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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Since global antiquity, the body has played a central role in culture and society. From physical figures to political metaphors, objects of analysis to sources of value, bodies take multiple forms. They ground emotions, desires and identities, and are inflected by technology. They connect to histories of place and space, both online and offline, and are framed by political, environmental, spiritual, and other discourses. All too often, conceptions of the body have sought to delimit or exclude bodies deemed 'other' for reasons of race, gender, class or other markers of identity. Never isolated, bodies are also arranged into larger units, from cultural groups to nation states. Thinking through the body not only reshapes our body of knowledge, it also moves us to rethink our lives otherwise in a time of political, ecological and health crises. No matter which perspective on bodies one adopts, bodies do matter.

The central theme of this LGJ issue revolves around two prominent concepts that are at the heart of contemporary critical discussions. 'Bodies Matter' focuses on the significance of the human body, including the ways in which our physical forms shape our perceptions and how we are perceived in the world. It also underscores the importance of the materiality of the body, emphasizing its physical and tangible nature, which both enables and constrains our experiences. Discussions concerning the body and its various roles have been ongoing for many years, and they are gaining even greater prominence with the ongoing digital transformation of society and the increasing prevalence of artificial intelligence.

The interconnected ideas encapsulated in 'Bodies Matter' go beyond their individual significance, serving a prism through which we can examine the broader

dynamics of human existence. In a time marked by swift technological progress, globalization, and evolving power dynamics, our comprehension of the body transcends mere physicality. It now serves as a battleground for asserting rights, a canvas for self-expression, and a mirror reflecting the intricate interplay between personal autonomy and societal conventions. The body, as a space where conflicts and expressions converge, embodies the quests for equality and freedom, challenging established norms and reshaping societal values.

As a consequence, the 'Bodies Matter' theme urges us to look beyond the superficiality of the physical form and delve deeper into the complex interplay between bodies, technology, society, and the environment. It is a call to reassess our values, priorities, and ethical frameworks, encouraging us to recognize the intricate ways in which bodies, both individual and collective, shape and are shaped by the ever-evolving landscape of the contemporary world. In this context, the exploration of bodies and their significance extends into the realms of identity, diversity, and inclusivity. It prompts us to consider how various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, intersect with the understanding of bodies. The lived experiences of individuals from different backgrounds and social contexts are deeply entwined with how their bodies are perceived and treated. Recognizing and acknowledging these intersections is vital to addressing issues of inequality and discrimination that persist in our societies. Moreover, it invites us to question how technological advancements and the virtual world impact these intersections, as digital spaces provide new arenas for both expression and oppression. By centering our discussions around the theme of 'Bodies Matter,' we can better navigate the intricate dynamics of identity, technology, and social change in the contemporary landscape.

The inspiration for the current issue stems from a conference hosted by LUCAS on 15-16 April 2021, also titled 'Bodies Matter'. Originally planned as an in-person event in Leiden, the conference was shifted online due to Covid-19

restrictions. Despite the challenges in organization, the conference proved to be a resounding success, drawing numerous participants from both LUCAS and various other institutions. We are particularly appreciative that the two keynote speakers from the 'Bodies Matter' conference, **Elleke Boehmer** (Oxford University) and **Willemijn Ruberg** (Utrecht University), have graciously agreed to contribute forewords to this issue. Boehmer touches on the body as the most loaded of iconic symbols and contemplates its transformative potential. Ruberg, on the other hand, discusses the 'bodily' turn that has taken place in the humanities since the 1990s.

The articles featured in this issue of the LUCAS Graduate Journal are the result of the diverse and interdisciplinary exploration of the multiple actions, states, and meanings of bodies from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Each of them, in its unique manner, delves into some of the concerns outlined in this introduction: What does it mean to be seen as having a body that is considered other or less? How are bodies constructed as gendered, sexed, raced, abled or constrained? What if the focus is on the body as a constitutive category which in fact contains multiple and varied bodies? These are among the inquiries posed within the articles presented in this LGJ issue.

Marcella Schute opens the Journal with an article that delves into the potential for resistance exhibited by enslaved women. Schute aims to show that women whose bodies have endured the hardships of slavery displayed a systematic resistance against their physical exploitation. This challenges the longstanding perception that enslaved women's resistance historically appeared to be less confrontational and organized compared to their male counterparts. Schute's research focuses on the Antebellum US South and traces how the enslaved women there discovered effective ways to resist their sexual and reproductive exploitation, and how they ultimately managed to turn their wounds into wisdom and their pain into strength. Schute examines various acts and methods of resistance, such as the opposition of Black enslaved women to the

practice of wet-nursing. She also highlights the acknowledgment of abortion and infanticide as deliberate and strategic choices to counter forced slave breeding and the authority of the master. Schute uses a variety of primary sources to identify such instances of gender resistance, including slave narratives, journals, newspaper articles, reports, interviews, and letters. She also brings forth accounts of slave owners, journalists, abolitionists, politicians, and doctors, in which acts of resistance to physical exploitation are showcased. The primary source she relies on the most is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. Shute concludes her paper by emphasizing that the majority of enslaved women did not passively accept sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation; nor were they impulsive in their methods of resistance. Instead, she argues that they developed a series of effective strategies to reclaim personal agency. The enslaved female body, rather than passively accepting limited freedom, consistently found unexpected ways to push back.

Isabel Fontbona tackles the theme of the Body from a completely different angle. In her article she discusses how the practice of bodybuilding challenges gender stereotypes and undermines the binary perception of human bodies. Viewing bodybuilding both as sports and a corporeal practice, Fontbona investigates the gender politics of corporeal transformation, as this is achieved through bodybuilding. As a bodybuilder and performance artist herself, Fontbona incorporates her own performative work, as well as the work of two other bodybuilders and artists, Cassils and Francesca Steele, into her analysis. Her specific focus is on the female and non-binary bodybuilder's physique, aiming to highlight and ultimately subvert the gender expectations historically imposed on Western bodies. Fontbona argues that while artistic bodybuilding may be less renowned than its competitive counterpart, it is within this realm of bodybuilding that one can more effectively challenge the presumed rigid distinctions between male, female, and transgender body identities. Using constructivist theory of gender performativity to support her argument, Fontbona goes on to pinpoint how the practice of bodybuilding blurs gender boundaries

and gives rise to a new understanding of personal agency in respect of body self-definition and transformation. Fontbona concludes her article suggesting that the body of the bodybuilder, irrespective of gender, evades closed and fixed identifications. The intricate specifications and needs of the bodybuilder's body, the constant change and flux that it undergoes, decidedly attest to this. Bodybuilding transcends established dualities of the body, offering a more nuanced and fluid perspective.

Shiyu Gao concludes the Journal with a paper focused on the topic of body surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This represents a shift from individual considerations of the body to a collective and communal understanding of it. At the core of Gao's investigation lies the identity of the collective body and its biopolitics. Gao argues that due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies, surveillance in PRC is not solely linked to state and corporate ways, but it is also connected to people's daily lives. The ever-increasing individual dependency to information infrastructures and the growing reliance on the digital in human interactions have led to the formation of new power asymmetries between the body and the state. To critically reflect this emerging culture of body surveillance, Gao introduces the artwork *i, mirror* by the female Chinese artist Cao Fei. Fei's *i, mirror* is a machinima created within the virtual platform Second Life (SL), where users can generate their avatars and immerse themselves in a three-dimensional virtual world. This platform's ability to defy established boundaries has attracted numerous artists who use it for art exhibitions, political discussions, and free communication. Cao Fei's virtual persona, known as China Tracy, is the focus of *i, mirror*, allowing viewers to follow China Tracy's virtual life in SL over six months. Throughout this period, China Tracy is aware of being under constant surveillance, with all her interactions and thoughts shared with the viewer. Through her virtual experiment, Cao Fei promotes the concept of political counter-surveillance by strategically appropriating and disrupting technological surveillance methods. To theoretically support her argument about the issues of permanent and unverifiable

visibility in PRC, Gao also refers to the well-known Foucauldian paradigm of the Panopticon. In conclusion, Gao emphasizes that Cao Fei, through her SL avatar China Tracy, effectively questions the legitimacy of digital surveillance that has permeated the private sphere of people's lives.

In the lead-up to the publication of this issue, the Editorial Board of the LUCAS Graduate Journal witnessed significant developments. After leading the Journal since its inception, the longstanding series editor, **Sara Polak**, stepped down and was succeeded by **Emma Grootveld**. We want to express our heartfelt thanks to Sara for her vital and passionate role as series editor of JLGC. Sara has shaped the journal with warmth and expertise, and we are grateful for the dedication she demonstrated in guiding us during the preparation of this issue. In line with the handover of the role of series editor, **Dimitris Kentrotis - Zinelis** was appointed as the new editor-in-chief of the Journal. Together with Emma, they concurred that the Journal required rebranding and that its affiliation with the biennial LUCAS Graduate Conference should be less emphasized. Consequently, the previous title of the Journal - Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference (JLGC) - was replaced with a simpler one: LUCAS Graduate Journal (LGJ). Then, with the assistance of **Sara**, **Emma** and **Dimitris** embarked on the process of recruiting new editors to comprise the editorial board. These are **Cynthia Kok**, **Henric Jansen**, and **Nathalie Haak**. They all showed dedication and diligence towards the publication of this issue, and we would like to express our sincere gratitude to them. Finally, due to the current transition phase of the Journal, the number of papers included in this issue may be smaller than usual, but we are all highly satisfied with their quality and the diverse approaches they bring to the theme of 'Bodies'. We are excited with what comes next for LGJ, looking forward to address new themes and host new authors, in the issues that will follow.

Leiden, December 2023

Dimitris Kentrotis - Zinelis