EDITED BY
ALBERICA BAZZONI AND
FEDERICA BUONGIORNO

PERFORMING EMBODIMENT

CHOREOGRAPHIES OF AFFECT, LANGUAGE, AND SOCIAL NORMS

CULTURAL INQUIRY

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PERFORMING EMBODIMENT

Cultural Inquiry

EDITED BY CHRISTOPH F. E. HOLZHEY
AND MANUELE GRAGNOLATI

The series 'Cultural Inquiry' is dedicated to exploring how diverse cultures can be brought into fruitful rather than pernicious confrontation. Taking culture in a deliberately broad sense that also includes different discourses and disciplines, it aims to open up spaces of inquiry, experimentation, and intervention. Its emphasis lies in critical reflection and in identifying and highlighting contemporary issues and concerns, even in publications with a historical orientation. Following a decidedly cross-disciplinary approach, it seeks to enact and provoke transfers among the humanities, the natural and social sciences, and the arts. The series includes a plurality of methodologies and approaches, binding them through the tension of mutual confrontation and negotiation rather than through homogenization or exclusion.

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Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms

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Introduction

Performing Embodiment

ALBERICA BAZZONI AND FEDERICA BUONGIORNO

The paradigm of embodiment — which is today a broad concept around which various theoretical approaches revolve, from phenomenology[1] to embodied cognition,[2] and from cognitive sciences[3] to ethology[4] and artificial intelligence[5] — should be primarily understood as a strong

1 Beside Merleau-Ponty's works, see Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* [1931], trans. by Dorion Cairns (Springer, 2012); and Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* [1975], trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Indiana University Press, 1988).

2 See Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* [1987], trans. by Robert Paolucci (Shambhala, 1998).

3 See Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (MIT Press, 1992).

4 See Helen L. Ma and others, 'Embodying Cognitive Ethology', *Theory & Psychology*, 33.1 (2023), pp. 42–58 <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543221126165>.

5 See *Embodied Artificial Intelligence*, ed. by Fumiya Iida and others (Springer, 2004).

response to the mind–body problem. Beginning from the Cartesian legacy, this dualism has strongly influenced modern and contemporary theories of subjectivity and knowledge, both on a theoretical and practical-political level.[6] At the heart of Western metaphysics lies the idea — much older than Cartesian dualism — of a distinction (both ontological and epistemological) between corporeality — that is, extension (space, matter) — and spirituality — that is, thought (unextended and immaterial). Modern philosophy has been marked by the problem of dualism: 'This idea that the mind was separate from the body was later dominant in the Christian metaphysical tradition in the form of a "soul"', and the conception 'of a mind–body split persisted into the 18th century through the works of Locke, Hume and Kant'.[7]

Against substantial dualism, the materialistic tradition — beginning in antiquity with Democritus — has rejected the conception of the soul as immaterial and separate from physical reality, and has argued for its reduction to the actual (material) components of reality. However, while this is an argument against dualism as the real *distinction* of the substances, it does not address the question of the *connection* of mind and body, as it is already presented by Descartes. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth (dated 28 June 1643), Descartes claims that as long as one *does not do phil-*

6 For a reconstruction of the mind–body problem with particular reference to phenomenological theory, see Federica Buongiorno, 'Embodiment, Disembodiment, and Re-embodiment in the Construction of the Digital Self', *Humana.Mente*, 12.36 (2019), pp. 310–30 <https://www.humanamente.eu/index.php/HM/article/view/290> [accessed 10 November 2025].

7 William Farr, Sara Price, and Carey Jewitt, 'An Introduction to Embodiment and Digital Technology Research: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives', *National Centre for Research Methods Working Paper* (2012) <https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2257/> [accessed 10 November 2025].

osophy and relies 'on life and ordinary conversations', one learns 'how to conceive the union of mind and body'. If one focuses on the union, rather than the distinction of body and mind, one can claim that the body and the soul are united as matter is to form. But what about the relation of mind and body? Is it of a mental nature, or is it itself material? Materialism avoids this question, which instead is fully addressed — in contemporary debates — by phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology reacted to dualism by developing two specific and correlated notions: that of *reduction* (on the methodological level) and that of *embodiment* (on the ontological level). Husserl's conception of *Leib* — or the living body as more than just a physical body (*Körper*) — is already meant to overcome substantial dualism: what makes a body a living body is the fact that it inhabits and experiences itself (and others) within a certain environment, and this experience is inseparable from the kinaesthetic processes performed by the body. Intentionality itself expresses the original correlation of mind (subject) and body (materiality): the starting point is precisely the *relation* of body and mind, and not their split. They constitute each other mutually from the very beginning. At the same time, the ontological primacy of relation can be sustained only by resorting to reduction as a method. Descartes claims that the union (relation) of mind and body could be conceived by subjects only by *refraining from doing philosophy,* that is, by *simply living* — this is the meaning of the well-known Cartesian motto: *primum vivere, deinde philosophari*. Reflection splits what life keeps united. Phenomenological reduction is a way to reconcile life and reflection: it is both a *gesture,* a bodily exercise — an effort to stop and focus not on the supposedly objective way things *are,* but on the way they *manifest* themselves and are subjectively apprehended —

and a reflection, an abstraction from common-sense reality. It is an embodied view — a *point of view,* and not from nowhere, but from the specific, embodied, and situated experience that is lived. Reduction is *performing embodiment* — this is why phenomenology represents the main theoretical and methodological reference for the reflections gathered in this volume.

Combining the notions of *performativity* and *embodiment,* this volume situates the body in the realm of processes, movement, and *poiesis*. The notion of performativity addresses questions of ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, and politics, generating alternative configurations to the mind–body dualism while avoiding forms of essentialist and deterministic foundationalism. The contributions to this volume emphasize *doing* over *being*: the body *does* and *is done*; it is engaged in a movement of co-constitution with the world. It is an emplaced and kinaesthetic unit, which expresses itself within, and is shaped by, the constantly changing encounter with its physical and social environment. It is in *doing* that bodies produce knowledge and shared (or contested) social meaning. Embodiment is *performed,* in the sense that it is a process that manifests itself in the forms of its making, a process which is both passive and active, inscription of the world in the body and action of the body in and on the world.

It is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who best understood this sense of *performing embodiment* beyond substantial dualism:

> Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity [= consciousness] is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am,

> when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.[8]

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty highlights the a priori coincidence of consciousness and the body, and argues that mind and body are not reducible to their parts, nor is the body simply to be conceived as either object or subject, since from the very beginning it is already a body-subject. As Russell Keat notes, 'Merleau-Ponty implicitly challenges all philosophical positions which accept some basic dichotomy between subject and object [...]. In particular, he rejects Cartesian dualism',[9] especially the ontological principle of the real distinction of the substances. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the human body is itself a 'subject', and the human subject is necessarily, not just contingently, embodied. Against the Cartesian assumption, he argues that

> our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a 'praktognosia', which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary.[10]

In other words, as Keat writes:

> [T]he body's *praktognosia*, i.e. practical knowledge, cannot be analytically decomposed into more primitive concepts, such as 'body' and 'mind'; [...] this praktognostic body in

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. by Colin Smith (Routledge, 1962), p. 408.

9 Russell Keat, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body', unpublished paper delivered at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University (May 1982) <https://www.russellkeat.net/admin/papers/51.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2025].

10 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 162.

> some sense forms the basis for all other kinds of relationship between the human subject and the world.[11]

Not only is consciousness embodied; for Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious itself is nothing other than 'a certain posture of my social body'.[12] Conversely, 'to have a body is also to have a past of embodiment; there is a time of the body, a temporal structure of embodiment.'[13]

Merleau-Ponty speaks of a 'pressure of transformation',[14] whose centre is the body: to pressure is at the same time to be pressed, since perception always involves a chiasmatic relation that is active and passive at the same time. This evokes Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh* as the *tissue* or texture connecting bodily parts, and as the founding bodily ability to experience the world — a notion that is at the core of Susan Kozel's chapter in this volume, as well as her conversation with choreographer and dancer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir. Tissue is both active and passive: it fills the gaps and forms parts, and at the same time accommodates systems. Tissue is intelligent before being conscious: it is another way to reconcile life and reflection in a phenomenological perspective. Merleau-Ponty's thought implies embodiment as the temporal texture of being, whereby the subject is crossed and 'lived' by the unconscious, the passivity, and the vulnerability of *having a body* and *being alive*.

In their contributions, Lucilla Guidi, Alberica Bazzoni, and Ursula Fanning focus on language performativity as

11 Keat, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body'.

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, trans. by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 193.

13 Ibid., p. 201.

14 Ibid., p. 131.

providing the most effective objection to mind–body dualism. They investigate philosophical and literary language by foregrounding performativity — what language does, and how it does it — over its semantic function — that is, what it refers to. In these essays, performativity describes the embodied, relational, and situated feature of language, as opposed to a structuralist (and, later, deconstructionist) paradigm which focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on the absence of the signified and the web of relationships among signifiers. Much more than being just a *sign* that points to an external, independent *referent*, here language is understood as an embodied *gesture* that enacts — that is, performs — a certain configuration of reality. Drawing on Wittgenstein and Cavell, Guidi's chapter examines our mutual attunement in a shared and embodied practice of language; it further explores mutual attunement through Judith Butler's notion of opacity as a relational and affective ontology. Literary texts explored by Bazzoni and Fanning draw attention to writing as a physical act, carried out by an embodied and situated subject, which summons the reader into a shared temporality, further anchoring language to the body. Significantly, such an attention to the link between writing and embodiment is often central in texts written by women, who were historically excluded from self-representation. Within a patriarchal order, as Butler argues, 'the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom.'[15] In the course of the twentieth century, women writers appropriate and deeply transform the function of literature, as they seek to 'dismantle the Cartesian

15 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), p. 17.

and phallocentric separation of mind and body and push the woman's body, as part of her being, into the speaking subject'.[16]

The volume then moves away from language into a second area of inquiry: dance. In framing the ways in which embodiment is performed, the concept of choreography emerges as a particularly generative one. In her essay, Susan Kozel focuses on affective choreographies through a phenomenological framework, whereby attention to affective states can be articulated. As patterns of movement, choreographies suitably foreground processes and transformations that take place in time while retaining intelligible shapes. Furthermore, as patterns of movement that are defined by affective inter-actions within and among bodies, choreographies are powerful ways to capture the embodied dynamics of passivity and activity, design and improvisation, inner and outer states, and reciprocity of action and re-action. Such dynamics are central to Margrét Guðjónsdóttir's work on somatic practices, which she has also developed in her long-term collaboration with Kozel. As the conversation included here between Kozel and Guðjónsdóttir illustrates, their collaboration exemplifies a phenomenological methodology, which constantly circles theory back to praxis. This rooting of philosophical reflection into embodied and performative praxis was reflected in the structuring of the international symposium 'Performing Embodiment: Practices of Reduction', which took place at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in February 2022 and from which this volume originates. On that occasion, standard academic presentations and

16 Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980–2000*, Italian Perspectives, 9 (Legenda, 2002), p. 85.

panel discussions were accompanied by the premiere of Guðjónsdóttir's installation *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance*, which explores intensive somatic states in dance through the lens of augmented reality, and by a somatic practice workshop run by Guðjónsdóttir herself with the symposium's participants.

The notion of choreography as effectively capturing the dynamic between design and improvisation and the mutual affective influence among bodies is also relevant in Dorothea Olkowski's essay on Argentine tango. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre, Olkowski shows how embodied existence always implies *appearing* in front of an Other and into a world that is the site of that appearance. In tango, the dancing partners' embodied experience *appears*, as their self-display, relationality, mutual affect, and recognition are performatively heightened. A similar form of performative appearance also takes place in the literary writings analysed by Fanning, as the authors come into existence as authors precisely through the act of writing and their concomitant exposition to the (desired) reader.

Alongside language and dance, a third area where the coupling of performativity and embodiment offers original insights is socio-political analysis. Again, the notion of choreography is relevant here, as it fittingly describes the processes through which social norms categorize, orient, and discipline bodies, and the ways in which such norms are implemented — or may be challenged — in practice. Gender is possibly the most disputed ground in this respect, with Butler's *Gender Trouble* providing a fundamental contribution to the very notion of performativity. Biology, representation, norms, violence: gender is constantly produced and reproduced through the inscription of gestures, the selection of physical descriptors, and the

attribution of social roles, which form complex disciplinary choreographies that function as *dispositives*, in a Foucauldian sense. Elisa Virgili's essay begins from these premises, analysing gender performance and women's bodies in combat sports. Virgili opens up the investigation of a field of experience where performativity and embodiment may come into conflict, ultimately pointing back to dominant social norms and calling them into question.[17] As repeated and incorporated patterns of behaviour, disciplinary choreographies organize social space, dictating dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that work on and through bodies. While these dynamics and the lines they trace may be more evident in contexts where bodies are explicitly concerned — such as dance or, indeed, combat sports — they are no less stringent when a certain context is (allegedly) primarily concerned with 'the mind'. In her essay, Chiara Montalti draws on feminist and disability studies to investigate the role of embodiment and performativity in the academic field, exposing its obliviousness to the weight and needs of actual bodies engaged in academic work. Based on old-fashioned assumptions of neutrality and universal-

17 The subject of women and trans people in combat sports recently came to worldwide attention due to the transphobic, racist, and sexist remarks made by several public figures, including Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, US president Donald Trump, British novelist JK Rowling, and multibillionaire Elon Musk (among other right-wing public figures), concerning Algerian female boxer Imane Khelif's participation at the 2024 Olympics. Accusing Khelif of being a 'man' who was unfairly competing against women, these figures prompted surreal and violent speculation regarding Khelif's gender identity, and general confusion as to whether this ought to be determined by her birth certificate (which registers her as female) or by her hormone levels, leading to waves of degrading comments. Khelif went on to win the gold medal and sued her detractors. See 'Algeria's Imane Khelif Files Harassment Case After Gender Row', Al Jazeera, 11 August 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/11/algerias-imane-khelif-files-harassment-case-after-gender> [10 November 2025].

ity, accustomed to abstracting the intellect from the flesh, the academic field is in fact organized around very specific bodies, while through its choreographed performances it works as an exclusionary field. The Cartesian mind–body split is incorporated into a social field that tightly selects which bodies belong in it, and which do not. The lines of inclusion and exclusion, however, are not spelled out, as this would imply acknowledging that bodies matter; rather, they are performed. To foreground embodiment and performativity, thus, is also to challenge the mind–body split in the academic field: *in theory* and *in practice*.

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Language as Embodied Practice

Notes on Performative Processes of Subjectification with Reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Judith Butler

LUCILLA GUIDI

INTRODUCTION

'In the beginning was the deed', Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, echoing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.[1] Wittgenstein's late philosophy thus involves an understanding of language as a weave of embodied practice. According to Wittgenstein, language does not correspond to a disembodied system of signs through which already constituted subjects express their inner life and depict the outer world. Rather, language is conceived as an interwoven fabric of practices in which

1 Wittgenstein is quoting Goethe's *Faust* (Part 1). Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1969), § 396.

we constitute ourselves as subjects and at the same time maintain and transform normative practices. From this perspective, in this chapter I will first of all emphasize that Wittgenstein's account of rules as practices involves a process of mutual constitution of subjects and normative practices,[2] which can be described in terms of Judith Butler's notion of performativity as iterability. As I aim to show, Wittgenstein underlines that the validity of a system of rules emerges as a retrospective effect of the repetitive embodiment of inherited practices and implies both repetition and variation.

In a second step, I will take into account Stanley Cavell's insights, in order to examine the embodiment of language as an open and ongoing process of 'initiation into forms of life',[3] which is based in 'nothing more, and nothing less' than in our mutual attunement,[4] and thus in our mutual responses as speakers. Here I aim to show that the limits of 'our' 'forms of life' and communities are tested, confirmed, and renegotiated through our responses to each other as embodied beings. In a third and final step, I will further explore this mutual attunement in language as an embodied practice through Butler's psychoanalytic and Foucauldian perspective,[5] so as to examine this mutual

2 Wittgenstein writes: '"Following a rule" is a practice.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th edn (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 202.

3 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*: *Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 180–90.

4 See Stanley Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 41–67 (p. 48).

5 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005). On the similarities and differences between Butler's and Cavell's non-sovereign accounts of language, community, and embodied life, see Rosine Kelz, *The Non-Sovereign Self, Responsibility, and Otherness:*

attunement according to a twofold meaning of opacity: on the one hand, I will address the affective webs of relations to the environment and its caregivers that form the subject and make it opaque to itself, relational, and fundamentally vulnerable. On the other hand, I will consider a dimension of opacity as vulnerability to language. The latter points to the opaque fact that one finds oneself in a language which one has never chosen, which both constrains *and* enables one's embodied life, and which is therefore fundamentally opaque. Finally, I will underline the pervasiveness of the 'dual dimension of performativity',[6] which marks an account of language as embodied practice. This dual dimension refers to the fact that 'we are invariably acted on and acting',[7] while reshaping the normative practices by which we are acted on through our enactments.

WITTGENSTEIN'S RULES AS PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES: SUBJECTIFICATION AS TRAINING

At the core of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* there lies the description of human language, which is understood as a web of interwoven practices. Speech is thus an embodied practice, along with walking, eating, and drinking, which as such belong to our 'natural history'.[8] What is at issue in Wittgenstein's account of language, therefore, is neither a theory of meaning nor a definition of the essence of language, but rather a description of the

Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Stanley Cavell on Moral Philosophy and Political Agency (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), esp. pp. 46–77 <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137508973_3>.

6 Judith Butler, 'Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance', in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 12–27 (p. 24); my emphasis <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373490-004>.

7 Ibid.

8 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 25.

uncountable ways in which practices take place. Wittgenstein's notion of 'language-games' underlines precisely that language 'is part of an activity, or a form of life'.[9] It is worth emphasizing that the meaning of words lies neither in speakers' intentions nor in the entities that the words denote. Words, therefore, are not designations which refer to the properties of external or internal objects. Hence, one does not learn a language by means of ostensive definitions; rather, in order to be able to ask what something is called, one must already have learned and mastered many other language-practices. As Wittgenstein puts it: 'One has already to know (or be able to do) something before one can ask what something is called.'[10] Therefore, teaching a language is 'not explaining, but training (*Abrichtung*)'.[11] He adds: 'To understand a language means to have mastered a technique.'[12] As Wittgenstein famously argues, the meaning of a word lies 'for a large class of cases' in its 'use in language'.[13] Furthermore, the metaphor of language as a game, with which Wittgenstein describes language as an embodied practice, suggests that those practices are constituted by rules. Indeed, when we learn to use a word, what we actually learn is how to react and behave correctly in a particular context, so as to learn to practically follow a rule.[14] Hence, the rules of our language-games do not exist

9 Ibid., § 23.

10 Ibid., § 30.

11 Ibid., § 5.

12 Ibid., § 199.

13 Ibid., § 43.

14 As representative examples of the extensive debate on Wittgenstein's argument of rule-following, see especially Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Harvard University Press, 1982); and John McDowell, 'Wittgenstein on Following a Rule', *Synthesis*, 58 (1984), pp. 325–63 <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00485246>.

as explicit, determined, and fixed instructions before we actually play. Rather, Wittgenstein underlines the very impossibility of separating the rules from their applications, that is, from our shared practices. Therefore, we do not distinguish between correct and incorrect language uses — applications of rules — on the basis of a system of explicit instructions or mental representations of the rules, but rather on the basis of the shared (and inherited) practices in which we live. Accordingly, the criteria of correctness or incorrectness for those practices are neither rooted in some alleged natural features of the human being nor in the 'external world'. Even less do rules correspond to normative and fixed principles which lie outside our practices. Rather, these criteria are immanent in our shared practices as such. Wittgenstein expresses this point as follows:

> Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. One is trained to do so, and one reacts to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts to the order and training thus, and another otherwise? Who is right, then? [...] Shared human behaviour is the system of reference.[15]

From this perspective, I would argue that Wittgenstein's understanding of language as 'training'[16] and of rule-following as a 'practice'[17] involves a performative process of subjectification. Thus, we constitute ourselves as living speakers in and through training, insofar as we are trained to respond appropriately in given contexts: we learn to embody and enact (to practically follow) rules. Learning a language and continuing to live in it means being trained, embodying and enacting inherited

15 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 206.

16 See ibid., § 5–6.

17 See ibid., § 202.

practices, or, as Wittgenstein calls them, '*customs* (usages, institutions)'.[18] Through and in this training, we learn to 'project' those inherited uses into 'further life contexts',[19] so as to constitute ourselves and to contribute to and shape a shared language practice. We learn to use these inherited customs in further contexts and, indeed, to put it with Jacques Derrida, we learn to cite them.[20] In this (provisional) sense, 'following a rule is a practice'[21] which is carried out through training and has a performative dimension.

In order to analyse this performative dimension more closely, I wish to read it in light of Butler and Derrida's concept of iterability. For this purpose, I would like to emphasize first of all that at the core of Wittgenstein's conception of rules there lies the social, *recurrent*, or — better — *iterative* character of the *practices* of rule-following. Wittgenstein writes:

> Is what we call 'following a rule' something that it would be possible for only *one* person, only *once* in a lifetime, to do? — And this is, of course, a gloss on the *grammar* of the expression 'to follow a rule'. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on. — To follow a rule, to make a report, to give an

18 Ibid., § 199; emphasis in the original.

19 Stanley Cavell's description of the learning of language in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* plays a crucial role for this interpretation. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*: *Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 180–90. I will return to this point more extensively in section 2 below.

20 See Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 307–30.

21 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 202.

> order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions).[22]

As Klaus Puhl has shown, binding rules emerge and constitute themselves insofar as 'some contingent practical behaviours are *retrospectively* transformed into the normative criterion of the correct application of the rule, whereby their validity remains dependent on the fact that these contingent behaviours repeatedly assert themselves'.[23] In other words, 'the validity of the rule remains dependent on the maintenance of the regularity [of the practice] from which the rule has developed.'[24]

From this perspective, I would claim that the sedimented practices of rule-following, that is, the customs and institutions — to which Wittgenstein also refers as a 'world-picture'[25] — do not correspond to a system of well-founded, fixed, and normative principles. Rather, they are marked by a constitutive 'groundlessness',[26] which is to say that they are contingent,[27] since they correspond to the *hardened retrospective* effects of the repetition of practices. These uses, customs, and institutions, therefore, remain dependent on the regularity of our enactments: they are at the

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22 Ibid., § 199; emphases in the original.

23 Klaus Puhl, 'Die List der Regel. Zur Konstitution sozialer Praxis', in *Institutionen und Regelfolgen*, ed. by Ulrich Baltzer and Gerhard Schönrich (Mentis, 2002), pp. 81–99 (p. 96); my translation.

24 Ibid., p. 90.

25 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 95, 162, and 167.

26 Ibid., § 166.

27 I have tried to explicate this notion of contingency and situate it within a post-foundationalist paradigm in Lucilla Guidi, 'Die Grundlosigkeit der Praxis in Wittgensteins *Über Gewißheit*. Kritik als Übung des Kontingenzbewusstseins', in *Crisis and Critique: Philosophical Analysis and Current Events; Contributions to the 42nd International Wittgenstein Symposium 2019*, ed. by Anne Siegetsleitner and others, Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, xxvii (Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2019), pp. 86–90.

same time sustained and altered by the repetition of practices. A world-picture, which points to the inherited system of normative practices according to which we are trained so as to constitute ourselves, is determined as 'unmoved' by 'movement', meaning that it is sustained and hardened by our 'ungrounded way of acting'.[28] Wittgenstein writes:

> I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them retrospectively [*nachträglich*] like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not 'fixed' in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.[29]

In this sense, Wittgenstein compares the system of rules which builds up our world-picture to 'foundation-walls [which] are carried by the whole house'.[30] Moreover, he underlines that this sedimented web of practices that we embody in order to constitute ourselves as subjects points to the background against which we distinguish between true and false, correct and incorrect embodied behaviours and uses of language. This web consists in nothing more (and nothing less) than the retrospective *hardened* effects of the repetition of practices. Thus, on the one hand, the 'hardened'[31] background or — as Wittgenstein also calls it — the 'river-bed'[32] enables the constitution of ourselves and points to the criteria according to which we distinguish between true and false. On the other hand, this background does not correspond to a necessary and universal normative horizon. On the contrary, it is constitutively contingent, since it is historically situated and altered

28 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 110.
29 Ibid., § 152.
30 Ibid., § 248.
31 Ibid., § 96.
32 Ibid., § 97.

over time: it is hardened and altered by the 'movement of the waters',[33] which is to say by our 'ungrounded' enactments.[34] From this perspective, I would claim that the repetition of practices — in which the normative dimension of the reference system of rules *retrospectively* emerges, and which sustains, hardens, and alters this system — points to a performative, or iterative, process and can be uncovered in light of Derrida and Butler's notion of performativity as iterability.

In short, according to Butler, the notion of performativity refers to 'the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration'.[35] The temporal dimension of the process of iteration is crucial. On the one hand, iteration remains futural: it produces effects, which *retrospectively* constitute something that is 'not yet' there. On the other hand, iteration depends on a sedimented past. Iteration means citing, and therefore enacting and embodying, 'sedimented' discourses and practices.[36] Herein lies the 'dual dimension'[37] of a performative — iterative — process of repetition: on the one hand, an embodied social assignment is the *retrospective effect* of the iteration of practices (in Butler's context what is at issue are 'process[es] of materialization'[38] of sex and gender as retrospective effects of iterated practices and acts of naming and signification). On the other hand, in this very same process of iteration, a predominant normative matrix, or, to put it in Wittgenstein's

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., § 110.

35 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Routledge, 1993), p. 20.

36 Ibid., p. 10.

37 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 63.

38 See Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 15.

terms, the reference system of regulated practices (uses, customs, institutions), is both 'stabilized',[39] or hardened, and always already 'de-stabilized',[40] or altered.

This is the meaning of repetition conceived as a performative process of iteration. Hence, as Derrida has shown, when a sign (but this is 'valid not only for the orders of "signs" [...] but [...] for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience'[41]) is repeated or cited, it is cut off from its (previous) contexts, so as to be inscribed in a further context. From this perspective, every iteration implies at the same time both something identifiable, that which makes something citable, and a constitutive '*différance*',[42] that which inscribes the sign in a new chain of significations.[43] Hence, when a sedimented practice is cited and therefore enacted in a further context, this process of iteration is never the reproduction of an identical principle or 'meaning', since it always involves otherness: '*itara*, *other* in Sanskrit', variations.[44] From this perspective, iterability 'links repetition to alterity' and means both 'repetition/alterity'.[45] As Wehrle argues with reference to Butler's reading of Derrida's notion of iterability:

> Every use of language [...] never signifies something in absolutely the same way, but transforms pre-established rules and meanings in its very application. In this sense, discourses [as practices]

39 Ibid., p. 10.

40 Ibid.

41 Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 317.

42 Ibid., p. 327.

43 See ibid., pp. 318–19.

44 Ibid., p. 315.

45 Ibid., pp. 315 and 317.

> are neither stable nor fixed, but remain always fragile and open to transformation.[46]

In a parallel way, according to Wittgenstein, on the one hand, the regularity of practices, which is to say their iterative embodiments and enactments, *retrospectively* brings out the normative dimension of a system of rules, so as to stabilize and harden it in and through these enactments. On the other hand, the practice of rule-following is marked by the constitutive impossibility of logically deducing the application of a rule, that is, the particular use of language, from an abstract 'instruction' or 'meaning', so as to employ it in an identical way in another context. Wittgenstein thus emphasizes the fundamental hiatus between sedimented regulated practices and usages and their application or 'citation' in a different context, since no rule exists to regulate the application of the rule without running into an infinite regress.[47] Accordingly, our practices are never completely determined; rather, they are constitutively open. The practice of rule-following implies that it is always possible to *act otherwise*, to change the language-game by playing, to follow the rule differently — that is, to enact an inherited practice in a different way. Wittgenstein asks: 'And is there not also the case where we play, and make up the rules as we go along? And even where we alter them — as we go along.'[48]

Moreover, it is not only always possible to enact an inherited practice in a different way, but, more radically,

46 Maren Wehrle, 'Bodily Performativity: Enacting Norms', in *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, ed. by Lucilla Guidi and Thomas Rentsch (Brill, 2020), pp. 120–39 (p. 124) <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004420991_009>.

47 Wittgenstein writes: 'Can't we imagine a rule, regulating the application of the rule?' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 84.)

48 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 83.

every application of a rule — that is, every embodiment of a sedimented practice in a particular context — is constitutively iterable. The enactment of an inherited practice in a new context is described by Cavell, following Wittgenstein, as the 'projection of a word', and by Derrida as the 'citation of a sign'.[49] The crucial point in both cases is that the particular situated enactment is constitutively variable and therefore remains constitutively open. Cavell writes in this regard:

> [W]e keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed.[50] [...] Any form-of-life and every concept integral to it has an indefinite number of instances and directions of projection [into further contexts]; and [...] this variation is not arbitrary [since it is influenced by the inherited uses].[51]

In Derrida's words:

> Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written [...], can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts

49 Cavell critically engages with and distances himself from Derrida's reading of J. L. Austin in 'Signature Event Context', particularly in relation to the notions of voice and intention. However, Derrida's criticism of a disembodied, metaphysical notion of voice as transparent to itself, and the related conception of intention, are much more in line with Cavell's account of voice as responsiveness than might seem to be the case at first sight. One should take into account here the phenomenological roots of Derrida's criticism of Husserl's notion of voice in Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, ed. and trans. by Leonard Lawlor (Northwestern University Press, 2011). I cannot analyse this point here, since it would require a separate article. For Cavell's critical reading of Derrida, see Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Blackwell, 1995).

50 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 180.

51 Ibid., p. 185.

> in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center.[52]

This means that there are only practices 'with blurred edges', as Wittgenstein would say.[53] The inherited practices which we embody and enact can thus be understood as iterable, since 'we, in our conceptual world, keep seeing the same thing recurring with variations; […] concepts are not for use on a single occasion.'[54] From this perspective, Wittgenstein's conception of language can be described as performative, that is, as the iterative enactment of inherited practices. Accordingly, the latter involves both regularity and multiple variations and is therefore constitutively open. Moreover, I would like to highlight one last feature of this performative process: the sedimented practices and customs that we simultaneously maintain and change in and through our enactments are never at our disposal. Rather, they are marked by a constitutive opacity, since it is precisely against the background of these weaves of practices — that is, in their very training, embodiment, and enactment — that we constitute ourselves as subjects and thus live and act. Wittgenstein also characterizes this inherited background of sedimented practice as a world-picture. In *On Certainty*, he writes:

> But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness: nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the

52 Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 320.

53 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 71.

54 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1967), § 568.

> inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.[55]

What is at issue in the performative enactment of practice is neither a sovereign and individualistic form of self- and world-creation, nor mere subjection to and determination by the inherited practices which we enact. Rather, what is at stake is the acceptance of the constitutive opacity and openness of the inherited practices that we enact in order to constitute ourselves as subjects, and that we simultaneously maintain and change in and through our enactments. From this perspective, the mutual constitution of subjects and normative practices can be understood as a weave of performative, or iterable, processes.[56]

CAVELL'S INITIATION SCENE AND MUTUAL ATTUNEMENT IN LANGUAGE

In this second section, by drawing upon Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, I aim to show that language, understood as a weave of embodied iterable practices, is based on nothing more (and nothing less) than our mutual responses and thus on our mutual attunement in form(s) of life. This mutual attunement is not a matter of sharing an allegedly given human nature, nor does it consist in social conventions conceived of as agreements on judgements or principles. After exploring Cavell's insights, I will analyse more deeply the bodily, affective, and social dimension of this mutual attunement by resorting to Butler's account,

55 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 94.

56 I have explored this performative — that is, iterative — constitution of practices in Lucilla Guidi, 'Iterabilität und Kontingenz der Praxis in Wittgenstein und Heidegger', in *Praxis. Ausüben. Begreifen*, ed. by Michael Corsten (Velbrück, 2021), pp. 46–68. The first section of the present chapter is a revised version of the first section of this German contribution.

thereby reading this mutual attunement in forms of life as a constitutive 'opacity' to oneself 'as a relational being'.[57]

Cavell draws attention to the crucial significance of Wittgenstein's critical assessment of the account of language as a disembodied, symbolic system of rules or signs that denote outer or inner objects. For Wittgenstein, as Cavell underlines, Augustine's idea that the child learns to speak because the adult teaches it to associate names and objects is not just a false picture of language. Rather, this picture fails to take into account the unrecoverable and fragile dimension of teaching and learning a language, which coincides with the very process of becoming oneself and at the same time giving form, sustaining, and transforming our forms of life. Cavell describes this unrecoverable dimension as follows:

> When you say 'I love my love' the child learns the meaning of the word 'love' and what love is. *That (what you do)* will *be* love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought *that* will be sought. When you say 'I'll take you tomorrow, I promise', the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what *trust* is, and what you do will show what trust is worth. When you say 'Put on your sweater', the child learns what commands are and what *authority* is, and if giving orders is something that creates anxiety for you, then authorities are anxious, authority itself uncertain.
>
> Of course, the person, growing, will learn other things about these concepts and 'objects' also. They will grow gradually as the child's world grows. But all he or she knows about them is what he or she has learned, and *all* they have learned

57 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 20.

> will be part of what they are. And what will the day be like when the person 'realizes' what [s/]he 'believed' about what love and trust and authority are? And how will [s/]he stop believing it?[58]

Cavell is here drawing attention to three pivotal dimensions of our embodied practice of language. First, our language and the world are constitutively entangled and grow together. Second, he emphasizes that to learn a language is not to associate some names with some objects, so that an already constituted subject represents an already given external world. As Wittgenstein puts it: 'Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a foreign country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one.'[59] Rather, there is no sovereign mastery of language and no sovereign self-mastery as speaker, since one constitutes oneself by learning, embodying, and inheriting a language as a shared weave of practices, and this learning is something irrecoverable. (Echoing Cavell's question: How will I stop believing what I have learnt?). Third, Cavell draws attention to the fact that learning and teaching a language means *being initiated and initiating others* into forms of life. This (open) process of initiation is founded on nothing more (and nothing less) than on our mutual responses, that is, our inheriting and embodying a shared language practice. For example, the child 'produced a sound (imitated me?) which *I accepted, responded to* (with smiles, hugs, words of encouragement, etc.) as *what I had said*'.[60] Through the acceptance and the response of the other, the child learns to 'leap', as Cavell puts it: the child learns to pro-

58 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 177; emphases in the original.

59 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 32.

60 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 172; emphases in the original.

ject certain words, that is, to use them in further contexts. Here Cavell emphasizes that:

> Instead […] of saying either that we *tell* beginners what words mean, or that we *teach* them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world.[61]

Moreover, this process of initiation does not only concern children, but is ongoing. In other words: this process of initiation is never-ending, since we keep finding new possibilities in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed, thereby sustaining, shaping, and transforming our embodied practice of language and thus our forms of life. Thus, we are always beginners and '"the routes of initiation" are never closed'.[62] Hence, the boundaries of 'our' forms of life, that is, both our concepts and the aspects of a shared world, are not fixed or drawn a priori; rather, they are inherited language-practices (or conventions) that are shaped and expanded through our mutual responses in new contexts and life circumstances, and are therefore fundamentally contingent and open. They are marked by a constitutive futurity and open potentiality — a 'not yet'.[63] As Cavell puts it:

> Wittgenstein's discovery, or rediscovery, is of the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of

61 Ibid., p. 178; emphases in the original.

62 Ibid., p. 180.

63 On this potential dimension of one's community as something 'beyond itself', see Thomas Khurana, 'This New Yet Unapproachable Community: Formen der Gemeinschaft bei Cavell und Blanchot', in *Happy Days: Lebenswissen nach Cavell*, ed. by Kathrin Thiele and Katrin Trüstedt (Fink, 2009), pp. 43–65 <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846747254_005>.

> human society but, we could say, on the conventionality of human nature itself.[64]

Paola Marrati observes:

> Cavell himself suggests that Wittgenstein's understanding of conventions could be read along similar lines as Pascal's remark that 'custom is our nature' [... or, I would like to add, along a phenomenological account of being-in-the-world as ecstatic, as being-outside-of-itself]. And indeed these are different ways of conveying how precarious, ungrounded, unnecessary, and ultimately 'unnatural' 'human nature' truly is. [...] Such an understanding of the depth of conventionality challenges the idea of nature as a necessary and unchangeable given — a point that is quite important to recall in any discussion of forms of life.[65]

Thus, Augustine's picture of language is not only (and not primarily) a theoretically false picture of language; rather (and more radically), it involves a *practical avoidance*:

> What is important in failing to recognize 'the spirit' in which we say 'The child, in learning language, is learning the names of things' is that we

64 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 111.

65 Paola Marrati, 'The Fragility of Words, the Vulnerability of Life', *MLN*, 130.5 (2015), pp. 1055–66 (p. 1061) <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2015.0081>. This point has been underlined by Rosine Kelz: 'This leaves open the possibility that in future human nature could be defined differently. [...] This implies that any definition of concepts such as "life" or "the human" must remain blurry. While Cavell refers to language, to specifically human ways of moving and perceiving, of being companions or seeking separation, finally the definite boundaries of human community cannot be defined. What "we" understand as the human remains a contestable notion, an ever shifting term. Instead of committing ourselves to a clearly delineated community of human beings, then, thinking about the "human form of life" as marked by contingent practices allows us to interrogate how distinctions between the human and the non-human are made and to acknowledge their ethical and political productivity' (Kelz, *The Non-Sovereign Self*, p. 114).

> imagine that we have explained the nature of language when we have only avoided a recognition of its nature; and we fail to recognize how (what it really means to say that) children learn language *from* us.[66]

What Cavell is underlining here is that a picture of language as a disembodied system of signs that denote outer or inner objects is not just a theoretical position. Rather, this 'picture' involves a practical attitude toward our life in language: it means *avoiding* the acceptance of the fact that language does not work without us and that every time we speak we are already constitutively involved in, and committed to, the process of embodying, inheriting, sustaining, and renegotiating our life in language. Thus, we are constitutively involved in our 'agreement' *in* what we say and what we mean by saying it. In other words, we are mutually in agreement, or, better, *in consonance*, regarding what counts as something — what something is (called) — and at the same time what counts for us.[67] In other words, we are mutually attuned *in* a 'bustle' of judgements which opens up the intelligibility of our life and the world. Wittgenstein also calls this 'bustle' 'a world-picture', that is, the sedimented and opaque background against which one distinguishes between true and false, correct and incorrect, and identifies what something (or someone) is. Cavell emphasizes the 'astonishing' nature of this agreement, as

66 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 177; emphasis in the original.

67 On Cavell's notion of criteria, see Davide Sparti's afterword to the Italian edition of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*: Davide Sparti, 'Fra Scetticismo e riconoscimento. Breve guida alla filosofia di Cavell', in Stanley Cavell, *La riscoperta dell'ordinario: la filosofia, lo scetticismo, il tragico* (Carocci, 2001), pp. 505–23 (p. 508). See also Stephen Mulhall, 'Criteria, Scepticism, and the External World', in Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 79–108 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198238508.003.0006>.

well as its fragility and precariousness. Hence, this is not an agreement *on* a set of words, judgements, or 'criteria' conceived as 'social conventions'.[68] Rather, one might say, it is a sense of convention, as the German word *Übereinstimmung* suggests, a being-in-consonance. As Cavell observes, commenting on (and quoting) a famous Wittgenstein passage:

> It is altogether important that Wittgenstein says that we *agree in* (forms of life) and that there is agreement *in* (judgments). [...] 'It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use' [§241].[69]

Cavell stresses that this idea of agreement (*Übereinstimmung*) does not mean

> coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but [...] being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. That a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually *attuned* top to bottom.[70]

From this perspective, our language — to quote Cavell again — 'rests upon very shaky foundations'.[71]

68 As Cavell puts this point: 'Since we cannot assume that the words have their meaning by nature, we are led to assume they take it from convention. And yet no current idea of "convention" could seem to do the work that words do — there would have to be, we could say, too many conventions in play, one for each shade of each word in each context. We cannot have agreed beforehand to all that would be necessary' (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 31).

69 Ibid, pp. 31–32; emphases in the original.

70 Ibid., p. 32; emphasis in the original.

71 Ibid., pp. 178–79.

Thus, our mutual attunement is the fragile and vulnerable basis of our embodied life in language, which has to be accepted as the 'opaque fact' of finding oneself attuned in an unchosen language. Yet this opaque fact is not altogether determined, but remains fundamentally contingent and open, and is constantly confirmed, reshaped, and renegotiated by us. Cavell writes:

> If I am to have a native tongue, I have to accept what 'my elders' say and do as consequential; and they have to accept […] what I say and do as what they say and do. We do not know in advance what the content of our mutual acceptance is, how far we may be in agreement.[72]

In other words, what is at stake are the limits of the possibility of speaking to and for each other, which come to the fore when we do not know our way around, when our mutual understanding is interrupted, or when for example the child asks: 'Why do we eat animals?'[73] In these circumstances, I am forced to come back to myself, in order to examine my embodied and inherited practice of language, thereby making explicit and appealing to what 'we' say and what we mean by saying it. In such a way, the limits of this mutual attunement in language are tested, as I examine the extent to which I can(not) speak to and for you, that is, the extent to which I (we) can(not) agree on what counts as something and what counts for us. In this sense, as Cavell writes:

> The […] appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to

72 Ibid., p. 28.

73 Ibid., p. 125.

> community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established.[74]

As Sparti puts it: 'Our mutual availability [...] shapes the community that comes into being in the medium of our joint responsiveness to each other, the community of which we are a part and we help to make up.'[75]

There are three dimensions at stake in this mutual and fragile attunement. First, the openness of our projections: the enactment of inherited practices in new contexts is constitutively open. How my words as actions will affect others — their 'perlocutionary' effects, to quote J. L. Austin — are not (entirely) predictable.[76] Second, in projecting a word, in using it in a new context, I am not only saying something, thereby disclosing a new aspect of the shared world. Rather, I am also expressing, disclosing myself — that is, constituting myself as a subject — so that this process depends on, and is shaped by, the other's responses to my expressions: 'My words are my expression of my life; I respond to the words of others as their expressions, i.e., respond not merely to what their words mean but equally to their meaning of them.'[77] Third, this mutual attunement is

74 Ibid., p. 20. On the complex relation between the method of ordinary language philosophy, according to Cavell's reformulation of J. L. Austin, and its connection to an account of philosophy as a practical conversion and 'claim to community', see Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. pp. 15–49.

75 Davide Sparti, 'Projective Imagination: Therapy and Improvisation in Wittgenstein's (and Cavell's) Vision of Language', in *Wittgensteinian Exercises: Aesthetic and Ethical Transformations*, ed. by Lucilla Guidi (Brill/Fink, 2023), pp. 19–44 (p. 34) <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846767450_003>.

76 On the significance of the perlocutionary according to J. L. Austin and Stanley Cavell, see Sandra Laugier and Daniele Lorenzini, 'Who's Afraid of the Perlocutionary?', *Inquiry*, 68.6 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1990792>.

77 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 355.

not only the contingent and ungrounded foundation of language as an inherited weave of practices, but also marks our relating and being related to each other as embodied beings. Here Cavell underlines that in inheriting, embodying, sustaining, negotiating, and reshaping a language, we are at the same time exploring, testing, and renewing our relation to each other, a relation which involves our separateness as embodied beings.

Hence, this account of language as embodied practice is, on the one hand, a critique of a disembodied account of language conceived as a system of signs or rules by which an already constituted subject represents an already given reality. On the other hand, this account of language as embodied practice emphasizes the embodied character of the mind, as well as the acknowledgement of the other (mind) as an embodied being, thereby radically overcoming any dualism between body and mind. Thus, according to 'the myth of the inner', disembodied minds are veiled and separated by bodies. According to this myth, 'knowing other minds' is a matter of 'inferring' the mental 'inner states' of others from bodily movements or behaviours. On the contrary, for Wittgenstein (and Cavell), the 'body is the field of expression of the soul'.[78] Each of us is related and relates to others on the basis of an inherited weave of practices that make our own and the other's embodied being intelligible as such. Here, 'knowing the other's mind' is not a matter of epistemological knowledge, that is, the inference of an inner mental realm from outer bodily behaviours (or the impossibility of doing so, per the 'myth of the inner'). Ra-

78 Ibid., p. 356. Here, Cavell is reading Wittgenstein's passage 'The face is the soul of the body'. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, ed. by G. H. von Wright, trans. by G. H. von Wright and others (Blackwell, 1998), p. 26.

ther, it means *seeing* and *interpreting*,[79] 'sensing'[80] the other as an embodied being, responding to the other in a certain way, acknowledging the other according to an inherited weave of practice which makes the other and myself as embodied beings intelligible as such.[81] Here the metaphysical dualisms of inner/outer, sense perception/intellectual interpretation, and body/mind are called into question and overcome.[82] Cavell writes:

> Now we may see more of what is expressed in the myth of the body as veiling or screening the mind. Something *is* veiled […]. But the idea of the body plays its role. In the fantasy of it as veiling, it is what comes between my mind and the other's, it is the thing that separates us. The truth here is that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated* (*by* something); that we are, each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied […]. If something separates us, comes between us, that can only be […] a particular *way* in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another — our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another. Call this our history. It is our present.[83]

In conclusion, according to Cavell, language — as an embodied practice — means relating and being related to one another as embodied beings, that is, being in a certain position or attitude toward oneself and the other, against

79 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophy of Psychology — A Fragment' (previously known as Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*), in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 164.

80 What is at stake here is what Wittgenstein calls a 'modified concept of *sensing*'. Ibid., § 231.

81 See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 84.

82 I have analysed the overcoming of such dualisms in Lucilla Guidi, 'Emotions as Embodied Expressions: Wittgenstein on the Inner Life', *Humana.Mente*, 12.36 (2019), pp. 146–69 <https://www.humanamente.eu/index.php/HM/article/view/295> [accessed 11 November 2025].

83 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 369; emphases in the original.

the background of an inherited weave of practices. Thus, this inherited web of practices does not remain at our disposal. On the contrary, it points to the unchosen 'agreement' which enables our life. However, this 'agreement' is not given once and for all, but is maintained and renegotiated through our mutual responses. The boundaries of our agreement as mutual attunement in language as a form of life are (constantly) at stake, since they are confirmed, tested, expanded, reshaped, and redrawn each time I can(not) speak to and for you.

BUTLER'S SCENE OF ADDRESS AND THE OPACITY TO ONESELF

I propose to deepen this idea of mutual attunement, as well as Cavell's account of our relationality as embodied beings, by drawing on Butler's psychoanalytic and social account of the living being as fundamentally vulnerable, that is, as relational and opaque to itself.

By combining a psychoanalytic and a Foucauldian perspective, Butler analyses in greater depth the formation of the subject, which at the same time means both the (trans)formation of a matrix of norms conceived as embodied iterable practices and our relating and being related to one another. In particular, I will refer here to Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, so as to analyse the double opacity and dispossession at the core of the formation of embodied life.[84] Butler underlines two aspects. First, they describe the ways in which the infant's emergence through a web of primary bodily and affective relations with its

84 On this double dimension of opacity and its ethical consequences, see Catherine Mills, 'Undoing Ethics: Butler on Precarity, Opacity and Responsibility', in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. by Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 41–64 <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748678860-004>.

environment shapes the very constitution of the 'I'; these relations are formative and remain fundamentally opaque and unrecoverable. Second, they identify language, as a weave of social norms conceived as iterable practices, as the impersonal and opaque dimension which both constraints and enables one's own embodied life. In this section, I wish to consider these two points in order to deepen, through an affective and social account, a conception of language as embodied iterable practice that I have sketched out following Wittgenstein and Cavell, and thus to further develop the idea of mutual attunement in language.

First, as 'speculative philosopher',[85] Butler describes the unrecoverable scene of becoming oneself, so as to radicalize the bodily and affective dimension of the process of initiation into a form of life described by Cavell. The starting point here is not the embodied child in relation to the world and others, but the infant's body in relation to its environment and caregivers.

Drawing on Winnicott and Laplanche's psychoanalysis, Butler describes the scene in which the infant's body is impinged upon and overwhelmed by the other and thus by its environment. This 'being given over to the other', whose phantasmatic presence is experienced as overwhelming, is the way in which the infant first opens up to the world. Butler writes:

> We cannot tell a story about this, but perhaps there is some other way in which it is available to us, even available to us through language. [...] I am, prior to acquiring an 'I', a being who has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, established as the subject and object of speech. My infantile body has not only been touched, moved,

85 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 78.

> and arranged, but those impingements operated as 'tactile signs' that registered in my formation. These signs communicate to me in ways that are not reducible to vocalization. They are signs of an other, but they are also the traces from which an 'I' will eventually emerge, an 'I' who will never be able, fully, to recover or read these signs, for whom these signs will remain in part overwhelming and unreadable, enigmatic and formative.[86]

I would argue that Butler allows one to take into account the affective dimension of our mutual attunement in language as a form of life, by considering the ways in which corporeal and affective relations with an environment and caregivers are 'formative' of the 'I' that is yet to emerge. Drawing on Laplanche and Winnicott, Butler challenges the point of departure of Freud's psychoanalysis by emphasizing that the starting point is not innate drives,[87] but rather the constitutive *relation* of the infant with its caregivers and its environment, that is, its attachment to them — an 'attachment which is overdetermined from the start'.[88] Moreover, the infant does not yet exist as a separate, embodied 'I', but rather is a web of bodily and affective relations with its environment — that is, with its caregivers – a weave of bodily and affective relations which are 'formative' of this 'I' and that cannot be narrated, that is, recovered as such.

> One can make the general claim that primary impressions are not just *received* by an ego, but are *formative* of it. The ego does not come into being without a prior encounter, a primary relation, a set of inaugural impressions from elsewhere. When

86 Ibid., pp. 69–70.

87 Ibid., p. 71.

88 Ibid., p. 74.

> Winnicott describes the ego as a relational process, he is disputing the view that the ego is constituted and there from the outset of life. He is also positing the primacy of relationality to any bounded sense of self. If the ego, as Bollas and Lacan would agree, 'long precedes the arrival of the subject', that means only that the relational process that seeks to negotiate a differentiation from the unconscious and from the other is not yet articulated in speech, not yet capable of reflective self-deliberation. In any case, the ego is not an entity or a substance, but an array of relations and processes, implicated in the world of the primary caregivers in ways that constitute its very definition.[89]

Invoking Laplanche's 'Copernican revolution',[90] Butler emphasizes how adult experience is always decentred by infantile experience, thereby making it dispossessed, that is, outside of itself. Here Butler radicalizes the role of infancy, which still is present in Wittgenstein's and Cavell's accounts of language as embodied practice, by decentring the (ongoing) initiation of the embodied child into forms of life through the (ongoing) scene in which the infantile body emerges as a weave of affective relations with its environment and the other. Furthermore, on the one hand, this scene calls into question a developmental and self-coherent narrative account of the self — in other words, the possibility of coherently narrating and thus being the author of one's own story.[91] On the other hand, this scene inscribes an interruption at the core

89 Ibid., pp. 58–59; emphases in the original.

90 Ibid., p. 76.

91 On the failure of self-narration and its ethical potential both in Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* and in Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives*, and on the similarities and differences between these two accounts, particularly with reference to bodily vulnerability, see Ann V. Murphy, 'Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism', *Hyp-*

of embodied speaking life. This interruption is the very phantasmatic scene of having been addressed or called by the overwhelming presence of the other, the weave of affective relations from and out of which the 'I' emerges and which are still operative in our embodied speaking life with others. Here a double movement comes into play: in light of the primacy of one's relation to the environment, Butler reformulates the Levinasian priority of the Other, rethinking it with Laplanche as an *overdetermined relation* of the infant to its environment and its caregivers:

> For Laplanche, I am animated by this call […] and I am at first overwhelmed by it. The other is, from the start, too much for me, enigmatic, inscrutable. This 'too-much-ness' must be handled and contained for something called an 'I' to emerge in its separateness. The unconscious is not a topos into which this 'too-much-ness' is deposited. It is rather formed as a psychic requirement of survival and individuation, as a way of managing — and failing to manage — *that excess and thus as the persistent and opaque life of that excess itself.*[92]

This excess points to the overdetermined, formative, affective relation to the other and the world, and therefore is not something relegated to the past. This prehistory of embodied speaking life is not a past in the chronological sense. Rather, it is still happening and will not cease to happen, since these formative affective relations attune the relation to the other and thus the mutual attunement in language as an embodied practice and form of life.

> That prehistory continues to happen every time I enunciate myself. In speaking the 'I', I undergo

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atia, 26.3 (2011), pp. 575–90 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01202.x>.

92 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 54; my emphasis.

> something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the 'I', since I always arrive too late to myself. (Nietzsche's bees in *The Genealogy of Morals* clearly prefigure the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit*.) I can never provide the account of myself that both certain forms of morality and some models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself in coherent narrative form. The 'I' is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself. It remains the unaccounted for and, in that sense, constitutes the failure that the very project of self-narration requires. Every effort to give an account of oneself is bound to encounter this failure, and to founder upon it.[93]

Both the persistent *Nachträglichkeit* of this prehistory and the failure to give a full account of oneself are therefore continuously involved in our embodied life in language and thus in our mutual attunement in language and to each other. In psychoanalytic practice, then, this *nachträgliche* prehistory and failure — which are ongoing operants — are taken explicitly into account. In psychoanalytic practice — in transferences and counter-transferences — the analysand 'orchestrates'[94] with the analyst those primary affective impingements by the other, namely, the infant's attachment to its caregivers and environment. Hence, according to Butler, the analyst's task is not to provide interpretations, nor does the goal of the psychoanalytic process lie in the narrating of one's own story. Rather, what is at stake is the possibility of an embodied re-enactment of those formative affective relations within a 'holding environment',[95] as Butler puts it with Winnicott, while at

93 Ibid., p. 79.

94 Ibid., p. 58.

95 Ibid., p. 59.

the same time continuing to abide within the limits of self-knowledge, within a fundamental not-knowing:

> A certain humility must emerge in this process, perhaps also a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to know. Perhaps every analysand becomes, in this sense, a lay Kantian. But there is something more: a point about language and historicity.[96]

Accordingly, I would like to draw attention to this further (and final) point, a dimension of opacity related to the historical and social dimension of language, which opens up a second aspect of the opacity to oneself as a relational being and thus deepens the meaning of the 'agreement' in language as an embodied practice from a social perspective. This dimension points to what Butler also calls 'enabling vulnerability'[97] — the fact that one has already been addressed and affected by a language which one has never chosen. 'The "I" "agrees", from the start, to narrate itself [...] through modes of speech that have an impersonal nature.'[98] Butler emphasizes that one can become intelligible to oneself and to the other, thereby acquiring agency, by embodying a weave of social norms, understood as iterable practices. This vulnerability to language as the unchosen constraint *and* enabling condition of embodied life marks its impersonal and opaque dimension, a second and intertwined aspect of the opacity to oneself as a relational social being. As Butler puts it:

> This follows, not only from the fact that language first belongs to the other and I acquire it through

96 Ibid., p. 69.

97 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997), p. 2.

98 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 52.

> a complicated form of mimesis, but also because the very possibility of linguistic agency is derived from the situation in which one finds oneself addressed by a language one never chose.[99]

This is where the 'dual dimension of performativity' comes into play,[100] the fact that 'we are invariably acted on and acting',[101] in such a way that we both stabilize and change the practices by which we are acted upon through our enactments. This dual dimension, which also emerges in Wittgenstein's account of rules and Cavell's account of language as embodied (and iterable) practices, acquires a more radical social dimension in Butler's account. This dimension is related to the hegemonic nature of norms as practices and the risk involved in challenging them.

> [N]o 'I' belongs to itself. From the outset, it comes into being through an address I can neither recall nor recuperate, and when I act, I act in a world whose structure is in large part not of my making — which is not to say that there is no making and no acting that is mine. There surely is. It means only that the 'I', its suffering and acting, telling and showing, take place within a crucible of social relations, variously established and iterable, some of which are irrecoverable, some of which impinge upon, condition, and limit our intelligibility within the present. And when we do act and speak, we not only disclose ourselves but act on the schemes of intelligibility that govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony.[102]

99 Ibid., p. 53.

100 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 63.

101 Butler, 'Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance', p. 24.

102 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 132.

Butler adopts neither a voluntarist nor a determinist perspective. After all, these interwoven relations are historically determined formations, sedimented effects of the iterative embodiment of practices, not universal principles given once and for all. As Sparti puts this point:

> We could even argue that every time we act and speak, we intervene in the schemes of intelligibility that determine who will be a speaking being, subjecting these schemes to revision. Knowing, however, that if I want to challenge the hegemony of schemes and categories, I can only jeopardize the intelligibility of my conduct.[103]

CONCLUSION

I have claimed here that Wittgenstein's account of language as a weave of embodied practices involves a process of mutual constitution of subjects and normative practices that can be outlined in light of Butler's account of performativity as iterability. Drawing on Cavell's perspective, I have emphasized that embodying a language means being initiated and initiating others into a form of life, and being related and relating to each other as embodied beings. Moreover, I have stressed that an account of language as a disembodied system of signs by which already constituted subjects depict an already given reality is not just a false theoretical picture of language, but also means *avoiding the practical responsibility* for inheriting, maintaining, and renegotiating our mutual 'attunement' in the criteria that open up the intelligibility of ourselves, others, and

103 Davide Sparti, 'Dal riconoscimento alla riconoscibilità. Soggettivazione e la questione dell'umano in Axel Honneth e in Judith Butler', *Lares*, 89.2 (2023), pp. 205–22 (p. 215); my translation <https://doi.org/10.1400/297478>.

the world. In other words, it means avoiding the responsibility for our mutual 'attunement' in an inherited and sedimented language as a form of life. I have further proposed to deepen Cavell's idea of mutual attunement, as well as his account of our relationality as embodied beings, by drawing on Butler's psychoanalytic and Foucauldian account of the living being as fundamentally vulnerable, that is, as a bodily and socially relational being, which is fundamentally opaque to itself. From this perspective, I have argued, with reference to Butler, that an account of language as a weave of embodied practices is intertwined with the social and hegemonic nature of norms as practices and the risk involved in challenging them. In conclusion, in this chapter I have described the mutual constitution of subjects and normative practices as iterable, performative processes in order to complement Wittgenstein and Cavell's philosophy of ordinary language and their account of language as embodied practice with Butler's social and psychoanalytic perspective.

Performing the Living Present

Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*

ALBERICA BAZZONI

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I read Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* (1973) as a performative text that strives to capture and put into language the living present.[1] By *performative* I mean here a text that makes something happen, a text that embodies and enacts a certain configuration of experience, rather than a text that represents something that already exists, real or imaginary, as in a referential (semantic) use of

1 The text was first translated into English as *The Stream of Life*, trans. by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz (University of Minnesota Press, 1989); the title *Água Viva* literally translates as 'living water'. A later translation keeps the original title in Portuguese: see Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. by Stefan Tobler (New Directions, 2012). In this chapter I use the latter translation (e-book edition).

language.[2] Bridging linguistic, theoretical, and aesthetic approaches, the investigation of the performativity of a literary text also asks questions of *how* it realizes its performance, that is, questions of form and literary devices — metaphor above all. *Água Viva* is an attempt to speak of time as it passes in and through writing; it is 'the story of instants that flee', in which the speaking voice writes 'the flow of the words' and counts 'the instants that drip and are thick with blood'.[3] It is a philosophical-poetic meditation on, and staging of, the fleeting, flowing, and embodied temporality of the present.

Lispector is an experimental writer whose literary work engages with existential and aesthetic questions about language, representation, temporality, love, loss, joy, contradiction, the organic interconnectedness of humans and the world, and every nuance of thought and feeling. She was born in 1920 in Ukraine to a Jewish family, but she

2 Classical points of reference for this specific understanding of performativity are J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975), and Judith Butler's redeployment of the concept in the fields of gender and collective political identities, in Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 270–83; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997); and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015). For an up-to-date, comprehensive map of the concept of performativity in the study of narrative, see Ute Berns, 'Performativity', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn and others (Hamburg University Press, 2009–13) <http://lhn.sub.uni-hamburg.de/index.php/Performativity.html> [accessed 14 November 2025]. For a thorough philosophical investigation of the performativity of language, see also Lucilla Guidi's chapter 'Language as Embodied Practice: Notes on Performative Processes of Subjectification with Reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Judith Butler', in the present volume.

3 Lispector, *Água Viva*, pp. 66, 15, and 29.

grew up in Brazil, where the family moved soon after.[4] At the age of nine she lost her mother — an early encounter with death and mourning which left an indelible mark on her that can be traced as an underlying structuring force in all her writings. She married a diplomat, with whom she travelled and lived in several European countries and in the US for over ten years, writing novels and short stories in Portuguese and becoming an internationally acclaimed author. She then returned to Brazil, to Rio de Janeiro, where she died prematurely in 1977. Today, Lispector is considered one of the most significant twentieth-century Brazilian writers and her works are translated and read all around the world.

Alongside *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*) (1964), *Água Viva* is Lispector's literary masterpiece and represents her highest aesthetic-philosophical achievement. It is a short, experimental text, in which the voice who says 'I' addresses a nameless 'you' with an uninterrupted flow of images, reflections, invocations, descriptions, short narrative fragments, and unanswered questions. Completely devoid of plot, sustained by a rhythm of variations within repetitions, *Água Viva* mixes poetic and philosophical language to delve into the temporality of the present, which is, performatively, the present of writing.

The question of temporality is central to the phenomenological enterprise. In reading Lispector's *Água Viva*, I draw attention here to the present as the kinaesthetic awareness of the flowing of life, where temporality itself is formed. From a phenomenological perspective, the constitution of temporality lies at the heart of experience and of

4 See Benjamin Moser, *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector* (Penguin, 2014).

the co-constitutive encounter of self and world, which is an embodied experience *in* time and *of* time.[5] The experience of the living present comes to the fore as an intensified awareness of the ever-changing and embodied experience of becoming. Such a heightened experience is temporary and intermittent, as other dimensions of temporality — namely chronological, linear time, which organizes the temporal continuum into memory and projection — intervene to make life possible and to shield life from its own all-encompassing intensity. In the living present, however, only the present matters; past and future do not exist as such as there is — temporarily — no outside to the experience. The living present is therefore expansive and not organized chronologically, while at the same time constituting the foundation of temporal experience. *Água Viva* is an extraordinary exploration of the experience of the living present in its happening and of the possibilities of language to grapple with an experience that defies the very fabric of language itself.

In the first part of this chapter, I analyse Lispector's concept of the present in *Água Viva*, which is characterized as embodied, open, relational, and dynamic. I interpret Lispector's use of written language as *performative*, and reflect on what such performativity entails in terms of the relationship between enunciation and experience and the libidinal propulsion of writing as an affirmative force. In the second part, I look at how the temporality of the living present is performed in the text. I focus in particular on

5 In this chapter, I expand on the theoretical investigation of temporality and the aesthetic of the living present that I developed as part of my project at the ICI Berlin (2020–22), published in my essay 'Reduction in Time: Kinaesthetic and Traumatic Experiences of the Present in Literary Texts', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, Cultural Inquiry, 25 (ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 191–212 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_10>.

five elements, which are in no way meant as exhaustive of the text's strategies, but which effectively illustrate Lispector's *mise en scène* of the living present. These are: 1) the combination of philosophical and poetic language; 2) the open frame of beginning and end, which cuts the flow of language while at the same time only temporarily delimiting it — in fact, writing is presented as having no beginning and no end: the frame of the book works as a phenomenological reduction, a circumscribed experience of intensified attention to temporality in its happening; 3) improvisation as a form of openness to the unknown, which is discovered as it is created in writing; 4) the undoing of the distinction between subject and object, towards the achievement of an impersonal experience and an experience of the impersonal; and 5) the metaphor of birth.

LISPECTOR'S CONCEPT OF THE PRESENT AS LIVING WATER

Temporality is at the centre of Lispector's meditations in *Água Viva*. In the book, the voice who says 'I' makes the temporality of writing materialize on the page by speaking in the present about the present:

> I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown. The next instant, do I make it? or does it make itself? We make it together with our breath. [...]
>
> Let me tell you: I'm trying to seize the fourth dimension of this instant-now so fleeting that it's already gone because it's already become a new instant-now that's also already gone. Every thing has an instant in which it is. I want to grab hold of the *is* of the thing. These instants passing through

> the air I breathe: in fireworks they explode silently
> in space.[6]

Each fragment of the text contains Lispector's entire philosophy of time, reformulated in infinite variations throughout the book. In this passage, the core elements of the living present are convoked: the narrator speaks in the present, and wonders whether time is her own creation, or something that creates itself; in order to answer, she needs an interlocutor, the reader, and an embodied experience, breath: 'We make it together with our breath.' The time of writing and the time of reading are brought together as a material act that creates the next moment, that is, the continuity of the flow of the present. Lispector wants to capture the becoming of being, 'the *is* of the thing', in writing, which is 'the fourth dimension of this instant-now', a material existence that constantly *is* and constantly *becomes*. This operation is scary, she says, because it requires abandoning control and a full immersion into the unknown that is to come: 'I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown.' As Marília Librandi remarks, '[a]gainst the fixity of the written text, her consistent (even obsessive) aim was to create texts able to capture the instant of time in movement.'[7] Performativity, embodiment, openness to the unknown, and relationality emerge as the constitutive elements that define Lispector's concept of the living present, which *Água Viva* stages by mobilizing an impressively creative sequence of images and reflections.

The kind of present that Lispector performs in the text responds to a fundamental awareness of the inces-

6 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 3; emphasis in the original.

7 Marília Librandi, *Writing by Ear: Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 21.

sant movement and transformation of life as it happens. Lispector's textual performance of the living present shares some aspects with a modernist understanding of time exemplified in the literary device of 'epiphany', as both are intensified experiences that have their origin in the mundane, each emphasizing temporality through the prism of the instant, and having to do with accessing a different, often overwhelming, plane of cognition.[8] However, while modernist epiphany is a revelation happening in an instant that is abstracted from its temporal sequence, Lispector's intensified experience of time is rooted precisely in duration, in staying as close as possible to the realization of the becoming of being. The living present is not an epiphanic moment out of time, an instant that coincides with a metaphysical eternity, but the embodied experience of time as flow: 'More than the instant, I want its flow.'[9] Bringing desire into the picture ('I want'), Lispector's performance of the living present is a sustained experience and a sustained practice that has to do with an interrogation of time itself, which is intrinsically linked to its aesthetic production through writing. Lispector does not pursue transcendence, but rather embraces full materiality, exploring the living present as the foundational experience of embodiment.

Lispector's concept of the present as embodied, open, relational, and flowing, brings her close to thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,[10] and to an extent

8 See Terry E. Palls, 'The Miracle of the Ordinary: Literary Epiphany in Virginia Woolf and Clarice Lispector', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 21.1 (1984), pp. 63–78. However, Palls does not grasp the distinctive elements of embodiment and duration that characterize Lispector's concept of the present.

9 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 10.

10 See Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, trans. by Verena Andermatt Conley (University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Hélène

anticipates neo-materialist, posthuman, and ecofeminist developments of those strands of thought by Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway.[11] In 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', Paula Marchesini identifies the writer's philosophical influences in relation to temporality, which include Spinoza, Bergson, and Martin Heidegger, and analyses the original ways in which she develops her literary discourse on the present. According to Marchesini, Lispector

> conceives time as pure actuality, a relentless present, without past or future, that never stops being and that extends as wide as reality [...]. This ubiquitous present is primarily material [...]. Additionally, this present is a permanent vigilance, where material existence is ceaselessly attentive to itself.[12]

The anchoring of the present in the material world is what distinguishes Lispector from other thinkers on whom she draws in foregrounding the temporal constitution of experience. Furthermore, her concept of the present differs from other forms of temporality, 'the practical time of everyday life', 'the timelessness of religion', and 'the time-

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Cixous, 'Foreword', in Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life*, trans. by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl E. Fitz (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. ix–xxxv; Paula Marchesini, 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', *Angelaki*, 28.2 (2013), pp. 125–35 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2023.2192072>; Michael Marder, 'Existential Phenomenology According to Clarice Lispector', *Philosophy and Literature*, 37 (2013), pp. 374–88 <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2013.0032>; and Fernanda Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life with Clarice Lispector', *Humanities*, 7.55 (2018), pp. 1–18 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7020055>.

11 In fact, Lispector is a source for Braidotti. See the section entitled 'Clarice Lispector as the anti-Kafka', in Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Polity Press, 2002), pp. 160–67.

12 Marchesini, 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', p. 125.

lessness of rational thinking'.[13] These other temporalities are necessary as they enable prediction and control, 'protect humans from bare existence',[14] and provide the illusion of a justification of existence somewhere outside of it. However, Lispector is interested in phenomenologically suspending these other forms of temporality ('wanting to know why — I'm not interested in that, the cause is past matter'; 'The invention of today is the only way to usher in the future')[15] and aims for the very source — the very spring, to stay with the aqueous metaphor — of temporal experience, which is found in the materiality of existence in constant transformation. Being in the present, Lispector shows in *Água Viva*, demands the relinquishing of control and a posture of acceptance of what is, replacing the impulse to understand with the affect of tuning in. Importantly, this is not a transcendental experience but a deeply embodied one, which brings about a state of non-religious grace, the 'joy of being material among material things'.[16]

In Lispector's work, the question of temporality involves an epistemological and an aesthetic interrogation. How to conceptualize the experience of the living present, and how to render it into language? First, as an immersion into bare life in its flowing, Lispector is confronted with a pre-categorial experience, a continuum which precedes division and the structuring of experience into discrete portions, actors, and objects. The experience of the living present therefore exposes the subject to a constitutive cognitive limit and plunges her into the ineffable, the incomprehensible. Librandi highlights the pervasive element

13 Ibid., p. 126.

14 Ibid., p. 127.

15 Lispector, *Água Viva*, pp. 4 and 6.

16 Marchesini, 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', p. 130.

of silence and negation in Lispector's work, pointing to the limits of linguistic comprehension, whereby 'the ineffable is expressed negatively';[17] Similarly, Negrete stresses the constitutive limits with which language has to contend: 'While only accessible through language, life begins only by writing at the extreme point of language's necessary failure.'[18]

> Beyond thought I reach a state. I refuse to divide it up into words [...]. I know that I'm scared of the moments in which I don't use thought and that's a momentary state that is difficult to reach, and which, entirely secret, no longer uses the words with which thoughts are produced. Is not using words to lose your identity? is it getting lost in the harmful essential shadows?
>
> I lose the identity of the world inside myself and exist without guarantees. I achieve whatever is achievable but I live the unachievable and the meaning of me and the world and you isn't obvious.[19]

In order to capture the present, Lispector has to push language beyond semantic and syntactic boundaries, searching for choreographies of words that are not detached from the pre-categorial realm of experience and that enact the perceptive transformations of temporal becoming — words that, in Cixous's powerful formulation, attempt to 'repair the dreadful cut between book and body'.[20]

Cognitive studies of phenomenological orientation have stressed the embodied character of thought and the continuum existing between body and language. In *Metaphors We Live By*, a seminal text that connects cognitive

17 Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 9.

18 Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life', p. 9.

19 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 64.

20 Cixous, *Reading with Clarice*, p. 15.

studies of the embodied mind to cultural constructs such as war and death, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson trace a development of thought that works by means of analogy from basic physical schemas to complex conceptual aggregates, from the concrete to the abstract, from the body to language.[21] Although cognitive studies of the embodied mind contribute immensely to rooting thought in the body, establishing a continuity (rather than a radical alterity) between body and language, the basic schema on which Lakoff and Johnson's analysis is based responds to a narrow, selective understanding of the body as a perceptive and kinaesthetic unit, which limits their description of cognition to certain specific patterns. In the case of temporality, for example, they describe two fundamental ways of conceptualizing time:

> 1) time is a moving object, the future moves towards us, and passes us by; 2) time is stationary and we move through it. […] What is in common is relative motion with respect to us, with the future in front and the past behind. That is, they are two subcases of the same metaphor.[22]

The dominant metaphor of temporality explored by Lakoff and Johnson presupposes a front–back orientation, which is based on vision and walking: we have our eyes on the front, we walk forward. However, this is not the only way for a body to be oriented; what happens to our temporal understanding, for example, if we replace vision with hearing as the foregrounded sense? Hearing entails switching from a front–back orientation to an immersive and recep-

21 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago University Press, 1980).

22 Ibid., p. 44.

tive one.[23] It is not by chance that so many metaphors that attempt to express the living present through language resort to hearing rather than sight. Furthermore, when the body is immersed in water, front–back orientation loses its dominance. Waves of water, waves of sound, *água viva*: the aqueous metaphor seems much more apt to capture the temporality of the living present, displacing or suspending the centrality of certain specific cognitive categories (linear, discrete), and demanding a different language to be mobilized.

Instead of resorting to the structures of referential language, Lispector uses the present tense and widespread deictics such as 'this' to produce an actual temporal experience through enunciation:

> This is not a message of ideas that I am transmitting to you but an instinctive ecstasy of whatever is hidden in nature and that I foretell. And this is a feast of words. I write in signs that are more a gesture than voice.[24]

The text is not a container of meaning, 'a message of ideas', but a gesture and a feast, that is, an experience in and of itself (and, specifically, a joyful, sensually pleasurable experience, although scary in the face of the unknown, as we have seen). By performing the present, approximating embodied experience in writing, the text produces pleasure — precisely what is deemed unachievable in an understanding of language as lack, as separation. As Cixous remarks, in *Água Viva* Lispector 'manages to produce a place where

23 See Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, on the aural aspect of Lispector's work and its philosophical implications.

24 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 17. The English translation 'ecstasy' forces the text's original meaning into a specifically connoted term. The Portuguese term used by Lispector is *volúpia*, which literally means 'intense sensual pleasure'.

to have pleasure and to say it would not be absolutely antagonistic, where pleasure would flow into saying it, would not be extinguished through the act of saying it'.[25] This is indeed the difference between representation, which presupposes the absence of the signified and its replacement in language, and performativity, which enacts a presentification in language: 'I am savoring whatever exists.'[26] In *Água Viva*, pleasure is present, the present is pleasurable.

PERFORMING TIME

The reader of *Água Viva* is invited by Lispector to join in the writer's pleasure by relinquishing a controlling attitude, which would seek to understand and anticipate what is to come, and instead to surrender to the flowing force of the text. The text elicits an attuned reading, in small portions or all at once, starting anywhere in the text, reading some parts again, and enjoying the variations within repetitions. There is an unfolding of images of flowers, animals, caves, mundane activities such as drinking coffee and sitting on a chair, births, dawns, the short narrative inserts, the direct addresses to 'you', the unanswered questions, the alternation of intense emotional states such as joy, fear, mourning, and beatitude. Such a text, which 'escapes the first rule of text', as there is no story and no intelligible development, requires alternative modes of fruition, based on sensorial immersion rather than narrative tension or hermeneutic interpretation.[27] And in this movement of acceptance, the reader may join Lispector in a shared, pleasurable presentification.

25 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. xii.
26 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 67.
27 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. ix.

Part of the fascination exerted by *Água Viva* is its recourse to a combination of philosophical and poetic language. As Librandi notes, Lispector's work is both 'a case study and a source of theory'.[28] In this respect, Lispector joins other authors who pursue a mutual contamination of poetic and philosophical linguistic functions, starting from an awareness of the irreducible role of metaphor in constructing meaning, on the one hand, and of the embodied (situated, contextual, relational, and sensorial) nature of language, on the other.[29] In the case of *Água Viva*, the original interweaving of philosophical poetry and poetic philosophy responds to the author's challenge to write an experience that pushes the boundaries of language, that is, the capturing of the very forming of experience in the present, the approximation of the becoming of being: 'My state is that of a garden with running water. In describing it I try to mix words so that time can make itself.'[30] Lispector constructs a text that is a meditation on the living present

28 Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 9.

29 See Giuseppe Stellardi, *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor: Imperfect Thought* (Humanity Books, 2000). See also Adriana Cavarero's extensive work on the relationship between philosophy and literature from a feminist perspective that reclaims the centrality of the body: Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005). As Cavarero elsewhere puts it: 'literature is a polysemous language that undoes the arrogance of every system claiming stability. [...] Philosophy is constructed by removing from language the liveliness of the body, the communicative sense of its resonance.' See Adriana Cavarero and Elisabetta Bertolino, 'Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero', *Differences*, 19.1 (2008), pp. 128–67 (p. 161) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2007-019>. In discussing the philosophical-literary mix that characterizes Lispector's style, Librandi mentions Nietzsche, a reference that recurs in criticism on Lispector, as the thinker who 'established the modern form of literature as a hybrid text in between philosophy and fiction' (Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 21).

30 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 10.

and also a performance of the living present. Metaphor, the margin of philosophy, is widespread within the text, contending with the impossibility of verbalizing experience. But metaphor is also in the very construction of the text, as the text performs what it says: it is an interrupted flow with no beginnings and no ends; it connects the present tense of sentences and the present of writing and reading; it constantly transforms; it pushes meaning into the unknown. As Cixous evocatively puts it, '[t]he text is a metaphor itself, a metaphor which is not a metaphor but *água viva*, living water, a metaphor without stop. [...] The text is its own echo.'[31]

I wish now to provide some more detailed examples of how metaphor and performativity work in the text. The first element to highlight is that of the text's frame. If the living present is an ongoing flow, how to contain it in a book that is necessarily delimited? Lispector tries to respond to this structural limit by staging a text with no beginning and no end. From the opening line, writing is presented as already ongoing, as if picking up a stream of words that was inaudible but already there:[32] 'It's with such profound

31 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. xxii.

32 Bergson's concept of time is useful here, as it distinguishes between objective time, which is spatialized, linear, and can be divided into segments with beginnings and ends, and subjective time, or duration, which is continuous and cyclical. See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [1889], trans. by F. L. Pogson (Dover Publications, 2001). It is interesting to note the affinity between Lispector's temporal performance in *Água Viva* and the work of electronic composer Caterina Barbieri, explored from a similar perspective by Federica Buongiorno in 'Reduction in Computer Music: Bodies, Temporalities, and Generative Computation', in *The Case for Reduction*, pp. 175–90 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_09>. Barbieri works on repetition and variation, immersion, improvisation, sustained attention, and the embodied negotiation with the medium of execution. What for electronic music is the necessary mediation of computers, with which the artist forms an embodied 'structural

happiness. Such a hallelujah. Hallelujah, I shout, hallelujah merging with the darkest human howl of the pain of separation but a shout of diabolic joy.'[33] The first sentence is subjectless and breaks with syntax. We are thrown in the middle of a discourse, an expression of joy intermixed with the pain of separation, as in giving birth. It is a beginning, but it comes from something else; enunciation is already in a continuum. Later in the text, she says it explicitly: 'What I write to you has no beginning: it's a continuation.'[34] The end of the book is equally open, another sequence of present-tense enunciations on the movement of 'now':

> Ah this flash of instants never ends. My chant of the *it* never ends? I'll finish deliberately by a voluntary act. But it will keep going in constant improvisation, always and always creating the present that is future. […]
>
> Whatever will still be later — is now. Now is the domain of now. And as long as the improvisation lasts I am born.
>
> What I'm writing to you goes on and I am bewitched.[35]

Writing, and time with it, continues even after the word on the page ceases to be audible, Lispector suggests. The book is, of course, a frame to the event, which cuts the flow of language while at the same time only temporarily

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coupling' (p. 178), is for Lispector the mediation of writing, which performs the experience of the living present. Barbieri describes the temporality created by cycles of repetition and differential alterations in her electronic pieces as 'a dynamic and living being able to develop its own organic laws' (Barbieri, in Buongiorno, 'Reduction in Computer Music', p. 186). See (or, better, listen to) Caterina Barbieri's albums *Patterns of Consciousness* (2017) and *Ecstatic Computation* (2019).

33 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 3.

34 Ibid., p. 41.

35 Ibid., pp. 86–87.

delimiting it. Inside the frame, however, the frame itself is not perceivable; there is no beginning and no end, no before and no after, no externality, only the flow of the living present. The text contained in the book works as an exercise of phenomenological reduction, or else a ritual, an experience of intensified attention to temporality in its happening. The fact that the experience of the living present is delimited by the book, however, does not mean that outside of that experience time stops flowing, that there is an actual temporal interruption; it is attention that is diverted — it resurfaces and is drawn to everyday chronological time. But this is not in the book.

The creation of a present *in fieri*, with no beginning or end, is reinforced throughout the book by the continued variations on similar repeated patterns, which undo any linear, front–back development, and create a disorientating effect. 'I have the vertiginous impression never to know which page I am on,' comments Cixous; 'all these relations of false anteriority, posteriority are something of a déjà vu which is not a déjà vu.'[36] Like the reader who does not know exactly where they are, so the narrating voice writes without knowing in advance where she will go. Whereas storytelling is based on the organization of the story into sequences, distinct temporal and spatial domains, actors, actions, causes, and consequences, Lispector pursues the *mise en scène* of the sensorial experience in its becoming, which does not respond to a logic of distinction and consequentiality but follows unforeseen associations. Delving into the living present, Lispector does not organize writing according to a predetermined plan. Writing is not the representation of a pre-existing reality, but the discovery and creation of reality in its making: 'I direct nothing. Not

36 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. xxii.

even my own words. But it's not sad: it's happy humility.'[37] In this space of improvisation, by renouncing the position of a sovereign subject who orders reality, Lispector can access a different kind of reality, which precedes or exceeds thought: 'I'm slyly coming into contact with a reality new to me that still has no corresponding thoughts and not even a word that signifies it — it is a sensation beyond thought.'[38] Lispector seeks to inhabit a simultaneity of writing and the present, abandoning herself to the flow of words and the physical compenetration with life that words produce:

> This contact with the invisible nucleus of reality is of such purity.
>
> I know what I am doing here: I am telling of the instants that drip and are thick with blood.
>
> I know what I am doing here: I'm improvising.[39]

If Lispector does not direct her words, *who* is writing? If the subject gives up a controlling attitude towards reality and renounces acting as its master, how does reality emerge? The encounter with the living present, as articulated in *Água Viva*, undoes the hierarchical distinction between subject and object, replacing it with receptivity and acceptance. Writing in *Água Viva* is an exercise in actively becoming open to receiving the world and attuning to it. The subject is no longer the organizing governor of reality, but an entity among other entities, through which the world reverberates: 'I am a tree that burns with hard pleasure. A single sweetness possesses me: complicity with the world.'[40] Librandi conceptualizes this aspect of Lispector's

37 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 27.

38 Ibid., p. 41.

39 Ibid., pp. 15–16.

40 Ibid., p. 32.

work by focusing on the aural dimension, which she places at the core of what she defines as 'echopoetics':

> A written text founded on listening is first a receiving text rather than a producing one. By 'echopoetics', I refer to such a receptive capacity as an unconditional openness to the outside, and as a result of being completely inside in the sense of belonging, of being part of something that can be the womb, the world, and/or the planet itself, as Lispector articulates it.[41]

Such an epistemological shift is enabled by the realization that the living present is shared among everything that exists. It is an impersonal energy, in which all beings participate and which Lispector calls 'it'.[42] The 'it' of things is the continuity, the underlying, uninterrupted existence, from which Lispector extracts words through her writing. As Negrete explains, there are two perspectives: that of the writer, which is necessarily limited as it begins and ends with the book; and that of writing itself, boundless, which is the perspective of life on life itself. Through writing, the writer tries to get as close as possible to this impersonal perspective, where the separation between subject and object is abolished: 'This is life seen by life. I may not have meaning but it is the same lack of meaning that the

41 Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 10. Caterina Barbieri describes her experience with music composition and performance in terms that closely resonate with Lispector's: 'You are immersed in the sound and the sound is at the same time inside and outside of you. And you cannot tell the difference, because you become that sound and that sound becomes you [...]. I really appreciate the music [...] that forces me to leave behind my subjectivity and become an object myself, fused together with the sound' (Barbieri, in Buongiorno, 'Reduction in Computer Music', pp. 178–79).

42 See Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life', on impersonality in Lispector's works, which the critic reads in parallel with Deleuze's thought.

pulsing vain has.'[43] In this impersonal perspective, it is life itself that expresses itself, overflowing the boundaries of subjecthood:

> Creation escapes me. And I don't even want to know so much. That my heart beats in my breast is enough. [...]
>
> So the basis of existence turns up to wash over and erase the traces of the thought. The sea erases the traces of the waves on the sand.[44]

As Cixous comments, 'she lets her hand write and puts herself into an intense relationship of listening. [...] She transmits. [...] She considers that she is not the one that writes but that the word is already a thing in itself.'[45] We are in a mediumistic setting, although outside of any religious inclination and firmly anchored to an embodied, material dimension.

Immersing oneself into the 'mystery of the impersonal that is the "it"' requires the deconstruction of one's habits of thought, the acceptance of the limits of what can be understood with the usual tools of logic, and the courage to trust an unknown world in which one participates and belongs:[46]

> Before I organize myself, I must disorganize myself internally. To experience that first and fleeting primary state of freedom. Of the freedom to err, fall and get up again.
>
> But if I hope to understand in order to accept things — the act of surrender will never happen. I must take the plunge all at once, a plunge that

43 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 8.

44 Ibid., pp. 59–60.

45 Cixous, *Reading with Clarice*, p. 14.

46 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 23.

> includes comprehension and especially incomprehension. And who am I to dare to think? What I have to do is surrender.[47]

Words falter, and yet they are what enables the writer's and reader's experience. In this incomprehensible reality, which is beyond thought and has its own 'underlying style',[48] personal identity no longer exists in separation, but only in a co-constitutive relationship and co-determination of matter:

> I'm myself.
>
> [...] I have the impersonal inside me and isn't something the personal that sometimes floods me can corrupt or rot by the personal that sometimes floods me: but I dry myself in the sun and am an impersonal of the dry and germinative pit of a fruit. [...]
>
> The transcendence inside me is the living and soft 'it' and has the thought that an oyster has.[49]

And elsewhere:

> I surpass myself abdicating myself and am therefore the world: I follow the voice of the world, I myself suddenly with a unique voice.[50]

The last element I wish to foreground here is the theme of birth, which recurs throughout the text and is deeply connected to its performance of the living present and its act of presentification in language. Birth is commonly a leading metaphor for creation, but is also connected to separation and metamorphosis, as well as, obviously, to death.

47 Ibid., p. 61.

48 Ibid., p. 65.

49 Ibid., p. 23.

50 Ibid., p. 17.

The process through which Lispector puts herself and the reader in *Água Viva*, as we have seen, is a deconstruction of a subject position, so that a different world can emerge and be heard, and is an encounter with life in its happening, with the joint 'birth' of temporality and experience. In this context, the metaphor of birth — and widespread associated images of dawn — speaks to the incessantly generative force of life, by which the writer herself is created through writing. Literary autogenesis, that is, self-creation through writing, is indeed a frequent trope in autobiographical texts, especially by subaltern subjects who are traditionally excluded from a speaking position and embrace writing as a way to assert their gaze on themselves and the world. The metaphor of birth also has particularly rich connotations for several women writers and thinkers, who confront the patriarchal association of 'womanhood' with the ability to give birth, but who also, in many cases, elaborate their actual experience of gestation and giving birth. In Lispector, there is certainly a drive towards giving birth to herself in writing, a performative act of creation through words:

> I slowly enter my gift to myself, splendor ripped open by the final song that seems to be the first. [...] It is a world tangled up in creepers, syllables, woodbine, colors and words — threshold of an ancestral cavern that is the womb of the world and from it I shall be born.[51]

However, what moves Lispector is not the achievement of a strong authorial position, but rather the attunement to impersonal life, which binds writer and world together, annulling the roles of subject and object. Thus, the writer is born out of her own writing, but does not give birth

51 Ibid., p. 8.

to herself. Being born and giving birth are both impersonal events, generated by the force of life in its ceaseless becoming:

> I am not objectivizing anything: I am having the real birth of *it*. I feel faint like someone about to be born.
>
> To be born: I've watched a cat give birth.[52]

> And walking in complete darkness in search of ourselves is what we do. It hurts. But these are the pains of childbirth: a thing is born that is. Is itself. It is hard as a dry stone. But the core is soft and alive, perishable, perilous *it*. Life of elementary matter.[53]

As a constantly renewed beginning, the metaphor of birth is the expression of the generative force of life. At the same time, as violent separation, birth is also intimately connected to loss, absence, and death.[54] Birth and death form a cycle that cannot be effaced, but can be subsumed within the wider flow of transformation and becoming. 'This natal dimension', Negrete writes, 'inhabits each and every instant; it is the stuff of the event.'[55] It gives rise to a

52 Ibid., p. 28; emphasis in the original.

53 Ibid., p. 39; emphasis in the original.

54 Cixous points out the significant role of the absence of the mother (who died when Clarice was nine years old) in all of Lispector's works, inflecting her search for the present and belonging with an acute sense of loss and mourning: 'The question of birth is an intensification, a metaphorization of a situation that is read as painful. [...] There is a continuous emergence, a separation or a struggle of the subject in order not to lose the enveloping contact with the living. At the same time, it must be lost, during an instant. [...] Clarice suffers from an originary solitude' (Cixous, *Reading with Clarice*, p. 41). In *Água Viva*, however, Lispector does not write from a place of melancholia, but rather is propelled by a joyful, affirmative desire.

55 Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life', p. 15.

'nonlinear flow [...] interweaving being born, giving birth, writing, and the world'.[56] Mindful of the loss that comes with each birth, Lispector strives to stay in that space that precedes individuation, as close as possible to each instant in its unfolding, attuned to the flow of life that is constantly reborn and propelled by a desire for immanent pleasure.

CONCLUSION: PERFORMATIVITY AS AFFIRMATION

In this chapter, I have interpreted Lispector's *Água Viva* as a phenomenological-poetic adventure into temporality. Lispector dives into the present and attempts to bring the bare experience of temporal becoming into language, without separating enunciation from the world, falling into complete silence, or else reducing the world to language. This is a poetic exercise of presentification — evoking, calling, summoning into existence. It avails itself of metaphors, images, repetitions, broken syntax, unanswered questions, condensed reasoning, paradoxes, and vocative acts, in order to capture the present in its happening.

The whole work is inscribed within the category of birth, and is propelled by pleasure, the joy of being and becoming together with the world. As such, it embodies what Rosi Braidotti calls an 'ethics of affirmation', which emphasizes 'the freedom to affirm one's essence as joy, through encounters and mingling with other bodies, entities, beings and forces', as complementary to an 'ethics of melancholia' which characterizes the poststructuralist linguistic turn and its focus on absence, lack, and negation.[57] Affirmative

56 Ibid., p. 15.

57 Rosi Braidotti, 'Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 14.3 (2008), pp. 7–36 (p. 31) <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2008.11666049>.

ethics does not presuppose a strengthened identity; quite the opposite, it seeks attunement to processes of becoming, where 'becoming is an intransitive process'.[58] In *Água Viva*, writing does not compensate for an absence, it performs presence; it does not substitute experience, it embodies it. In the physical act of writing and reading, in the metaphorical dis-organization of linear temporality, language flows in and with the living present — at least temporarily, *as long as the improvisation lasts*.

58 Ibid.

Performing and Embodying Authorship

Case Studies from Italian Women's Autobiographical Writings

URSULA FANNING

INTRODUCTION

The stated aim of the symposium in which this chapter has its origins has real resonance for the literary texts and authors whose work I will discuss here. The symposium set out to explore the concept of reduction as a movement towards the cornerstones of lived experience, as an attempt to grasp the primary encounter between self and world (which takes place through the senses), and as an articulation of the link between embodied experience and knowledge. When we turn our attention to autobiographical writing, we might think of it first and foremost as a form of writing of and about the self — and it is certainly that, but it is also and inevitably about that encounter between

the self and the world, and is, in part, an attempt to grasp and give voice to that encounter. It is a movement towards some articulation of the experience and consciousness of the self (performative, then, in and of itself), and it is also a movement towards an expression of the self in the world. For the authors I focus on here (Sibilla Aleramo, Natalia Ginzburg, Dacia Maraini, and Lidia Ravera, whose works span the twentieth century), the experience articulated is always constructed as relational; their focus is all at once on the self, the self in the world, and the self in relation to the Other and others. These writers repeatedly evidence, through their writings, that lived experience is itself relational, that the self only has the sense of being a self and can only begin to understand itself precisely in relation to the Other, to others, and to the world.

I choose in the subtitle of this chapter, as well as in my volume on Italian women writers of the twentieth century,[1] to privilege the term *autobiographical writings* because of my view that the term *autobiography*, as it has frequently been used in critical discourse, is reductive. There is certainly a sense in foundational discussions of autobiography that it equates to an almost photographic representation of a life, underscored by Philippe Lejeune's (much-disputed) original formulation of the autobiographical pact, with its implicit guarantee of veracity.[2] Leigh Gilmore references this tendency in her observation that 'autobiography has been interpreted as the arena in which the self speaks itself without the artifice of fiction, where language is in some mysterious way a pure mirror of the

1 Ursula Fanning, *Italian Women's Autobiographical Writings of the Twentieth Century: Constructing Subjects* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017).

2 Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Éditions du Seuil, 1975).

writer's life'.[3] In fact, what is termed *autobiography*, along with autobiographical fiction and the autobiographical essay, draws on the same structural devices as fiction (as critics have increasingly recognized).[4] Both are narratives that purport to tell us something of the real (while invariably drawing attention to the impossibility of representing reality and to the inadequacies of language as a vehicle for meaning); hence, I deliberately choose not to distinguish between the terms *autobiography* and *autobiographical fiction*, and I use the term *autobiographical writings* instead to consider these different forms of expression as kindred narratives, with an eye to their inherent fictionality and to their reaching into the imaginative realm, and as a strategy to draw them together under a more capacious umbrella.

The description of the self, and of the self as ineliminably in the world, in these kinds of narratives, constitutes a grasping towards knowledge about the self, the self in relationship, and the Other. That grasping, and its representation, often turns out to take the form of an 'embodied approach to the construction of meaning', to borrow Susan Kozel's words,[5] and this embodied approach is frequently foregrounded thematically in the writings I focus on here. Their authors attempt to describe the process of integrating the intellect (specifically drawing the reader's attention, at times, to the act of cerebral authorship in which they are engaged, signposting and highlighting it) with a sensory

3 Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 35.

4 See, for example, Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Cornell University Press, 1984); and Franco D'Intino, *L'autobiografia moderna: storia, forme, problemi* (Bulzoni, 1998).

5 Susan Kozel and Adam Eeuwens, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2008), p. xxv. See also Susan Kozel's chapter 'Affective Choreographies' in the present volume

experience — surprising us, perhaps; how can what we typically think of as the intellectual act of authorship be reconfigured as a physical, sensory experience? They appear to tease out what they are doing as they are doing it, and their writing is thus essentially performative in its effort to convey and to foreground an experience at once cerebral and embodied. Their autobiographical enterprise is an attempt to understand phenomena as these are lived through and thus, from within, by definition — it is a phenomenological enterprise.

The authors I will discuss attempt to return us to the life of the living human subject in their engagement with the world, the subject trying to grasp the world, and hence to grasp the dynamic and unfinished character of their existence. To utilize Jean-Paul Sartre's views for my purposes here, these writers attempt to delineate carefully the affective, emotional, and imaginative life of the self in the manner in which it is meaningfully lived.[6] And for these women writers, taking on the role of author in this process of delineation (which actually turns out to be particularly difficult because of specific cultural connotations of authorship as male that persist throughout the twentieth century in the Italian context, and not only in that context)[7] is a performative exercise in which both mind and body are thoroughly engaged. Their work fits well, viewed through

6 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* [1939], trans. by Philip Mairet (Methuen, 1971). See also Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Routledge, 2000), especially p. 5 and pp. 354–90 for a detailed discussion of Sartre's philosophies and, in particular, his conception of consciousness.

7 See, for example, Carol Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968–1990* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), especially p. 34, for a discussion of the tendency to 'devalorize' women's writing in Italian literary criticism.

a philosophical lens, with that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, insofar as they are engaged in a rethinking of traditional dualisms of mind and body, consciousness and body.[8] These writers' conceptions of the self (or selves) appear as embodied, embedded in the world, and interrelated with others.

In the first section of this chapter I will focus on some elements of the autobiographical writings of Natalia Ginzburg that illustrate certain of the performative dimensions of the autobiographical, through a consideration of one of her paratexts — these being highly performative of the function of authorship by definition.[9] I will then turn, in the second section, specifically to the question of embodiment and to how it is thematized and constructed as integral to authorship by these writers.

PARATEXTUAL PERFORMANCE

Paratext is the term used by Gérard Genette to define the framing devices that authors (and publishers) employ to contextualize and situate the main text (in this case, the autobiographical work). It references the matter that surrounds or relates to a text, which can take several forms — for instance, prefaces, epigraphs, essays, interviews, sometimes even footnotes. Paratexts may be peritextual (that is, located within the covers of the material object — the book — itself) or epitextual (external to the book, as in the case of essays, interviews, comments in letters, diaries, or in the

8 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. by Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012), especially p. 113, for his discussion of *Bewegungsentwurf*.

9 Genette discusses the 'paratextual performance' repeatedly, and at some length, in Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* [1987], trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge University Press, 1997); see especially p. 408.

form of intertextual reference in other works). The paratext may be authorial (and prefaces and epigraphs very often are) or allographic; that is, it may be written by an editor or, more typically, by a critic or another author who has been specifically chosen by the author of the autobiographical work for the light in which they will cast the work on which they comment. By extension, in the case of autobiographical writings in particular, they are chosen to cast a light in which the author herself will be reflected. Whatever form or forms paratexts take, Genette holds (rightly) that the 'entire functioning [of the paratext] is based [...] on the simple postulate that the author "knows best" what we should think about [the] work'.[10] As he says, 'one cannot travel far within the paratext without encountering this belief',[11] and this is borne out by the following analysis. In sum, the paratext constitutes a space in which the author most often sets out to control the reception of the work and, in autobiographical writing, it is yet another attempt at representing a self. It is a space in which there is an effort to exert control in highly stylized fashion and, as such, is essentially performative. It is the place in which the author appears most fully clothed in the guise of author; it is that space in which authorship is most thoroughly and consciously performed.

I have chosen to focus in this section primarily on Natalia Ginzburg as my representative of paratextual performance because she provides an excellent and very obvious example of a writer who is constantly negotiating her sense of subjectivity, of being-in-the-world. Her being, as it is represented in the work I will focus on here, *Lessico famigliare* of 1963 (which has been translated into English

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.

with several different titles),[12] is precisely a 'being-with', to draw on Martin Heidegger;[13] *Lessico famigliare* is all about the presentness of others and various modes of 'being-with' them, even when they are not present and where the author is reconstructing them in this cultural enunciation. It is an autobiographical novel which frequently challenges what we think of as the autobiographical mode, precisely because its focus is almost entirely on others or, better, on the ways in which the first-person narrator (who shares the author's name) defines herself in relation to others, and on how she co-exists with them. Indeed, the narrator even has to intervene to remind us, as she describes childhood family holidays in some detail: 'I was there too' (C'ero anch'io).[14] The Italian critic Cesare Garboli, in his 1972 allographic preface to the novel,[15] even contends: 'The situation is that, while always saying "I", Ginzburg can only speak of others' (È che dicendo continuamente 'io', la Ginzburg sa parlare solo degli altri).[16] The self constructed by Ginzburg is very much in the world and is highly attuned to others, to the extent that that self can at times (at least in this text) be effaced. In her own preface to the first edition of the novel, Ginzburg addresses this issue head-on. She admits to having left a lot out of her autobiographical

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12 Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare* [1963] (Einaudi, 1996). The translations of the title always focus, albeit in differing ways, on the central position of language in the work. D. M. Low chose to entitle his 1963 translation *Family Sayings*, while Judith Woolf preferred *The Things We Used to Say* (1977). Most recently, Jenny McPhee opts for the more faithful *Family Lexicon* (2017). All translations from the Italian here and elsewhere, except in the case of Maraini's 1987 essay 'Reflections', are my own.

13 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. by Joan Stambaugh (SUNY Press, 1996).

14 Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare* [1963] (Mondadori, 1972), p. 122.

15 Ibid., pp. v–xv.

16 Ibid., p. ix.

narrative; there are, she tells us, 'endless gaps' (infinite lacune).[17] More particularly, Ginzburg acknowledges that much of what she has left out of the work directly concerns herself: 'I didn't really want to talk about myself' (Non avevo molta voglia di parlare di me),[18] she says of this text, which is often still referred to in reductive fashion as an autobiography. Ginzburg's perspective is broader than what is traditionally conceived of as the strictly autobiographical. She insists that she had always wanted to write 'a book that would tell the story of the people who lived around me at that time' (un libro che raccontasse delle persone che vivevano, allora, intorno a me).[19] This is (in part) that story, she concludes. The ducking and diving around self-representation in this example of that supposedly most self-representative of genres is notable.

What we meet with here is, I suggest, 'a doubleness of performative constitution', as Lisa Folkmarson Käll defines it in her discussion of those elements drawn from phenomenology in Judith Butler's concept of performativity.[20] The purpose of Käll's article is to identify elements of a phenomenological heritage in Butler's work, particularly in relation to her articulation of that notion of performativity. She sets out 'to draw attention to a doubleness of the performativity of identity and of the subject as on the one hand culturally and institutionally formed and reiterated, and on the other hand intentional'.[21] Käll's undertaking in relation to Butler, in fact, maps nicely onto what Ginz-

17 Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare* (1996), p. v.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Lisa Folkmarson Käll, 'A Path Between Voluntarism and Determinism', *Lambda Nordica*, 20.2–3 (2015), pp. 23–48 (p. 41) <https://www.lambdanordica.org/index.php/lambdanordica/article/view/447> [accessed 18 November 2025].

21 Ibid., p. 24.

burg is doing here, as the latter teases out the position of her narrator as subjected to particular social structures (in which, as the youngest female member of the family, she frequently simply does not have a voice, and functions often as an observer of others), but within those social structures, the narrator intentionally enacts different identities. The observing consciousness which she strives to construct in her narrative is at once aware of familial and social hierarchy and pressures, and also genuinely interested in telling the story of 'the others' (le persone intorno a me), and of her relationship with them. Moreover, it is precisely in her own preface (which Genette would certainly define as an assumptive authorial preface) that Ginzburg can perform the identity of author most fully. Genette notes that the assumptive authorial preface is 'monitory'.[22] Indeed, there could not be a better definition for Ginzburg's preface here, which she entitles, quite consciously, an 'avvertenza'; the word does double duty in Italian, since it means both 'foreword' and 'warning', and Ginzburg absolutely intends her preface to be both. She takes on fully the role of the author who knows best, who sets out to control the reception of the work, and who thus represents her self in another way (the voice of the author in the preface is not the self-effacing voice of the narrator in the body of the text). The 'avvertenza' is full of instructions to the reader, and yet it also slyly subverts itself. It begins with the strong assertion: 'Places, facts and people in this book are real. I have invented nothing' (Luoghi, fatti e persone sono, in questo libro, reali. Non ho inventato niente).[23] The verb 'to invent' is employed four times in the first two paragraphs of the preface, and on each occasion it is surrounded with

22 Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 239.

23 Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare* (1996), p. v.

negative connotations. The author is here telling her readers categorically that this work is, in some sense, real — not fictive — and that it should be read as such. So 'real' is the work, she insists, that she feels unable to give her characters names other than those they possess in real life. This is an instance of something akin to Lejeune's earliest notions of the autobiographical pact, where not only does the main character/narrator bear the name of the author but other characters also bear their real-life names. Later objections to Lejeune, of course, point out that any such claim 'depends on taking representations of identity and the real as identity and the real themselves'.[24]

Ginzburg proves to be well aware of the problems with her own claims, as she progresses through the short preface to *Lessico famigliare* oscillating between attempts to stabilize truth and the real, and simultaneously admitting to gaps (and to the precise nature of those gaps around her representation of herself). Her consciousness of these gaps, and of the difficulties in the process of representation itself, ultimately lead Ginzburg to an instruction to the reader which sits entirely at odds with her claim to truth-telling: 'Although this is taken from reality, I think it should be read as though it were a novel' (Benché tratto della realtà, penso che si debba leggere come se fosse un romanzo).[25] It is here that *Lessico famigliare* undergoes, in effect, a generic reclassification by its own author. The 'taken from reality' that we meet here on line thirteen of the preface undoes the 'real' of its opening line. The author, in the end, has written a destabilizing prologue: she insists that a story that is 'real' and 'not invented' should be read as if it were unreal and wholly invented. In her questioning of the possibil-

24 Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p. 65.

25 Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare* (1996), p. v.

ities of representation of the real, Ginzburg has taken on a shape-shifting authorial self. In the preface, she repeatedly performs authorship for us, at once categorically telling us how to read the work while, at the same time, calling into question the possibility of representing reality and of representing consciousness through writing. In a sense, she is showing us the author in the process of becoming.

EMBODYING AUTHORSHIP

I turn now to the arguably more complex issue of embodying authorship to pose the question of how this might be done through the process of writing and, moreover, through the lens of the performance of authorship. One of the features of the writings of several of the authors on whom I have worked in the context of autobiographical expression by which I have been most struck while considering their attempts to define both themselves as authors and the characteristics of their authorial enterprise is precisely their constant, recurring recourse to and evocation of the body. The body is frequently brought front and centre by these authors; we are regularly reminded of its presence, indeed of its ineluctability. This is especially evident in those moments where the authors are conceiving (and I use that term advisedly, since this conception of the self as author is surprisingly often linked to themes of physical gestation) of themselves as authors, where they are consciously constructing the self as author, where they are most fully performing authorship. This construction of self is therefore, again, frequently (though not exclusively) located in the paratext, often in the epitext (in essays about the writing process, for instance). In phenomenological terms, this notion of embodying authorship through its performance, in the act of writing (and in the moment

of writing about writing), is tricky. It can really only be approximated through literary representation and through thematization, but I would argue that its very representation and thematization is challenging in itself (for both author and reader), and that it is challenging in a very positive sense. It confronts us with what we do not tend to think of immediately when we think of authorship and of writing; our view of these undertakings is all too often hived off into the intellectual and cerebral dimensions, and we rarely automatically reflect on the body that is writing (in spite of much interesting work on the topic in feminist criticism),[26] on the fact that writing quite literally cannot be done without the body.

In that sense, I would argue that the foregrounding of the body that is writing in the works of these authors constitutes a kind of reduction in itself; it challenges what we think of, paradoxically, as the received image of writing and of the writer, and causes us to modify (maybe even radically change) our views. Cartesian dualism, so foundational for much of Western thought, notoriously separates body and mind.[27] These writers, however, absolutely do not subscribe to this division. Rather, they seem to set out to undo that mind–body dualism in and through their writ-

26 Certainly from Cixous onwards, the body and its relationship to writing has been a topic of some significance in French feminist criticism and has been enthusiastically taken up and debated in the Anglosphere. See Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975), pp. 39–54. Cixous's essay was rapidly translated into English by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen as 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 4 (1976), pp. 875–93. It has been reprinted several times since in both languages. An essay by Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'Écriture Féminine"', *Feminist Studies*, 7.2 (1981), pp. 247–63, was one of the first to deepen the debate around *écriture feminine* and writing the body.

27 See Jonathan Westphal, *The Mind–Body Problem* (MIT Press, 2016), for an engaging account of the mind–body issue in Descartes and in monist theory.

ing, to rethink and reconceptualize it in a way that would be immediately understandable to a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty. He asks us to break with our 'familiar acceptance of the world' in order to 'grasp it as paradoxical',[28] and these writers certainly break with familiar concepts of the literary world and of writers, presenting us with the paradox of the body as determining the writing which we often tend to hive off as purely intellectual. There is, for these authors, no clash between the intellect and the body (or, where there is one, it is ultimately faced and worked through); rather, intellect and body turn out to be intertwined and thus these writers illustrate an integration of intellect with sensory experience.

How does this look in practice? My first example comes from Dacia Maraini and her conceptualization of writing. In a 1987 essay that immediately homes in on the centrality of the body, 'Reflections on the Logical and Illogical Bodies of my Sexual Compatriots' (Riflessioni sui corpi logici e illogici delle mie compagne di sesso), Maraini insists: 'In the end, one writes with the body.'[29] She repeatedly draws attention precisely to the body that writes, before describing the undertaking of writing in distinctly embodied terms.[30] It is, she claims, 'profoundly feminine and maternal [...] tied as it is to the sense of becoming'.[31] She uses strongly corporeal maternal images,[32] deliber-

28 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xiv.

29 Dacia Maraini, 'Reflections on the Logical and Illogical Bodies of my Sexual Compatriots', trans. by Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, in *The Pleasure of Writing*, ed. by Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Ada Testaferri (Purdue University Press, 2000), pp. 21–38 (p. 27).

30 'Writing is tongue, and the tongue is not limited to moving in the mouth' (ibid.).

31 Ibid., p. 29.

32 'The body of the mother means the flesh and milk of every spoken language' (ibid., p. 30).

ately and provocatively, as a poetic for writing, and especially for writing by women. This is, of course, a decidedly risky undertaking because of the way in which, in terms of Cartesian dualities, women are repeatedly associated with the body and with nature, while men are associated with the mind and with culture. Maraini is all too aware of this and yet still takes it on; she wants to collapse these boundaries. Her formulation would not be 'Je pense, donc je suis', à la Descartes;[33] it would be closer to Gabriel Marcel's 'Je suis mon corps',[34] which was so inspirational for Merleau-Ponty, but it would be most fully captured in a notion of thinking with and through the body.

This thinking with and through the body involves a collapsing of other boundaries too. Critics have noted how, for Maraini, writing is connected to an intense relationality. Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, for instance, notes how 'for Maraini, writing is […] connected to the loss of boundary between self and other, a work of empathy';[35] she also notes that the experience of blurring boundaries in Maraini is 'often characterized by a sense of queasiness'.[36] Not coincidentally, I would argue, that queasiness-inducing loss of boundaries is also intimately connected to Maraini's conception of writing, pregnancy, and the maternal. Indeed, Maraini has described writing as a gestational process.[37] In her collection of essays *Un clandestino a bordo* ('The Stowaway'), which focuses on maternity, abortion, miscar-

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33 René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* [1637] (Nouveaux Classiques Larousse, 1972), p. 65.

34 Gabriel Marcel, *Journal métaphysique* (Gallimard, 1927), pp. 236–37.

35 Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, 'Body as Will: Incarnate Voice in Dacia Maraini', in *The Pleasure of Writing*, ed. by Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Testaferri, pp. 195–214 (p. 198).

36 Ibid., p. 200.

37 Dacia Maraini, *Un clandestino a bordo. Le donne: la maternità negata, il corpo sognato* (Rizzoli, 1996).

riage, and literature, she conflates writing and pregnancy. Here, discussing Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*,[38] which lends its title to her work (most appropriately for the figure of the pregnant woman whom she evokes), she considers the relationship between captain and stowaway as one of 'relating the other to himself [...]. The stowaway is another, but [...] he is a part of him, an [...] unknown part' (adeguare l'altro a sé [...] il clandestino è un altro, ma [...] è una parte di lui, una parte [...] sconosciuta).[39] This mother–foetus/captain–stowaway analogy is even more clearly spelled out just two pages later, where an overt comparison is made between the captain's establishment of an emotional bond with the stowaway and that which grows between mother and child.[40] There is 'an intense relationship of knowledge, comprehension, tenderness. Just like a mother has with her child' (un rapporto intenso di conoscenza, di comprensione, di tenerezza. Proprio come fa una madre col proprio figlio).[41] Susan Stanford Friedman, in an article on the usage of maternal metaphors for writing in English-language literature, notes that 'women writers have [...] risked' what she calls 'the metaphor's dangerous biologism in order to challenge fundamental binary oppositions of patriarchal ideology between word

38 Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer* [1912] (Penguin, 1995).

39 Maraini, *Un clandestino a bordo*, p. 13.

40 Ginzburg, too, addresses this stowaway relationship — and in striking terms — in her essay on abortion, 'Dell'aborto' (1975). She depicts the pregnant body as engaged in a very particular kind of relationship: 'the most closed, the most enchained and dark relationship that exists in the world [...] the least free of relationships' (il rapporto piú chiuso e piú incatenato e piú nero che esista al mondo, è il meno libero fra tutti i rapporti). Natalia Ginzburg, *Opere*, 2 vols, ed. by Cesare Garboli (Milan: Mondadori, 1987), II, pp. 1299–303 (p. 1302).

41 Ibid., p. 15.

and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body'.[42] I would contend that this is exactly what Maraini does in her work.

She is not, however, an isolated voice; she has, to use her own term, 'sexual compatriots' at either end of the century who have form in this regard. I will briefly draw here on one early twentieth-century example, Sibilla Aleramo, and a late twentieth-century case, Lidia Ravera, to illustrate this point.

Aleramo's 1906 autobiographical novel *Una donna* (A Woman) is hugely important for Italian feminism, and for Italian women's writing, and is far too complex to do justice to here.[43] I will touch on just one aspect of the text which is highly relevant for the question of embodying authorship, and that is Aleramo's knitting-together of intellectual and bodily experience and the fusing of these in the process of artistic creation. Here, indeed, the maternal is more than a metaphor. In chapter seven, the novel's first-person protagonist describes the birth of her son. This is figured, fascinatingly, as a sort of rupture in the self. The protagonist says: 'at the moment in which my son was entering the world, I cried out in revolt at […] my shattered consciousness' (nel punto in cui mio figlio entrava nel mondo, avevo gettato un urlo di rivolta in nome della […] mia coscienza naufragante).[44] One paragraph later she is describing 'a coming-together of two distinct elements: one centred on my son […], the other the first invincible impulse towards the artistic expression of everything that now moved me; it was filling me with clear, quick, new and

42 Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies* 13.1 (1987), pp. 49–82 (p. 51) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177835>.

43 Sibilla Aleramo, *Una donna* [1906] (Feltrinelli, 1982).

44 Ibid., pp. 70–71.

ineffable feelings' (un avvicendarsi di due distinti progetti: l'uno che riguardava mio figlio […]; l'altro, che costituiva il primo invincibile impulso verso l'estrinsecazione artistica di quanto mi commuoveva ora, mi riempiva di sensazioni distinte, rapide, nuove ed ineffabili).[45] The protagonist is trying, she says, to do the impossible: to express through writing the sensations which she is feeling through the written word, to bring together the two apparently separate domains of bodily experience and literary expression. She is shining a light on this task, but also precisely on the link between the body and the artistic impulse.

That coming-together of two elements is, I suggest, Aleramo's attempt at an integration of the intellectual and the sensory and relational. It turns out to be an ongoing process for her. In her later essay 'La pensierosa' (The Thoughtful Woman), of 1913,[46] Aleramo still focuses on the (maternal) body and also insists there specifically that writing bears the marks of the gendered body, long before Hélène Cixous will construct a similar argument. This essay is addressed to Aleramo's male colleagues, and she is at pains to stress that she has had to be untrue to herself in order to be understood by them: 'understanding men, learning their language, has meant moving away from myself' (capire l'uomo, imparare il suo linguaggio, è stato allontanarmi da me stessa).[47] She expands on her wish to write in a way that is true to herself, linking her writing ineluctably with her physical body, pointing to 'the physical spasm and the rush in every fibre of my being in the struggle to […] recreate the world' (spasimo e voluttà delle fibre

45 Ibid., p. 71.

46 Sibilla Aleramo, 'La pensierosa' [1913], in Aleramo, *Andando e stando* [1921] (Feltrinelli, 1997), pp. 113–22.

47 Ibid., p. 113.

bramose struggendosi [...] di ricreare il mondo).[48] For Aleramo, then, writing is not a purely intellectual exercise; it is one in which her body is inevitably involved (and it is specifically the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth that have inspired her to write, and to integrate her body into her writing).

Lidia Ravera begins her writerly journey later in the century with a strong sense that the act of writing is both intellectual and masculine; in her 1979 autobiographical novel *Bambino mio* (My Child),[49] her protagonist states (interestingly, precisely as she fights against the desire to have a child): 'I have a jacket with padded shoulders. I write. I have to think like this' (Io ho una giacca con le spalle imbottite. Io scrivo. Così devo pensare).[50] When she eventually finds herself pregnant, the narrator dryly ironizes on the creative possibilities: she decides to keep a notebook 'just in case the whole experience reveals itself to be particularly "creative"' (caso mai l'intera esperienza si fosse rivelata particolarmente 'creativa').[51] In a manner reminiscent of patterns in Ravera's predecessors' work, her narrator finds (to her surprise) that life, and specifically the experience of giving birth, overturns her view of writing as a purely intellectual undertaking and pushes her to the startling recognition that 'the body writes' (il corpo scrive).[52] Again, this writing through the body turns out to be profoundly relational from Ravera's perspective, as we see in her 1993 novel *In quale nascondiglio del cuore* (In

48 Ibid., p. 115.

49 Lidia Ravera, *Bambino mio* (Bompiani, 1979).

50 Ibid., p. 15.

51 Ibid., p. 85.

52 Ibid., p. 139.

Which Hideout of the Heart),[53] where the protagonist's advice for her adolescent son is, crucially: 'Travel. Even if you don't go far [...] the baggage is what's important. Carry yourself lightly. Open your eyes' (Viaggia. Anche senza andare lontano [...] l'importante è il bagaglio: alleggerire l'Io, aprire gli occhi).[54] This is an injunction to move beyond the self, to be alert to others, and to possibilities of being-in-the-world. The focus is outward, not inward. This brings us back to Ginzburg's other-centred narratives, and again subverts what we think of as the autobiographical enterprise of focusing on the self.

CONCLUSION

In essence, I am suggesting here that these writers upset norms and dissolve boundaries. They challenge our thinking around what autobiographical writing consists in; they insist on drawing attention to the body *in* writing and the body *as* writing/*in the act of* writing. Indeed, perhaps the most arresting elements of their representations of the self lie in their recurring recourse to the physical. They bring body and book into mutually illuminating play. The book turns up as metaphor, and the self turns up as book. Their autobiographical selves are never unitary, or entirely self-focused. Rather, they are multiple and relational, focused on the Other and on others. They strive to grasp the primary encounter between self and world, which takes place through the senses, and to articulate the link between embodied experience and knowledge (to draw again on the concepts underlying the original workshop which gave rise to this volume of essays). In their autobiographical writ-

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53 Lidia Ravera, *In quale nascondiglio del cuore. Lettera a un figlio adolescente* (Mondadori, 1993).

54 Ibid., p. 127.

ings, they integrate the intellect with sensory experience in performative fashion. Their aim is, at least in part, to convey writing as an embodied experience.

DANCE

Affective Choreographies

SUSAN KOZEL

> Inside the many debates swirling around the rapid rollout of so-called artificial intelligence, there is a relatively obscure skirmish focused on the choice of the word 'hallucinate'.
>
> Naomi Klein, 2023[1]

A profoundly affective and embodied verb, *to hallucinate* means to find oneself transposed into a parallel and not entirely recognizable or comfortable sensory state. The cultural hallucinations of which Naomi Klein speaks can be dangerously performative, producing new actions, behaviour, and beliefs — in effect, new ontologies shaping the presence of artificial intelligence (AI) in daily life. The artistic research project *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance* had

1 Naomi Klein, 'AI machines aren't "hallucinating". But their makers are', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/08/ai-machines-hallucinating-naomi-klein> [accessed 18 November 2025].

its premiere at the ICI Berlin during the 'Performing Embodiment: Practices of Reduction' symposium. This work used mixed reality technologies to reactivate the embodied states of the dancers in the choreographic archive of Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir and was supported by the German AUTONOM initiative inviting artists to experiment with AI.[2] In this chapter, I argue that performance-making and phenomenology can be seen as closely entwined acts of praxis concerned with reflecting and shaping embodied existence. Joining the growing body of writing on affect, I propose that the logic of juxtaposing phenomenology with performance is not simply additional, but is *compositional*; or, to use the language of dance, it is *choreographic* in the sense that not only can phenomenology be used to attend

2 *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance* was part of the AUTONOM initiative of the Fonds Darstellende Künste in Germany, with funds from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. See *AUTONOM*, ed. by Holger Bergmann (Fonds Darstellende Künste, 2022) <https://www.fonds-daku.de/en/events/publikationen-en/> [accessed 19 November 2025]. An exhibition of somatic states from the work of Icelandic choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir, the project is a choreography of mixed reality technologies, kinaesthetic algorithms, affects, archival material, and live bodies. Visitors are invited to download the *CATALYSTS* app to immerse themselves in the resonant states of the dancers, informed by Guðjónsdóttir's deep tissue deconditioning practice 'Full Drop into the Body'. States of affective potential arise from the awakening of latent energies over time, across media and flesh, expanding what dance can be and how bodies can remember. This work was created by an interdisciplinary team of artists and researchers including philosopher Susan Kozel, screen dance maker Jeannette Ginslov, choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir, and artist-technologist Keith Lim. It was co-produced with the Data Society Research Program of Malmö University, with additional support from Malmö's Inter Arts Centre (IAC); The Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture; ICI Berlin; Open Spaces festival, Tanzfabrik Berlin; and WUK performing arts, Vienna. For visual documentation, see 'Bodily Interfaces/CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance' <https://msgudjonsdottir.com/index.php/catalysts-somatic-resonance-bodily-interfaces-2022/> [accessed 19 November 2025>; and 'Somatic Archiving' <https://www.somaticarchiving.org/> [accessed 19 November 2025].

to affect, but the performance of phenomenology creates affective choreographies. This accentuates the practical dimension of affect, and it places phenomenology squarely in the fields of art, dance, design, and activist politics — any field where changes are implemented by means of close attention to beings in motion. It provides a way to reflect upon and choreograph the 'hallucinations' of AI along with the other material manifestations of technological developments.

'BUT HOW?'

The argument that a combination of phenomenology and performance produces affective choreographies reflects a turn towards practice or methodology. The question of methodologies, both those used to conduct research and those that research seeks to transform, has taken on an urgency in present cultural and academic worlds. This demonstrates a need on the part of scholars and artists to transform disciplinary practices from 'within' to account for what is 'without' and, in so doing, to render porous the boundaries separating the inside and outside of disciplines and institutions. Methodologies are broken into methods, recombined, hybridized, supported by tools and toolboxes, integrated, legitimized, discredited, marginalized — either as a deliberate strategy or as an act of aggression — queered, mainstreamed, instrumentalized, celebrated, or condemned; all in the quest for new constructions of knowledge and enactments of change. Anyone navigating this as an artist, researcher, teacher, or human being runs directly into multiple questions of 'how?' How do we access complex situations and confounding data? How do we capture them? How do we make sense of them? How do we legitimize the processes? How do we act on them while re-

specting the lives and histories at the centre of our research (including our own)? How can we activate our disciplinary knowledge and expertise in the face of multiple crises? How can we mobilize methodological rigour, transforming when necessary, but not throwing inherited knowledge overboard in a panic? How can we do all this ethically?

Methodological constraints and blind spots are felt by researchers at all stages, in simple as well as complex investigations. These constraints are particularly evident when affective phenomena are being explored. In one of those rare but valuable moments of spontaneous discussion at the transmediale media art conference in Berlin several years ago, a pair of presenters let down their guard and permitted their concerns to emerge. It was as if the disciplinary police (or the academic superego) had not yet awoken on that final Sunday morning. One presenter revealed the affective nuance that emerged from their careful and empathic ethnographic processes, yet, when asked to describe in greater detail the affective states demonstrated by their interviewees, they faltered. They were aware that a potent affective range was evident in their study — fatigue, powerlessness, boredom, apathy, frustration, depression — and they knew that these distinctions needed to be refined, but they could not find a way to account for such fine-grained qualitative description within their methodology. It was clear that they felt they were not permitted to let ambiguity, speculation, or, even worse, their own subjectivity enter their research processes. To do so was to risk the legitimacy of the whole project. In their words, they and others faced a significant methodological challenge in conducting the research that most mattered to them. Nevertheless, they were drawn to inquire into the sort of real-world phenomena that effectively broke their methodological and conceptual structures. They were at a loss.

The presenters were certainly not alone in this headlong collision with the conditions for legitimacy of a chosen field. This happens to many of us, in any number of academic disciplines and artistic fields. It might place us in a situation of having to plan an 'escape route from academia' — words spoken by a media artist at that same conference. Another option is to transform scholarship from outside but in close counterpoint with academic institutions, as has been done so powerfully by Sara Ahmed in recent years.[3] Alternatively, we might decide to develop our ideas and practices from within, by the pragmatic means of 'limitations, adaptations and inversions', as proposed by A. N. Whitehead in his resonating reflections on process at the heart of reality.[4] Or we might attempt methodological inversions by a combination of all three: within, without, and proximate.

Methodologies are practices that can bind or liberate, blind or authenticate. Those that are designed to attend to affect, and simultaneously shape it, take on a subtle and potentially invasive character. An engagement with affect invites, provokes, even requires a capacity to attend to what is happening — and this nexus of attention is where phenomenology is located. The ontological stakes of cultivating acts of attention are high, particularly when what one is attending to is barely graspable, or unsayable. Judith Butler points to this when they assert that dominant forms of representation within media coverage of war constrain what can be seen, heard, felt, read, and known, ultimately shaping 'the lives that are marked as lives and the

3 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017); Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?* (Duke University Press, 2019); Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021).

4 *A Key to Whitehead's* Process and Reality, ed. by Donald W. Sherburne (University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 196.

deaths that count as deaths', asserting that in present times 'our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance'.[5] They offer a parallel argument when, several years later, they claim that the ability to respond to acts of violence reaches the limits of a framework that governs what is sayable and whose lives are grievable. A new 'compass of mourning' is called for, one that integrates bodily responses within language and politics.[6] This reveals that the act of attending to something or someone is not a binary state, as in responding with a 'yes' or a 'no' to the question 'Are you paying attention?' Attention is composed from acts of apprehending, noticing, performing, and speaking that can be cultivated, dampened, expanded to include other beings, or refined to respond to other states of being.[7]

AFFECT + CHOREOGRAPHY

CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance was part of a long cycle of artistic research into archiving that investigated the potential for archival practices to enact performances of memory while simultaneously cultivating a critical stance on the massive impact of data technologies upon the bodies of people living under regimes of surveillance capitalism.[8] This work uses mixed reality (MR) techniques and

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5 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. xx–xxi.

6 Judith Butler, 'The Compass of Mourning', *London Review of Books*, 13 October 2023 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n20/judith-butler/the-compass-of-mourning> [accessed 19 November 2025].

7 Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

8 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019). Research from the 'Living Archives' project can be found at <https://livingarchives.mah.se/> [accessed 19 November 2025]; and details of

Fig. 1. *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance* at the ICI Berlin in February 2022. A mixed reality choreographic archive of the work of Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir. Dancer: Marie Topp. Photograph: Keith Lim.

technologies to create a new performance out of the archival material of choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir. Her work can be seen as a choreographic example of reduction for composition. Closely aligned with methods for enacting phenomenological reduction, her technique is based on the dancers' performing a meditative practice by which processes of thought and movement are suspended, with the intention to release deeper and more intense somatic states. Guðjónsdóttir refers to these as *hyper* states. This practice of concentrated inner sensing produces a 'Full Drop into the Body' — the name of Guðjónsdóttir's technique. Once in these states, dancers embody different affective and dynamic qualities, often accessing autonomous movement.[9]

How is it possible to engage philosophically with this work, to account for the complicated practice of somatic reduction that is evident in *CATALYSTS* — Catherine Jodoin's internal rippling (Figure 2), Suet-Wan Tsang's trance-like state (Figure 3), Laura Sigemund's dropping into her body (Figure 4) — and to investigate the phenomenological states produced by the re-choreographing of this material into a mixed reality installation? Two layers of embodied performativity intersect in the installation: 1) that of the dancers in the archival material; and 2) that produced by the layered interactions of the mixed reality choreography (encompassing people, devices, media, and the physical space). The work can be read as a presentation of archival documentation, but it is intended to

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the 'Somatic Archiving' work at <https://www.somaticarchiving.org/work/catalysts-somatic-resonance> [accessed 19 November 2025].

9 For a description of Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir's work, see <https://msgudjonsdottir.com/> [accessed 19 November 2025]. A discussion of the somatic qualities of her work can be found in Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir and Susan Kozel, '"Full Drop into the Body": A Conversation and Public Discussion', in this volume, pp. 131–49.

Fig. 2. Dancer Catherine Jodoin in *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance*, 2022. Photograph: Susan Kozel.

Fig. 3. Dancer Suet-Wan Tsang in *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance*, 2022. Photograph: Keith Lim.

function on a deeper level, activating somatic responses to the MR choreography. These somatic responses exist partly autonomously but partly because people reflect on them; this work 'catalyses' by means of phenomenological reflection, which is to say that phenomenologies of affect both respond to and create affective choreographies.[10]

10 Susan Kozel, 'Performing Phenomenology: The Work of Choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir', in *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, ed. by Lucilla Guidi and Thomas Rentsch (Brill, 2020), pp. 196–213.

Fig. 4. Dancer Laura Siegmund in *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance*, 2022. Photograph: Keith Lim.

The juxtaposition of the two terms, *affect* and *choreography*, sets up a relation between philosophical thought and artistic practices. *Affective choreographies* becomes a frame for understanding both artistic performances and performances of daily lives, particularly within digital cultures. It integrates a philosophical understanding of the intensive forces of affect with a choreographic sensibility of bodies, structures, data, environment, and emotions being constantly reconfigured. Both affect and choreography need to be reconfigured prior to juxtaposing the

terms. Not presuming to answer the question 'what is affect?' in broad terms, I provide instead seven ways to approach affect. These do not make up anything as fixed as a definition; instead they can be seen as orientations towards understanding and moving within affective choreographies.

1. *Affects are intensities*. They are the 'vital forces' that can drive us to movement or leave us overwhelmed and suspended in non-action.[11]

2. *Affects are more than emotions*, but emotions are jumping-off points. Affects are loosely based in emotion, to the extent that emotions have been called the 'common currency of affect',[12] but the arguments and practices in this chapter define affects as more than discretely identified emotions. Nevertheless, emotional qualities saturate affective discourses and emotions entwine with the senses in affective states.

3. *Affects are more than senses*, but we sense affect all the time and it is possible to refine our capacities for sensing affects, which can be more liminal or more intense than the sensory register.

4. *Affects are always in motion or exchange*. Always shifting, they are dynamic. They shape the relations between bodies. Frequently, affect will be described in terms of an affective state or a bodily state; however,

11 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Duke University Press, 2002); Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–25.

12 Nigel Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 86.1 (2004), pp. 57–78 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3684.2004.00154.x>.

this is not intended to imply a static state, but rather a vibrating state that is always in the process of giving way to another configuration.

5. *Affects are materially diverse*. The affective register includes a wide range of material phenomena, some of which might be considered immaterial, like memories, hopes, fears, and imagination, but which are no less powerful for having a different material *density* or existing in a different *register*. This is particularly relevant to choreography, where different elements make up a shifting whole.
6. *There is a role for language in materializing affect*. This is not to say that affective forces are transposed into symbolic exchanges, but that the attempt to describe liminal states in words is an important stage towards materializing affect. It is also a key stage in applying phenomenology to affective experiences.
7. *Affects exist in potential*, because an affective exchange is never fully actualized, never fully contained, but is always coming to be and passing away. This is conveyed by Gilles Deleuze when he posits the virtual and virtuality as a state of potential that permeates the very composition of bodies, for 'we do not yet know what a body can do'.[13]

The artistic practice of choreography is expanding, widening what constitutes choreography and what counts as dance, at the same time as challenging who or what can be considered a choreographer. The acknowledgement that patterns of social movement can be considered choreo-

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* [1968], trans. by Martin Joughin (Zone Books, 1990); and Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, p. 226.

graphic is generally accepted, but can algorithms choreograph? Do animals produce choreographies? Do choreographers have to produce movement in time and space?

Dance historian Susan Foster points out that *choreography* as a term is used widely to refer to the structuring of movement, and not simply human movement. She offers a layered conception. Choreography refers to the kinds of actions performed, their sequence, and an overall plan or score that reveals how the movement of a whole unfolds. It can designate minute aspects of movement or the broad contours of a large terrain of multiple actions: buildings choreograph, cameras choreograph, birds perform intricate choreographies, protein complexes choreograph DNA repair, operatives in call centres engage in improvised choreographies, web services choreograph interfaces, and family therapy sessions constitute a their own form of choreography.[14] The variations of scale and actants evident in Foster's approach is complemented by the cybernetic approach offered by Michael Kliën, who prefers the term *framemaking* to *choreography*. Where choreography is a 'metaphor for dynamic constellations of any kind, consciously choreographed or not, self-organizing or artificially constructed', framemaking places greater emphasis on improvisational aspects of movement, setting conditions for relations to emerge. In this way it can become an 'aesthetics of change'.[15] André Lepecki contributes a related transformative perspective by anchoring choreography not just within politics but within political ontology. He unties the unquestioned alignment of dance with movement by examining choreographies of exhaustion and still-

14 Susan Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 2–3.

15 Michael Kliën, *Framemakers: Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change* (Daghdha Dance Company, 2008), p. 21.

ness that critique the ideological formations of late capitalist modernity.[16] He rethinks the temporality of dance, so that it is not the fleeting art form existing only in the moment and disappearing once that moment has passed. With relevance to performances of memory, he writes that being should not be confused with being-present.[17] The sedimentation of presence that makes up rituals, collections of artefacts, and the sharing of memories is addressed by other approaches to choreography, thereby opening it beyond the artistic towards a myriad of social interactions.[18]

The formulation of *affective choreographies* continues to expand the questions of who or what constitutes a choreography; it provides a central place for improvisation; and it emphasizes the material and ontological status of movement. Crucially, it opens to an awareness of choreographies occurring *within* bodies. The exchange of intensities that compose affective choreographies includes the somatic dynamics of bodily systems such as the immune system, the nervous system, connective tissue, blood circulation, and rhythms of breath. Affective choreographies include memories and fears, with their traces in tissue and bone. Many somatic practices demonstrate qualities of immanence not simply for cultivating interoceptive awareness, but for activating states of change that elude clear subjective control and collapse rigid constructions of the

16 André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (Routledge, 2006), p. 16.

17 Ibid., pp. 128–29.

18 Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Duke University Press, 2005); Gabriele Klein, 'The (Micro)Politics of Social Choreography: Aesthetic and Political Strategies of Protest and Participation', trans. by Elena Polzer, in *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity*, ed. by Gerald Siegmund and Stefan Hölscher (Diaphanes, 2012), pp. 193–208 <https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/the-micro-politics-of-social-choreography-2135> [accessed 19 November 2025].

subject.[19] This embodied experience of slippage and opacity is captured by Deleuze, demonstrating the highly performative or practical qualities of his thought. When he discusses immanence and refers to 'consciousness with neither object nor self, as a movement that neither begins nor ends', he could be describing the reconfiguration of perception and subjectivity cultivated by somatic movement practices.[20] These practices confront us with the lived reality of perpetually dipping into pre-existing flows and rhythms, with no real starting point or closure to our investigations, and no solid self as a reference point. His words on entering into the flow of movement, '[o]ne never commences; one never has a tabula rasa; one slips in, enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms',[21] describe the practical experience of affective choreographies, echoed by the phenomenological description of listening provided by Jean-Luc Nancy, 'the oto- or self[*auto*]-produced sounds that come to mingle with received sounds, in order to receive them ...'.[22]

Affective choreographies invert two tendencies latent in traditional perspectives on Western choreography: the

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19 Examples of somatic practices include Alexander Technique, Rosen Method, Feldenkrais, Full Drop, Skinner Releasing Technique, Affective Sensibility, and various forms of movement improvisation. What they share is a first-person, inner-body perspective and a conviction that the intellect, body, and emotions cannot be separated. See *Back to the Dance Itself: Phenomenologies of the Body in Performance*, ed. by Sondra Fraleigh (University of Illinois Press, 2018); Jeffrey Maitland, *Spacious Body: Explorations in Somatic Ontology* (North Atlantic Books, 1995); Thomas Hanna, *Somatics: Reawakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility, and Health* (Da Capo Press, 1988).

20 Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. by Anne Boyman (Zone Books, 2001), p. 26.

21 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* [1970], trans. by Robert Hurley (City Lights Books, 1988).

22 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. by Charlotte Mandel (Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 16.

first is that individual dancers have control over their movements and clear awareness of the boundaries of their own bodies; the second is that a choreographic whole is bounded within time and space, composed by regulating overall patterns within this spatio-temporal unit. Addressing the first, affective choreographies require a reconfiguration of the notion of *body* towards a play of improvised and unexpected forces, thereby challenging many unquestioned protocols of control and direction embedded in the choreographic process. Even the valuable Spinozan formulation of 'bodies affecting and being affected' is inverted. Notice what happens when we imply that bodies are *affected* prior to bodies *affecting*, when we conceive of being impacted prior to exerting the agency of affecting things and people outside of us. Precarity and vulnerability become foregrounded. For Dorothée Legrand, working across phenomenology and psychoanalysis, the forces shaping bodies are real and fictional, with the subject suspending certainty about which is which in the surge of existence. Suspension is imbued with vulnerability in the process towards healing.[23] Similarly, in her investigation of brain plasticity, philosopher Catherine Malabou evokes improvisational choreography occurring in the brain when she describes the movement and transformation of neural pathways produced by head trauma. Impermanence and accident supersede any sense of fixed identity, for new patterns may explode upon us without the comfort of advance knowledge. This destructive plasticity enacts a form of negation that 'frees up the possibility of another story', but one

23 Dorothée Legrand, 'From Crisis to Psychoanalysis: Suspension as an Act of Resistance against the Reduction of Subjects' Singularities', in *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, ed. by Guidi and Rentsch, pp. 29–48.

that cannot be known or imagined in advance.[24] Zooming outwards, this is arguably what is happening presently with the barely controlled ripple between hope and panic surrounding predictions on the impact of AI: vast numbers of people are suddenly in the position of being affected prior to being able to affect.

Now combine this with an inversion of the second tendency in choreography, that of starting from individual dancers and regulating them within contained spatio-temporal patterns, and notice what happens when choreography is multiple, relational, cross-temporal, and cross-material. Philosophers Yuk Hui and Harry Halpin have posed a question that invites a choreographic response: 'Instead of asking how atomized individuals form collectives, we must find out how a collective social network changes and shapes individuals, and take this phenomenon as primary.'[25] This inversion poses a challenge to anyone trained in dance and choreography, or indeed to most artistic practices that originate in the studio prior to migrating to external locations. A guiding question could be: what might it mean to start from large-scale networked exchanges, including the large data sets required by AI, to re-choreograph or re-design relations between the individual, media systems, and the collective? The intent is not to say that everything can be viewed choreographically, but to emphasize that affective choreographies are open to di-

24 Catherine Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Polity, 2012), pp. 85–86.

25 Yuk Hui and Harry Halpin, 'Collective Individuation: The Future of the Social Web', in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and their Alternatives*, ed. by Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), pp. 103–16 (p. 111) <https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/unlike-us-reader-social-media-monopolies-and-their-alternatives/> [accessed 19 November 2025].

verse material composition and scales, and produce new forms of agency and knowledge.

PHENOMENOLOGIES OF AFFECT

Research in phenomenology is flourishing. Postphenomenology,[26] queer phenomenology,[27] feminist phenomenologies,[28] micro-phenomenology,[29] phenomenology of the alien,[30] alien phenomenology,[31] and critical phenomenology[32] populate a vibrant field of research responding to the need to find new ways to account for the complexity of lived experience. This work demonstrates various ways that the philosophical tradition of phenomenology is, to revisit the words of Whitehead, being adapted and inverted or, to use the language proposed in this chapter, is being performed, composed, or choreographed to meet the exigencies of our times.

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26 Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology and Technoscience: The Peking University Lectures* (SUNY Press, 2009); *Postphenomenological Investigations: Essays on Human–Technology Relations*, ed. by Robert Rosenberger and Peter-Paul Verbeek (Lexington Books, 2015).

27 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2006).

28 *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. by Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. by Christina Schües, Dorothea Olkowski, and Helen Fielding (Indiana University Press, 2011); *Rethinking Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. by Sara Cohen Shabot and Christinia Landry (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

29 Claire Petitmengin, 'Micro-phenomenology' <https://www.microphenomenology.com/> [accessed 19 November 2025].

30 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien*, trans. by Alexander Kozin and Tanja Stähler (Northwestern University Press, 2011).

31 Ian Bogust, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

32 Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, *Fifty Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, 2019); Elisa Magri and Paddy McQueen, *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Polity, 2023).

Phenomenologies of affect can be considered 'process phenomenologies' because they are investigations of dynamic processes and are themselves processual, which is to say that they do not follow a rigid set of instructions and do not necessarily reach a final conclusion.[33] For this reason, they exist as a series of variations and are open to further modification and adaptation. They are not, however, completely free-form. They were developed from a set of practical and theoretical shifts I myself had to make so that I could question affect in my artistic and philosophical research into archives and memory. Without these shifts I found it impossible for phenomenological processes to be able to attend to the particular intensities of affect. Affect slipped between the web of attention of even the sensory and kinaesthetic phenomenological method that I proposed in my earlier writing.[34] Practically speaking, the intensity, dynamics, indeterminacy, and liminality of affective experience made most phenomenological approaches feel like blunt tools. Affect shimmered around and through the processes of attending to it. In order to be able to get anywhere at all, the modes of attention I set in motion had to be shaped by that to which they attended.

This is not such a shocking statement if one considers the work of many phenomenologists, for even Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing on perception in the mid-twentieth century, revealed the fact that the world is shaped by our perception of it, and that our perceptual processes are transformed by what they perceive. This

33 Susan Kozel, 'Process Phenomenologies', in *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. by Maike Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou (Routledge, 2015), pp. 55–74.

34 Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2007).

is at the root of his famous 'chiasm', where subject and object fold into one another as the seeing-seen and touching-touched,[35] and the vibrant, undulating world reaches out to palpate the painter.[36] Other, more recent phenomenological writing takes this further, such as Jean-Luc Nancy's careful deliberations of listening,[37] Sarah Ahmed's explosion of phenomenological certainty into directions and orientations,[38] and Roland Barthes's oblique and poetical considerations of the neutrality of affect.[39] These writers' thought demonstrates the plasticity, responsivity, and uncertainty that permits phenomenology to be performed rather than simply used as an analytic framework.

Phenomenologies of affect can be broken down into three basic moves. As with affective choreographies in the section above, these moves do not make up a solid definition but can be approached as critical and creative reorientations.

1) Bodies

The first move is to release the 'body proper' (*corps propre*) that animates much phenomenological writing and

35 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* [1964], ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1987).

36 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', trans. by Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception* [1964], ed. by James M. Edie, trans. by William Cobb and others (Northwestern University Press, 1985), pp. 159–90.

37 Nancy, *Listening*.

38 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

39 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005).

replace it with a radically different construction of bodies as dynamic, affective, and plural.[40]

It is impossible to really understand affect as an exchange of intensities without shattering the sense of a contained, homogeneous body into a body-in-flux that moves, thinks, feels, lives, and dies in relation to other bodies. Such bodies are not defined in terms of the human or even the organic. Animals, land, and water can be considered as bodies, but so too can bodies be mechanic, algorithmic, imaginary, or conceptual. This reimagining of the body may coincide with the cybernetic movement and recent developments in AI, but it is best illuminated by Spinoza. Throughout his *Ethics*, he carefully constructs a notion of the body that is based on movement, rest, and relation to other bodies:

> All bodies either move or are at rest.
>
> Each body moves now more slowly, now more quickly.
>
> Bodies are distinguished from each other in respect of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not in respect of substance.
>
> A body which is in motion or at rest must have been determined to motion or rest by another body, which was also determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on to infinity.[41]

Once the pervasive human/non-human distinction is released, bodies can be understood according to two Spinozan propositions, rearticulated by Deleuze: kinetic and

40 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. by Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012), pp. 184–90.

41 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. by G. H. R. Parkinson (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 126.

dynamic. According to the kinetic proposition, a body is fundamentally in motion; it is 'a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles. A composition of speeds and slownesses'; according to the dynamic proposition, 'a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies.'[42] This latter is the proposition cited most often, for it opens interactions beyond just human bodies. A third quality of bodies, less frequently cited but pertinent to affective choreographies, is that they experience increases and decreases in the power of action. This is to say that they live according to different intensities, exhibiting differing degrees of vitality. They get sick, they recover, or they die. As bodies circulate, they combine with other bodies into communities of beings.[43] The body's innate social dimension is emphasized by Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd:

> To be an individual — a determinate self — at all is to be embedded in wider social wholes in which the powers of bodies are strengthened or impeded. To be an individual self is to be inserted into economies of affect and imagination, which bind us to others in relations of joy and sadness, love and hate, co-operation and antagonism.[44]

Attuning phenomenological methods and concepts to align with Spinozan bodies helps to break out of the latent solipsism and the more pernicious sorts of humanism occasionally attributed to phenomenology. Once bodies are understood as perpetual and dynamic compositions, phenomenologies of affect can be cultivated to attend to affective choreographies. This occurs by attending to

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42 Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, p. 123.

43 Ibid., p. 126.

44 Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (Routledge, 1999), p. 73.

motion, by attuning to the multiplicity, fragmentation, condensation, weaving, and distribution of beings as they respond to and create affect. Bodies are not units *within* choreographic patterns set by choreographers; they *are composed of* a play of forces engaged in mutually generating choreographies, and they *actively compose* such choreographies. The shattering of the contained body and its reconfiguration into myriad forces means that such a body not only engages *in* affective choreographies — it *is* these choreographies.

2) Phenomenologies

The second move is to use the plural form of *phenomenology*. *Phenomenology* becomes *phenomenologies*, a set of practices enacted by more than one person.

It is easy to fall back into the singular form, respecting the philosophical lineage, but the reminder of plurality is crucial not simply for the sake of permitting the work of a variety of bodies but for the variations and unevenness that can happen in one's own processes. Plurality of what is sensed follows from the plurality of who does the sensing.

Related to this is the way phenomenological method is neither a formula nor a tool. Phenomenologies are ways of attending to experience — of apprehending. What seems as if it comes hardwired into human perception is in fact multiple learned processes, including how to perceive, how to listen, what to attend to, how to move through the world, where and how one is permitted to move through the world. It is not simply that we have become lazy and forgotten how to notice things but that, returning to Butler's argument for the need to cultivate new modes of attention, what we see and hear, and the ways we express our grief and joy, are controlled in order to constitute the

public sphere.[45] In saying that attention is controlled, or cultivated, the implication is that it is rehearsed, repeated, modified, and iterated. Perception is not a universal or innate capacity. It is a composite set of cultivated practices.

The reminder that phenomenologies are plural is faithful to the actual practices of conducting them over time. This makes sense when research or artistic processes are collaborative, with contributions by more than one body, but even a solitary or isolated researcher is never just one voice. They are likely to conduct many phenomenological explorations over time, of different phenomena, with and alongside other bodies. Their body changes and recombines over time. The plural form is generous to research. It removes the pressure of 'nailing it' the first time around, and it recognizes that research is rarely done in exclusion from other bodies (human and non-human). It provides the breathing space to conduct plural investigations and to appreciate the transformations wrought by the performance of phenomenologies, as is captured by the next move.

3) *Performativity*

The third move is to make a direct connection between phenomenology and performativity by recognizing that phenomenologies are performed and performative.

This argument has permeated this chapter thus far. Saying that phenomenologies are *performed* means that phenomenology is a practice or set of practices; saying they are *performative* means that they are ontologically and epistemologically generative. Phenomenologies, when applied as methods, must be enacted or done, and with this doing something else is brought into being. This is key: phenom-

45 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. xxi.

enology does not just *describe* what is there, it *changes* what is there through description, opening towards analysis, interpretation, and subsequent material transformation. The ontological dimension of any methodology is that some things come to be through their application, and other things/beings/thoughts are excluded or rendered invisible. This points to an equal imperative for the cultivation of an ethics alongside phenomenology.

This move reflects contemporary phenomenological scholarship that emphasizes the practice inherent in phenomenological philosophy. Such a reframing focuses on the ways in which phenomenology is a 'performative exercise' and opens its potential to intervene in the social world: 'Phenomenology, therefore, does not correspond to a theoretical doctrine but embodies an exercise to be enacted from the first person perspective. It involves a transformation of our own personal experience.'[46]

TECHNOLOGIES: FROM THE SOPHISTICATED TO THE BANAL

CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance requires a custom-made app for it to function.[47] Augmented, mixed, and virtual reality (AR/MR/VR) systems and applications are no longer regarded as sophisticated technologies, but the goal of this artistic project was never to foreground complex or sophisticated technologies, nor was it to indicate that reaching for latest-generation tech is the best way to boost creativity in digital cultures. The opposite is more accurate: we do not have to reach for complex technologies; the com-

46 Lucilla Guidi, 'Introduction', in *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, ed. by Guidi and Rentsch, p. 1.

47 The app *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance* is available from the Apple App Store and Google Play.

plexity and sophistication are coming to us. And by this I do not mean that we have increasingly 'smart technologies' at our disposal, as Westerners with disposable incomes and increasingly disposable technologies. The technological sophistication that is available to us, or even forced upon us, now occurs largely in the algorithms and analytics that are performed on the data extracted by our devices, in the networking protocols that link these devices, and in the artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) increasingly embedded in the functionality of these devices. Frequently, the algorithms exist to 'personalize our experiences' or to enable devices to become better at 'helping us', for example, to avoid mistakes or to compose entire texts. Instances of the encroachment of algorithms into our personal lives are numerous and range from the shocking, such as the recordings of domestic life by Amazon's digital assistant Alexa being routinely listened to by engineers to 'improve' its functionality, to the banal, as in the location tracking performed by almost every app, whether or not this is required for the service. The example I now offer seems to lie on the banal end of the spectrum. It is an instance of algorithm-supported mistake avoidance, but, when examined critically, this small autocorrect glitch reveals wider implications for the policing of corporeality. It also reveals how affective micro-events can linger, provoking phenomenological reflection.

I sent a message on the messaging application WhatsApp to choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir, referring to her strangely successful meditation experiment using Zoom that connected people in several European countries.[48] I wrote to her that I felt a palpable quality of

48 This online meditation experiment took place during the COVID-19 lockdown.

shared experience, calling it a sort of 'morphic resonance'. I was reflecting on how affect operates through the resonance of bodily practices even across distances using mediated platforms, and suddenly found myself thinking that this was a way of revitalizing Rupert Sheldrake's controversial coining of this expression from the 1990s with possible links to Hartmut Rosa's more recent work on resonance.[49] I discovered some time afterwards that WhatsApp's autocorrect function had intervened and translated 'morphic' resonance into 'moronic' resonance.

Easy to dismiss at the time, and perhaps trivial, yet the more I thought about it the more objectionable it became. This is not simply because the word is an anachronistic slur pertaining to neurodiversity but because it points to widespread algorithmically induced normativity operating even on micro levels. I could not escape the sense that this was yet another example of an inbuilt bias against bodies and diversity in our technological systems. As with everyday sexism, such a bias makes itself known in ways that span the banal to the shocking — often both at the same time. Consider the embodied and cultural biases embedded in how facial recognition is least effective for women with dark skin,[50] how speech recognition applications are constructed around the so-called 'Harvard sentences' of the white male voice,[51] and how the emoji skin tone modifier

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49 Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance & the Habits of Nature* (Park Street Press, 1995); Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*, trans. by James C. Wagner (Polity Press, 2019).

50 Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed by Men* (Vintage, 2019); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018); Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity Press, 2019).

51 Within computer science, and dating back to 1965, 'Harvard sentences' refers to a collection of 720 sample phrases considered to be phonet-

is constructed in Unicode with white as a default colour,[52] to say nothing of predictive analytics and the homogenization of bodies and movements enacted by many network protocols and internet-of-things-activated devices.[53]

A sensitivity to this flattening of difference, and to the imposition of a hierarchy of values, coincides with a desire for things to be otherwise with our designed systems. But even more than this, the work of feminist philosophers does not only argue for different forms of agency and subjectivity but begins by first noticing when people and bodies have been 'eclipsed'. Malabou uses this word when she argues that the category of woman is not biological or cultural but refers to a subject 'overexposed to a specific type of violence or negation', like the way the bodily sensibility of a morphic state is negated by the basic AI embedded in WhatsApp.[54] This act of calling attention to norms and biases that are so embedded as to be invisible, whether subtle or egregious, is at the heart of intersectional and decolonial scholarship.[55] A choreographic understanding of norms takes note of how they shape the movement of

ically balanced. These samples, featuring an educated male American voice, are used for the implementation and testing of VoIP ('voice over IP') and other telephone systems. Currently they can still be found in speech recognition software.

52 Roel Roscam Abbing, Peggy Pierrot, and Femke Snelting, 'Modifying the Universal', in *DATA Browser 06: EXECUTING PRACTICES*, ed. by Helen Pritchard, Eric Snodgrass, and Magda Tyżlik-Carver (Open Humanities Press, 2018).

53 Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI* (Yale University Press, 2021); Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition* (MIT Press, 2021).

54 Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident*, pp. 2–3.

55 Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Duke University Press, 2019); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'R-words: Refusing Research', in *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, ed. by Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Sage, 2016), pp. 223–47.

people and institutions. More so, choreographers are experts at working the eclipse; they can either make their presence evident or hide their influence so that movement seems spontaneous or improvised.[56] This means that a choreographic perspective can do more than identify obvious patterns of movement — it can foster an awareness of when movement is shaped by structures and forces that operate on hidden levels.

REDUCTIONS

This chapter began with Klein's piercing and reorienting of the word *hallucination*, as used by AI developers to describe the fictions and mistakes of large language model (LLM) generative AI chatbots that are confidently presented as truth. Klein points to an unacceptable crisis in accountability when the tech sector appropriates a word used in psychology, psychedelics, and mysticism to prop up its 'cherished mythology' that current developments in AI 'are in the process of birthing an animate intelligence on the cusp of sparking an evolutionary leap for our species'.[57] Her argument is not based on a battle over who owns the word. Starting from the embodied state of hallucination, followed by a material analysis of the current functionality of AI, then moving towards a frightening extrapolation of its potential uses, Klein can be seen as enacting a variation of phenomenological reduction to launch a cultural critique.

CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance, together with nineteen other artistic research projects funded by the AUTONOM initiative, performed related reductions by

56 Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (Routledge, 2010), p. 33.

57 Klein, 'AI machines aren't "hallucinating"', p. 2.

grounding algorithms in the creative embodied practices of the performing arts. Unsurprisingly, the reflections and the work that was produced reveal diverse and highly critical engagements with algorithms relevant to artistic practice and to society.[58] As part of the *CATALYSTS* development process, we questioned AI, evaluating its potential use for kinaesthetic and somatic choreographies. We were particularly cognizant of how algorithms used to analyse what exists can easily be adapted to shape what has not yet happened and be used for prevention and control. This pivotal moment when AI analytics becomes AI *predictive* analytics was decisive for us, resulting in the decision not to import additional algorithms or AI beyond what was already embedded in the basic software developer tools that supported the camera recognition and visual processing we needed to obtain a minimum but stable level of functionality.

Recognizing that the artistic intention in creating *CATALYSTS* was to work with deep somatic layers and to provoke affective responses, we cultivated a stance of extreme care over which AI-enabled tools we used and which algorithms we developed ourselves (or chose not to develop). We crafted a statement of guiding principles:

As artists,

- We crack open our existing tools to see the algorithms that already exist (we open the 'black box' to the best of our abilities),

58 The criterion for receiving AUTONOM funding was to work in performance and live arts to engage creatively with algorithms. See *AUTONOM*, ed. by Bergmann; and Susan Kozel, 'In the Half-Light: Phenomenological Approaches to Complex Technological Systems', in *The Routledge Companion to Performance and Technology*, ed. by Maaike Bleeker and Norah Zuniga Shaw (Routledge, forthcoming 2026).

- We decide which ones we want to keep and which ones to deactivate (if we can), like location-tracking and personal data capture,
- We choose to activate algorithms based on our choreographic and ethical principles.

We recognize that we are not entering a new field, nor are we entering a domain that is purely computational. This is a dense and provocative field with precedents, tensions, conflicts, and both overt and hidden agendas. We join a wider social movement towards seeing and challenging AI's power by working with algorithms, not by avoiding them. We maintain the right to refuse to implement algorithms simply because they exist. Working with these contentious choreographies of affect, we can be utopian, but we can't be naïve.

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‘Full Drop into the Body’

A Conversation and Public Discussion*

MARGRÉT SARA GUÐJÓNSDÓTTIR AND SUSAN KOZEL

Susan Kozel: One of the striking things about Margrét Sara’s work is that she does not just use somatic practices to train the body before setting a choreography upon it. What Margrét Sara does is work with somatic practices as a meditative myofascial release to create bodily states. Those states are then choreographed. Reflecting on this unique approach to bodily practice as choreography, a two-fold question arises: Firstly, can you explain your specific practice, called *Full Drop into the Body*? And secondly, can you describe how this leads into choreography?

Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir: In 2010 I began to research a certain bone visualization meditation, which induces a deep myofascial release. My first encounter with

* First published in *Energy and Forces as Aesthetic Interventions: Politics of Bodily Scenarios*, ed. by Sabine Huschka and Barbara Gronau (transcript, 2019), pp. 177–92. Reprinted with the kind permission of transcript.

this visualization meditation occurred while I was working for another performance-maker, together with my friend, the German dancer and fascia therapist Anja Röttgerkamp. When I had confessed to her that I was tired after rehearsal, she replied: 'Just lie down on the floor and melt your bones. It will ground you and when you stand up again you are going to be full of energy; I use it as a warm up before performing.' However, what happened to me was very different. I laid down on the floor, performed the meditation, and discovered I could not stand up again. Instead, I became deeply in touch with the incredible exhaustion of my matter and spirit, which in turn totally changed my life and interest in body and dance work. I therefore spent the next three years on the floor practising this meditation, up to five hours a day, and experiencing all kinds of full-body states, rhythms of inner systems, and inner movements. In relation to this, I noticed a strong wish to cease performing and to decondition my hyper-professional dancer's body. I came into dialogue with my tissue regarding exhaustion and a resistance to performing in this achievement-oriented society, which had caused me to use the force of my muscles and the force of my will to get what I thought I wanted to achieve. Although my career as a dancer and maker has been conducted within the experimental field of contemporary dance, I trained as a gymnast as a child. You can imagine how much conditioning had become normal to me since that time: to push through and over all my limits, in order to achieve and succeed on all levels. I began this meditation in 2010 and it has been my practice ever since. Of course, it has also developed tremendously since then. I discovered new tools to enter ever more deeply into dialogue and intimacy, both with myself via the body, as well as with and through the dancers I work with. Getting in touch with the tissues of a burnt-out body

— an alienated, isolated, disconnected, and non-sensing body — directly reflects the sociopolitical situation we live in. This is a society of speed and isolation, where identity and self-value are built on personal achievements and competition, not unlike in professional sports. We are all in this space, and it expresses itself and is reflected in the matter of which we are made. In response, I started to develop a practice of utter surrender. Of not doing anything. Of letting go of control and basically not moving until something else did: something more than my will and my conditioned body moving habitually through muscular force or my dancer's body memory. Out of this practice I discovered multiple inner rhythms. Once you stop doing and start listening, you develop a whole new relationship with yourself, because you have developed a sort of neutral observant eye upon yourself that can, through its neutrality, guide you into sensing and being with yourself in much subtler, deeper ways, and in nondualistic terms. Another reality of yourself opens up to you. I researched the tides and the rhythms of the tides, some of which cranio-sacral therapists also work with. I got in touch with that inner breath that is the biorhythm: a certain type of autonomous rhythm in the body that never stops and has its own timing, as well as a lot of other rhythms that are constantly beating in your body without you feeling or recognizing them in your daily life. So, it is a form of hyper-inner-listening that I started to practice. At a certain point something moved me, and it made my body move without my consciously controlling the movement or knowing where it was taking me. This became a breakthrough into recognizing a certain type of inner movement that can actually animate your body visibly. I began to train myself in how to get in touch, on demand, with these inner movements, and I discovered the modes of different speeds and pathways within the body.

When I eventually shared this inner listening and started teaching people how to connect with this inner movement, I noticed the tremendous amount of presence it created. This presence was very touching for me in the way it demands one's attention. I work with it consciously in my performances.

In 2013 I was commissioned to do a graduation performance work for the BA dance students at the DOCH, Uniarts, in Stockholm. As I believed it necessary for me to have a common language with the students in order to complete this work, I decided to teach them this practice of inner listening. The piece was titled *Step Right To It*, and the process was both beautiful and also represented my own beginning of sharing and developing this kind of practice with others. Previously I had been doing the practice solely by myself, away from the context of performance-making, and in order to step out of the exhausted professional dancer's body and to release it from its conditioned body memory. This is how it started entering my choreographic works and how it has developed alongside other artistic themes since.

During the years 2014–15 I worked on the *Blind Spotting Performance Series*: placing the burnt-out, broken, exhausted, apathetic, imploding body of the achievement-oriented society and the anonymous multitude on display in front of red velvet theatre curtains. My deep and artistic desire for the series was to build a space on the contemporary stage for the antihero, especially in the context of dance. We do not need any more polished, controlled, or aesthetic bodies to watch: we have these everywhere around us on billboards. Instead, we are talking about resistance and about placing more importance on what things feel like rather than what they look like. It is also about highlighting topics such as vulnerability and overexposure, as well

as the need for intimacy and dialogues with inner, physical, psychological, and emotional pathologies and realities. Between 2015 and 2017 I decided to create certain conditions, for myself and the dancers I have worked with before, by conducting a two-year research period into opening up a new branch of my practice, while still keeping focus on the introspective body: moving away from the exhausted, broken, and emptied-out body, into a more energized, private, emotional body. I wanted to work with the expression of the pathological inner symphonies of the private, emotional body with which we are all constantly, albeit mostly unconsciously, in dialogue. The dancers and I started to work on how to dive into the subconscious and unconscious, and we reached a new and intense territory together. We used meditation to tune into hidden realities — blind spots, so to speak — in order to allow unknown knowledge and states to appear to us through the matter. As a result, a new work entitled *Conspiracy Ceremony — HYPERSONIC STATES* premiered in November 2017 at the Sophiensaele, here in Berlin.

Kozel: I would like to ask you to speak, from your choreographer's perspective, about your choreographic sensibilities. Once you have worked with dancers who have done this practice for a very long time, and you have identified pathological states, then you need to shape them into a piece that lasts roughly sixty minutes, such as *Conspiracy Ceremony — HYPERSONIC STATES*. Can you describe how you make the transition to the conventions of the professional dance production world, while still remaining faithful to the energetic forces of the meditative practice?

Guðjónsdóttir: As you can imagine, it is quite a job to develop choreographic processes when beginning from the position of dancers lying down on the floor. They are

experiencing a lot sensorially, and coming into incredible intimacy with themselves, along with undergoing a kind of widening of the recognition and awareness of themselves through their own matter. However, very little of this wild inner life and experiential field is visible from the outside. The dancers lie on the floor, in ecstatic states at times, and yet I see nothing: no expression and no movement.

For that piece *Conspiracy Ceremony — HYPERSONIC STATES*, I set out to research an artistic topic that required a certain type of body and movement vocabulary (the hyperstates) on stage to convey it. I would then compose these hyperstates as if they were notes in a musical score, because each hyperstate has its own colour and feeling, just like musical notes do. My inspiration for conducting these two years of research was to discover more animated, complex, and interpersonally linked states that could arise not only from autonomous inner body systems, but also from the subconscious levels of each individual dancer. They were unique expressions of the non-expressed but highly active component of a person's being. I have called them 'hyperstates', since they are coloured by emotional and formerly lived experiences. What I discovered during this long working process was that, eventually, all sorts of physical states arise. This is because an increasingly deep capacity to surrender to what is there develops, along with a perpetually deepening access to your inner depths. As a desired result, this performance became very different from the others, and of course it also brought into other territories such as the archetypes of the common unconscious. These explicitly became the main topic of my newest work, premiering at the Sophiensaele in November 2018, titled *Pervasive Magnetic Stimuli*.

In *Conspiracy Ceremony — HYPERSONIC STATES* we searched endlessly for openings. We asked: How can

inner, personal, private, subjective, sensorial experiences and inner realities reveal full body states? How can they be visible from the outside? How can the audience feel it in their own bodies? We work with activated and 'volumeized' connective tissue movements, and if you experience these performing bodies live on stage the connectivity stretching from body to body is palpably present in the theatre between the dancers and audiences. Actually, you can create a direct physical connection with the audience, and they will feel what is happening in front of their eyes but now within their own bodies. This point has always been very important for me: How can I reach this level of 'communication' through the performances? How can I make a performance with this kind of oozing energetic body, while at the same time talking about its tragic state? My wish is to reach a kind of mirroring of this togetherness, an opening and a letting happen, so as to give space for these topics of shared realities to emerge through the body. I worked on these hyperstates during 2015–17. It was a process of stepping out of my extremely precise director's position, up to a certain degree, and collectively discovering inner pathways and keys to stage full, authentic body states, via very personal and new types of dialoguing with the dancers. The dancers could then access these states again and again. The primary goals were to truly live in these states in front of the audience, as well as that the states would create their own animated movements or static positions, each with different types of flavours, timing, colours, and autonomous hyper-privateness. Based upon these experiences I have been able to expand the vocabulary of the Full Drop into the Body practice, and ultimately create the performance *Conspiracy Ceremony — HYPERSONIC STATES* out of it.

As with each of my works since 2010, I still use my 'eagle eye' to spot, distil, and then mould and direct the

material in very concrete ways. This allows it to be able to serve its artistic purpose, and for it to be received as fully as possible, as well as to be performed on demand within a detailed and composed performance. I spent the last fifteen years in this busy pursuit and it is quite important for me to now share this reality with people, and to see what kind of repercussions and cognitive shifts occur as a result of that sharing. My interest lies in finding ways of developing the capacity for cognitive plasticity through activating the fascial body.

Kozel: Can you say something about the broken body, because you speak a lot of pathologies and choreographing through them? And also about the way the dancers' bodies are mirroring what you are seeing in the world?

Guðjónsdóttir: [directing the question to the audience] What do you think? What do you do with your blockages? Sadness? Incapacities? Your exhaustion? When dancers follow this inner listening I propose to them, I can observe through their bodily movements clear expressions of blockages in certain areas, as well as incoherencies in amplitude, rhythm, and the direction of movement of internal and energetic systems. Pathologies. I have developed a keen eye for those bodies as well as the wish for them to be visible, spoken about, choreographed, and worked with in the dance sector. My piece *Step Right To It* (2013) was the first performance where I used my practice as a working tool. I wanted to work choreographically with bodies that appeared to have no awareness of being the servants of a larger political power, which wants them to be and behave in a certain way. They are almost like cold, empty, numb bodies participating in actions without thinking. These are the generic young bodies of the digital millennium generation. I was placing emphasis upon total isolation, as well as upon the alienation of those bodies. They were spiritless

and disconnected from themselves, from the outside, and from each other. In the *Blind Spotting Performance Series* (2014–15) I focused on showcasing and working with the exhausted broken matter of the burnt-out body, which perhaps was more directed at the bodies of people in their thirties and forties. These are the bodies of people who became overwhelmed by neoliberal society's demands on the individual. They are extremely slow, darkly flavoured bodies, incapable of reaching out, reacting, moving, or being vibrant in any way. Imploding, and overflowing with too much information — oozing, peeing, drooling, unable to keep things in anymore. Bodies without life energy.

In order to choreograph performances about these topics, you require bodies that embody these states, rather than bodies that showcase their dance control. I direct the material by stripping away all referential or habitual movements, directions, and the tonus in the body that does not support these states when they are observed from the outside. This undoing of the physical habits of the dancers I work with requires a lot of work. At all times I need them to look very pedestrian and non-composed, and I place great focus and emphasis upon this, so the crafting of the material and simplifying of a lot of gestures and movements becomes the hidden acrobatics of my work. What appears to be very natural timing is in fact completely composed, in order to create that effect on stage.

Choreographically, I specifically work to offer the audience the most precise, detailed, and clear propositions possible. I do so by stripping away everything that does not serve this purpose, to create maximum clarity, in order for the audience to have as much freedom as possible to perceive it. The work therefore does not dominate the mind and its reflections, but rather determines the audience members' physical experiences, which also serve to

hold their attention. This occurs if the audience allow themselves to fall into the physical dialogue that is resonating so strongly in the room, due to the physical practice. What the dancers' practice, and what I myself strive for as the performance choreographer, is to offer an experience where one can fully surrender to the physical, sensorial experience of the event, while at the same time maintaining an extremely clear cognitive clarity and awareness. Contradictions always exist inside each other.

Question from the audience: You were talking about tissues and the connectedness or connectivity between people and the dancers. Do you think there is something like this connective tissue between persons, or between a dancer and their movements and the space around them?

Guðjónsdóttir: I do not separate the dancers from the inner movements and full body states that they dance with and which dance them. And yes, the space where the happening of the performances takes place, between the dancers and the audience, can be filled with connective tissue energy/movement. The physical performance is infiltrating the body of the audience, which happens through the connective tissue. This has been experienced time and again by different audience members and critics who otherwise do not know anything about myofascial work.

Kozel: In my experience and research into Margrét Sara's practice, she uses language very carefully to communicate and to give choreographic guidance to the dancers. She has developed a way of using words to nudge them back into a particular state if they have happened to slip out of it. Indeed, when the dancers slip out of an energetic state, the field collapses; it is just not there anymore. This observation opens a direct link with the different kinds of energetic forces that we are discussing today at this conference. Energetic forces have a clear somatic validity.

They are not only visual or sensory; rather, these forces invite different ways of using language in choreographic processes. In the case of Margrét Sara's work, this language is fascinating because it ranges from recognizable terms for bodily states and emotions (such as hate, love, or ecstasy), but also includes less definable qualities (like black slime, trauma, possession, and hesitation), figures (like snowman, sculpture garden, and Jesus-woman), and actions (like flavouring, puffing-up, crushing, and becoming). This curious use of language borders on the affective and imaginary. Margrét Sara, can you say more?

Guðjónsdóttir: I think a very big part of my work is that, with each and every person that I work with, we have to create our own vocabulary of understanding in order to find ways of describing our inner subjective experiences, and that is why it takes so long. By now I have a large knowledge of possible reactions and states that can be experienced by people who do the Full Drop into the Body practice. These elements and processes are something that I can teach and guide people towards, but there are also the hyperstates, which are the newer branch of the method the dancers and I searched for during the last two years. These are personal, individual states and trips, which the dancers experience, and many of them feel amazing and yet at the same time look like nothing. At times you cannot observe the experience in the/of the body from the outside. So it is strenuous work to do, and it takes a very long time to work in this way, and especially in order to create a performative outcome. But when you witness someone in front of you actually living something profoundly deep, you recognize the process that it kick-starts in your own being. Then you realize that this is a very strong thing, and that is why I dedicate my time to this kind of work. And now I am of course very trained in how to bring something into focus

in the studio, in terms of dialogue, state, and movement material.

This work we are actually busy with is not about shape, nor is it about a spectacular movement quality. Rather, this type of full presence and these magical physical qualities that appear through the practice are used choreographically in order to carry a larger message — emphasizing physical communication and the activation of new states, thoughts, consciousness, and realities for both the viewers and performers.

These working processes are very private, which has become apparent ever since I started to work with long-term collaborators in 2013, and those dancers have a lot of experience with the method by now. When you work like this, you make the decision to go into depths that exceed professionalism. It becomes a private and personal journey that you nonetheless share with the group, no matter what happens. In our long relationship, my collaborators and I have discovered that the work goes together with friendship, and that is very important. Additionally, I have also developed ways to give classes and workshops to professional dancers, as well as to people outside the artistic field. Separating performance-making from the practices, and using my own experiences with the practice to create a safe space for inner listening and myofascial release, creates conditions for people to come into intimacy with themselves and with their tissues, which is the main priority.

Audience: I would like to ask if you could say something about the sound in your performance, because I was deeply intrigued by the sound. I had the image in my mind of listening to inner body processes, while watching bodies performing them.

Guðjónsdóttir: To 'colour' the performances, I use the experimental and very sensorial music of Peter Rehberg —

who is an electronic musician originally from London and now living in Austria, directing the record label MEGO. I have worked with Peter since 2010 and when we devise the performances I guide him onto certain paths. Together we make it work, but the music is mostly created and worked on separately.

Audience: And does the music have the function to trigger certain states?

Guðjónsdóttir: The dancers can reach these states without the music, due to the way we work and train together. It comes from a deep listening to the body. Actually, the music is there for the audience, and I use it consciously to embrace the audience, or to confuse them, or to guide them into a slower rhythm. For me, it is a choreographic question of how to use the music in each piece, and I operate with the music in different ways. Sometimes it is intended to make it harder for the audience to be with the dancers, or sometimes easier. Often it is to add a colour and a topic for thought in relation to the visuals, so to speak. Most of the time I work conceptually with the music, but the sound of course has a very sensorial as well as a referential quality.

Audience: I would like to ask you again about your use of language, since I am wondering if you address affects in particular and/or do you verbally create and figure landscapes or images like, for example, flowing water? Summing up, my main question is:do you address affects directly or do you use other imagery to stimulate them? Or do you look for something other than affects?

Guðjónsdóttir: I use visualizations that trigger the participant's fascial system, which leads the way to a meditative practice. What you discover through this practice is your own immense sensorial subjective experience field of inner listening. In this way the work differs greatly from

practices such as hypnosis, trance, past life regression, Mysore yogic meditations, or other ways of getting in touch with the energies of the subtle body, the subconscious, and beyond.

Kozel: I find it fascinating that it was so hard to ask that last question on affect, because what you [the questioner] are navigating is the distinction between somatic states and affects. These overlap and swarm around each other, and as much as we need to ask ourselves to define them and distinguish them, they sort of collapse together again, making the work of understanding them analytically even harder. I have a feeling that Margrét Sara, and each of us who experiences her work, might be able to come up with our own senses of where the affect resides in relation to the somatic, and how these are materialized through the processes. But this is a shifting terrain, because affects are, as far as I understand them, exchanges of intensities. They are already there, they are generated, and they exist as potential. Affects exist above and beyond the emotional body: they exist as vibrations.

Guðjónsdóttir: I just want to say that when you work in the way that I am working, you leave a lot of space for the subjective sensorial experiences that are unique to each person. That is why the mapping of working in this way is particularly exciting and difficult.

Audience: I am very, very fascinated. Thank you. I am wondering how much care goes into this — the ethics of it. There is a lot of exposure in this work. My question would be: It seems to be incredibly difficult to navigate a line between these melting bodies crying, and then choreographing them. For a performer, it seems to me to be extremely difficult to then re-impose form on this, so that you can re-perform it on stage. Do you see what I mean? It is of course relatively fraught, or very, very difficult ethic-

ally. I find this very fascinating, but it is probably very hard. How do you do it?

Guðjónsdóttir: I will explain. When you work with this Full Drop practice, it is deeply healing. This is very clear between those of us who work together. We seek to elevate the performer's capacity to be in the here and now, to be with the whole of herself, increasing presence. I create working conditions for ceasing active doing, in order to come into full presence through self-exploration. This becomes a task where there are no boundaries between the private and the professional. That has been clear from day one, and the people with whom I work joined the project due to that same desire. It is a trip, as well as a massive self-exploration and deconditioning, and a freeing of matter through work on structural adjustments, changes, and integration. The dancers I work with are all professionally very experienced performers, and I would say that what we do is impossible if you are not a professional dancer, since the type of analysis and awareness we are currently working with is quite advanced. This is what enables us to make a performative stage work from it, as well as a personal practice. They go on stage without feeling exposed, since the framing and crafting of the performance work protects their autonomy and their privacy. As a viewer, you also feel their power in what they do, making it impossible to feel like you are some sort of a 'Peeping Tom'. I work consciously and clearly with this topic, and control the outcome in that way: the work is thoroughly composed. And that is, of course, my deepest desire as a choreographer: to make work where you can talk about this overexposure and intimacy without exploiting anybody in that performance space, being in the rawness of that topic and reality nevertheless. That is a very political issue for me and is deeply important. If you could experience the pieces you

would understand better what I am talking about. What you observe is the darkness of the topic being addressed in each piece, but working on it is deeply healing, and even pleasurable. Many of the states in my works perceived from the outside as very dark are actually experienced by the dancers as incredibly enjoyable in their bodies, even if they are drooling and peeing. It is a wonderful thing to heal directly through artistic processes. It is deeply humanistic work.

Audience: My question concerns your strong ties to a philosophically phenomenological approach and aesthetic. I am wondering about your scientific sources, or other material you refer to in your body work, especially about your fascia knowledge. To what degree do you bring the knowledge that we currently have about fascia to your project? I would be curious to know more, because it is probably not a bibliography. So what kind of sources were you looking for to sustain your research?

Guðjónsdóttir: I will go into this topic more in the workshop immediately after this talk. By now it has been proven that the bones are compressed fascia. Basically, we have a tremendous amount of fascia in our body that is either very compressed or completely liquid: it is all the same. You carry your whole life with you in your tissues. Everything you experience. The fascia does this. Say you fall off your bike or somebody hurts you emotionally: your tissue is reacting to it, leaving tightness, blockages, or scars. Mostly, if you do not react to it instantly, you carry it with you in your body from then on, wherever you are. That is usually what people call 'old people's bodies', which are actually just an accumulation of hardened fascia, and people closing their bodies more and more as a naturally protective physical device. When you start to work with this matter, which is focused on initiating movement and unblocking areas that are blocked, you will address the

fascia in the body and then anything can come up or out. And that is why it is an intensely physical and intimate journey with yourself when you work on the matter of fascia. Does that answer your question a bit?

Audience: I was curious as to whether you are exposed to scientific literature, and if this is important for your work. Upon what physiological knowledge is your work grounded, and what kind of knowledge do you use, based on what we know today about bodily, mental, and affective states of being in the body, or with the body? That is a big question. I was wondering which direction you would go through, primarily, or what do you choose as your path?

Guðjónsdóttir: My main focus is on the 'Perceptive Pedagogy' branch of the Danis Bois fascia therapy method. Danis Bois is a French osteopath who has made many discoveries in the field of the connective tissue over the last thirty years. I have been studying his method and am also a manual therapist in the method by now. This knowledge is incredibly useful for my work with the dancers. It is about supporting people to move forwards, away from their former biographies and into the present. The work is conducted through the subjective and sensorial experience of the body. It is amazing to have that kind of knowledge while working with dancers, and to be on this kind of artistic journey together, as well as to know how to be with people in the best way possible in these intensive situations that we have passed through in the work. Personally, I study manual therapy, meditation methods, and the science of the subtle body so that I can get in touch with and discover the real meaning of cognitive plasticity, with a focus on deconditioning and listening to a person's biography.

Audience: I saw your performance *Conspiracy Ceremony — HYPERSONIC STATES* in November 2017 at

the Sophiensaele in Berlin and was very impressed. I was really impressed by these energies around the dancers and the resonance that I could experience between myself as audience member and the dancer. I could see that there is a kind of relation between the dancers on the stage. My question is: how can this state become a choreography and how — if you do — do you train this resonance between a dancer and yourself as a choreographer too?

Guðjónsdóttir: We emphasize the distinctive reality of the connective tissue dialogue that exists between us as human beings, which can be palpably felt when we remain in a clear and aware resonance with it. It requires a lot of training and meditation and intimacy with your own tissues to be able to do that: that is the expertise I am training with the dancers through the Full Drop into the Body practice. I have been practising, processing, and exploring the practice through my own body all these years, alongside the dancers, of course, and before starting to work with others on it as well, as you know. I am one of the practitioners. One major goal that I set for myself when I started this journey as the choreographer was the desire to work with bodies like these and topics like these: diving into them to then reflect outwards the inner realities of the social-political body of our times, as well as the ancient knowledge that we also carry from generation to generation within our bodies.

It is not a re-enactment or representation. Indeed, it is not a representation or a presentation. Rather, it is a fully lived physical state and a tuning-in to rhythms of inner autonomous systems, which produces certain types of movements, imagery, presence, vibrations, and a certain type of sensorial flavour for the audiences and the dancers. These particular states that we worked with came up during the working process and research (and we discarded many,

many others that emerged but did not fit the topic of the performance). I tried to crack them open and ask: what is it that makes them resonate so strongly with the artistic theme? And how does the dancer relate to them? How can you talk about them together, in order to try to examine them more thoroughly? Can the dancers reproduce them on demand? And then how? Et cetera. In that sense, it is a very acrobatic and complex process. For instance, I could never have done the last piece we made if I had not had two years of time and incredibly dedicated people.

Dancing Tango

The Realm of Appearances

DOROTHEA OLKOWSKI

INTRODUCTION

There was a time, not too long ago, when I thought that dancing tango was about the body and affective life. This is because tango is not a dance that is choreographed but one that is improvised between two dancers who must have a certain amount of technical skill but who must also have a special physical connection in order to dance well together. However, after some years of practising tango and performing tango, I have come to see it differently. There is no way to gloss over this. Of course, one must have a body of some kind to dance, and affective life is universal, but these criteria might really amount to existence. What it takes to dance is, minimally, existence, so that someone who loves movement may find a way to do this regardless of even extreme bodily limitations. Dancing is in the desire and the intention of the individual, and each individual

creates their own idea and sense of movement. Traditional tango does, of course, call for more than just the minimal. Dancing tango may be something like two skilled musicians playing improvised jazz: they know the moves, the riffs, the phrasing, and they play off one another to create something new. Tango is like this too, but as a performer I would argue that there are additional elements to tango that are not as pronounced in jazz performance, although they are perhaps not completely lacking.

Tango, in its most creative appearance, is a dance of what is called the *close embrace*. This is not the elaborate stage tango one often sees on television or online, but what is often called *Argentine tango* or *salon tango*. This kind of tango is focused on the dancer's ability to enact a number of traditional moves with a partner and then to create a dance that is based on those moves but not confined by them. This works best when there is connection and communication between two dancers. Tango does not begin with the embrace; the technical skill must come first. However, lacking the embrace, one cannot dance tango at its finest. Nevertheless, 'The embrace does not judge, but demands respect and acceptance.'[1] In the embrace, each dancer wants to be fully aware of and responsive to the other, but the connection cannot be thought, willed, or judged. Some tango professionals claim that it can be taught, but this does not seem to be quite right. One can learn many skills that may lead to a truly connected close embrace, but there are no guarantees that it will happen. One can read accounts of the embrace stating that it involves physical intimacy, communication through muscles,

1 Stefani Kang, 'My Tango Quotes' <https://stefanikangtango.com/my-tango-quotes/> [accessed 25 November 2025]. There is nothing special about this website except that it states this clearly and strongly.

breathing, and gestures, but again, this is no guarantee of connection either.[2] Having observed and (I think) experienced close embrace, it seems to me that the embrace is an effect of other things; it is an outcome and not the place to start. The place to start might be something like appearance — the love and appreciation of appearance as the sensitive starting point or initial condition for tango.

Every tango appears to start in the same way, but small variations in initial conditions can lead to very different dances. The DJ or (if you are lucky) the tango orchestra begins to play a set of tangos (either three or four, closely following one another) and two dancers who may or may not know one another look at one another, often across a room, and invite one another to dance. Traditionally the (male) lead looks first to the (female) follower, but these conventions have long been superseded by gender-fluid practices and anyone may freely invite another dancer. But what brings about this *cabeceo*, the glance across the room of one dancer to another, is initially entirely a matter of appearance. The dancer receiving the glance has the option of looking away, breaking the power of the glance and refusing the invitation to appear with the other dancer. Perhaps they have accepted another invitation already, or perhaps they simply do not want to dance at that time or with that appearance.

'All is appearance' is a statement plucked by Hannah Arendt from the work of W. H. Auden, who wrote, 'Does

2 The website 'Ultimate Tango' claims that tango is the ultimate dance for introverts because it is reverent, subdued, and structured. Of these three characteristics, only the latter seems correct, and while statistically there may be more introvert tango dancers than extrovert ones, this tells us little about it. See <https://www.ultimatetango.com> [accessed 25 November 2025].

God ever judge us by appearances? I suspect that he does.'[3] God is not the only one who does so. Arendt repeats these words to us living beings who speak and are spoken to, who touch and are touched, who see and are seen, who move from place to place, whose senses are affected consciously and beyond, whose feelings and thoughts are alive in a world that precedes us in every possible way and will continue long after our departure. But in the temporal span between our arrival and our disappearance, we do appear; we *make* our appearance. We care for our bodies, we dress ourselves, and we decide how to appear to others. Whether we are pragmatic or dramatic or something else, this might be said to be part of a universal 'urge toward self-display'.[4] But this also means that no living thing that exists does so without the presumption of a spectator.[5] It means that every subject is also an object appearing at some time and place to some spectator, and the urge toward self-display may also include the presence of spectators because living things depend on the world as the site of their appearing, their blooming, and their eventual fading away.[6] Only this, Arendt claims, guarantees our reality in a manner that consciousness alone — both feeling and thought — cannot.[7]

If it is true that even the most demure or restrained of creatures may at times appear like those exotic birds that flash their brilliant breast feathers to attract or warn off other birds — or like those creatures that change their skin and camouflage themselves to harmonize with the sur-

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* [1977/78] (Harcourt, 1981), p. 17.

4 Ibid., p. 21.

5 Ibid., p. 19.

6 Ibid., p. 22.

7 Ibid., pp. 19–20. Even Descartes's cogito presumes a reader or listener.

rounding untamed forest — then all living beings appear and disappear.[8] The point is that there are many ways of appearing and many forms of self-display. It is not always the brash revelation of a being; it may be the urge to appear as an individual distinguishable from other individuals, expressing, however one may, nothing other than oneself.[9] If we live as appearances among appearances then what is universal is that our biological, neurological, and physical processes exist for the sake of appearances. They allow appearances to appear and so our satisfaction with those appearances is reliant to a very great extent on what does not appear at all. But this is not a question of function.

What is really at stake in appearance is its infinitely varied and highly differentiated aspect.[10] This exceeds both self-preservation and sexuality, and, as Arendt argues, is more likely to be discerned in a glance, a sound, or a gesture. It is not singularly a thought, a feeling, a passion, or an emotion, so it tends to be subtle.[11] The urge to self-display of appearance is distinguishable from self-presentation as, unlike the latter, the former does not permit of choice. For dancers, the trappings of clothing, hair, makeup, and shoes are there, but they are not the main show. Appearance shows what is there to show without pretence; it cannot help but show it.[12] Yet, illusion and deception remain a possibility insofar as living beings are capable of manipulating appearance and deceiving themselves and any spectators. This is because they all exist in the common world of appearance, which serves to distract the mind and activity of

8 Ibid., p. 20.
9 Ibid., p. 30.
10 Ibid., p. 28.
11 Ibid., pp. 31–32.
12 Ibid., p. 36.

thought.[13] In the traditions passed down from the ancient Greeks, the original spectators were the gods who viewed humans as 'a spectacle for their entertainment'.[14] Struck by the beauty of harmonious appearances, humans sought to partake in this godly perspective and boldly embraced the virtue of the performance, its virtuosity, as how it appears was taken to be divine.

> Both the world and men stand in need of praise lest their beauty go unrecognized. Since men appear in the world of appearances, they need spectators, and those who come as spectators to the festival of life are filled with admiring thoughts which are then uttered in words.[15]

This admiration, this wonder, is what we philosophers have been told is the source of philosophy.[16] According to Arendt, this experience of appearance is the ground of thinking, willing, and judging. If so, then Arendt's deep insight into the foundational role of appearance as the ground of our thinking, willing, and judging should shake us to our core and undo most if not all of our presuppositions about self-display, feelings, and thought. The inner organs, the muscles, the sensory networks, the flow of blood, and the neurophysiology are what do not appear. If we can accept this insight, many things will follow and many of our assumptions will fail us. Arendt sees the darker side of this in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, whose hero, coming upon appearance, stands before the diversity and individuality of things, their sheer existence. He experi-

13 Ibid., pp. 39, 87.

14 Ibid., p. 130.

15 Ibid., p. 132.

16 Ibid., p. 143.

ences the shock of their appearing and falls apart, unable to admire or wonder or affirm sheer existence.[17]

In a similar way, Sartre also becomes painfully aware of the necessity of the spectator. Like Arendt, Sartre confirms that when the spectator, whom he calls the 'Other', looks at what appears, the Other holds the secret of its being, the proof of its existence, that which makes the appearance a visible being able to show itself in the world.[18] If the Other disappears, ceases to see who or what appears, the appearance disappears as well. Unlike Arendt, Sartre insists that even if there is a conjunction of two independent beings, this looking and being looked at is a game of conflict, a matter of which one will gain the upper hand and be free to define the Other, while struggling to remain free of that other person's domination.

For Sartre, the spectator dominates, to the detriment of the appearance, as a connection between two beings. Yet Sartre remains very much aware of the primacy of appearance. He encounters it again in his failed meeting with Pierre, who is not in the café when Sartre arrives to *see* him to meet with him. He has an appointment with Pierre but arrives late as usual. Pierre does not appear. The café offers nothing because the appearance of Pierre would have been the foundation, the ground, and without Pierre, there is no appearance, and so nothing.[19] Perhaps in the face of historical reality, war, and suffering, this is to be expected, but if Sartre's nothingness is one aspect of appearances, Arendt's is another. Sartre's situatedness between two world wars, as well as his crude male gaze in other circumstances, is a clue that we might want to take social and historical realities

17 Ibid., p. 148.

18 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 473.

19 Ibid., p. 41.

into account. We can do that with tango by briefly examining the historical and social context in which it arose. This is, we will see, crucial to the reality of its appearance.

HISTOIRE DU TANGO

The first dance to lay the groundwork for tango was called *candombe*. The Atlantic slave trade brought twelve million enslaved people to South America from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In Argentina, they organized themselves in barrios — small nations — and fought in the War for Independence. In 1812, their children were declared free. By the 1760s, Afro-Argentines held public dances, called *candombes*, attended by as many as two thousand people.[20] One of the difficulties of writing about tango is that the music is integral to the development of the dance. For example, *candombe* is highly syncopated music divided into four beats (quarter notes) per measure. Often, the drumhead is allowed to resonate freely when struck with either the hand or a stick, hard or softly, either at the edge or in the centre of the drum.[21] Rather than trying to simply

20 George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 158. The history of tango and the cultural politics of its institutionalization and globalization have been the subject of thorough critique in recent years. See, for example, Kathy Davis, *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* (NYU Press, 2015); Melissa A. Fitch, *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Morgan James Luker, 'Tango as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Development, Diversity, and the Values of Music in Buenos Aires', in *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, ed. by Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Duke University Press 2016), pp. 225–45 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374947-011>; and Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Routledge, 2018).

21 For an excellent explanation of this complex music, see Clifford Todd Sutton, 'The Candombe Drumming of Uruguay: Contextualizing Uruguayan Identity through Afro-Uruguayan Rhythm' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Miami, 2013) <https://scholarship.

describe the rhythms of *candombe*, I am providing links in the footnotes so that readers can see and hear it for themselves.[22]

The dance usually begins with two lines, then couples dance one by one, before everyone dances in pairs in a circle, and as the rhythm picks up speed the pairs go their own way with greater intensity. In the barrios, men and women would have dressed in their very best clothing. The men wore hats, heeled boots, and scarves tied loosely around the neck, and the women wore full skirted dresses. The Afro-Argentines took the dance to the working-class communities of Buenos Aires — to bars, dance halls, and brothels. Many had come from the Bantu region of Equatorial and Eastern Africa. In some native African languages, the word *tango* refers to a closed place and there are some African places called Tango as well. In Latin, *tangere* means to touch.[23] Whatever the precise origins, the word came to be applied to Afro-Argentines' dances held outdoors with drummers. In Argentina, Afro-Argentines frequently needed the permission of the governing rulers in order to hold their *candombes*, although local town councils frequently objected to them as immoral and as opportunities for enslaved people to form communities and possibly threaten the power and authority of their masters.[24] In

miami.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-Candombe-Drumming-of-Uruguay-Contextualizing/991031447556402976> [accessed 25 November 2025].

22 See 'Candombe Milonga performed by Central Ave Dance Ensemble', YouTube, 1 May 2011, <https://youtu.be/Ck8nfkv5l0Y> [accessed 25 November 2025]. This *candombe* is performed by the Central Ave Dance Ensemble in Santa Monica, California, in 2011. *Candombe* persists throughout the Americas, but especially in Uruguay.

23 Simon Collier and others, *Tango: The Dance, the Song, the Story* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 41.

24 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, pp. 156–59. On the origin of the word *tango*, see also William W. Megenney, 'The River Plate "Tango": Ety-

spite of this, the communities persisted in their gatherings and brought their drums and dances into the cities, spreading their unique rhythms and movements to those outside of their barrios.

From its founding in the sixteenth century and for approximately three centuries, Buenos Aires was a 'remote, thinly peopled and rather neglected backwater of the huge Spanish-American empire'.[25] Argentina consisted of a vast pampas, a level plain conducive to ranching and agriculture. This was initially the habitat of Indigenous people, before they were joined by mostly mixed-race (Afro-Argentine and Creole) nomadic gauchos, horsemen who served as the cavalry for rival warlords.[26] Driven eventually to the edge of the cities by the division and fencing of the land into private ranches, these *compadres* brought both their music and their macho tendencies with them to the by then thriving Buenos Aires, where they influenced the native-born and mostly poor city dwellers, the *compadritos*, along with sailors, immigrants, and others who called themselves *porteños* (port city dwellers), a name widely used to the present day.[27]

Quite possibly it was the *compadritos* who ventured into the barrios of the Afro-Argentines and took their

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mology and Origins', *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 22.2 (2003), pp. 39–45. For a critical perspective on race in Argentina in relation to tango, see Matthew B. Karush, 'Blackness in Argentina: Jazz, Tango and Race before Perón', *Past & Present*, 216.1 (2012), pp. 215–45 <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gts008>.

25 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 19.

26 Ibid., pp. 19–20. See also Julia Chindemi and Pablo Vila, 'Another Look at the History of Tango: The Intimate Connection of Rural and Urban Music in Argentina at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century', in *Sound, Image, and National Imaginary in the Construction of Latin/o American Identities*, ed. by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Pablo Vila (Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 51–109.

27 Ibid., pp. 38–39.

movements and gestures to the brothels and bars where the *milongas* — their dances — took place.[28] There, the partners danced together, sometimes outdoors, sometimes in rough dance halls, brothels, and bars. The gauchos also brought their guitar music and songs to the dances, and especially their sentimental song lyrics, sung by *milongueros* (singers or dancers) and reflecting the life of the lonely gaucho, which became an important part of the emerging tango. For those who know tango music, the guitar music of the gauchos will sound quite familiar and the themes of the songs will resonate.[29]

The *milonga* — the combination of the songs of the *payadores* (folk singers of the pampas) and a guitar accompaniment — came together as a mixture of different musical and dance forms. In addition to the *candombe* and gaucho music, the *compadritos* incorporated the *habanera*, which came from Cuba as a modified form of the French *contradanse* and the English country dance.[30] In these forms, the dancers followed rigid patterns, but the Cuban version was more fluid, alternating between slow and fast rhythms and danced to music filled with syncopation and offbeats played by wind instruments.[31]

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28 Ibid., pp. 44–45.

29 Listen to 'Roberto Lara: Argentina — The Guitar of the Pampas', YouTube, 21 December 2013 <https://youtu.be/Jt1HnKB5WEc> [accessed 25 November 2025].

30 Collier and others, *Tango*, pp. 40–41. See 'Contredanse française La réverbère', YouTube, 10 October 2014 <https://youtu.be/ib6h1sSnYZ0> [accessed 25 November 2025]; and compare it with the 'Baroque Haiti Contredanse', YouTube, 9 June 2020 <https://youtu.be/RH5pydsxpMQ> [accessed 25 November 2025], danced to drums and a flute.

31 See '*Habanera*, History of Cuban Dances', Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA), 17 June 2003 <https://fresques.ina.fr/danses-sans-visa-en/fiche-media/Dasavi00706/habanera-history-of-cuban-dances.html> [accessed 25 November 2025].

Talented Afro-Argentine musicians who had studied in Europe, upon their return to Argentina were often snubbed by the high society that had once flocked to hear them in the concert halls, in favour of their white European counterparts. However, art forms of African origin continued, especially that of the *payada* or *payada de contrapunto*, the poetic duel of two guitarist-singers spontaneously composing verse in response to one another.[32] The two melodies of the *payada* could be played simultaneously, and this practice — derived from the combination of gaucho practices and European counterpoint — became central to both the music called *milonga* and to the tango music that emerged from it.

The waltz also came to Argentina from Europe, brought by immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth century. Native working-class Argentines, called *criollos*, grew up to the sounds of the waltz along with the polka and the other dances described above. They incorporated the waltz into their dance and modified it to produce the variation called the *vals criollo* or *vals cruzado*. The waltz's association with the European upper class, for whom it was the first dance to feature a close embrace, made it more acceptable for Argentines of all classes.[33] Like its European counterpart and unlike the traditional tango, the music of the *vals criollo* has a 3/4 time signature — three beats to the measure rather than four — but it is usually played at a faster tempo, and its steps are not the same as the European waltz. The *tango vals* consists of many

32 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, p. 170. *Payada de contrapunto* was developed by Afro-Argentine musicians who had studied in Europe, upon their return to Argentina.

33 See 'The Three Faces of Tango', Los Angeles Tango Academy, 21 July 2015 <https://www.latangoacademy.com/blog/the-three-faces-of-tango> [accessed 25 November 2025].

giros, turns in both directions, and the *molinete*, in which followers dance small circles around the leader. Again, a video helps us to see and feel the difference.[34]

Milonga originally referred only to a specific version of the tango — one that persists to this day. All tango dancers also learn to dance the *milonga*, and if tango music and lyrics are akin to ancient Greek tragedy, then the *milonga* is its comedic counterpart, its satyr play. Originating in the region of the Rio de la Plata, *milonga* music combined the Cuban *habanera*, the polka, and the *payada de contrapunto*, derived from its European origins. In European counterpoint, 'two separate but equal melodies are played simultaneously. Separate means they peak and valley in different places and that they move at different times. Equal means that they are both interesting lines in their own right.'[35] These principles carry over into the *milonga* and the tango dances. Given its origins in the rural areas of Argentina and in the lower-class neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires and Montevideo where whites and Blacks met and mixed, *milonga* is fast and energetic.[36] Some sources claim that the *milonga* was created by the young white toughs, the *campadritos*, to mockingly imitate the *candombe*, both the dance and the music.[37] The pace is a fast 2/4 tempo, syn-

34 Watch 'Best Tango Valz Sebastian Arce and Mariana Montes', YouTube, 21 January 2010 <https://youtu.be/RfOM8pxafzg> [accessed 25 November 2025].

35 Ryan Leach, 'The Contemporary Musician's Guide to Counterpoint', Envato Tuts+, 9 March 2010 <https://web.archive.org/web/20240820191745/https:/music.tutsplus.com/the-contemporary-musicians-guide-to-counterpoint--audio-4630t> [accessed 25 November 2025]. All references to the nature of counterpoint are drawn from this clear account by the musician Ryan Leach.

36 'Milonga Dance and Music', Dance Facts, n.d. <http://www.dancefacts.net/tango/milonga-dance/> [accessed 25 November 2025].

37 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, p. 166.

copated so that accents are placed on the first or second beat as well as the fourth, fifth, and seventh of an eight-beat series. The music creates a rhythmic dance, with often humorous movements called *quebradas* — slightly jerky movements and pauses, or *cortes*, that break up the flow. Advanced *milonga* dancers make double steps or take three steps between two beats (*milonga con traspié*).[38] Again, only a video can give the non-dancer a clearer idea of the intricacies of the *milonga*.[39]

TANGO IN THREE PARTS

As stated above, the word *tango* seems to have been strongly rooted in Afro-Argentine culture. The exact origin of the word is difficult to pin down, but at first the term was widely used to refer to the dances of Black Argentines.[40] Tango, as a new way of dancing the *milonga*, is referred to in newspapers as early as the 1870s as a dance of the Afro-Argentines, and it is the pianist Rosendo Mendizabal, a musician of so-called 'mixed African blood', and the son of a famous Argentine poet, who is credited with writing the first tango that can be fully attributed to its composer. Written in 1896, 'El Enterriano' remains a well-known and often played tango.[41] Additionally, most if not all of the early tango musicians were Afro-Argentine.

38 'Milonga Dance and Music'.

39 Here are two of the finest *milonga* dancers in the world, Miguel Zotto and Daiana Guspero: 'Zotto dancing milonga at Tango Magia', YouTube, 30 December 2012 <https://youtu.be/_4G03HpzArc> [accessed 25 November 2025].

40 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, p. 165.

41 '1868, April 21 — Birth of Rosendo Mendizabal', Today in Tango!, 21 April 2011 <https://todayintango.wordpress.com/2011/04/21/1868-april-21-birth-of-rosendo-mendizabal/> [accessed 25 November 2025]. Here is an early version played by Aníbal Troilo's orchestra: 'Anibal Troilo — 1944 — El entrerriano', YouTube, 19 July 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouub5Cjc8ok&list=

As the tango spread from the barrios to parts of town inhabited by European immigrants, and to wealthier neighbourhoods, the European influences toned it down into the *tango liso* or smooth tango.[42]

The period from the 1880s through the 1920s, known as the *old guard* or *guardia vieja*, saw the rise of richer and more sophisticated music with more varied instrumentation, including the bandoneon (a more complex version of the accordion), violins and other string instruments, and the piano, in addition to the more traditional guitars and flutes.[43] The bandoneon has been called a formidably difficult instrument to play. It became the central instrument of the tango trios who played in the cafés of La Boca, usually without dancers. These musicians were the first true stars of tango, whose creativity and musicianship have not been forgotten, especially as they began making records as early as 1902. Eventually, professional dancers emerged from the cabarets and the *tango milonga* prospered.[44]

The Golden Age of tango is replete with too many highly rated composers, singers, orchestras, and dancers to name, and is still firmly the tango of the *porteños*, the lower classes, the mixed-race Argentines, and the female prostitutes/cabaret performers who were the best women dancers. Men had to learn to dance well to even have a chance

RDOuub5Cjc8ok&start_radio=1> [accessed 25 November 2025]. The song title refers to a person from the country's interior.

42 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 50.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., pp. 58–60. Here is a video of Rino Fraina and Graziella Pulvirenti dancing to composer and orchestra leader Francisco Canaro's 'Mimosa' (1929), filmed in Portland, Oregon, 20 April 2018. The music and dance beautifully evoke the aesthetics of the era: 'Rino Fraina & Graziella Pulvirenti — Francisco Canaro (Mimosa) Portland', YouTube, 20 April 2018 <https://youtu.be/1ArwQgyvsM8> [accessed 25 November 2025].

of dancing with the women.[45] Some orchestras remained committed to traditional rhythms using novel instrumentation to produce a more danceable tango, but many evolved the tango through the formal study of melody, harmony, and classical music in addition to the musical traditions passed down to them. This led to the creation of a more complex and refined tango, but one that retained the sextet of two bandoneons, two violins, a double bass, and a piano.[46] Sometime around 1913, the tango was taken up by the high society of London and Paris, opening the way to greater acceptance from the Argentine upper classes and to the Golden Age of tango.[47]

The orchestras of this time dressed formally — their elegant sartorial appearance correlated with the elegant musical one. We see this especially with the appearance of singers such as Carlos Gardel, an illegitimate son of French parents, who grew up in Buenos Aires listening to opera as much as to the *payadores*. His unmistakable, expressive baritone voice led to success in the clubs, on stage, and in recordings across South America and Europe.[48] Often the singers — usually men but increasingly, over time, women as well — along with the orchestra performed for the dancers, in the sense that they paid attention to the phrasing, the tempos, and the pauses of the songs, creating expressive opportunities for the dancers' movements and gestures. The words of the Golden Age songs were expressions of urban life: of immigrants, of the attempts of men and women to climb out of poverty by selling their bodies in one way or another, of shattered illusions, inequality,

45 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 118.

46 Ibid., pp. 119–20.

47 Ibid., p. 61.

48 Ibid., p. 124.

and social injustice, and, of course, of love — unrequited love and longing.[49] Thus the tango was called 'a sorrowful thought that can be danced'.[50] For this reason, as well as for the wild popularity of this music and the sensuous appearance of the dance, political leaders — including those who gained their position through coups — frequently tried to ban the tango, especially when the lyrics reflected politics and poverty.

The 1930s were a period of tremendous growth and development of all aspects of tango. The music initially emphasized rhythm, and this brought out the dancers. It is impossible to do justice to this period of the tango with a single composer, orchestra, singer, or pair of dancers; the list of accomplished performers and dancers is too long. The spine-tingling 1971 video of Juan d'Arienzo directing his orchestra and the singer Mercedes Serrano in a performance of the 1938 song 'Nada más' conveys the urgency of the music and the brilliance of both the composition and the singer.[51] A second video, of a 2016 performance by two unnamed but extraordinary dancers, exemplifies the essence of salon tango dance and music.[52] Another brilliant composer and pianist of the period, Carlos di Sarli, revived the melody without losing the rhythm.[53] The plenitude of exceptional music accompanied the prolifer-

49 Ibid., p. 132.

50 Ibid., p. 136. These are the words of the lyricist Enrique Santos Discépolo, whose most beloved song compared twentieth-century life to a junk shop, corrupt and immoral.

51 D'Arienzo's orchestra with Mercedes Serrano, performing 'Nada más': '"Nada más" d'Arienzo "Mercedes Serrano" 1971 Tango', YouTube, 7 February 2010 <https://youtu.be/adI4-3CvCSU> [accessed 25 November 2025].

52 'Tango Night 2016! Juan D'Arienzo "Nada Mas"', YouTube, 11 August 2016 <https://youtu.be/yAcXTX7DOJ4> [accessed 25 November 2025].

53 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 149.

ation of exceptional dancers at this time, the best of whom competed against one another in dance contests that continue worldwide to the present day. Even as the favoured music remains that of the Golden Age, the music and dance has evolved considerably and the dancers' appearance has taken on even greater importance.

By the 1940s there were hundreds of tango orchestras in Buenos Aires, many of which, like that of Osvaldo Pugliese, had become quite large and professional, and there were so many more dancers that every district of the city had at least one and as many as five tango clubs. These were places where friends could meet and dance, and where men and women of diverse ethnicities and socio-economic classes could mix.[54] This period also coincided with the rise of the populist president Juan Domingo Perón, who lifted the ban on tango lyrics that had been imposed by the dictatorial military regime. Most of this success melted away in the 1950s with changes in government and cultural shifts in the population. Out of these changes, the work of composer Astor Piazzolla stands out for its introduction of dissonance, chromatic harmony, and non-traditional rhythms, all of which made the music difficult for dancers but challenged others to develop the *nuevo tango* and *tango escenario* (new tango and stage tango).

THE URGE TO SELF-PRESENT

The history just presented covers the multiplicity of competing and contributing cultures that make up what we call *tango*. But in choosing to visualize each of these through YouTube videos of dancers whose performances fully articulate the appearance of each of these eras and genres,

54 Ibid., pp. 154–55.

I have tried to bring to light the role of appearance for the dancers as well as for the spectators. Anyone who has watched videos of their performances modulates their feelings and thoughts entirely on the basis of their appearance. As philosophers encountering this situation, we are pretty safe when we restrict ourselves to the life of the mind, but we are in increasingly unstable territory when we start to think and speak about something like tango and its non-philosophical fascinations. We still feel relatively secure addressing nature, literature, and visual art. We make sense of the poetry of songs because it is language, and music provides us with many points of departure, beginning with musical scores and a multitude of recordings. But what can we say about the dance, which for dancers and lovers of dance exists almost entirely in the realm of live appearance, especially given the reality that salon tango is entirely improvised on the basis of a few fundamental moves?

To situate appearance, Arendt points to the findings of zoologist and biologist Adolf Portmann, whose research focused on 'the external shape of the animal [which] serves to conserve the essential, the inside apparatus, through movement and intake of food, avoidance of enemies and finding sexual partners'.[55] In nature, Portmann discerned visible shapes and sounds that appear to us — as to other living creatures — as definite and pleasing. Although Portmann favoured symmetry, and recent studies have shown that asymmetry or antisymmetry or *contrapposto* (as tango dancers call it) actually makes for more pleasing features, what remains salient is the evidence for an unmistakable urge toward self-presentation, unnecessary merely for the preservation of life, almost always exceeding even the requirements of sexual attraction, yet extremely gratifying

55 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 441.

to the 'sheer receptivity of our senses'.[56] In short, living creatures wish to please and to be pleased, and this display makes it possible to feel, to see, and to hear what pleases our sensibility.

Feeling, seeing, and hearing, that is, the tactile, the visible, and the sonorous, are how we enhance the value of the *surface*, the site of the maximum power of expression. If the surface that is felt, seen, and heard is the site of maximum expression, what is being expressed? Not something deeper and invisible, hidden from our senses, but actually the surface expresses itself, its own emotion, its contours and contrasts, its delicate or explosive colours, rhythms, harmonics, form, movement, and sensibilities — its multiple dimensions.[57]

Non-dancers frequently express the view that tango is sensuous or erotic, and perhaps it is, but what appears as sensuous and erotic to non-dancers is, for the dancers and musicians, bound up with their technique, their connected embrace or orchestration, and especially their contrapposto, their counterpoint. Counterpoint requires at least two voices, two appearances, but when we add the musicians and possibly also a singer as well as a room full of other dancers, there can be many voices or appearances in the tango. Every historical cultural contribution to tango adds a voice to the overall contrapposto appearance. Musicians play and sing to the dancers who dance both with and independently of the music, both with and counterpoised in relation to the dance partner and to the other

56 Ibid., p. 458. See e.g. John P. Swaddle and Innes C. Cuthill, 'Asymmetry and Human Facial Attractiveness: Symmetry May Not Always Be Beautiful', *Proceedings of the Royal Society B, Biological Sciences*, 261.1360 (1995), pp. 111–16 <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.1995.0124>.

57 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 473.

dancers in the *milonga*. 'The great composers throughout history, from Bach and Mozart, Debussy and Stravinsky, John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith, all share the common trait of a mastery of counterpoint.'[58] In counterpoint, the musicians and dancers may move parallel to one another, both in the same direction. They may also move contrary to one another, and so move in opposite directions. And finally, they may move obliquely to one another, one voice moving while the other stays in place.[59] In doing so, they are the expression of the history of tango and the many cultures that created it. In this video (cited in the note), several excellent pairs of Argentine street dancers reflect these tango movements beautifully at different tempos and also with the *milonga*.[60]

These three types of counterpoint produce tension and its resolution and are probably the source of much of the appearance of sensuousness and eroticism. In the dance, there is a sensible connection that resonates between dancers realizing their appearance, their movements, within the dynamics of the music, which itself appears to the dancers as modulation, mutation, contrapuntal variation, and inversion, but also as something independent of their dance. There are the moments of slowing down into the adagios, which then give way to a gradual speeding up into an accelerando, and again a slowdown, even a complete cessation of visible movement — although dancers never truly stop moving — as the intensity of the music fades or increases.

58 Leach, 'The Contemporary Musician's Guide to Counterpoint'.

59 Ibid.

60 This is a typical scene in the San Telmo barrio of Buenos Aires: 'Amazing! Real Tango Street Dance in Buenos Aires, Argentina', YouTube, 10 July 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-17O9Ocydw> [accessed 25 November 2025].

The dancers can *feel* skin and muscles and breath as a *passion* by which they are engaged in the world and are in danger in the world — in danger as they add yet another independent line, consonant or dissonant with the music as they dare. Along with technique, these feelings and passions create the dancer's appearance.

THE MELANCHOLY OF TANGO AND THE SOUL

The lyrics and music of an early tango of 1903, 'La Morocha' (The Creole Woman; lyrics by Ángel Gregorio Villoldo), convey perfectly the melancholy soul of tango. 'I am the dark woman with smoldering eyes, and the love-heat is ablaze in my soul. I am the one whose love is on fire for the noble and daring Creole.'[61] These lines are not meant to exemplify heterosexuality. Instead, they universalize the appearance of the one who suffers and offers the *cabaceo*. Arendt refers to seeing and hearing as aspects of the soul, and when we speak of the soul, we might think back to the French word *esprit*, which can be translated as either 'mind' or 'spirit' — in other words, the inner and invisible life, whether sensible, psychological, cognitive, or spiritual. Thus, *esprit* has generally been opposed to the body, and taken to be part of the 'silent, non-appearing activity [...], the soundless dialogue of me with myself'.[62] But this is not correct, Arendt insists, for it is the case that the life of the soul is expressed much more effectively through melody, harmony, rhythm, gesture, and glance — that is, through movement and sensory life, feeling and emotion. Nevertheless, as she argues, these are not the actions of a mindless creature merely responding to an external stimulus. What

61 Isabelle Muñoz and Évelyne Pieiller, *Tango*, trans. by Rosanna M. Giammanco-Frongia (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1994), p. 56.

62 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 502.

matters is both our sensitive and sensible embodiment and the unstoppable consciousness of our sensibility. To feel is to be conscious and how the dancer feels in relation to the partner, the music, and the environment is intrinsic to the appearance.

Like Arendt, Sartre confirms that when the Other — meaning another human being — looks at me, he or she holds the secret of my being, the proof of my existence, that which makes me a visible being able to show myself in the world.[63] If the Other disappears, ceasing to see me, I disappear as well. This is not trivial, for to be invisible to others is a painful experience, giving way to a sense of not existing at all. But unfortunately, much of the time, the connection between people does not arise in our conjunction with one another, in the tango-like embrace and appearance, but proceeds logically. Sensation is added to sensation, each moment is reflected upon, and they are consciously added together until the judgement arises: that the Other belongs to my Gestalt, my organized experience of the whole, or else they don't. Often, Sartre insists, even if there is a conjunction of two independent beings, this looking and being looked at, sensing and being sensed, is a game of conflict, a matter of which person will gain the upper hand and be free to define the Other, while struggling to remain free of the Other's domination. In other words, one voice dominates to the detriment of the other and counterpoint is lost.

For the most part, this is not the case with tango. In describing the structure of one who is in balance with another, engaging with the other in a consonant composition, Sartre observes that this balance, which he calls 'desire', is non-reflective. If it were intellectual we could turn it on and off, reducing that other person to an object and reducing

63 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 473.

the engagement with another to the sum of cognitive judgements. Nor is it sexual desire, what we generally refer to as 'lust' or 'infatuation'. After all, in public dances, bodies are usually covered by clothing. Given the urge to self-display and to feel, see, and hear, what we sense is the figure at the surface, the interesting lines, the delicate or explosive movement, colour along with form, usually all quite ambiguous and with no guarantee of the connection intrinsic to tango. Sometimes when a human being, a living counterpoint to our own independent existence, appears, our soul and all our senses awaken and call forth our own historical and cultural existence in a variety of modes: contrary, parallel, or oblique (slanted — keeping the same pitch constant in a single voice). Sartre calls this type of conjunction 'affective intentionality', a hyper-sensory awareness of our own feeling and sensation, as well as of embodied affections in relation to another, which infuse the attentive mind with its invisible preoccupations.[64]

Unlike cognition and its theoretical realm of ideas, affective intentionality is quite effectively fluid and translucent, yet Sartre finds it to be troubled water for a largely cognitive consciousness. When consciousness flows from what is felt, its logical clarity and Gestalt-like completeness is disturbed by affective intentionality, which, like fine solid particles in a stream, disrupts thinking. This bears no resemblance to other sensory functions, such as being tired or hungry. Hunger does not require the presence of another human being; it involves no counterpoint.[65] But affective intention — desire — happens only in relation to another; it compromises us as rational beings; it clogs

64 Ibid., p. 501.
65 Ibid., p. 503.

our intellect; it can take hold of us and overwhelm us.[66] In tango there is a *shaping* of the body of the other in tandem with one's own: motion awakens motion, sensation awakens sensation. The caress given to another is felt on one's own body as much as on the body of the other; it is the placing of one sensory surface against another surface, one appearance against another appearance. At its best, it is counterpoint.

This can occur in the dance when dancers are able to become the motion for the form that is the dance. The perfection of technique is not for the sake of the ego but for the sake of the common appearance. There are two independent beings, two different but equally interesting types of movement, yet they are in balance. The freedom of movement of each one makes possible the freedom of movement of the other. These freedoms create the dance. Music adds a third or fourth voice to the counterpoint, as the dancers move in consonance or dissonance with these other sensations as well. The freedom of each dancer is realized in this way as the mystery that the incarnation of another's body reveals regarding one's own. It is a double and reciprocal incarnation, an awakening.[67]

Let us say, then, that from this point of view, no body is ever an object; the body is the *translucent matter* of consciousness, a *revelation* for consciousness, a *condition* of consciousness, suffered as pleasure and/or pain, as love and/or hate.[68] Yet as philosophers, we constantly forget the soul. We objectify sensations and sensibility, movement and musicality, and we objectify others, even or especially when they show themselves as independent

66 Ibid., p. 504.

67 Ibid., p. 508.

68 Ibid., pp. 437–44.

beings. We leave the soul behind and focus only on our thoughts, permitting our thinking to make the body into an object and the other into one dimension of our own consciousness.

Sartre proclaims that desire is one of the great forms assumed by the revelation of the Other's body.[69] But we misunderstand what this means. Our passion for being with others comes to us, he says, not from the pleasure or pain arising with our mental states, but from our affective engagement in the world, our consonant or dissonant counterpoints. Sartre is aware of how extremely fragile this can be, because fundamental to our own existence are the many possibilities of our own non-being, which is not merely absence. Imagine that you arrive at the dance looking for one person in particular, but do not see them. As Sartre would describe this, 'there is an intuition of [...] absence.'[70] This crucial intuition can affect us powerfully. If the dancefloor is the background from which emerge the figures of other people who are not the one with whom you will have that possibility of real connection in the embrace, their faces and figures melt back into that background.

For Sartre, if you were to see the one you seek to *cabaceo*, the entire room would organize itself around that person and come to life. Perceptually, this is a Gestalt, and Sartre demands the Gestalt as the fulfilment of his perceptual intentions, but that already goes beyond the realm of appearance. Lacking the sought-after appearance, the room reflects the nothingness of one's own existence, which, because it is so powerfully soulful, is also most fragile. But this happens only if one conceptualizes others

69 Ibid., p. 502. Crucial here is the idea of revelation rather than fascination.

70 Ibid., p. 41.

as belonging to one's own Gestalt, and thinks of oneself as nothingness, the not-there at the heart of existence, thereby feeding the terrible sense of fragility. It is as if no one else in the room can see you, as if no one will ever offer a *cabaceo* to you purely on the basis of appearance. It is as if Sartre still assumes that the self must be there like something deeper and invisible, but hidden from our senses, and not an appearance, but because it is not there — there is no essential self — then there is nothing. So let us augment Sartre's melancholic tale and say that the nothingness of the room and of the self is an illusion and the Gestalt is a false ideal. What is real are the contrary, parallel, or oblique motions between oneself and the sensibilities of others, all of whom are independent existences in motion. It is this independence and the motion that Sartre fears, and in his demand for oneness, for a figure in his perceptual ground, he ends up always in conflict and in pain.

CONCLUSION: APPEARING AND THINKING ABOUT SOUL

Why is it the case that the failure to appear opens the melancholy, soulful abyss of fragility and nothingness? In part, because Sartre does not grant the appearance its independent existence in the structure of the relation taken as counterpoint. And related to this, Sartre still makes the mistake of referring to this one person as an 'Other' to himself and not, as Arendt suggests, as a distinct and unique human being. This indicates a failure on his part to fully take in the other as appearance. Otherness belongs to all more or less inert objects, and to refer to human beings as 'Other' says a great deal about our refusal of their self-showing, and thus our need to dominate them in order to situate ourselves. But living beings are various and quite

distinct, and mostly they distinguish themselves, expressing not merely hunger or thirst, affection or hostility, ease or fear. Each is unique, independent. For Arendt, soulful movement or action alone is not enough to reveal this uniqueness. A human being is not, in the end, merely a dance or a conduit for music or thought. An independent human being also speaks by whatever means possible. This is to take counterpoint to another dimension.

Cognition does eventually play an important role. A dancer or musician or philosopher who knows nothing of the complex history of tango music and dance, and who cannot speak about their dance, music, or philosophy, may not be able to show themselves in their full existence as an appearance.[71] There are some dancers who, at a *milonga*, either out of shyness or indifference, refuse to speak with a dance partner whom they do not already know. Perhaps they revel in the mystery of appearance or secretly fear objectification. But to continue to invite them to dance, we want to understand *who* they are and not merely *what* they are; we speak with them and are spoken to. This is the point of the brief break of a minute or so between three of the four dances in a tango set. Their invisible thoughts matter. A person's 'qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings are still hidden when they are silent', and are revealed only as they begin to speak about dance or music or philosophy, when they speak about what matters to them.[72] For Arendt, it is not enough to only manifest the dancer or musicians, or to only let concepts pop up in one's head. Speaking matters because in speaking — for better or worse — a unique and personal appearance, which silence would turn

71 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [1958] (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 176.

72 Ibid., p. 179.

into the mystery of non-being, is revealed to others who hear and know the unique story of the unique human being and speak directly with them.[73] This, too, is what makes each of us independent even as we manifest the dance, the music, or the concept in our appearance.

No two pairs of dancers dance alike. No musician plays a piece of music exactly the same way as another. No philosopher thinks the same thoughts as another. Through speaking about our thought, dances, and music, we partake of the human world, initiate movement, set our attachments into motion and express their value with our words. Every feeling and thinking human being wants to act and to speak because in so doing they can begin something unexpected and new — it is a birth. This birth, this *natality*, as Arendt calls it, eliminates the fantasy of non-being and the undifferentiated background, and replaces it with a distinct and unique existence, and not merely with the empty placeholder of an 'Other'. Our intuition can work here as well. We may intuit by means of soul, not merely an 'Other', an other object-like non-being, but the revelation of a unique and distinct being who appears, acts, and speaks, revealing who they are, appearing to us in the human world, in the 'unique shape of the body and the sound of the voice', as an independent existence with whom we may fully engage in the counterpoint of dance, music, and philosophy.[74]

73 Ibid., p. 183.

74 Ibid., pp. 178–79.

BODIES AND SOCIAL SPACE

Embodying and Transforming Female Masculinity through Combat Sports

ELISA VIRGILI

INTRODUCTION

Before I sat down to write this essay, I streamed the Katy Taylor versus Amanda Serrano boxing match that took place at Madison Square Garden, New York, in April 2022. For the first time in boxing history, the main event of the evening was a match between two female boxers. Specifically, it was a fight for the world lightweight title, which went to the Irish Katy Taylor after ten hard-fought rounds and a non-unanimous verdict. Looking beyond the verdict, Serrano (the other fighter) said: 'No matter what happens Saturday night, I think the real winners are the fans and women in general and the sport of women's boxing, be-

cause it's only going to grow from now on.'[1] I remember that when I first saw the fight, I commented on it in a WhatsApp group with some of my boxing mates, who were almost amazed at the match and the technical skills of the female boxers. Several people pointed out that the women's boxing technique was different from that of men: more technical and cleaner. The body is also different, and so is the attitude. But sending in the gym chats, as a joke, a picture of Taylor and Serrano weighing each other up, facing each other in defiance, I thought: why are they using the same script as men's boxing? Why are they imitating the arrogance, the rivalry, and the personal confrontation, rather than the sporting challenge? Do we really want to go to Madison Square Garden to see a boxing match based on the same gender norms? However, at the end of the match, the two female boxers — visibly emotional — shared a long embrace.

In this chapter, I will begin from this image to answer the following question: what effect do bodies, particularly those socialized as female,[2] have on a *dispositif* — to use Michel Foucault's term — such as boxing,[3] in terms of

1 Amanda Serrano, quoted in Brian Mahoney, 'Taylor vs Serrano at MSG Is a Main Event for Women's Boxing', *AP News*, 29 April 2022 <https://apnews.com/article/sports-boxing-new-york-mens-womens-f9c353fa4e3f6a420c7eb5354a8c853e> [accessed 26 November 2025].

2 In this essay, I use the word *woman* to refer to those who recognize themselves as women. However, the categories of combat sports are strictly binary; there are still very few trans women in combat sports, and literature on the subject is scarce. Moreover, gender performativity encompasses other nuances that I am unable to explore here.

3 I interpret the term *dispositif* here in the Foucauldian sense: 'What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the

the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity? Conversely, what effect does the sport of boxing have on women's bodies? How does this typically male sport shape their bodies and performatively construct their gender identity? What is the relationship between the body and female behaviour? How do these two dimensions become intertwined through the gender dimension?

In the first sections, I will explain what I mean by gender performativity in a sporting context, specifically in combat sports, and what the *dispositifs* are that construct and deconstruct these identities through bodies, how they move and how they behave. I will first offer a contextualization of the relationship between gender and sport drawing on recent literature on the subject, the body of which is growing fast and is mainly sociological. I will then analyse gender performativity through the theories of Judith Butler and Paul B. Preciado, and — especially — through Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity. Finally, I will delve into a specific aspect of female gender construction: motherhood. This is undoubtedly a relevant theme when speaking of female bodies in combat sports, but I will try to understand how motherhood, or the desire for it, relates to these kinds of sports. Before starting my analysis, I must

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apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the program of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality. In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely.' See Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. by Colin Gordon (Vintage, 1980), pp. 194–228 (p. 194).

make a brief methodological note: the author of this article is an amateur athlete, who devotes part of her time and body to training as a boxer in a community gym in Milan. The changes and negotiations with gender identity have therefore also been experienced first-hand, affecting her own body and gender identity.

WE ARE HERE TOO!

In recent decades, we have witnessed an increased presence of women in all types of sports, at different levels (professional or amateur) and with varying modalities of participation.[4] Despite this visible increase, differences in terms of gender opportunities remain in most sports, both in terms of accessibility and professional recognition.[5]

The mass entry of women into sport began gradually in the 1980s, in conjunction with a different style of consumption, which also involved a different idea of sport on two different and perhaps complementary fronts: on the one hand, there was an increased awareness of the social function of sport; on the other hand, a different body culture began to take shape, which had an influence in the areas of both psychophysical well-being and aesthetics, understood as a tendency towards a well-defined body norm. In Western countries, sport — especially that practised in

4 YouGov, *Women in Sport Report 2021: The Growth in Women's Sport — and What It Means for Marketers* (YouGov, 2021) <https://commercial.yougov.com/rs/464-VHH-988/images/YouGov-Women-in-sport-wp.pdf> [accessed 26 November 2025]; Lynda B. Ransdell, Jamie M. Vener, and Katie Sell, 'International Perspectives: The Influence of Gender on Lifetime Physical Activity Participation', *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 124.1 (2004), pp. 12–14 <https://doi.org/10.1177/146642400312400105>.

5 See Taylor Kennedy Gersch, 'The Gender Pay Gap: Seeking Fairness for Women in Professional Sports', *Oregon Review of International Law*, 22 (2021), pp. 147–96 <https://hdl.handle.net/1794/26270> [accessed 26 November 2025].

commercial gyms — became a tool for creating a body that resembled the ideal proposed by the media: a toned and lean body, far from the images of femininity of the 1950s and 1960s. Sport thus became a way of performing a specific gender identity. What has been decisive for this increase in participation has been the presence of women in all types of sport, a presence that had previously been very low and limited to sports considered typically feminine (such as artistic gymnastics and volleyball), while women were barely present in sports such as football, cycling, and boxing — sports that attracted (and perhaps still attract) media, public, and economic attention. Women gradually began to practise sports that were considered typically male, and not without difficulties: at the 2012 Olympics, for example, we saw the first women's boxing match. In the same years, interest in women's football also began to grow, starting with English football. As these sports gained visibility, so did debates about the so-called 'masculine' bodies of female athletes and whether they should wear skirts instead of trousers.[6]

All modern sports have been based on the idea of a white male body that is considered neutral. All spaces, imaginaries, norms, and performances have been based on this standard. Athletic bodies reproduce and reinforce a stereotyped idea of gender. Women who play sports, especially sports not designed for the female body, are somehow violating a gender norm. They do this by entering spaces that were inaccessible to them until a few decades ago, by stepping into public and media spaces and claiming labour rights and recognition; they do this by changing

6 Cathy van Ingen and Nicole Kovacs, 'Subverting the Skirt: Female Boxers' "Troubling" Uniforms', *Feminist Media Studies*, 12.3 (2012), pp. 460–63 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.698091>.

their bodies, which are supposed to be 'graceful and pretty', thus challenging gender binarism. They do this by making an exception to the norm, an exception to the normed female body.

PERFORMING GENDER IN SPORTS

By gender performativity, I mean that gender is constantly constructed in the repetition of acts (whether linguistic, such as using certain words, or bodily, such as making certain gestures, walking, or playing sports).[7] In this sense, gender is not merely an external social construction but the assumption of a bodily posture: the embodiment of a norm through various social *dispositifs*. If gender is constructed in this way, that is, by repeating a norm, then this norm can be changed through the repetition of gestures and postures that are exceptions to, or failures of, this norm. How, then, do these exceptions to the norm take shape in combat sports, or, rather, which bodies and subjectivities appear as exceptions to the norm?

Since the 1970s, sociology has turned its attention to combat sports.[8] In the 1990s, sociologists began to look at the relationship between gender and sport from a phenomenological perspective,[9] which in some ways has something in common with the gender studies and queer

7 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

8 Alex Channon and George Jennings, 'Exploring Embodiment through Martial Arts and Combat Sports: A Review of Empirical Research', *Sport in Society*, 17.6 (2014), pp. 773–89 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2014.882906>.

9 Cristiano Barreira, 'The Essences of Martial Arts and Corporal Fighting: A Classical Phenomenological Analysis', *Archives of Budo*, 13 (2017), pp. 351–76 <https://archbudo.eu/index.php/latest-publication/2017-volume-13/the-essences-of-martial-arts-and-corporal-fighting-a-classical-phenomenological-analysis> [accessed 26 November 2025].

theories that were developing in the same years. These studies focused on the subjective experiences and embodiment (that is, the social experiences of human beings) of those who practise combat sports (who are both the subject and object of this strand of research).[10] In the same years, the phenomenological perspective became the interpretive framework for analysing drag queen shows and butch nights, showing how gender is performance. The issues sometimes intersect; for example, Elise Paradis shows how boxing practices can also be analysed from a gender perspective, in terms of how bodies and gestures change.[11] In this sense, the body is an archive or a 'somatheque' in which various norms, teachings, and movements that define gender (and are defined by gender) are sedimented by those who embody them, leaving space for the negotiation of norms.[12] Women in combat sports are often referred to as 'masculine' because the way they use their bodies and make gestures is normally defined as such. But exactly how is this masculinity defined?

When I say that gender is a performance, I am referring to all genders. Therefore, just as a certain type of femininity is constructed through sports that reproduce typically feminine movements and bodies (sports without physical contact and with slim and tapered bodies), typically masculine movements and bodies are reproduced in other sports (namely, 'violent' sports with a lot of physical contact and with muscular bodies).

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10 See Channon and Jennings, 'Exploring Embodiment'.

11 Elise Paradis, 'Boxers, Briefs or Bras? Bodies, Gender and Change in the Boxing Gym', *Body & Society*, 18.2 (2012), pp. 82–109 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X12440829>.

12 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo junkie: sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (Grasset, 2008).

If we consider that masculine bodies are the bearers of 'markers of masculinity',[13] we could say that this fact shapes the experience of male athletes and affects their attitudes and behaviour, whether they adhere to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity or construct themselves in reaction to it. Hegemonic masculinity is the 'dominant' mode of being male, the most desirable one in any society,[14] characterized by a decided heterosexuality and an aversion to anything feminine or homosexual. On the opposite side, we find normative femininity. Precisely because they are socially and culturally constructed, masculinities need contexts in which to define themselves; although experienced by individuals, they are also created and shaped collectively and sustained in the practices of institutions. Given the role that homosociality and competition play in dominant masculinity, some places are traditionally considered 'more masculine' than others, including within the context of sport. Boxing gyms are generally a masculine environment permeated by values — respect, courage, competition, and physical strength — that are considered to be linked to a specific gender affiliation.[15] Women boxers tend to be fewer than men in such gyms, and the percentage decreases in professional boxing. This may be for practical reasons, such as the difficulty of juggling sport with private lives and care responsibilities, or because of the perceived difficulty of entering typically male territory, with the pressure to be at least 'as good as a male boxer'.

13 Michael Flood, 'Men, Sex, and Homosociality: How Bonds between Men Shape their Sexual Relations with Women', *Men and Masculinities*, 10.3 (2008), pp. 339–59 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X06287761>.

14 Raewyn W. Connell, 'Politics of Changing Men', *Arena Journal*, 6 (1996), pp. 53–72.

15 See *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, ed. by Kath Woodward (Routledge, 2004).

While the male presence that characterizes the gym is taken for granted, the female presence, by contrast, is always perceived as strange, as an exception, and must therefore be justified and legitimized. Or rather, female athletes must legitimize themselves in a space where their presence is not taken for granted. The female body in a boxing gym continues to be perceived as a foreign body, acceptable only if it is a defeminized body, that is, if it has less accentuated feminine features and 'hits like a man'. At the same time, the female presence is rendered reassuring by those who produce accessories and clothing for combat sports: pink gloves, coloured leggings, and short tops instead of loose tank tops.[16]

In the boxing context, constant displays of virility seek to convey the image of the strong and aggressive man that many young boxers want to project. They will often talk about women as sexual objects and show possessive behaviour towards their partners, especially in social spaces outside the gym. All this happens within a framework in which heteronormativity acts as a legitimizing device for this type of masculinity. Hence, talking about gender construction again means talking about masculinity and femininity in their multiple dimensions. The discussion of female athletes allows us to understand how the construction of the female gender takes place through changes and contradictions because in masculine activities such as combat sports, gender characteristics and norms become more apparent by contrast.

However, not only do female bodies adapt to be able to enter this world; perhaps the real challenge is to see

16 Piroska Béki and Andrea Gál, 'Rhythmic Gymnastics vs. Boxing: Gender Stereotypes from the Two Poles of Female Sport', *Physical Culture and Sport*, 58.1 (2013), pp. 5–16 <https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2013-0009>.

how the presence of these bodies changes the environment they enter and the subjectivities of which it is composed.[17] Starting from the assumption that masculinity is not necessarily linked to a body biologically identified as male, and that it is not simply an effect of the male body, I argue that femininity is also not defined by a biologically female body. Even for a woman, being masculine does not automatically mean that she is similar to or imitating a man. Halberstam explores this issue in his book *Female Masculinity*,[18] which describes a long history of female masculinity that intersects with gender and sexual orientation.

Masculinity is a difficult thing to define, even though it usually seems easy to recognize, especially when a person enters the gym. In general terms, Western normative society seems to identify it quite clearly; indeed, it consolidates the more normal versions of masculinity, which some define as hegemonic and others as 'heroic masculinities'. Whatever term we prefer to choose, these subjectivities are based on the subordination of possible alternative versions of masculinity itself, that is, on making one way of being male (usually straight, white, and successful) prevail over others.

In combat sports, whether on TV channels such as DAZN, or in films, novels, or biographies, the ring is a metaphor for dominant masculinities and their relationship to subordinate masculinities; in this metaphor, heterosexual white masculinity resists all attacks (the enactment of masculinities is a site that offers essentialized and

17 Elisa Virgili, 'Practicing Otherwise. Feminist Boxing Challenges Mainstream Narratives of Combat Sports', in *Boxing, Narrative and Culture: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lennox (Routledge, 2023), pp. 72–86 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003312635>.

18 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998).

polarized versions of masculinity, race, and class).[19] The masculinity to aspire to is not that of the winner, but that of those who resist and endure pain. In our mainstream imagination, boxing is both a physical and psychological journey in which man trains to resist and fight life's adversities without giving in to emotions.[20] Masculinity becomes legible precisely when it abandons the body of middle-class white men, that is, when it abandons its most obvious position, so obvious that it is no longer conceived as a social construction but as natural normality. Women's presence in the gym, through varying degrees of the 'imitation of masculinity', is functional in this mechanism in revealing what the dominant masculinity is, but it can also be a device for highlighting and deconstructing it. As Paul Smith explains:

> And it may well be the case, as some influential voices often tell us, that masculinity or masculinities are in some real sense not the exclusive 'property' of biologically male subjects — it's true that many female subjects lay claim to masculinity as their property. Yet in terms of cultural and political power, it still makes a difference when masculinity coincides with biological maleness.[21]

This statement shows that it is the correspondence between masculinity and men that underpins the social legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity itself, but also that an inquiry beginning with cis males could be extremely effective. These subjectivities (that is, cis men) are even

19 Kath Woodward, 'Rumbles in the Jungle: Boxing, Racialization and the Performance of Masculinity', *Leisure Studies*, 23.1 (2004), pp. 5–17 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0261436042000182281>.

20 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 26.

21 Paul Smith, *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture* (Westview Press, 1996), pp. 4–5.

willing to question themselves. However, they rarely spontaneously question their own privileges (not just gender), not so much because they lack the will to do so but because it is difficult to understand their position in the absence of conflict and confrontation.

I am not saying that women in gyms have a pedagogical function, nor that they have to engage in conflict. Rather, it is a matter of understanding how boxers, and more specifically female masculinity, can sabotage the mechanism of heteronormative genders. What are the effects of the feminization of masculinity and the masculinization of femininity? Weakening on one side and strengthening on the other? If we continue to think in these terms, however, we risk falling back into a binary in which masculinity is always the pole of power.

QUESTIONING NORMS THROUGH BODIES

I will now give an example of a body that has challenged the neutrality of bodies in sport and shown once again how the norms designed for a neutral body are actually based on a male body. The story is that of Shannon Courtenay, a twenty-eight-year-old English boxer who until October 2021 held the WBA bantamweight world title. However, on 8 October of that year, at the weigh-in for her title defence against Jamie Mitchell, scheduled for the following evening at the Eco Arena in Liverpool, the boxer was found to be one kilo overweight. She was given two hours to lose the weight and return to the competition.

This is an interesting point in the story, for the boxer not only refused to lose weight. The following day, she explained her choice on Instagram as follows:

> I was on weight and ready to go yesterday, then last night unexpectedly my period started, which

> causes women to gain weight. We didn't have any weight issues during camp and I was really in good shape and ready all week. To say I'm devastated is an understatement because this has never happened before — I'm always professional, but this was physically out of my control. It happened and I can't change it, but what I can do is go out there tomorrow [Saturday] night to win and get the belt back right after and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

A statement like this, which confirms that the neutral body is actually the male one, had never before been made in the field of boxing. The issue of menstruation in sports is still under-discussed, but it has gained attention precisely in relation to the growing presence of menstruating athletes.[22] The preliminary results of research that I am conducting in northern Italy with twenty women between twenty and thirty-five years of age, concerning the relationship between boxers and menstruation, reveal that menstruation is indeed a problem, especially in terms of weight and not only because of the pain or the impact it has on athletes' performance.

Shannon Courtenay's statement and the preliminary interviews I have conducted with boxers (in particular, professional ones) offer, first and foremost, a reflection on the diversity of bodies compared to a sporting standard based on a neutral male body. Even if the majority of female athletes say that they do not notice any great difference in their performance depending on their menstrual cycle (even if

22 Mikaeli A. Carmichael and others, 'The Impact of Menstrual Cycle Phase on Athletes' Performance: A Narrative Review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18.4 (2019), 1667 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041667>.

medical studies say the opposite),[23] and even if they do not want to change their training and do not discuss it with their coaches because it is not something that might determine a radical change in their athletic preparation, on the specific issue of weight (linked to a precise rule), criticism and contradictory claims emerge. All the athletes I have spoken to perceive it as a problem because it does not depend on their own will and athletic preparation. Of course, many athletes use the contraceptive pill to regulate their cycle, and some use it continuously to avoid menstruation during competitions, but this does not solve the problem of water retention and therefore weight. It should also be noted that women's hormonal balance is more delicate than that of men, and excessive loss of fat mass tends to alter hormonal cycles. One of the main consequences is hypomenorrhea, infrequent menstruation with reduced flow, which can develop into amenorrhea, the complete absence of menstruation. In the long term, this condition can affect the reproductive system.[24]

This world champion talking about her cycle in a press conference was the first time anyone had undermined the taboos and sense of shame that still surround menstruation.[25] Courtenay's statement also highlighted the very mechanisms of a sport based solely on the male body. The solution is not to look for ways to lose weight during men-

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23 Necip F. Kishali and others, 'Effects of Menstrual Cycle on Sports Performance', *International Journal of Neuroscience*, 116.12 (2006), pp. 1549–63 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207450600675217>.

24 Saskia J. Verhoef, Merel C. Wielink, and Edwin A. Achterberg, 'Absence of Menstruation in Female Athletes: Why They Do Not Seek Help', *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 13 (2021), 146 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13102-021-00372-3>.

25 Elisabeth A. Kissling, 'When Being Female Isn't Feminine: Uta Pippig and the Menstrual Communication Taboo in Sports Journalism', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 16.2 (1999), pp. 79–91 <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.16.2.79>.

struation and thus adapt to a norm created at a time when women's bodies did not enter the ring, but to think about different practices and rules, without these becoming further limitations for women, but on the contrary to begin again at the roots of how we think about sport and competitiveness. This became even clearer when Courtenay mentioned the possibility of being able to choose whether to become a mother or not. In fact, like many other female athletes, she had suffered from amenorrhea for almost three years and, a few months before the famous match, had had a medical consultation about this, precisely to understand how reversible her condition was and whether there was any possibility of permanent damage to her reproductive system. This inevitably leads us to a further reflection on the subject of motherhood, and on two issues in particular: the transformation of the body and the question of labour contracts.

MOTHERS, MONSTERS, AND BOXERS

Female athletes, especially those practising male sports such as combat sports, often experience a dichotomy between a sports culture defined by masculinity and a daily life where a certain type of canonical femininity is required. If this dichotomy is evident in many aspects of female athletes' lives,[26] it becomes even more pronounced in the case of motherhood. How then can we reconcile these two seemingly opposed aspects? Or rather, how might we redefine and perform a form of motherhood that is not strictly linked to a docile and reproductive canonical femininity?

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26 Vikki Krane and others, 'Living the Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Muscularity', *Sex Roles*, 50 (2004), pp. 315–29 <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SERS.0000018888.48437.4f>.

This starts with the embodiment of motherhood: the image of the body, what one eats, and how one represents oneself and one's desires.[27] In this regard, much research has inevitably focused on changes in the female athlete's body. Some studies have highlighted that the sports world creates pressures that lead to unhealthy practices such as disordered eating, excessive exercising, and training with injuries. Thinking about female athletes' bodies and gender performativity from the perspective of motherhood provides us with a foundation for examining the paradox of the physically active female body. On the one hand, there is a body that always wants to be the same, to perform in the same way; on the other hand, there is a body that is changing and that needs to understand how to negotiate this change in a sporting activity.

The concept of gender and its canons is linked to historical context (in other words, it changes across time and place), and 'acceptable' femininity can be perceived differently depending on, for example, race and sexual orientation, but also class or — in our case — the practice of a sport. As with masculinity, precisely because there are multiple femininities, there is also a privileged, or hegemonic, femininity. In the contemporary Western historical-cultural context, hegemonic femininity takes the form of a thin and toned body. In the case of combat sports, this body also takes on masculine traits such as broad shoulders, narrower hips, and well-defined muscles. These are all characteristics that clash with the image of the maternal body. Within the male domain of sport, women are expected to perform hegemonic femininity while distancing themselves from behav-

27 Patricia Marten DiBartolo and Carey Shaffer, 'A Comparison of Female College Athletes and Nonathletes: Eating Disorder Symptomatology and Psychological Well-Being', *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 24.1 (2002), pp. 33–41 <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.24.1.33>.

iour that may be perceived as masculine. They are faced with the contradiction that to be successful in sport they must develop characteristics associated with masculinity (strength, assertiveness, independence, competitiveness) that are at odds with hegemonic femininity. On the other hand, professional female boxers and elite ice hockey players often present a feminine image even during competitions (for example, wearing pink clothes or accessories). The question therefore is: how can women perform gender and motherhood with a body that has masculine features?

One of the issues that arises when we consider how female athletes perform hegemonic femininity is the representation of the female body. The norm imposes toned but not excessively muscular bodies on female athletes because this would make them appear as masculine; they would be performing, so to speak, a female masculinity. If they are asked to be dominant and strong, this must not be too visible, so as not to contradict hegemonic femininity. This creates the dichotomy mentioned above. Muscle development in female athletes therefore creates the paradox that while a firm and toned body is perceived as ideal, large muscles symbolize strength and masculinity. In this sense, William Russell speaks of a tension between the 'sporting body' and the 'social body',[28] which we can call here a tension between the sporting gender and the social gender — in other words, a tension between the gender performed in the gym and the one that is, or must be, performed in everyday life. This performance concerns not only the body, or gestures, but also one's behaviour, that is, one's attitude in a broader sense. The norm urges women to be gentle, feminine, and

28 William D. Russell, 'Comparison of Self-Esteem, Body Satisfaction, and Social Physique Anxiety across Males of Different Exercise Frequency and Racial Background', *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 25.1 (2005), pp. 74–90.

delicate in order to be perceived as female and relegates characteristics such as aggressiveness and competitiveness strictly to the realm of sport, characteristics that — as we have seen — instead construct masculinity. When female athletes bring these characteristics into everyday life, into their behaviour, their movements, and even their clothing, they are perceived as different from normal girls.[29]

In the context of sports, female athletes are constantly reminded that they are different. They are larger, more assertive, and more muscular, and they eat more than normal women. Female athletes are also not considered feminine because of their bodily shape and their casual attire. To be considered socially acceptable, they sometimes have to create an alternative identity to that of an athlete, namely that of a feminine woman. The problem is that these characteristics cannot be separated. One cannot perform two completely different types of femininity by simply changing clothes; as we have seen, the two identities are intertwined. Moreover, as Butler reminds us, gender performativity does not remain within the realm of voluntary choice, or rational decision, but is part of subjectivity in a broader sense. This is even more evident in the case of motherhood. Since the end of the twentieth century, the number of mothers among professional athletes has increased, and this social phenomenon has become increasingly visible, partly because of the athletes' own desire for recognition.[30]

29 Heather Barber and Vikki Krane, 'Creating Inclusive and Positive Climates in Girls' and Women's Sport: Position Statement on Homophobia, Homonegativism, and Heterosexism', *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 16.1 (2007), pp. 53–72 <https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.16.1.53>.

30 Beatriz Martínez-Pascual and others, 'Pregnancy in Spanish Elite Sportswomen: A Qualitative Study', *Women & Health*, 57.6 (2017), pp. 741–55 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2016.1202883>.

Whereas in the past motherhood almost inevitably meant the end of an athlete's career, there are now more and more athletes who continue or resume their sports careers after becoming mothers.[31] However, they usually have to face practical obstacles (such as a lack of adequate maternity leave policies) and emotional factors that expose them to greater stress than female athletes who have not made the same choice, and especially relative to male athletes.[32]

Although existing literature on this topic is scarce, some research has shed light on the main factors that hinder this way of being an athlete. First, like many working women, female athletes do not have access to adequate maternity leave policies and childcare services. This is a structural problem that has an even greater impact in a field where women have only recently become professionals and where the system has not yet adapted to their presence and their bodies.[33] A second factor concerns media representations of motherhood in sports, which focus on the 'return' to sport after motherhood and the biological barriers that this entails (such as weakened or inferior bodies, the natural desire to be a mother). Other representations emphasize the ideal of the good mother who should prioritize care over a sports career. This creates a narrative

31 Kerry R. McGannon and others, 'Negotiating Gender and Sexuality: A Qualitative Study of Elite Women Boxer Intersecting Identities and Sport Psychology Implications', *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 31.2 (2019), pp. 168–86 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2017.1421593>.

32 Margie H. Davenport and others, '"It's Going to Affect our Lives, our Sport and our Career": Time to Raise the Bar for Pregnant and Postpartum Athletes', *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 57 (2023), pp. 893–94 <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2023-107256>.

33 Elizabeth A. Sully, Ann Biddlecom, and Jaqueline E. Darroch, 'Not All Inequalities Are Equal: Differences in Coverage across the Continuum of Reproductive Health Services', *BMJ Global Health*, 4.5 (2019), pp. 1–6 <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2019-001695>.

of the impossibility of two identities (that of the mother and that of the athlete), based on the biological and social incompatibility of the two roles.

A third factor, not necessarily in tension with the previous two, is that of the physical and mental strength acquired through motherhood. This emphasizes that female athletes can make a greater effort thanks both to the determination given by the spirit of sacrifice associated with sport and to the conviction that motherhood is something that strengthens women. This last factor also fits into the framework of neoliberal feminism that often accompanies discourses on the empowerment of female athletes. In turn, maternal and work empowerment are feminist ideals, widespread in media representations that describe motherhood as 'self-regulated' and 'balanced' with (un)paid work.[34] Neoliberal practices related to bodily self-governance (for example, family planning) and career investments (time and sacrifice) are part of the neoliberal feminist ideal of 'good motherhood'. This ideal portrays athlete-mothers as powerful and autonomous, and female athletes as self-determined subjects who have made this choice consciously and who demonstrate that they can do it all, thus overshadowing persistent structural inequalities.[35] This is not only a view that others have of female athletes, but also one that some athletes have of themselves and which they have embodied. Athlete-mothers thus be-

34 Hao Wu, 'Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*', *International Sociology*, 38.2 (2023), pp. 249–52 <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809231158884a>.

35 Sara Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21.1 (2020), pp. 3–24 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>.

come 'athlete-activists' who want to demonstrate that they can be both, as when they publish pictures on social media of their bodies first modified by motherhood and then returned to the canon of the athlete's body. However, they also show that this path is often obstructed by the sporting system and its rules, which in some cases impose a forced choice. In this sense, then, they also denounce the sexism behind it all.[36]

CONCLUSION. NEW SPORTING FEMININITIES: MOTHERHOOD, MOTHERING, AND BOXING

In this chapter, I have explained how gender identities are constructed, or rather normalized, through combat sports. We have seen how femininity is negotiated or subverted through the performance of a sport that has long been constructed around masculinity, and that this femininity is not simply socially constructed but incorporated by blurring the boundaries between the biological and the social, between nature and culture. We have also seen that bodies perform new femininities through combat sports, especially in the case of motherhood.

These bodies shift from essentialism to post-structuralism, which we can translate as a terminological shift from *motherhood* to *mothering*. We can therefore speak of *maternal performativity*, and in order to think of mothering as performative, it is necessary to think of it as an active practice that one embodies, not as an event — however desired — that one undergoes and that transforms bodies. With regard to the idea of performative mothering, Mielle Chandler states that '[i]t is my position

36 Cheryl Cooky and Dunja Antunovic, '"This Isn't Just About Us": Articulations of Feminism in Media Narratives of Athlete Activism', *Communication & Sport*, 8.4–5 (2020), pp. 692–711 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519896360>.

that "mother" is best understood as a verb, as something one does [...]. To be a mother is to enact mothering'.[37] It is here that we find the subversive potential of this type of subjectivity, a subversion of the norm that imposes a certain form of motherhood and maintains its agency in performing it. In other words, what is perceived as a failure, from the point of view of the norm, is the construction of a new femininity.

37 Mielle Chandler, 'Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices', in *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*, ed. by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly (Second Story Press, 1998), pp. 270–86.

Choreographies of Knowledge

Mis/fitting in Academia

CHIARA MONTALTI

INTRODUCTION

Academia represents the space in which an institutionalized body of knowledge is not only taught but also created, discussed, supported, and crafted in new directions.[1] The starting point of this essay, however, is the consideration of *a different kind of knowledge*, which is also reinforced or may eventually be contested. This knowledge, however,

1 The ideas behind this essay have benefited from many conversations I have had in recent years with my peers ('early-*career* researchers' seems inadequate, given that academia's precarity and underfunding, especially in the humanities, do not guarantee this linear temporality at all). These opportunities for discussion happened mostly in the interstices, in the moments of suspension, in the intimate exchanges — in parentheses that always seemed stolen from work. I especially thank Corrado Claverini, Simona Giorgi, Lorenzo Giovannetti, and Francesco Pisano, for sharing time and space with me. I have also discussed some of these considerations at the Posthuman Summer Camp (Naturama, Galliera, 10–13 August 2023).

does not involve a specific field or discipline, and yet it nonetheless represents one of academia's anchors: how we *participate* — or not — in the creation and exchange of knowledge. Even though academia involves a great number of 'actors' — students, administration, staff, and so on — I focus here on scholars. Researchers and faculty members, more deeply than students, have introjected the modes and gestures I will take into consideration. Most importantly, scholars actively participate in both the creation and the circulation of academic theories and practices. I will frame academia as a peculiar landscape, with its own implicit or explicit rhythms and routes to be navigated, composing what I am here calling *choreographies* of knowledge. Throughout the chapter, I will interchangeably employ the concepts of choreography and performance, acknowledging, however, that the latter can refer to the overarching 'execution', of which the former is just a part. Both concepts may involve kinaesthetic, visual, rhetorical, and verbal elements. A choreography produces continuity over time; it is a consistent interweaving of movement, vocal expression, gesture, and suspension. Reference to this concept allows me to insert, from the start, a bodily presence: it is intended here as an interrelation between bodies, time, and space.

I will explore how embodied subjects grapple with the expectations imposed by the academic environment, examining the performative aspects of scholarly identity construction, and asking how they influence individuals' credibility and opportunities for acceptance. I will address how academia is structured according to certain times, spaces, and communicative/rhetorical inclinations, and how it tends to exclude bodyminds that seem not to conform to these norms, which concern both cognitive expressions and material, embedded, and situated practices. To

better clarify the performative demands I refer to, I will employ scientific conferences as an example. The exploration of 'not only the practices that characterize academic discourse, but also the attitudes and ways of knowing that underlie those practices', may enable us to frame academia more precisely.[2] The chapter will also discuss the potential threats posed by these performative demands to academic scholarship. In this sense, the marginalization of subjects who are perceived as 'asynchronous' and misfitting determines an epistemological failure. Finally, I will craft some possible alternative paths: strategies, albeit precarious and tentative, that might help us unveil and challenge the alleged neutrality and immutability of these patterns. My references are mainly situated in disability and neurodiversity studies, but I will also refer to feminist and queer theory.

Critical analyses of academia are not rare and usually aim to challenge exclusionary practices with respect both to students and researchers, especially concerning marginalized minorities.[3] Academia is certainly a privileged

2 Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 8.

3 See Moya Bailey, 'The Ethics of Pace', South Atlantic Quarterly, 120.1 (2021), pp. 285–99 <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916032>; *Il tempo per pensare: un bene essenziale per la comunità universitaria*, ed. by Brunella Casalini and Silvia D'Addario (Firenze University Press, 2019); Francesca Coin, 'On Quitting: The Labour of Academia', *Ephemera*, 17.3 (2017), pp. 705–19 <https://ephemerajournal.org/contribution/quitting> [accessed 1 December 2025]; Francesca Coin, 'When Love Becomes Self-Abuse: Gendered Perspectives on Unpaid Labor in Academia', in *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures*, ed. by Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 301–20; Daphna Hacker, 'Crying on Campus', in *Feeling Academic*, ed. by Taylor and Lahad, pp. 281–300; Akemi Nishida, 'Neoliberal Academia and a Critique from Disability Studies', in *Occupying Disability: Critical Approaches to Community, Justice, and Decolonizing Disability*, ed. by Pamela Block and others (Springer, 2016), pp. 145–58; Maria do Mar Pereira, *Power,*

context and is still 'romanticized' because it allows intellectual innovation, the sharing of knowledge, and a certain amount of freedom and autonomy, while it also confers social status. However, these analyses frequently pinpoint the critical aspects.[4] Contemporary neoliberal academia qualifies as an elite institution: it requires high performativity and promotes competition, pushing researchers to self-promote as subjects worth *investing* in. Further points that are contested are the demand for hyper-productivity, the quantitative evaluation parameters, and the managerial evolution of the university. Concepts such as 'excellence' and 'merit' have been revealed as imbued with privilege and often rooted in unequal starting conditions.[5] As María Elena Cepeda clarifies, '[c]orporatization has undeniably quickened the pace of life in academia', producing a constant feeling of exhaustion and leaving many academics to realize that they 'cannot cope'.[6] This critique grounds my perspective too, but I will especially tackle the repetition of narratives and practices that are thought to comply with the space of knowledge, and explore the consequences they entail for the subjectivities involved.

Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia (Routledge, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692623>.

4 Nicole Brown, 'Introduction: Theorising Ableism in Academia', in *Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education*, ed. by Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh (UCL Press, 2020), p. 2 <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787354975>.

5 See Roberto Brigati, *Il giusto a chi va? Filosofia del merito e della meritocrazia* (Il Mulino, 2015); *Ableism in Academia*, ed. by Brown and Leigh.

6 María Elena Cepeda, 'Thrice Unseen, Forever on Borrowed Time: Latina Feminist Reflections on Mental Disability and the Neoliberal Academy', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 120.2 (2021), pp. 301–20 (pp. 306–7) <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916046>.

ACADEMIC WORK AS BODILY LABOUR

Since academia is the realm of exchanges of thought and theoretical analyses, whenever we consider its possible patterns of exclusion, we are inclined to think about selection based on intelligence and cognitive characteristics. This exclusive emphasis on the activity of the *mind* would obviously reinforce a dualistic perspective which historically substantiates the Western subject and has been the target of several critical analyses — including within disability studies and feminist theory.[7] Beyond that, this dualistic perspective, which grounds the idea of knowledge as disembodied and purely cerebral, is not accurate in describing subjectivities participating in intellectual work. It is important, therefore, to examine the interactions enacted and experienced by bodies in the spaces of knowledge. Here, I will briefly pinpoint the impossibility of disentangling the *body* from academic work — which, given these premises, appears more accurately identified by the term *labour*.

In reading academia as a performance, rhythm, space, and time are important, and they matter specifically because we are taking into account *bodily* labour that is enacted through these axes. Even when we talk about track records, parameters, and publications, we must necessarily be aware that they regard embodied and situated subjects. Our intellectual activity is always 'embedded, embodied, affective and relational', and this perspective also allows us to examine our own work as academics differently.[8] In

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7 See Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Polity, 2019); Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017); Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), pp. 149–81; and Price, *Mad at School*.

8 Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p. 143.

addition, a materialist perspective is necessary to carefully track the processes of exclusion and injustice, which frequently pass precisely through this domain. A disability studies approach would primarily, but not exclusively, pay attention to the material obstacles that can prevent disabled researchers from fully participating in academia: for example, the architectural structure of a university building, or the difficulty of moving away from one's web of support (for example, to present at conferences, or to enrol in a visiting scholars programme).

As Jennifer Leigh and Nicole Brown claim in *Ableism in Academia*, 'there is little space for the body within neoliberal academia.'[9] The transparency of the body is assumed as proof of scientific rigour. Academia highly values the intellect and individuals' cognitive abilities, while largely neglecting the presence and the importance of bodily aspects (with the exclusion of some specific fields, such as the performing arts). As Angela Balzano notes, however, 'there is no cognitive labour that is not always bodily labour, labour by mammals, earthly labour, just as there is no capital more interested in valorizing ideas than bodies.'[10]

Following a non-dualistic perspective, according to which the mind/rationality/intellect cannot be separated from the body, I acknowledge many positive, negative, and nuanced features of intellectual work: the role of passion, the inescapable expression of emotions, the

9 *Conversations on Embodiment across Higher Education: Teaching, Practice and Research*, ed. by Jennifer Leigh (Routledge, 2018), p. 170 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315266664>. See Nishida, 'Neoliberal Academia', in *Occupying Disability*, ed. by Block and others, p. 150.

10 Angela Balzano, *Per farla finita con la famiglia: dall'aborto alle parentele postumane* (Meltemi, 2021). Translations from Italian into English are mine.

material obstacles, and so on.[11] A materialist perspective on intellectual work makes us painfully aware of how unsustainable academic structures can be, thinking about 'the long hours and physical pain' the work can entail, together with the 'anxiety, despair, [and] resignation'.[12]

> Academic work, work performed by the *mind*, one might say, can be carried out with extreme efficiency only when the body weighs *nothing*. When it remains untroubled, seated, composed, back straight, eyes fixed on a computer screen.[13]

When the body *evokes* itself and acknowledges the impossibility of its being *transparent*, aspects emerge that we tend to ignore. (Academic) work may *waver*, but being conscious of bodies, and paying attention to their needs and possibilities, represents an expertise in itself, which can lead to significant insights, as clarified by Carla Finesilver and others:

> [C]onsciously drawing attention to our bodies in this way is, for most of us, a choice. Whatever the state of our bodies, we can choose to pay attention to them or not. This kind of work is hard [...]. It is tiring to be self-aware and conscious of one's body in this way, even while it is valuable, aiding reflexivity and creativity.[14]

11 See Charlotte Bloch, *Passion and Paranoia: Emotions and the Culture of Emotion in Academia* (Ashgate, 2012); Rachele Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio: Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema-mondo* (Meltemi, 2020), pp. 25–28; Hacker, 'Crying on Campus'; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994); *Conversations on Embodiment*, ed. by Leigh.

12 Robert McRuer and Merri L. Johnson, 'Cripistemologies: Introduction', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 8.2 (2014), pp. 127–47 (p. 139) <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12>.

13 Angela Adami and others, 'Scomode: Voci e pratiche femministe nell'accademia', *DWF* 126.2 (2020), pp. 4–12 (p. 10).

14 Carla Finesilver and others, 'Invisible Disability, Unacknowledged Diversity', in *Ableism in Academia*, ed. by Brown and Leigh, pp. 143–60 (p. 144).

Certain subjects may be more alert towards these aspects, whether because of the type of research they conduct or due to first-person experience. Disabled or neurodivergent researchers, researchers with chronic illnesses, or researchers who menstruate and/or get pregnant — to name but a few — may be specifically aware that their work can greatly vary depending on their well-being at a certain moment or on the material circumstances of their life (for example, the increased severity of a symptom, or the fear of precarity linked to pregnancy). Nonetheless, to varying degrees, this point concerns everyone: the system of academia exposes the relative vulnerability or suitability of a body.

'Being an academic takes effort', and I shall attempt to trace precisely what kind of performative effort it entails.[15] It becomes clear that when we avoid considering the body, we fail to address the relationship between our academic work and our energy, our fatigue, and the often complex interconnection between this work and other spheres of our lives (for example, the desire to cultivate hobbies, or the wish to create significant relationships with friends and partners). We fail to acknowledge the *role* that all these dimensions enact in academia. Furthermore, the spatial and temporal axes, examined in the following section, have a strong connection with our embedded and embodied position as academics. Paying attention to the presence of the body also grants relevance to topics and practices otherwise excluded, because they are considered *out of place* in the framework of academia: for example, the presence of accessible toilets in universities, or the organization of time and spaces at conferences.[16] The presence of mater-

15 Ibid., pp. 144–45.

16 See Hacker, 'Crying on Campus'; and Simone Chess and others, 'Calling all the Restroom Revolutionaries!', in *That's Revolting! Queer Strat-*

ial aspects which can devalue or, alternatively, boost our academic profiles is pervasive: it is, simply, not explicitly thematized.

ACADEMIC WORK AS PERFORMANCE

Everything concerning the realm of knowledge is also a performative machine. And by this, I do not just mean that the logic produced and reproduced is one of excellence, hyper-productivity, and competition, but also that in many cases, it represents a choreographed and rhetorical execution. Academic research, for instance, involves the repetition of a gesturality, a way of moving and communicating, a manner in which to build a space, and then to inhabit it. This point becomes evident when we emphasize that every type of intellectual and cognitive work is always also material, embodied, and situated. In this section, I will frame academia not simply as a work setting, but as a *practice* which is *done*. Therefore, I will explore which 'choreographies' are normally entrusted with value and are consequently reinforced. This iteration, on the other hand, tends to marginalize other forms of behaviours, habits, and modes of interaction. Choreographies, as I have said, are composed of rhythms in certain times and spaces; I will pay attention especially to these dimensions.

I do not claim that every academic framework perfectly overlaps with others, in a homogeneous repetition of the same. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace some features which transversally characterize this domain. For example, despite intellectual inquiry being commonly connected to autonomy and freedom of thought, neoliberal academia establishes a rather fixed structure and requires certain forms

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egies for Resisting Assimilation, ed. by Mathilda Sycamore (Soft Skull Press, 2008), pp. 216–35.

of participation and output. It is normally based on the respect of rigid hierarchies of power, self-promotion, the publish or perish 'rule', and hyper-productivity. It is important to note that these choreographies are enacted not only in collective contexts (for example, in conferences or during spontaneous conversations within university spaces) but also in the individual management of work: they are internalized.[17] These patterns concur not only to shape the work conducted but also to substantiate the *academic subject*. It is possible to trace some explicit or implicit patterns that 'appropriately' convey what Eva Bendix Petersen calls *academicity*: 'How does this being come to know how to act, speak, think, write, and feel as an academic: how is "academicity", or academichood, produced?'[18]

The figure of the *perfect academic* takes shape from the adherence to different norms that I will explore here. The *temporality* and *spatiality* that characterize academia are anchored precisely on a 'normate' subject.[19] Time and space appear *transparent* and *neutral* only to those who can conform to these directives, and therefore often go unmentioned as binding dimensions. In most cases, space is invisible: it is only seen by those who struggle to access it. Our orientations around temporality, too, are often

17 See Leigh and Brown, 'Internalised Ableism'.

18 Eva Bendix Petersen, 'Negotiating Academicity: Postgraduate Research Supervision as Category Boundary Work', *Studies in Higher Education*, 32.4 (2007), pp. 475–87 (p. 477) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701476167>.

19 The *normate* is a term coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997): 'This neologism names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings' (p. 8).

implicit. Even though I am distinguishing here between time and space, there is obviously a deep interconnection between these two dimensions, which shape a continuum: namely, a choreography.

It is important to note that the spatial perspective I am here referring to is simultaneously material and discursive: I intend the space of knowledge as an actual place and as a cluster of expectations, norms, obstacles, and possibilities. It is very difficult to separate these two senses of spatiality, and usually, they mutually influence each other. Spaces are never neutral; they contain sociocultural narratives. The characteristics of places produce subjects and are shaped by them in turn.[20] These processes involve the direct participation of the body — although it is, sometimes, an *imagined*, ideal one. Spaces have always been a core topic in disability studies and in the activism of the disability community, under the umbrella concept of accessibility: not only might we not be able to access the same spaces, but how we inhabit them can differ significantly. Do we openly discuss these movements of opening/closure, presence/absence, inclusion/exclusion, or do they remain unexpressed? In the academic context, who feels in the right place, and who, on the other hand, assimilates the dominant perspective, internalizing the feeling of not legitimately occupying this space?[21]

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20 See Jennifer Charteris and others, 'A Heterotopology of the Academy: Mapping Assemblages as Possibilised Heterotopias', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30.4 (2017), pp. 340–53 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1250178>.

21 See Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio*; Maddie Breeze, 'Imposter Syndrome as a Public Feeling', in *Feeling Academic*, ed. by Taylor and Lahad, pp. 191–219; Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Berg, 2004); Yvette Taylor, 'Navigating the Emotional Landscapes of Academia: Queer Encounters', in *Ableism in Academia*, ed. by Brown and Leigh, pp. 61–87.

The geography of academia is 'powerfully rhetorical', and 'shapes the bodies within these spaces'.[22] How we understand *academic subjects* affects how we build the spaces they inhabit. Jay Dolmage employs the example of a staircase at the entrance of a university building to convey both the 'physical' and 'rhetorical' nature of the space in which the present analyses are situated:

> [T]he steep stairs outside of a university lecture hall can be critiqued as a spatial and architectural feature that excludes; the stairs can also be understood as making a rhetorical argument or sending a message at the same time; and also at the very same time the stairs should push us to understand that other features of the institution that may not be as immediately recognizable to us, also set up steep steps.[23]

As stated by disability studies scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell, even the choice of furniture within a university signals compliance with highly standardized prospects.[24] The concept of accessibility invites us to consider not only how a space is built but also how design varies depending on context, and therefore how adjustments are differently distributed. For example, we normally expect to find ramps in hospitals, but these are not so common in conference rooms. The presence/absence of accessible toilets and the presence/absence of ramps and tactile indicators for blind people reveal the typical population we expect to find in a

22 Jay T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 8.

23 Ibid., p. 9.

24 Fiona Kumari Campbell, 'The Violence of Technicism: Ableism as Humiliation and Degrading Treatment', in *Ableism in Academia*, ed. by Brown and Leigh, pp. 202–24 (p. 211). See also Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (University of Toronto Press, 2011).

given place — say, on campuses.[25] The question of space is also profoundly connected with time: the time and mental energy spent asking for accommodation, or the time needed to move between classes and university offices.[26]

I now turn my attention to temporality. I shall consider, in particular, how the analyses proposed by disability studies and feminist theory can be applied to academia, even though they could encompass a great variety of frameworks. While the concept of accessibility is most frequently associated with spatiality, disability scholars and activists have expanded the concept to tackle the dimension of time as well; my perspective here is profoundly indebted to their work. Disability scholars have pinpointed the power of normative orientations to temporality to reassert which subjects meet standard expectations in a given context. The concept of crip time has emerged to expose the artificiality of this alleged norm, and it embraces multiple temporalities: the fact that disabled, chronically ill,

25 See Chiara Montalti, 'Mapping Disability Politics through Cyborg Coalitions', *AG — About Gender*, 9.18 (2020), pp. 50–82 <https://doi.org/10.15167/2279-5057/AG2020.9.18.1219>; Chess and others, 'Calling all the Restroom Revolutionaries!', in *That's Revolting*, ed. by Sycamore; Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha makes a similar point concerning the space of art: even though it is possible to find seats for disabled people in the audience, it is significantly rarer to have *stages* accessible for disabled artists and performers. See Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp, 2018).

26 See Campbell, 'The Violence of Technicism'; and Price, *Mad at School*. In addition to the elements mentioned, some authors consider accessibility more broadly, highlighting, for example, the need to find adequate food and the possibility that this may need to be requested because of specific medical conditions (Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh, 'Preface', in *Ableism in Academia*, ed. by Brown and Leigh, pp. xv–xvi), and also, from an intersectional perspective, the possibility to choose vegan food. See Sunaura Taylor, 'Toward a New Table Fellowship', in Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (The New Press, 2017), pp. 149–56.

or neurodivergent people might move at different paces — not simply more slowly, but sometimes in fractured or accelerated ways. Crip time may encompass the 'wasted' time spent in hospitals, the extra time needed to get somewhere because of the absence of accessible transport, or it might denote the energies (mental or physical) expendable for certain actions.[27] Crip time also means to acknowledge that standard temporalities count as 'a factor that determines how disabled a person is'.[28] Beyond 'what crip time *is*', Alison Kafer invites us to explore 'what crip time *does*': it can, for example, push to expand expectations as to the amount of time needed to perform certain actions or to achieve certain goals, which are based on standardized bodyminds.[29] It may represent a resistance towards the feeling of being less productive. Crip time invokes the necessity for flexibility and for experimenting with unforeseen relationships with temporality: an openness to the unexpected, to contingency, to the need to reschedule something.

Further relevant references here are the analyses conducted by feminist theorists and queer theorists, especially on the need for deceleration and slowness and on the desire to challenge the alleged linearity of time. Feminist the-

27 See Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*; Mara Pieri, *LGBTQ+ People with Chronic Illness: Chroniqueers in Southern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Margaret Price, 'The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain', *Hypatia*, 30.1 (2015), pp. 268–84 <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127>; Ellen Samuels, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37.3 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824>; Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman, 'Introduction: Crip Temporalities', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 120.2 (2021), pp. 245–54 <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8915937>.

28 McRuer and Johnson, 'Cripistemologies', p. 139.

29 Alison Kafer, 'After Crip, Crip Afters', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 120.2 (2021), pp. 415–34 (p. 420) <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916158>. See Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*.

ory does not simply insist on the *quantitative* dimension of time, but highlights, in an anti-capitalistic move, that time should not be invested purely in exploitative and quantifiable activities.[30] These analyses do not simply advocate for *extra* time — even though the importance of leisure time and more time to think and to cultivate relationships beyond the workplace are rightfully urgent topics — but promote 'a qualitatively different use of time that is not indexed on short-term and fast productivity'.[31] In addition, queer theory examines, through the concept of chrononormativity, how the assumption of a universal temporality substantiates our race towards productivity and social acceptance, and pinpoints 'how power and oppression are also exercised through time'.[32]

'As academics', Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman claim, 'we knew that our lives were structured by time as a vector of power.'[33] How much time it takes to *think* about something, or to write a paper, for example, is not objective: it can vary depending on someone's duties in their personal life, or according to the needs and limitations of a bodymind (for example, a fluctuating chronic pain, or mental distress). The framework of crip time, and

30 See María Puig de la Bellacasa, 'Think We Must, Again! Notes from Academia Inc.', keynote lecture delivered at the conference 'Think We Must! 25 Years of Feminist Knowledge Production. The Big Debate' (Brussels, 21 November 2014) <https://www.academia.edu/31116974/Think_We_Must_Again_Notes_from_Academia_Inc_Text_of_2014_talk_at_SOPHIA> [accessed 1 December 2025].

31 Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p. 149. See *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, ed. by Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber (University of Toronto Press, 2016); *Il tempo per pensare*, ed. by Casalini and D'Addario.

32 Pieri, *LGBTQ+ People with Chronic Illness*, p. 29. See Ellen Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2011); Samuels and Freeman, 'Crip Temporalities'.

33 Samuels and Freeman, 'Crip Temporalities', p. 245.

the challenge to chrononormativity, in this context, can also lead us to positively value the time spent on activities that most likely would not fit into the scores, whether real or metaphorical, on which research is structured. Feminist deceleration means to recognize that 'the time for reflection and open-ended enquiry is a core value and not a luxury'.[34] Through the analyses presented, we can detect how unrealistic and alarming 'the speed with which we are supposed to produce intellectual thought' is, while at the same time we can acknowledge that we, too, demand this speed from ourselves and others. The politicization of time — the fact that our experience of it and our expectations are not neutral — also allows us to unveil the systemic fault:

> Corporatization has undeniably quickened the pace of life in academia. I used to wonder if the problem was entirely me, if as a mentally disabled person I was simply unfit for the profession. Yet such an individualistic approach is misguided.[35]

These critical analyses can therefore be liberatory, mobilizing the entire academic context instead of insisting on one's 'unfitness'.

The dimensions traced so far lay the foundations of several features that profoundly qualify academia: for example, presence, participation, productivity, competence, independence, and attention all have material connotations and are expressed through the axes of time and space. We tend to imagine that each of these features unfolds in a certain way, and that they shape academic research; consider, for instance, how lessons are structured, or how

34 Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, pp. 148–49.

35 Cepeda, 'Thrice Unseen', pp. 306–07. See also Nishida, 'Neoliberal Academia', p. 149.

interactions in scientific events are framed. The time someone needs to prepare the draft of a book determines, at least to some extent, whether they are qualified as competent and productive. Participation, presence, and attention are also differently interpreted depending on spatial aspects: being online, for example, tends to devalue them.[36] It is also through our experience of academic *time* and *space* that we judge a researcher's 'fitness' or, conversely, we detect an improper performance of *academicity*. In particular, these performances are not neutral. Furthermore, rigid 'academic timetables and systems are often unable to cope with fluctuations in capacity and need, and how specific accommodations might be required at different times, with little warning'; this can affect everyone but can be particularly distressing for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people.[37] This point can also be counterbalanced, however, by the presence of conflicting tensions; for example, a neurodivergent researcher might be particularly able to hyperfocus on their topic of interest but yet be considerably less comfortable in adhering to other academic requests, such as interpreting academic politics.

I will now situate the analyses presented within a specific framework — conferences — to better clarify what I mean by way of a concrete example. In particular, I will consider in-person conferences, a context that allows consideration of the tight interlace between time, space, and performative skills. In this regard, I am drawn to pay attention both to 'formal' exchanges (such as paper presentations) and 'informal' ones (such as the moments between talks and keynotes, or social dinners), and to how smoothly

36 See Cristina Costa, 'Digital Scholars: A Feeling for the Academic Game', in *Feeling Academic*, ed. by Taylor and Lahad, pp. 345–68.

37 Carla Finesilver and others, 'Invisible Disability', p. 149. See Bailey, 'The Ethics of Pace'.

(or not) we move from one to the other. It is urgent to examine both the exclusionary consequences of this structure and the adjustments that can be enacted to counteract them.

Scientific conferences are very peculiar frameworks. Whereas intellectual activity appears, as I have mentioned, to be an autonomous and independent endeavour,[38] a conference takes a rigid structure: temporal and spatial aspects are planned in advance, and there is little space for variations — except when we eventually leave the space. At the same time, conferences appear to accelerate the pace at which we are usually called to think, produce intellectual activity, network, and exchange opinions. It is also possible that conferences raise conflicting forms of attentiveness: for example, we must simultaneously participate and carry on the rest of our academic work as if we were at home.[39] These moments of scientific research are heavily standardized because they are grounded in a heavily standardized *subject*. The aspects that prevail reward subjects with non-disabled, non-vulnerable, non-divergent bodyminds: spontaneity, rapidity, extroversion, ease of movement. Few physiological needs are privileged — conferences are, after all, a space for the *mind*. As Dolmage sums up, 'academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyper-ability.'[40]

38 As already underlined, this aspect is largely ideal. However, if we exclusively consider carrying out, writing, and presenting research — therefore removing teaching and institutional duties from the equation — the management of work is considerably individualized.

39 See Emily F. Henderson 'Feminist Conference Time: Aiming (Not) to Have Been There', in *Feeling Academic*, ed. by Taylor and Lahad, pp. 33–60.

40 Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, p. 18.

Conferences promote a certain temporality for the presentation of and response to intellectual content and for registering information — namely, promptly. There might be someone fatigued by chronic pain: they might need more time, or different timing (in solitude) to process and respond to information in an intellectual context. Trauma, fatigue, pain, and brain fog can 'haunt' the capacity to absorb, manage, and rework language. Conferences also presume a standard capacity to move from one talk to another: does the planning consider the space needed 'for manoeuvring several types of wheelchairs and mobility aids'?[41] Are there accessible toilets in the building, located near enough to not miss talks and keynotes? How many minutes are foreseen between talks, to decompress, or simply reflect in solitude, and is there a place to do so without leaving the conference entirely?[42] As regards communicative exchanges (formal and informal), they too are usually based on certain physical, sensory, and cognitive characteristics. They are almost exclusively oral: multi-modality communication is very rare (for example, the presence of a sign language interpreter, or written transcription). They also follow a certain rhythm, and this is also clear in informal moments: everyone should always be active and appear at ease. The privileged expression of attention and participation, for example, involves a sceptical and confrontational attitude, as frequently emerges in Q&A sessions. As Margaret Price emphasizes, these performative skills are also profoundly structured *against* mental disabilities. Because of the non-standard patterns that neurodivergent people sometimes

41 Brown and Leigh, 'Preface', pp. xv–xvi; See Finesilver and others, 'Invisible Disability'.

42 See *Ableism in Academia*, ed. by Brown and Leigh.

follow, their 'words, gestures, [and] appearance' risk not being granted credibility in scientific contexts.[43]

> [S]ome of us are more charming online. Or over a long period of time. Or while lying down, or while our hands are occupied with a stim device. What we say might be fascinating, but our voices might tremble or be slurred; we might need to stare out the window, or tap on the table, while saying them. We might shake visibly, sweat profusely, or make remarks that seem off-topic.[44]

The management of emotional and cognitive aspects, along with the control of the bodily needs that must sometimes be enacted, pile on the skills that allow one to efficiently 'read' the conference: the hierarchies of power, the implicit demands, or the rhetoric that better suits that specific group of people.

MIS/FITTING IN ACADEMIA

> Consider the last conference you attended: did events run from 9:00 a.m. until late at night? [...] [D]o such occasions assume each participant will have the ability to meet people, interact, and function for hours on end? Consider the persons who did not attend. Do you know who they are?[45]

How long is it sustainable for us, from a bodily, emotional, and cognitive standpoint, to remain at a conference? But also: how long is it sustainable, for us, to remain *in academia*? Price's quote links a reflection on conferences to the topic of the failure that derives from the standardized approach I have presented so far. Failure, in academia,

43 Price, *Mad at School*, p. 26.
44 Ibid., p. 105.
45 Ibid., p. 13.

usually means that someone cannot correspond to the expectations outlined above, concerning productivity, performance, communication skills, and ways of inhabiting the spaces of knowledge. However, I do not consider here when *we* fail *in* academia; on the contrary, I aim to underline how *academia* fails *us*. By *us*, I generally mean scholars, but I remain perfectly aware of the differences in privilege, opportunities, discrimination, and accessibility needs. Failure, here, is represented by the marginalization and/or expulsion of subjects who cannot keep up the pace, or who appear asynchronous about the general context. 'Rather than embracing difference as a reflection of wider society, academic ecosystems seek to normalise and homogenise ways of working and of being a scholar.'[46] I wish to highlight the paradox here: on the one hand, academia privileges competence and individualism; on the other, it fails to consider differential subjectivities.

The point that I seek to make here is not that a certain rhythm is nonsensical; obviously, every context involves the drawing of appropriate gestures, attitudes, and practices. The problem is firstly the alleged *neutrality* of these choices, and secondly the exclusionary effects they have. The struggle that some scholars may face in conforming to the standards presented is rarely explicit, and the avoidance of confronting these standards ends up reinforcing them. Nonetheless, conformity to the choreography we perceive going on around us can be motivated by the need to survive. Precarious researchers are obviously encouraged to adapt without complaint to the academic landscape. The path, therefore, seems to bifurcate: the first possibility is to find a way to cope, and the second possibility is to withdraw because it is impossible to conform to these imperatives.

46 Brown, 'Introduction: Theorising Ableism in Academia', p. 5.

As Price underlines, '[t]he instruments of exclusion are not visible or dramatic — men in white coats dragging people away — but quiet, insidious', as is clear from an examination of the micro-aspects of academic life I have mentioned so far.[47]

When the academic landscape is too homogeneous, it fails not only on an ethical and political level but also on an epistemological one. Firstly, in feminist theory and disability studies, the impossibility of identifying a standard represents a core point — a standard subject, a standard gender performance, a standard speed, and so on.[48] Feminist theorists and disability studies scholars emphasize the need to embrace diversity and heterogeneity. From this perspective, structures need to be reconfigured, including those within academia. Secondly, difference not only exists but also appears as a potentiality. Academic encounters involve subjects with different biographies, privileges, levels of productivity, communication skills, bodyminds, and so on. The more accessible and liveable the spaces, times, and structures of academic research are, the more diverse subjectivities participate in the production of knowledge, allowing for multiple perspectives to co-exist and thrive. What might appear as restrictions, adjustments, challenging adaptations, dispersed energies, or even illegitimate complaints instead represent an increment of possibilities, making spaces of knowledge more sustainable for everyone.

But what would happen if we considered *plurality* as the *norm*? And how could we guarantee this change of pace? It seems important now to propose how we might

47 Price, *Mad at School*, pp. 6–7.

48 These fields are obviously not the only ones to 'trouble' the universal (humanistic) subject, but they represent my main references here.

propagate possible new rhythms, and consequently affirm a more sustainable academia. To do so, I wish to introduce the concept of the 'misfit'.[49] The concept is explored by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, mainly with reference to bodily variations, and is taken up by Price with regard to mental disabilities.

> Fitting and misfitting denote an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction. When the shape and substance of these two things correspond in their union, they fit. A misfit, conversely, describes an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole. The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together. When the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit, and with it meanings and consequences. [...] The discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, produces fits and misfits.[50]

Misfitting can enhance resourcefulness and innovative perspectives: an inadequate relationship between subjects and their material environment can push them to imagine a new reality and negotiate a more just and creative interplay between the two.[51] Discomfort can become a motor of change, and new fittings between the academic subject and academia can make their way through. In this regard,

49 For a phenomenological account of how subjects can be differently oriented towards material/discursive space, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).

50 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept', *Hypatia* 26.3 (2011), pp. 591–609 (pp. 592–93) <https://doi.org/ and 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x>.

51 Ibid.; Price, *Mad at School.*

disabled people explore ways to carry out actions, relate to others, and programme events (cultural, artistic, social, and so on) that take seriously into account the needs and characteristics of diverse bodyminds.[52] Because of this, my main references here are drawn from the areas of disability and neurodiversity studies, but the concept of the misfit can also exceed these domains to include everyone who experiences complex friction with the academic landscape. In addition, early-career researchers, specifically, live not uncommonly in a condition of precarity; this academic positioning can both exacerbate forms of exclusion and enable these subjects to uncover the same mechanisms.

This chapter aims to enlighten the normative standards of academia and invokes, first and foremost, the requirement for us to look among us and within ourselves to recognize that this landscape is sometimes inhospitable. Therefore, I emphasize the need to acknowledge the effort and the fatigue: academic choreographies are not performed *smoothly* by every subject. It is necessary to recognize that the space, time, and communication skills normally requested (and how these elements compose dominant choreographies) are neither *inevitable* nor *neutral*. Some aspects, such as the push to hyper-productivity, the implicit request to always be available, and the neglect of bodily limits, represent prohibitive demands for everyone. To welcome diverse subjectivities, we must prefer

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52 See Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Alison Kafer, 'Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 10.1 (2016), pp. 1–20 <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2016.1>; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*; s.e. smith, 'The Beauty of Spaces Created for and by Disabled People', *Catapult*, 22 October 2018 <https://magazine.catapult.co/column/stories/the-beauty-of-spaces-created-for-and-by-disabled-people> [accessed 1 December 2025]; and Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*.

instability and flexibility rather than repetition of the same rhythms. Since, as I have pointed out above, intellectual work is carried out by embedded and embodied subjects, their material encounters with the world must be taken into account. In these frameworks, choreographies must not necessarily unfold smoothly: moments of arrest, suspension, and doubt are welcomed in the spaces we share. Choreographies shatter, and new paces must settle in. On this path, it is necessary to acknowledge 'the ambivalence of simultaneously inhabiting — and seeking legitimacy and recognition within — the neoliberal university while trying to resist and rework these forms of educational governance and practice'.[53]

On a practical level, are there possible forms of resistance through which to counter-attack this shared pressure?[54] Even though my purpose is primarily a change of perspective, I also wish to map some steps that might characterize this path, thanks to what Price calls 'microrebellions'.[55] The aim is to orient ourselves, and possibly others, in new ways, for example, by acknowledging how dissonance does not necessarily equate to incompetence and unfitness. These strategies can unsettle the standard, even ironically, and must be not only relational but also self-focused. The purpose is to produce ruptures and subversion in academic choreographies, since their enactment, as mentioned, does not simply represent shared identity but ends up being exclusionary. A preliminary point along this path, therefore, must be to practise attentiveness and care: we must be alert and curious towards difference and acknowledge it as legitimate.

53 Breeze, 'Imposter Syndrome', p. 210.

54 See Bailey, 'The Ethics of Pace', p. 287.

55 Price, *Mad at School*, p. 7.

The first strategy is represented by a form of care toward ourselves, acknowledging our fatigue and the forms of injustice we endure. This approach might include 'self-monitoring', aimed at detecting our limits and therefore 'sav[ing] energy whenever possible', 'anticipat[ing] the conditions that render it difficult if not impossible to work'.[56] When we are near the point of breaking, physically, emotionally, and cognitively, can we grant ourselves the ability to say no? This might also mean fully recognizing that a certain correspondence to these performances has also been possible (if it has been so) thanks to the bodyminds we have relied on so far. By this, I do not mean the capitalist and mainstream imperative to 'self-care', which seems simply to promote individualism and to propose attention to our own needs and well-being at the expense of a collaborative critique of systemic injustice. This self-referred commitment is as personal as it is political: it can allow us to resist bolstering the patterns presented in relation to our peers as well.

Collectively, it might mean refusing to legitimize a culture of overworking, of contacting people beyond work hours, or it might mean understanding that not everyone can respond to a query with a brief notice. A significant move may be to openly share — at least among peers — whenever the performative effort seems to set too high a bar. Concerning more ironic proposals, it is worth mentioning the invitation by Melanie Stefan to share 'curricula of failures' in addition to curricula of achievements, which could encourage collective reflection on the widespread phenomenon of imposter syndrome and positively rework

56 Cepeda, 'Thrice Unseen', p. 310. See Samuels, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time'.

the shame of not meeting the standard.[57] The *expansion* of possibilities might also include the promotion of less rigid settings within which to share and present academic work, which could more readily include subjects with diverse accommodation needs.[58] In general, it is important to start reading the spaces we find ourselves in when we do academic work: What do they communicate? Who is absent? What could we do to grant more accessibility, enhance safety, and disempower the hierarchies? Which subjects appear to us as *out of place* because of their alleged lack of rhetorical skill? About conferences, for example, Price invites us to think about what this change of pace might imply:

> it might mean recognizing that people will arrive at various intervals, and designing sessions accordingly; and it might also mean recognizing that audience members are processing language at various rates and adjusting the pace of conversations.[59]

Price proposes to make explicit the non-neutrality of the space, and the fact that certain subjects might need to inhabit it in non-typical ways.[60] Akemi Nishida invites

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57 See Megan Stefan, 'A CV of Failures', *Nature*, 468.467 (2010) <https://doi.org/10.1038/nj7322-467a>; Breeze, 'Imposter Syndrome'.

58 See Francesca Ferrando and Stefano Rozzoni, 'Vision Quest in Posthumanist Education: Focuses, Praxes and Experiences', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 31.4 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2023.2290552>; Margaret Price, 'Access Invocation', *Margaret Price* (blog), n.d. <https://margaretprice.wordpress.com/access-statement-for-presentations/> [accessed 1 December 2025].

59 Price, *Mad at School*, p. 62.

60 'Please feel invited to use this space in whatever ways are accessible to you. For example, you may want to move around; stand up; lie down; put your feet up; go out and come back in; stim; engage with another person (for instance, by writing a note to a friend); post on social media; take notes; or make another use of this space that feels right to you' (Price, 'Access Invocation').

us to spend part of our time discussing accessibility arrangements, and this could become a formal task in the management of academic settings.[61]

A CONCLUSION, OR AN OPENING

There are implicit or explicit norms and standards that govern academia. The creation, discussion, and dissemination of knowledge are guided by specific conventions that reflect the expectations and practices that characterize this landscape. Each intervention within this framework is a performance that contributes to the construction of the traditional choreography of knowledge — or, on the contrary, that might contribute to the exploration of new trajectories. I have examined, in particular, how space, time, and modes of communication affect the subjects involved in academia. It is especially important to reveal how spatial and temporal dimensions usually unfold with respect to bodyminds, with the purpose of altering and reorienting their interconnections.

In this regard, we are called to actively relate to the world and pay attention to the elements emerging from the relationships in which we are embedded. Responding to diversity leads to honouring diversity, and therefore experimenting with new ways of being together. In this relational perspective, the desire to create liveable times and spaces gains significance. 'Thinking', as Rosi Braidotti suggests, 'is about increasing our relational capacity.'[62] Indeed, my discussion in this chapter has both ethical-political and epistemological implications: vibrant and heterogeneous 'choreographies' of knowledge are not only just, insofar as they refuse to perpetuate exclusion, but they are also fertile,

61 Nishida, 'Neoliberal Academia', pp. 153–54.

62 Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p. 79.

as they guarantee the presence of a plurality of perspectives. Diverse forms of participation, experience, biographies, and bodily expressions can enrich the academic landscape.

This essay has aimed not only to critically address the normative standards presented but also to make space for generative perspectives, in order to challenge our sense of 'apathy' and 'powerlessness' within the academic framework outlined here.[63] The aim, therefore, is to spark conversations, at a collective level, on how it might be possible 'to speak back to politics in the academy'.[64] The strategies that could be enacted do not simply represent a to-do list, however helpful they might be — the presence of accessible toilets, no email during the weekends, the valorization of different communication skills, and so on — but urge us, following the artistic metaphor of choreography, to cultivate a creative openness towards the heterogeneity among us. This is in line with what Tanya Titchkosky calls a 'politics of wonder': the idea of surprising one another with the possibility of *diverging* from the normative standard, also through untested practices and unthought concepts. Furthermore, access is a relation.[65] Even though scholars of disability and neurodiversity studies represent the main reference here, because of their significant critical work on this topic, this invitation exceeds them: 'anyone, regardless of disability status, would benefit from a cripped form of space and time.'[66] As Samuels and Freeman ask:

> What if temporal rhythms and their attached notions of normalcy, productivity, and community

63 Charteris and others, 'A Heterotopology of the Academy', p. 340.

64 Ibid., p. 343.

65 Tanya Titchkosky, 'Towards a Politics of Wonder in Disability Studies', in Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, pp. 129–50.

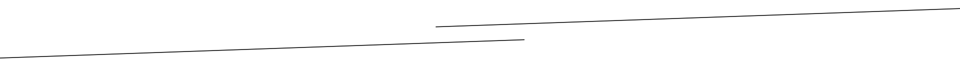
66 Price, 'Access Invocation'.

> were forever cripped, detached from chrononormative capitalist structures and predicated instead on the myriad realities of bodyminds along a spectrum of abilities?[67]

The multiple choreographies that could proliferate should not be restricted simply to questions of 'speed' or 'slowness', but rather should guarantee many possible *fittings* with academia through the experimentation of 'new rhythms, new practices of time, new sociotemporal imaginaries'.[68]

67 Samuels and Freeman, 'Crip Temporalities', p. 252.

68 Ibid., p. 251.



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