ideals of feminine beauty are. By making exorbitantly visible what ordinarily unfolds in the secrecy of the operating room, Orlan's bloody surgical theater (connected to the outside world via satellite, fax, email) reflects how deeply the body has been transformed through its alliances with technology. As the first "woman-to-woman transsexual," she reveals that gender and identity are processes that are impossible to complete; opening her body, she finds it empty of interiority, possessed of nothing but its infinitely plastic surface.

William A. Cohen's chapter, "Deep Skin," shows us how Victorian readings of the flesh of the colonized other undercuts artificial divisions between the corporeal and the noncorporeal. More specifically, Cohen offers a critical analysis of Anthony Trollope's "The Banks of the Jordan," in order to highlight the skin's "peculiar status as both physical embodiment and psychical envelope, both a surface projected from inside and a mask immediately comprehensible from without, the [skin's] crucial, if sometimes conflicting, psychological, spiritual, and social functions." Cohen argues that the narrator's fears about physical and spiritual contamination through close contact with the native's skin serves as a metonymic displacement of a pressing domestic concern in England in the late 1850s, namely, fear of exposure to the germs and disease circulating throughout the polluted, unembanked rivers of England including, most prominently, the Thames. Not surprisingly, the solution recommended for the latter problem, containing the rivers and ridding them of their noxious elements, finds resonance as a formula for addressing the bodily habits, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs of the colonized other. Fixing the rivers turned out to be a more successful project than establishing "proper" boundaries between colonizer and colonized, however; as Cohen powerfully reveals, the effort to keep bodies and souls pure is forever undercut by the skin's own resistances.

As William A. Cohen makes explicit in his excavation of a colonialist history, dermal boundaries invariably become racial edges. Laura Doyle's chapter, "Ontological Crisis and Double Narration in African American Fiction: Reconstructing *Our Nig*," turns our attention to the enslaved other and describes how severe racial oppression can lead to self-fragmentation. Though in many ways debilitating, this splintering of the self can be, as Doyle shows, a paradoxical form of self-preservation. Her essay offers us a "disjunctive ontology," a descrip-

tion of lived experience as a series of disjointed fragments that do not add up to a single whole. Through the perspectives of Harriet Wilson's main character and narrator, Frado, Doyle portrays a recognition of self in and through the other that generates a split subject. This split subject, which Doyle identifies with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiasm, allows for reversible relations between (unequal) subjects that simultaneously bind and divide them. Through her reading of this 1859 novel, we see how the project of constructing a self is both diminished and enabled by the dominating power of race.

The complex relationship between conquest, colonization, modernity, and cannibalism is explored in Sara Castro-Klarén's "Parallaxes: Cannibalism and Self-Embodiment, or, The Calvinist Reading of Tupi A-Theology." Challenging Jean de Léry's famous 1578 ethnographic treatise on Tupinamba culture, the scientific authority of which has seldom been questioned, Castro-Klarén shows how Lery's detailed accounts of ritualistic cannibalism among the Tupinamba were the product of colonialist fantasies of the "New World other." Human consumption of human flesh, and theophagy—the human consumption of Divine flesh—were doctrinal issues that the Church struggled to resolve. Léry's fascination with anthropophagy, she argues, originates in European anxieties about the status of the Eucharist *as* body in the wake of the Protestant reformation. Through a rereading of the myths of the contemporary Awareté tribe in Brazil, Castro-Klarén provides an alternative history of the body's limits that places the very practice of ethnography into question.

The insistence on making difference visible in the flesh, a process which inevitably normativizes the hierarchies that emerge in and through that differentiation, is the central focus of "Making Freaks: Visual Rhetorics and the Spectacle of Julia Pastrana." Rosemarie Garland-Thomson depicts the "visual cannibalism" that marks what might be called the logic of the stare. The complex emotions and desires evoked in spectators of nineteenth-century freak shows, she argues, simultaneously challenged and reinforced the traditional binaries of self/other, normal/abnormal, male/female, human/nonhuman, and civilized/primitive. Staring at the "monstrous other," Garland-Thomson suggests, ultimately assuages the spectator's own cultural insecurities even as it destines the spectacular other to a liminal existence, exiled by the visible signs of his or her imagined social transgression.

Like Garland-Thomson, Robert McRuer is a leading voice in the emerging discipline of disability studies. His chapter, "Critical Investments," takes as its focus the uncanny confluence of two media events featuring Christopher Reeve, a Superbowl commercial for an investment company in which the actor's disability is imagined as spectacularly "cured" and a television movie directed by Reeve in which a man with AIDS returns home to die. McRuer examines how disability and the queer limn the heterosexual, able body, challenging its self-presumption of normalcy. He finds in AIDS activism and scholarship nonbinary models for the explication of identity, models which bring queer theory not only

to the study of sex and gender but to a nuanced reading of race, nationality, and other categories. The deconstructive impetus of AIDS-focused queer theory shares much with disability theory, likewise concerned with detailing the historical contingency of minority identities and the ideological work such identities are made to perform. Against systems of power that would “immunize” dominating identities from their differences, both queer theory and disability studies offer ways of thinking the body outside of the constricting parameters of able-bodied heterosexuality.

The final section of our volume, *Liminalities*, extends the investigation of corporeal boundaries by emphasizing the porousness between bodies and world. If we cease to grant each body an absolute integrity, one that has too often been achieved by viewing the body as a self-sufficient entity, we become more sensitive to the complexities of intersubjective and intercorporeal relations. Whereas McRuer allies queer theory and disability studies to bring about a more just future, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s chapter conjoins queer theory and medieval studies to create a richer past. “The Inhuman Circuit” excavates a posthuman body in the Middle Ages. Reading Deleuze and Guattari alongside chivalric romance, Cohen argues that contemporary queer theory has jettisoned the notion of an atemporal, inherently natural sexuality without abandoning the humanism on which such a claim is founded. In medieval culture, the horse, its rider, the bridle, saddle, and armor together form a Deleuzian “circuit,” a network of meaning that includes the inanimate and the inhuman. No single object or body has meaning within this assemblage without reference to the other forces, intensities, affects, and directions to which it is conjoined. “The Inhuman Circuit” stresses the limits of the human as a useful conceptual category and maps out the transformative bodily possibilities that were always already present in the past.

If, as Luce Irigaray claims, the question of sexual difference is the most pressing of our time, Debra B. Bergoffen’s “Mourning the Autonomous Body” asks why it is that so few find Irigaray’s sense of urgency compelling. Appealing to Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, Bergoffen argues that our indifference to the question of sexual difference is itself a form of resistance to relinquishing the autonomy of the unsexed body. Although autonomy has traditionally been extolled as a basis for a politics of freedom, Bergoffen maintains that an overvaluation of autonomy betrays the meanings of erotic bodies and distorts the experience of sexual desire. In this betrayal and distortion the autonomous body becomes the ground of the politics of patriarchy upholding mastery, domination, and violence. Just as Nietzsche insisted on the murder of God, Bergoffen holds that we must murder the autonomous body, properly mourn our loss, and learn to love ambiguous bodies and their inscriptions of sexual difference.

Together, these chapters problematize the very notion of bodily limits at precisely those junctures where they seem most visible and insurmountable. Through the convergence of queer theory, postcolonial studies, disability studies, feminist theory, medieval studies, literary theory, phenomenology, and history,

Thinking the Limits of the Body argues against disciplinary isolation and for interdisciplinary approaches to corporeality. We have grouped the ten chapters that comprise this volume under five section headings, each of which captures a different facet of the body at its limits; however, as our discussion above suggests, the themes that link the various chapters to one another prohibit precise delineations, spilling over their fixed groupings. Exceeding their own textual limits, these chapters in their interconnections can—we hope—provide an important link between past discourses on the body and future interdisciplinary work. The body at its limits, this collection insists, need not be a site of collapse, negativity, and failure, but rather can become a locus of proliferation, mystery, and possibility.

Notes

1. See Martin Heidegger, introduction to *Being and Time* (1996).
2. The reflexivity Heidegger is calling our attention to is one that is always mediated by an intersubjective linguistic and cultural tradition; the self always comes back to itself via that which is other, namely its world.
3. According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25).

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PART I
HORIZONS

Histories of the Present and Future

Feminism, Power, Bodies

Elizabeth Grosz

There is much about feminist theory that is in a state of flux right now; major transformations are occurring regarding how feminist politics and its long- and short-term goals and methods are conceived. The debates about the place of identity in political struggle, attempts to make feminism more inclusive, the ways in which even the body is conceptualized, the impact of feminism on young women and men, have, instead of producing a new more focused and cohesive feminist movement, simply witnessed the growing fragmentation and division within its ranks. I would like to look at some of the effects that some key theoretical/political changes have on the ways in which feminist scholarship and theory have changed or should change.

In particular, I want to look at two paradigm shifts—shifts that have affected the ways we understand knowledge and power—which have occurred over the last decade or so and have transformed, or hopefully will transform, the way feminist scholarship and politics is undertaken and what its basic goals are. The first consists in transformations in our understanding of knowledges, discourses, texts, and histories, which politicizes them not only in terms of their contents—that is, in terms of what they say—but also in terms of the positions from which they are articulated (their modes of address)—what they cannot say—and what their positions are within a network of other texts that constitute both their milieu and the means by which they become both comprehensible and tamed. The second involves transformations in the ways in which women and femininity are understood, that move away dramatically from the prevailing feminist models of earlier generations of women's identity, their absence from prevailing practices and forms of knowledge, their unique features, qualities, and characteristics. Instead of focusing on women's unique identities, their roles as unrecognized agents in histories and practices, it may be time instead to focus on the disparate and disunified processes, or rather agencies (in the plural), forces and impulses that comprise such an identity.

This dual politicization of knowledges, discourses, and writing, on the one hand, and of identity politics, on the other hand, have come together to raise new feminist questions about knowledge, subjectivity, and power. It is no longer clear, in the wake of antihumanist assaults on the general question of identity, whether the strategic value of identity-politics, a politics developed around the affirmation of minority identities, remains as strong as it was two or three decades ago. Subjects cannot be understood as powerless, oppressed, defeated, marginalized, and stripped of action; nor conversely can they be affirmed as self-contained and