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Bodily Integrity and the Bodily Turn

It is no coincidence that two of the best-selling books in recent years address the body. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk pleads for more attention to the body in healing mental trauma in *The Body Keeps the Score. Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (2014).¹ And author Olivia Laing explores in *Everybody. A Book About Freedom* (2021) how we can inhabit a free body without fear: 'A free body need not be whole or undamaged or unaugmented. It is always changing, changing, changing, a fluid form after all.'² Laing builds on the work of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), who put forward the idea that our bodies carry our unacknowledged history, everything we try to suppress. But Laing also connects our – free or hindered – bodily experiences to power: the disciplinary power that steers our bodies into certain, often productive, behaviour, as well as conservative ideas limiting the expression of our gender or sexuality on the one hand, and on the other hand the energy inherent in our bodies. As Laing writes of our bodies: 'their power is not despite but because of their manifest vulnerabilities'.³

Here, I think, Laing gets to the core of why the body has become the epicentre of present-day politics, cultural analysis, and academic scholarship. The body

1 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score. Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2015 [2014]).

2 Olivia Laing, *Everybody. A Book About Freedom* (London: Picador, 2022 [2021]), 309.

3 Laing, *Everybody*, 15.

is the site per excellence to study the material effects of power on embodied individuals, but also provides an avenue to find ways of strength and resistance. Most of all, bodily –and thus human– vulnerability has regained attention, not only in human rights discourse but also in policy and self-fashioning. Only think of the 2010 TEDx talk ‘The Power of Vulnerability’ (viewed over 61 million times) by professor in social work, author and inspirational speaker Brené Brown.⁴

The body found itself at the intersection of power and vulnerability during the Covid 19-crisis. Protesters against (compulsory) vaccination and the wearing of facial masks emphasized that their rights to bodily integrity and autonomy were endangered. Ironically, they used the feminist slogan ‘My body, my rights’, which was known from the second feminist wave and its advocates for the right to abortion. Other demonstrations rather supported governmental policies aimed at protecting bodies, particularly of the most vulnerable such as the elderly and people with underlying medical conditions.

The cultural and social prominence of the body dovetails with new scholarly attention to the body. Particularly since the 1990s, the fields of history, sociology and cultural studies have witnessed a ‘bodily’, ‘somatic’ or ‘corporeal’ turn.⁵ Whereas at first most academic attention was focused on the ways discourses on gender and sexuality exerted power on bodies, often to the exclusion of women, homosexual, transgender, non-White, lower-class and disabled people, increasingly phenomenological and psychoanalytical approaches have highlighted (gendered or racialized) *experiences* of the body, such as in the work by feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young or postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon. In the last decades, particularly since ca. 2000, the new ‘material turn’ has emphasized the material aspects of the body, sometimes in connection with discursive or phenomenological analyses. Judith Butler thus called for attention to the ways in which certain bodies materialize and are acknowledged, whereas others do not ‘matter’ and are not mourned.⁶ And recently this material turn has become entangled with an ethical turn, in which it is discussed, for

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4 https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability/

5 For an overview, see Willemijn Ruberg, *History of the Body*. Theory and History series (London: MacMillan International/Red Globe Press, 2020).

6 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London: Routledge, 1993).

instance, how museums should deal with body parts in their collections that were appropriated by colonial explorers or medical scientists.

The issue of bodily integrity, whether in regard to the ethics of body parts in museum collections, the physical examination of rape victims, or the recent curtailing of abortion rights in the US, testifies to the politicization of the most individual and vulnerable aspects of being human.⁷ It is only one of many aspects of the body – material and discursive, individual and collective, experiential and ethical – that needs to be explored in future scholarship.

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⁷ This text is partially based on my keynote for the LUCAS conference Bodies Matter, 16 April 2021. Both were made possible by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement no. 770402, research project 'Forensic Culture: A Comparative Analysis of Forensic Practices in Europe, 1930-2000'.