

MATTER

journal of new materialist research

Universitat de Barcelona

ALMANAC ENTRY
ISSUE 9

Body

Cuerpo

Cos

Monika Rogowska-Stangret (0000-0002-8317-8562)

University of Bialystok, Poland

Date of submission: April 2024

Accepted in: April 2024

Published in: May 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v9.46703>

Recommended citation:

Rogowska-Stangret, Monika (2024). Body. *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, 9, 1-5.
<https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v9.46703>



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Body¹

The body is an important threshold concept for new materialist scholarship, genealogies, and cartographies (Rogowska-Stangret, 2017) that works through processes of de- and re-construction. The body as a philosophical notion bears the marks of a dualistic approach to it, principally conceptualized in Western thought as being opposed (and inferior) to the soul or mind. Dualism as such (mind-body dualism in particular) is rethought anew in new materialisms through its political and ethical implications. As Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin point out, new materialisms are engaged in “pushing dualisms to an extreme” (Bergson [1896] 2004: p. 236 in Dolphijn, van der Tuin, 2012) and in so doing, articulate two novel concepts of the body.

The first one is aimed at overcoming mind-body dualism, revealing how aspects once separated are in fact entangled, to the extent that one is no longer able to clearly and *a priori* demarcate differences between *psyche* and *soma*, reason and instinct, consciousness and unconsciousness, logic and emotion. This effort is visible in the notion of corporeality coined by Elizabeth Grosz (1987, 1994), where the body and mind are thought of as smoothly transforming into one another (without the possibility to precisely circumscribe the moment of transition). This transformation is illustrated with the model of the Möbius strip, where the “outside” and the “inside” become one another and are topologically “unorientable”. The entangled nature of body and mind is also present in texts by Rosi Braidotti, where she stresses the need “to acknowledge the embodiment of the brain and the embrainment of the body” (2017, p. 33), thus seeing both as not only interconnected and inseparable, but intra-connected, and impossible to detach from one another prior to their relation.

¹ This text is a slightly reworked version of an Almanac entry published on July, 21, 2017 on: <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/body/body.html>.

The de(re)construction of mind-body dualism is further “pushed to an extreme” in the idea of “gut” feminism by Elizabeth A. Wilson (2004), where the very organicity of the body (exemplified by the gut) is analyzed as writing and rewriting itself (“biological writing” and “the biological unconscious”) without *a priori* distinctions between *psyche* and *soma*, mood and gut, temper and digestion. There are important political imperatives attached to these reconceptualizations of body-mind dualism. They lie in the fact that epistemological and ontological categories are far from apolitical. The way we think of the world, establish and appraise distinctions has political meaning: they support power relations, challenge *status quos*, and reshape the world.

The mind-body dualism has been further “pushed to an extreme” by challenging the human-animal and culture-nature distinctions. With the appreciation of symbiosis as crucial for creation of cells, new organs, and species (Margulis, 1999), the body (among other so called ‘entities’) reveals its collaborative, collective, and inhuman or more-than-human aspects. Elizabeth Grosz (2011) stresses the need to place the human “in its properly inhuman context” (p. 21), whereas Donna Haraway cherishes the extent to which human bodies are made of more-than-human beings:

I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with* many (2008, p. 3–4)

underlining the powers of becoming-with and symbiogenesis (2016) as constituting the world. The relationality of the body grounds connections with other beings and the possibility of knowledge production, as Vinciane Despret puts it – commenting on Konrad Lorenz’s research –

his own body [was used] as a tool for knowing, as a tool for asking

questions, as a means to create a relation that provides new knowledge (2004, p. 129).

Yet, relational aspect of bodies-environments might also endanger lives of humans and more-than-humans in times of environmental destabilization. As extinction studies scholar, Thom van Dooren, states: “[...] coevolution can switch over into coextinction; co-becoming into entangled patterns of dying-with” (2017, p. 191). Becoming-with opens a potential for collaboration, relationalities and generative affinities at the same time as it poses a threat to the vulnerable lives susceptible to the deaths and diseases of others (Anna Tsing and co-authors explicitly suggest that the “condition of the Anthropocene” consists in “suffering from the ills of another species” (2017, p. m4)). Thus, the body incites reflections on both life and death, becoming-with and unbecoming-with, creation of new species, new ways of life, new environmental niches, and extinction – disappearance of species, ways of life, and environmental niches. Through that reflection on the body yet another set of dualisms is “pushed to an extreme”. The second approach to the notion of the body is further engaged with the relationality of the body – its *affective potentials*, that is, the potential of the body to affect and to be affected, to move and to be moved, to feel and to arouse feeling. Thus, its active-passive qualities and dynamic structure, is associated with movement, possibilities to act and be acted upon, and to be formed and form itself. As Brian Massumi underlines: “what is commonly called ‘the body’ is the *bodying* of the event” (2014, p. 29). In this vein, Grosz develops her notion of the body as corporeality, meaning “a system, or series of open-ended systems, functioning within other huge systems it cannot control, through which it can access and acquire its abilities and capacities” (2004, p. 3). This theoretical move points to the fact that the body as bodily, corporeal, material is irreversibly linked to the materiality of the

world – it is not only located in the world, but it is of the world. As Karen Barad writes: “‘We’ are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (2003, p. 828). Moreover, these concepts of the body enable thinking about human and more-than-human bodies and worlds simultaneously. It opens the space and time for thinking politically about relationality, alliances, flows, and blockages. In this regard, we may also cite Nancy Tuana’s concept of “viscous porosity” (2008), Stacy Alaimo’s notion of “transcorporeality” (2010) and Magdalena Górska’s idea of corpo-affectivity (2016) to direct theoretical attention to the political aspects of flows and blockages: what/who flows and for what/whom, what/who is inhibited, etc. Tuana’s “viscous porosity” addresses the paradoxical nature of bodies and the bodily, simultaneously “viscous” (in inevitable relations, wanted or unwanted states of interconnectedness and interdependency, being stuck with something) and “porous” (having “pores” – openings that enable flows). Whereas Alaimo’s “transcorporeality” is aimed at “thinking across bodies” (2010, p. 2), thinking against or through divisions such as subject-object, to reveal the extent to which power relations circulate across bodies-environments and link social inequalities with environmental damages. The flows and blockages, vulnerabilities and empowerments, hurt and transformational potential is also captured in Górska’s notion of corpo-affectivity (2016) coined to uncover the dynamics of the co-constitution of bodies, materiality, and affects for a feminist intersectional politics of vulnerability.

In the feminist new materialisms the autonomous, independent, separated, discrete, individualized notion of the body is no longer adequate to how the world and its complex entanglements are conceptualized

politically and ethically. As Laura U. Marks aptly puts it:

what appear to be points are not separate entities but folds. Unfolded, they express relations with a larger surface, and ultimately with the entire cosmos (2024, p. 8).

In so doing the notion of the body is somewhat erased, replaced by other concepts such as: the bodily, materiality, matter, (trans)corporeality, or folds, which do justice to how the body is never one, but part of open systems (always already in plural).

Nevertheless, it is important to think about categories traditionally associated with the body like: gender, sexuality, race, (dis)ability, ethnicity, to analyze how they are produced and reproduced through power relations that cut across bodies-environments, no longer confined within the vulnerable limits of the body. The opening of the body challenges anthropocentric approaches with more-than-human-worlds, mobilizes the urgent need to destabilize onto-epistemological and ethico-political hierarchies, and contributes to thinking anew about ongoing ethical and political concerns.

Bibliography

Alaimo, Stacy. (2010). *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press.

Barad, Karen. (2003). Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801–831.

Bergson, Henri. ([1896] 2004). *Matter and Memory* (5th ed.). (N. M. Paul & W. Scott Palmer, Trans.). Dover.

Braidotti, Rosi. (2017). Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism. In R. Gusin (Ed.), *Anthropocene Feminism* (pp. 21–48). University of Minnesota Press.

Despret, Vinciane. (2004). The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthro-zoo-genesis. *Body & Society* 10(2-3), 111–134.

Dolphijn, Rick, Iris van der Tuin. (2012). *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*. Open Humanities Press.

Górska, Magdalena. (2016). *Breathing Matters. Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability*. Linköping Studies in Arts and Science No. 683.

Grosz, Elizabeth. (1987). Notes Towards a Corporeal Feminism. *Australian Feminist Studies* 5, 1–15.

Grosz, Elizabeth. (1994). *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press.

Grosz, Elizabeth. (2004). *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*. Duke University Press.

Grosz, Elizabeth. (2011). *Becoming Undone. Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. Duke University Press.

Haraway, Donna J. (2008). *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, Donna J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Margulis, Lynn. (1999). *Symbiotic Planet. A New Look at Evolution*. Phoenix.

- Marks, Laura U. (2024). *The Fold. From Your Body to the Cosmos*. Duke University Press.
- Massumi, Brian. (2014). *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*. Duke University Press.
- Rogowska-Stangret Monika. (2017). Corpor(e)al Cartographies of New Materialism. Meeting the Elsewhere Halfway. *The Minnesota Review. A journal of creative and critical writing*, 88, 59–68.
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. (2004). Gut Feminism. *Differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 15 (3), 66–94.
- van Dooren, Thom. (2017). Spectral Crows in Hawai'i." In D. B. Rose, T. van Dooren, & M. Chrulaw (Eds.), *Extinction Studies. Stories of Time, Death, and Generations* (pp. 187–215). Columbia University Press.
- Tsing, A. et al. (Eds.) (2017). *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Tuana, Nancy. (2008). Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina. In: S. Alaimo & S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material Feminisms* (188–213). Indiana University Press.

Author information

Monika Rogowska-Stangret (0000-0002-8317-8562)

e-mail: monika.rogowska@gmail.com

Monika Rogowska-Stangret, Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy, University of Białystok, philosopher conducting research at the intersection of feminist philosophy, environmental humanities, and critical posthumanism, translator. She was a member of the Management Committee in the European project *New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on "How Matter Comes to Matter"*, European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), Action IS 1307 (2013-2018). She published in, among others, „Feminist Theory”, „Philosophy Today”, „The Minnesota Review: A Journal of Creative and Critical Writing”. She is the editor-in-chief of “Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research”.