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~~Cross-Disciplinarity as a Practice of Critical Linking: How Does a Scholar Relate Different ‘Bodies’?~~

Writing from Within the Body as a Research Process

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Abstract

Legal academic writing seldom reflects on its choice of research topic and writing style. The published text rarely incorporates thoughts about the choice of genre or format, and their fit with the research question itself. This chapter observes its own pre-writing process rather than making an argument or a claim as most academic writings do. An injury made me discard my initial plan for the chapter, and the notion of the ‘body’, which the editors had assigned me as the object of a hypothetical interdisciplinary study, became the material subject of the writing process itself. Experiencing bodily constraints changed my reading practice and necessitated different media and writing strategies. The resulting text is a personal record of reading and thinking in a particular period of time.

And were it true, we do not think all philosophy is worth one hour of pain.

(Pascal)¹

Introduction (written later, 15 November 2020)

This is a diaristic record of the process of finding anew an argument for a hypothetical chapter on the ‘body’. The reason for the unusual format is that my own body became the subject rather than the object of this exercise in academic thinking about methodology. The novelist Elias Khoury (2017) said: ‘I try not to write about war, but to write from within it.’ Similarly, this piece would be better described as a writing from within the body rather than about it.

This essay records the inchoate impressions from initial readings and other materials loosely related to the ‘body’ that had caught my eye in autumn 2020. The circumstances that led to these readings began much earlier in late January 2020 when I had started following news about the novel ‘Chinese’ virus and observed the subsequent incidents of anti-Asian racism and revelations of character in my closest personal circles. As the initial brief was to show the ‘working out’ of an interdisciplinary writing process, I decided to leave my entries in disconnected sequence and edited them only lightly (except the one from voice transcription) because I did not want to mould them into a single controlled narrative. This format more candidly reflects the fluctuating thoughts on a theme that is so deeply and widely discussed and written about as the one in question, namely the body. Such haphazard thoughts help to find out what exactly it is that bothers me about something (eg misrepresentations, fissures within legal conceptual premises, simplistic interpretations, accepted ‘truths’, sloppy definitions, argumentative cowardice, analytical shortcuts). Figuring out a problematisation is, for me, the most joyful part of research. At that stage, the thinking process leading up to a piece of research is still wide open, and I learn a lot by reading about what I don’t know.

On this particular occasion, the chapter’s gestational process was more disorganised than at other times. I had an initial plan, but I felt ill at ease with it and could not rekindle interest in it. I abandoned it and started thinking and figuring out from scratch again. This might have to do with the reassessment of research, or even life, priorities and ways of doing research at the start of a global pandemic. More personally, my aversion to the initial plan stemmed from an

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, A. Dutton, New York, 1958: Sect. 79.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-0.txt>

injury. It developed during the first lockdown and is still ongoing. The various limitations imposed by my body, as well as the pandemic lockdowns, changed my ability to navigate everyday life. As many of our bodies were confined in interior worlds during this pandemic year, my own bodily trapping felt like an additional layer of the world of interior.

What was different about these different kinds of locked-down interiorities, however, was that the collective experience of a pandemic was at odds with the private nature of an injury that could not be communicated and addressed because of the non-availability of medical treatment during the first lockdown. Perhaps my body chose to react to this year's turmoil by turning on itself as if it was trying to surpass the emotional interruptions caused by the pandemic by providing me with a physical distraction.

My bodily exterior does not show pain except when I move in a certain way. But within the bodily interior, pain's domination is near absolute. It demands immediate undivided attention like an emperor, overriding my will to ignore it. My body tells me when I can work and when I cannot. Pain is its messenger. So, in a way I have been left with no other choice but to try to write *with* the body, or from *within* the body, rather than *about* the body.

Speaking or writing about the relation between my personal body or life and research or work is something that I have declined in the past. I have felt the emotional labour of researching matters close to my own life too burdensome and sensitive. Sometimes, I also thought that to do so may be self-indulgent. I didn't want my assigned identity to be dictating my research. Yet, what the pandemic orientalism and anti-Asian and anti-Black racism showed me this year was that the process of academic research and writing often compartmentalises and conceals the number of personae that we have developed over time for different social settings by dislocating and erasing the 'I' from academic texts. This is not a new insight. Many academic texts have attempted to incorporate the process of writing into the published work (for example, Kathleen Stewart, Lauren Berlant, Katherine McKittrick). For me it was the pandemic that laid bare the limits of my attempt to separate my academic and private personae. I could not exclude my own bodily experience whilst thinking about and preparing for this assignment which was asking me how I would go about writing about the 'body'.

Much of academic research presumes the researcher's ability to recognise, understand and present different perspectives, and the writing process is supposed to be one of judicious

deliberation. The most interesting academic research involves a kind of queering against the grain of accepted norms; presenting a novel perspective by exposing the strangeness of the taken-for-granted beliefs and practices. This kind of unsettling can take the form of deconstruction and critique, or also historicisation. Interdisciplinary scholarship appears to be valued for the introduction of another point of view than one's own. Also meta-discourses about ways of knowing and specific constructions of truth-claims serve to show the limits and peculiarities of a particular knowledge tradition and the difficulty of these different ways of knowing to communicate and understand each other. My past scholarship, for example, tried to work out a notion of materiality specific to law or problematised reductionist representations of scientific knowledge in legal settings.

But I started to wonder whether the presumption of possessing a distance or even the ability to understand the other fairly, not to mention the ability to see with multiple perspectives, especially in multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary research, is a privilege that the very subjects or objects of a research may sometimes be denied for themselves. For example, the objects of our research may be non-human organisms lacking a common language with us, or are dead, or they may be inorganic matter. Some living human objects of study are seen to lack objectivity or voice precisely for the reason that they feel pain, or are angry about injustice. Or they are not regarded as being humans of equal value and hence lack credible voice. Only few scholars have experienced or lived the realities of the situations they are describing. I remember Yael Berda, a sociologist, once asking how many international refugee law scholars have actually ever been to a refugee camp.²

Reductionist objectification can also occur through interdisciplinarity. Although it is often assumed to provide a richer perspective than from the viewpoint of a single discipline, interdisciplinarity can sometimes offer a novelty factor without putting in the effort to represent the other disciplinary tradition and its internal debates fully. Problems are presented as loose associations between different disciplinary 'views', which are in fact neither uniform nor uncontested within their 'home' disciplines. The result is one discipline exoticising the 'other'. The philosopher Reza Negarestani called this phenomenon a 'contemporary rift culture' which is enabled by the 'facility of a vague concept known as Interdisciplinarity. You

² <https://twitter.com/YaelBerda/status/1329816313133477888?s=20>

can make a series of swindles in arts, humanities, science, etc by moving across the borders effectively'. (today at @NegarestaniReza)³

Over the course of spring and summer, I felt tired of 'theorytalks' as a thing in itself, especially of big abstract concepts (for example, biopower, necropolitics, anthropocene, capitalism, sovereignty) and facile metaphorisations of the current, specific and diverse pandemic experiences (for example, network, immunity, virality). I became wary of social theorists who handily 'applied' their existing ideas in order to explain a pandemic not previously experienced, little known about and still unfolding. These theorists moulded the world into their existing theoretical grid instead of seeing in what ways the latter can fit the current world, if at all. Such a practice could be called theoretical imperialism. To a certain degree, our vision is always shaped by what we have seen previously, but there has to be a room to recognise the inbuilt possibility of error or excess, as Georges Canguilhem would say. The imperative theorists lacked any concrete or constructive suggestions to better the conditions of peoples' suffering. The abstract theorytalks contrasted starkly with the neighbourhood actions of mutual help during the first lockdown. From April onwards, I read novels, essays, biographies and autofictions as they seemed to me more immediate and truthful forms of writing. And so this chapter assignment became the starting point to think about a broader issue than interdisciplinary research methods, namely that of a research voice and purpose: why and how one should write about which questions.

Sometime in September 2020⁴

This chapter originates from an invitation to contribute to a volume on interdisciplinary methodology on the theme of the body. The chapter that I had initially proposed to the editors would have developed a distinction between interdisciplinary and cross- or multi-disciplinary approaches to the 'body'. I would have argued for the latter by critiquing vague interdisciplinarity, which facilitates superficial namedropping and misappropriation of

³ <https://twitter.com/NegarestaniReza/status/1328010109759447040?s=20>

⁴ This section is from my Otter AI online voice dictation app on my iPhone, which is stored in the cloud and then copied and pasted into Word. My voice provides a pitiable transcription, or rather the other way around. It needs a lot of corrections.

concepts without a regard for their own specific histories of intradisciplinary debates. Such a broad-brush interdisciplinarity borrows another discipline's concepts and uproots them in order to make a point about a different set of problems in one's own home discipline. In this process, an idea or theory or concept may become reduced in its complexity or misrepresented, but, in a different disciplinary context, it is seen as 'novel'. As the 'home' discipline does not know much about the 'novel' concept, there is no discussion of any potential misunderstandings or misrepresentations. There is also little visibility or interest from the other discipline from which an idea was borrowed, so misunderstandings cannot be corrected. Oftentimes, deeper conceptual explorations are also not desired as they would complicate things too much. Barbara Stafford wrote incisively about the potential benefits and pitfalls of analogies (2001).

Other problems of interdisciplinarity include dialogues not based on mutual openness (one side is more open than other; pretend dialogue for ethics-washing); deferring to the other's expertise with superficial knowledge of the other discipline; lack of rigour because of 'diplomatic' tact or humility that covers it up; and overemphasis on commonalities rather than differences. Such interdisciplinary issues were the reasons why I analysed the use of 'materiality' in legal scholarship and proposed a more differentiated meaning specific to legal scholarship. Genuine inter-, trans-, or even multidisciplinary is rare given the highly fragmented and specialised nature of academic knowledge and its organisation, not to mention the current demands of academic 'production' or 'output' depending on which environments we work in. So, my proposed chapter for this volume would have sketched one possible map of a cross-disciplinary exercise in which other disciplinary internal debates and disagreements would be represented, as well as one's own intradisciplinary traditions critically examined. It would have entailed lots of disciplinary crossings and uncertainties rather than the belief in the possibility of a lateral translation.

After the summer of 2020, and with the continuing Covid sadness, it has gotten to a point where the chapter that I wanted to write is not what matters to me the most right now. I am not even sure I am cognitively able to write it. With the injury and chronic pain, I am at the level of first-order observation, preoccupied with my own body as a feeling subject, rather than observing my different disciplinary positions and usage of the 'body' as a concept (second order observation). At the moment, I feel an antipathy against anything which abstracises and diminishes from the physicality of the body. I need a more personal and direct writing than something ... I don't know how to describe more precisely what I feel irritated about. It might

be reading about the notion of 'body' in academic writing as an abstract object of analysis. Instead of writing about it in the abstract, I might as well observe myself and my body in this process towards the chapter writing. I am not sure how I would go about such a self-observation for an academic writing assignment. Also perhaps it is not a contradiction to my initial plan, but may add to it.

I could start learning more about the body feeling pain by reading some scholarly literature about it (after all this assignment is for a legal academic volume, and it ought to contain some scholarly sources, I tell myself). Perhaps it could help me figure out the exact reason for my irritation with meta-discourse at this moment.

28 September 2020

I remember a sunnily disposed friend telling me last year that someone is 'overly' obsessing over other people's stories of pain, as if that person was lacking a measured perspective and that focusing on others' pain was somehow improper or disproportionate. Does pain disappear when it is not paid attention to? Does it get better by brushing it aside? Which stories would we rather not hear and share? People talking about their pain are often uninteresting to those who cannot relate to them because they have not had the experience before, lack empathy, or are simply not interested. To others, listening to stories of illness and pain can also cause phantom pain when empathy is 'too' strong. I don't know what makes some people be more like one or the other.

I ordered Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) after the summer when things were not going well healthwise. I wasn't sure whether I would be able to do desk-bound work again for a long time. Reading it, I was struck by her observation that the body is the boundary at which pain becomes unsharable. A person who sits next to someone cannot know how much pain the other person is in. It cannot be communicated in a direct way. In contrast to the state of speechlessness that she describes, Scarry's writing is meticulous and precise, and the depth of her analysis, particularly on the effects of torture on language and expression, is minutely methodical. For me, the key insight is: when we are in acute pain or we fall, we don't utter a word, but a sound escapes our

mouth, a noise. I find myself thinking that this is very true and yet often forgotten in the language-centred practice of law and legal scholarship, namely that pain is that which escapes language. Also in reverse, not having a language is painful, sometimes perhaps even physically so. These observations imply that the body *is* the separation between the feeling subject (human or other sentient beings who feel pain) and its surrounding world.

Reading Scarry's emphasis on body's boundedness is refreshing. It helps me to see why being in pain is alienating and isolating despite popular theories of embodiment and cognitive sciences that argue that a body is social and permeable. Much of the research in the social and natural sciences over the last thirty years has focused on the connectedness and relationality between living organisms and their environments. Epigenetics is a prominent example of a discipline that is predicated on this kind of conceptual relationality, which queries the boundaries between inside/outside and individual lifespan/generational temporality. The trend to relate people, things, organic and inorganic entities into networks, assemblages, as well as tropes of 'becomings' and hybridity, was an understandable reaction against rigid binary divisions (mind/body; subject/object; nature/culture). Much of the literature that I had originally had in mind for this chapter claims connections between domains rather than delineating distinctions or divisions (Grosz 1994; Haraway 2007; Tsing 2015). But reading Scarry makes me realise that the body's openness and permeability may apply more to healthy bodies or to bodies that are not in pain. It seems strange that some social models of relationality that stress the open porous relations of humans to their environment and becoming turn out to be unhelpful precisely when the body is in pain. On the other hand, theories of embodied cognition support Scarry's thesis (Damasio 2003; Hayles 2005). The body in pain affects the subject's ability to think and communicate.

Theories of distributed cognition and subjectivity do not seem to apply to bodies in pain because pain ties us to our world within (Clark 1998; Rotman 2008). My pain does not form part of an environment. It does not participate in networks. It cannot be shared by its very nature. (*Addendum:* one editor points out that the effects of my pain will affect my environment and people around me, even if not consciously or voluntarily shared by the person in pain. This makes me think that pain may exceed bodily boundary, but it's not felt and perceived in the same way.) I think that these observations apply to both physical and emotional pain. When the body is in pain, there is an absoluteness of the separation of an individual body from the rest of the world. Pain is something which is so individual that it cannot be

communicated as it is (one editor notes that this is very true of grief). The ability to communicate and to relate seems to stop at the threshold of pain. A body in pain is not, cannot be, social.

This assignment is turning into an experiment of documenting the process of writing in short fragments as long as I can write or dictate. Some people have a full outline before they start writing. Usually, I don't have a full outline, but I do generally think things through before writing. And then thoughts change again. Christoph Hoffmann has written about the research process that takes place within and through writing as 'desk research' (Hoffmann 2013). When a problem or puzzle is complex and entangled, I usually have a theoretical step-by-step argument before starting to write. But the exact details of getting to a claim often arise during the writing process. Externalising thinking through inscription (or also through drawing) helps to map out the thinking process. The writing process may be different when one is writing about or presenting empirical studies because they are representations where the surveying or thinking has already occurred in a different format (e.g. surveys, quantitative methods). With theoretical work, writing helps me to think in logical steps. Sometimes it leads me to a very different ending than I expected at the beginning, or even wanted.⁵

Sometime after the Voice Recordings

It is difficult to think and write through voice. Writing has its own voice, which is not a sonorous one, at least not to me. More spatial, than temporal? I feel like I am losing my thought in the voice recordings. It just disappears. I'd rather try writing in short spurts, jot down thoughts.

1 October 2020

Gradually remove from your experiential concept of the body everything that is empirical in it – the colour, the hardness or softness, the weight, even the impenetrability – there still remains the space that was occupied by the body (which has now entirely disappeared) and you cannot leave that out. (Kant)⁶

If I will lose the friend I had, because his memory is going in circles, or fading, and his persona seems to be a shade of what he was before, because of dementia or alcohol, he still gifts me the

⁵ Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>

⁶ *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 1998: Sect. B6, p. 138

space that he occupied as a friend, but his body is not the friend that he was. I am not sure if the identity of the body deceives me, and himself, too.

Where does the body – person/I severance occur, if at all? I remember a friend telling me how a cremation was not a ‘clean’ way to be buried contrary to popular belief and how traumatised she was seeing the casket with her sibling’s body being put into the furnace. She’d rather want to be buried in a contained space with the body ‘intact’, regardless of the fact whether it is alive or dead. The body would then still be within a specific space, and her children would know that’s where the space of her body had once taken up.

7 October 2020

I was at the physio today. I am too distracted by the persistent pain, so that I don’t feel able to connect any two, three (if they can be counted) thoughts and impressions together.

Twitter format is strangely the only length of thought and typing (222 characters) that works fine for my current disabled upper body half and the resulting ‘*Spatzenhirn*’, a sparrow brain, which is the best description for my thinking capacity right now. My tweets today:

A trumpian deja-vu when my physio said that i have ‘internalised the covid’

If i had a therapist, he’d say that i have ‘externalised the covid’

I am not sure if my physio is right, but even if so, that does not change the pain, if not making it even worse.

14 October 2020

Since the pandemic and the injury, my languages are all mixed up in my head more than usual, and my current interior ‘language’ is none of them. It is, indeed, true, as Elaine Scarry writes: pain is that which escapes language. Dream feels most natural, as if I am more awake than in an awake state, a sentence pre-utterance or voicing is German, Korean, English, all mixed. Even single words come out mixed now. There is no ‘official’ me in ‘me’ able to be expressed by language at this point; only a very soft body.

15 October 2020

How this writing assignment is going:

Getting started is partly stalling, stalling by way of reading and of listening to music.
(Sontag 2013)

No music, but reading unrelated books. Last book I read and loved? Maggie Nelson's *Argonauts* (2015). And Alexander Chee's *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel: Essays* (2018). I am worried that they are not the normal legal scholarly sources, but so many books are boring or irritating me at the moment. I don't have much time or patience, I can only bear acute writing that has urgency. I realise that the trade-off is truncation and a greater likelihood of leaving some stones unturned in this writing process, something which would have bothered me intensely in the past but no longer does because there are fewer things that matter right now.

16 October 2020

Saw this image in which people's heads stick out from a white sheet. It was a poster for 'bodies in crisis' of Anab Jain's Design Investigations Project.⁷ I feel like I am in the photo.

22 October 2020

I have been reading intermittently and in no particular order:

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (2017);

⁷ https://twitter.com/D_I_Studio/status/1315700000735850496 accessed 5 July 2021. My thanks to Anab Jain for her permission to reproduce this image for this chapter.

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (2013) – I appreciate and admire Sontag’s rigorousness, but I feel that I cannot relate because she is so rational about her pain; and
Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. Unmaking and Making of the World* (1985).

At the moment I can only read and fully become immersed in Nelson’s writing. It feels like she is speaking to me intimately. That is strange because she does not decant her feelings to the reader. The author and reader are engaged in a relationship of civic formal intimacy as in Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (2000) or *A Lover’s Discourse* (2002).

Nelson writes in paragraphs. They are numbered, as if they are propositions. This Wittgensteinian style is well suited to someone as nimble and meticulous as Nelson. But, in fact, they are more vignettes than logical propositions. Reading and composing in small paragraphs makes sense for my pandemic, injury-shaped, scattered brain. My current preference would be to write a chapter in 222 characters. My desk is full with little post-it stickies.

I underlined some passages from Nelson’s *Bluet* for this writing exercise. This following paragraph is lovely and grandiose and truthful (unacademic words, but accurate here, I think). She seems to know and feel her friend’s unshareable pain but also folds the exteriority of her ability to share pain back into her friend’s generous ‘*within*’:

104. I do not feel my friend’s pain, but when I unintentionally cause her pain I wince as if I hurt somewhere, and I do. Often in exhaustion I lay my head down on her lap in her wheel chair and tell her how much I love her, that I’m so sorry she is in so much pain, pain I can witness and imagine but that I do not know. She says, if anyone knows this pain besides me, it is you (and J, her lover). This is generous, for to be close to her pain has always felt like a privilege to me, even though pain could be defined as that which we typically aim to avoid. Perhaps this is because she remains so generous *within* hers, and because she has never held any hierarchy of grief, either before her accident or after, which seems to me nothing less than a form of enlightenment. (Nelson 2017, p. 39)

Companions are friends who know what they don’t know and who know that pain cannot be shared.

Where does bodily interiority end; where does the exterior world start? Nelson writes:

109. Over time my injured friend's feet have become blue and smooth from disuse ... Often we examine parts of her body together, as if their paralysis has rendered them objects of inquiry independent of us both. But they are still hers. No matter what happens to our bodies in our lifetimes, no matter if they become like 'pebbles in water,' they remain ours; us, theirs. (Nelson 2017, p. 42)

As I read this passage, I remember a boy from summer school. He walked barefoot around town. He said that his feet were not 'part of his body'. I knew back then that it was supposed to be a cultural or political statement of some sort. Feeling no pain. The sole of the feet, as if they were shoes, were abandoned to the external world. I remember feeling sorry for his feet because I felt that he was treating his feet and by extension, the world, with little compassion. At this point, I come to think my problem with the notion of the body within the context of legal theory is that it is so unspecific to denote anything and nothing. It can be material, immaterial, meaning an organism, or its parts. It can be an organon, an organ, a vessel, an agent. The two bodies of the king. The office and the bodily incarnation. The bodies can multiply (post-election observation, 9 November 2020). At the moment there are three bodies with the US president elect, current president not conceding and the office of the president to be occupied.

23 October 2020

Do I take a view on these contradicting and multiple notions of a 'body'? I am not interested in functions of body and its liminalities, but more what is happening *inside* it right now, within the boundaries of my skin 'below' which is invisible to the outside, but which preoccupies and bounds me.

I am feeling a bit lost with the huge, vague concept that I am supposed to write hypothetically about. The contradiction between the speculative exercise and my embodied reality seems overwhelming: this strange task of as-if-writing is clashing with the persistent throbbing pain in my upper body. The more my body is preoccupied with attending to or willing away pain,

the more I feel that words and other modalities of representing thought elude me. The gap between my experienced reality and finding a truthful language for it is frustrating.

The literary critic Merve Emre writes about the opposite end of the pain spectrum: ‘the pain of precision’. It comes up in a very different context of her review of Ingeborg Bachmann’s work, but it is strangely relevant to my question about how one can express oneself and communicate with others through language if pain is essentially unsharable.⁸ Here, ‘pain’ seems to be a loose translation and derivation from Paul Celan’s words to Bachmann as ‘*peinlich genau*’. Emre writes (2020):

If the pain of precision comes from the desire to speak with absolute clarity, then its embarrassment surfaces from the impossibility of perfect understanding: the failure to anticipate another’s reading, the vulnerability of realizing that one’s mind has been breached by another’s thoughts, the confusion of emotion that makes exactness both more urgent and more unattainable.

In its ordinary German meaning, the adjective *peinlich* denotes more an affect of embarrassment, however etymologically it might be related to ‘pain’. Embarrassment or frustration is not the same kind of pain as the numbing, throbbing pain, or the acute electric nerve pain that flashes through the body. Yet, it is true that imprecision and a lack of language have both physical and affective implications. When we think about the function and consequences of legal language, there is so much at stake. Can legal or medical language approximate pain? It does so through metaphors. Nelson writes:

182. In the Phaedrus, the written word is also notoriously called pharmakon. The question up for debate between Socrates and Phaedrus is whether the written word kills memory or aids it – whether it cripples the mind’s power, or whether it cures it of

⁸ One editor asks about my sources and use of literary references. I did not have a research plan or literature review for this piece for the reasons that I have explained and also because the initial brief for the contribution was to provide a personal reflection on the writing process. I find that much thinking happens when reading, listening, watching, without a particular aim. Research questions seem to gestate in the back of the mind without overtly taking the centre stage; fragments of arguments make random sideways appearances rather than linearly or step by step. In the first year of the pandemic, my access to books in the library shrank radically. I owe immense thanks to my literary friends online who have sustained me with wonderful reading materials during my period of injury.

its forgetfulness. Given the multiple meanings of *pharmakon*, the answer is, in a sense, a matter of translation. (Nelson 2017, p 72)

I have been so reliant on the written word, on writing generally, as *pharmakon*, but with the limited ability to use my right upper limb, I am wondering if the reliance on writing has crippled me mentally and physically. What have I lost as a result of my reliance on writing and the written word; what would it take to untrain myself from the reliance on writing as a thinking tool and as a memory aid; why do I remember sounds and spoken word less clearly; is it a zero-sum process, hearing versus seeing? But then why do I remember scents and smells (affective atmospheres) better than words?

Such a 'matter of translation', as the written word or *pharmakon*, can represent the opposite of cure because it can erase the memory of pain when it misrepresents the pain or translates it wrongly. This would result in a double injury of misrepresentation: the injustice and the causing of more pain, or intensifying it, when powerful institutions (law, medicines) misrepresent individual bodily pain and objectify it wrongly and durably (eg doctor's reports, court judgments).

26 October 2020

The simplest characteristic of pain is its capacity to force the attention, to distract, to deny freedom. (Valéry)⁹

The pain is less domineering when I am in a horizontal position or in water. At least it seems that my brain feels supported more kindly. I cannot offer any reason for this. Truman Capote said in a 1957 Paris Review interview that he was very much a 'horizontal writer'. I do not compare myself with him in any way, but I agree that most of my writing and thinking has occurred on the couch or in bed, or in one of those very comfortable reading-room chairs in the British Library that supported my body perfectly.

I want to read a history of anaesthetics. The practice of anaesthetics is an interesting junction where pain becomes classified and represented into chemicals and quantified dosage. I bookmark Isabelle Baszanger (1998) *Inventing Pain Medicine: From the Laboratory to the Clinic*. The

⁹ *Cahiers*, 2000 (orig. 1973), 'Affectivity'.

academic hive mind on chronic pain also recommends Lucie Dalibert (2016) 'Living with Spinal Cord Stimulation: Doing Embodiment and Incorporation'.

28 October 2020

I am thinking about my irritation (?), disappointment (?) with some theorists who had rushed to reduce the pandemic to their existing theoretical frameworks (Agamben, Latour, Žižek). Does the world really need the unlocking of the 'bigger truth' on the pandemic by theorists, when the queering that theorising would need is not yet possible because we literally don't know our positions ourselves, as it feels like the grounds on which we stand are moving and yielding? Why would one want to foreclose the possibility of interpretation so hurriedly instead of waiting to see the pandemic unfolding in very uneven and unequal ways? Perhaps it might not be best explained by reference to existing concepts of 'network', 'state of exception,' or a 'barbarism versus civilization'.

All I want to read right now is anthropology of pandemics and zoonosis and science pre-prints that come out daily like hot doughnuts from the deep fryer of PubMed database.

Catherine Malabou wrote in March 2020 about the difficulty of thinking and working during the pandemic. Whereas some have been able to compartmentalise the pandemic as an 'outside' and have become extra productive and more certain in their theoretical orientation (as she describes them: 'I admire those who are able to analyze the current crisis caused by the covid-19 pandemic in terms of global politics, capitalism, the state of exception, ecological crisis, China-US-Russia strategic relationships, etc.'), she diagnoses her sense of disorientation as a loss of capacity to withdraw into oneself, and thus interprets it as a loss of interiority. In response, she tries to carve out a space for herself. So, paradoxically, for Malabou, the epidemic quarantine becomes only tolerable when seeking confinement from confinement:

Personally, at the moment, I am on the contrary trying to be an 'individual.' This, once again, is not out of any individualism but because I think on the contrary that an *epoché*, a suspension, a bracketing of sociality, is sometimes the only access to alterity, a way to feel close to all the isolated people on Earth. (Malabou 2020)

Her writing is more generous and reflective of the feeling of disorientation and the vulnerability of not even knowing the direction of futurity. Reading her turning-away from

attempts of large-scale and broad-brushed theorising, I am also reminded of McKenzie Wark's comment on the failure of grand narratives and what ought to come in its place:

Whereas the bare minimum i think u can say is that after the failure of the grand narratives, they can't really be restarted in a more overtly Hegelian language. It turns out that just erases the difference of every body in the name of the universals of the subject and the real.

Rather, one has to start with the specificities of the bodies acting in and against various institutional forms: factory, prison, school, etc. And start not just from the sovereignty of the body that works, but also the one that fucks, that aborts, that transitions, etc.¹⁰

But I disagree that the body is always sovereign. Pain is.

Addendum June 2021: one editor asks here, 'do you really mean to claim that pain is always sovereign?' I think in this diaristic writing from October 2020, I meant it in its full particularity from the viewpoint of my personal experience. The editor correctly adds nuance about minor pains, blurred pains, receding pain. I don't disagree. But this piece is not a piece of comprehensive research, but an essay which asks me to externalise the process of thinking and writing. I am not sure that any of my sentences here ought to be understood as claims. On the day of writing, complex academic truth was not be truthful or meaningful to me in relation to my experience of a particular pain.

3 November 2020

My QiGong and yoga teacher, Maymay Knight, says things that makes me think differently about the body. A few weeks ago it was 'Listen to your body', which is an over-used phrase that I have heard often but haven't really thought about. How is it possible that 'to listen', a verb used for auditory sensation and perception, can be applied and made to reconcile with the body which involves the locus of many different sensations? But we also somehow know what it means.

Another one: 'As the world is full of change that we have no power over, enjoy the constancy of your body.' But my body is in change right now, as is the world (today is the day of US

¹⁰ chica marx @mckenziwark, 3 June 2019
<https://twitter.com/mckenziwark/status/1135360067040157702?s=20> accessed 5 July 2021.

elections, Vienna and Kabul are in post-terrorist trauma). The memory of what my body felt like when it felt good seems deceptive. I wonder if the memory of goodness was based on the memory of feeling fit and able. But what if that state will never come back?

13 November 2020

My line of academic work, especially digitised research and teaching in pandemic times, is mostly sedentary. Thinking is presumed to be a cerebral activity, and some think of the body as a prison for the mind to ‘overcome’. But it is by now generally accepted knowledge in neuroscience that the brain is embodied. Also the body ‘thinks’ together with the head, particularly through a gut–brain interaction (Wood 1999).

It seems to me that the body is not the real culprit for the situation I find myself in. The supposedly disembodied work is the problem.

Liz MacFall, a sociologist of markets in Edinburgh, posted yesterday: ‘Academia, worse for your health than corporeal labour in a poisonous atmosphere.’¹¹ She included a morbidity table for different occupations in Manchester from the mid-nineteenth century and its textual interpretation in an insurance actuary journal. I am stunned that actuaries in Victorian times knew what seems to be hushed up in our academic labour, year 2020. I had heard before that ‘sitting kills’, but how can I not sit when all of the marking, meetings and readings are now online? The actuary article finds sedentary work to be more poisonous than working in the mines and more ‘detrimental to life’:

The highest rank [of vitality] is occupied by agricultural labourers; the lowest rank is occupied by those in the occupation of clerks. The highest degree of vitality belongs to the class whose corporeal powers are the most exercised; the lowest degree of vitality belongs to the class whose corporeal powers are least exercised ... the vitality of clerks is lower than that of painters, potters, and miners; that is to say, an occupation involving no corporeal labour is apparently more detrimental to life than occupations involving corporeal labour in a poisoned atmosphere. (Edmonds 1855, pp 139–140)¹²

¹¹ See <https://twitter.com/allartmarkets/status/1326863833185529856?s=20> accessed 5 July 2021.

¹² My thanks to Liz MacFall for sharing the reference.

When I was writing my PhD, I still had to get up from my library desk, go to enquiries, run up and down the stairs, go searching in endless miles of stacks, roll the stacks, climb up a ladder, go through volumes of books etc. Now my arm and fingers are trying to coordinate millimetres of cursor movement to place the comment in the right place for an exam feedback on an online platform, and we do this for twelve hours a day for five days for three weeks. Will my work kill me, I wonder? Do I need to pursue a different occupation to lower my morbidity rate? I wonder how much the demands of our sedentary work, especially in times of almost exclusive screen-based teaching, research and communication, are ‘detrimental to life’. How much of my ‘vitality’ am I prepared to trade for another journal article, fifty more essays, 100 more exam markings?

I guess we are disposable bodies, particularly because the corporeal injuries are invisible, chronic, a long-time coming and hidden from the world of minds. What becomes externally visualised is the supposedly immaterial labour that goes into our work ‘producing’ the material ‘output’ of publications and teaching, whereas in reality it is our bodily interiors that pay the price.

How ridiculous would be an obituary that would say, ‘She died of sedentary work.’

16 November 2020

Started to write introduction.

20 November 2020

I think my old-white-men-theory disappointments, still hanging over me from the lockdown No 1, are slowly dissipating in lockdown No 2 where I currently find myself.

Twitter replies and debates that some of the posts develop into and come close to the real interaction, if not being even more direct, resembling robust and playful jostles that a good seminar or intimate workshop setting can provide in moments of shared excitement about strongly felt views on theoretical delineations and divergences. Today, there is a discussion about a critique of theoretical imperatives that Christos Lynteris, an anthropologist of epidemics and zoonosis, has just published (2020). Another anthropologist, Casper Bruun Jensen, objects to the way in which the critique is presented. I read this unfolding debate as exploring the ethics of interdisciplinary work and modes of critique.

Despite my irritations about vague interdisciplinary superficiality and imperative theories, I do like to wander into other countries of academic inquiry for pleasure. It's less of a reconnaissance mission, or seeking the thrill of the new, but more a wanderlust-type curiosity. This morning, starting from a lecture announcement on the not so small matter of 'Climate, Class & Capitalism's Metabolisms: A Ridiculously Brief History' by Jason W Moore, who argues for the conceptualisation of the Capitalocene rather than Anthropocene – the proliferating '-cenes' trigger another abstraction fatigue in me – I arrive at an intriguing account on Magic and Ecology @EcologyMagic and a post with an image of a fantastic yet uncanny baroque hare with antlers and sequin gloves by the artist, Charlotte Rodgers.¹³ The accompanying text is by David Abram: 'The body is a place where clouds, earthworms, guitars, clucking hens, and clear-cut hillsides all converge, forging alliances, mergers, and metamorphoses.'

The body is such a battle ground, bound, but also porous and open through metabolism. Julie Livingston writes, 'healing the body requires healing the body politic—the collection of people who together form a larger whole' (2020). I agree with her too readily when she writes: 'The body is an act of exchange and a site of vulnerability in a complex and more-than-human world.' But the exchange does not seem equal. It rather resembles a one-way street. The permeability of the body stands in stark contrast to the un-sharability of bodily pain. What is sensed from the outside, seeps through our skins and metabolises (Barua et al 2020), but what is sensed within the body's interior is difficult to express to the outside, especially if the sensation is pain.

Perhaps the body is then better understood as a dialectic organism (or form?) between closed and open. This dialectic understanding seems to lead us back to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's autopoietic conception of the openness/closedness of living organisms (1991). But power in such a dialectic relation is uneven; it is rather a dynamic of dominance. Legal forms of body tend to focus and privilege the former meaning of body's boundedness (human body as person, corporate body, embodiments for materialising the immaterial) rather than its porosity, openness and vulnerability.

¹³ See <https://twitter.com/EcologyMagic/status/1319551663561211904?s=20> accessed 5 July 2021.

If there is a commonality between the body politic and the body in pain, it's that they both decentre a subject's language. Language is robbed from oneself and serves as the medium for envisaging the world as abstract structures, such as market, law, network, assemblage. These structures, in turn, are seen to evolve around abstract concepts, such as capital, rights, race, citizen, migrant. Around these intangible constructs are tangible practices of exclusion and inclusion (who gets to eat what, what are our working conditions, bodies crossing or stopped at borders, hospitalisation, practices of dying) and physical materials (flesh, virus, saliva, plexiglass, palm oil, high-fructose glucose, masks, fences around student halls of residence, plastic, oil etc).

The artist Jenny Holzer wrote 'WORDS TEND TO BE INADEQUATE' as part of her *Truisms*. It feels even more true in 2020. It has also lost its irony. The sentence feels suffocating.

21 November 2020

It is 8:30pm on a Friday, and I have just returned from the hospital. I heard some faraway techno music in the white tunnel of the MRI. In the midst of lockdown No 2, or precisely because of it, I felt perversely happy to be in the publicness of the hospital. In the waiting lobby I looked with new eyes at other bodies, their various clothing, and leather shoes and heels. The MRI tube rail was warm with magnetic waves.

Back home, I read 'A Heaven of the Book', an essay by Ryan Ruby about the poet Friederike Mayröcker's body of work, and it moves me very much, especially this sentence: 'It is only by "writing with the body" that "life can be metamorphosed into language," and it is only by being metamorphosed into language that life survives the inevitable breakdown of the body.' (Ruby 2020)

Before the body breaks, or before the breaking point of numbing pain and death, we necessarily write *with* our body.

I think I have reached a point where I can stop collating and start the linearisation of thoughts by writing. The gestation of ideas and argument for this assignment has been more personal and chaotic than it usually is.

What would be actually useful at this point, instead of another iteration of body multiple or emergent body, is a history of an idea or epistemic history of the term ‘body’, a genealogy of some sort. This is better done in a PhD thesis or book project. A book chapter is not the right format for it. What I could do in the limited space of a chapter is develop an initial diagnosis of the dialectical aspects of the ways in which we use the word ‘body’.

I feel ready to do the work of narrowing down the thoughts about the ‘body’ in law as a kind of unequal dialectics into a drawing now. Drawing allows flexibility in writing. I prefer it to a text outline because I have found out that the writing process often leads to changes in the argument, which can be more easily adapted in a drawing. Also, I like the non-linearity of drawings, which make logical relations, distances and gaps much more explicit by spatial ordering and graphics. But then the writing process might change everything again.

23 November 2020

The procedures in the hospital were rather unpleasant and the second injection was so painful that I had to reactivate birthing breathing technique again after exactly thirteen years. So much of modern medicine’s pain management seems to depend on the probability calculation (aka evidence-based medicine) or belief that frontloaded pain for healing is better than unhealed chronic pain. But what do they know about how my body interior feels?

Thirteen years ago my waters broke. Tonight, sterile water, together with some other chemical liquids, is injected into my shoulder capsule in order to dilate and rupture it. Water out, water in. A metabolism of some sort.

24 November 2020

My body gave birth to another body today thirteen years ago. I still find it wondrous that all humans co-inhabited a woman’s body for around nine months. As far as I know, there have been no exceptions to this human beginning within one shared bodily home.

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