

# Bodies at the Borders

## Liminality, Hegemony, Materiality

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What I would propose... is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.<sup>1</sup>

But on the body level – you can't ignore the body.<sup>2</sup>

As Judith Butler and Kath Duncan suggest in the above quotes, notions of materiality and embodiment are understood in a variety of differing, and often competing, ways. On the one hand, Duncan points towards the 'reality' of the body, and its unavoidability in a material sense. On the other hand, Butler outlines the ways in which materiality is constituted as a thoroughly social practice. Yet it is not necessarily the case that these two positions need to be understood as being in binary opposition.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we may focus on the ways in which 'the body' is granted a very specific form of materiality in Western cultures through a wide range of intersecting discourses. In this way bodies may be understood as gaining their ontological status not through claims to the 'realness' of materiality, but instead through networks of practices that are productive of bodies that are granted differing degrees of status (or at times non-status) within particular power relations.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, and as is the focus of this issue of *Philament*, that which we call 'the body', and the experiences that we claim to have as embodied beings, may be understood as 'liminal artefacts' – ones that are produced at the borders of both intersecting discourses of materiality, and through the multiple status of bodies as both real and surreal, subjective and objective. Indeed, the liminal status of the category 'body', as I will demonstrate throughout this paper, reminds us constantly of the contingency of our experiences of embodiment upon particular social contexts, and in particular, the specific 'types' of bodies that are rendered intelligible within a Western context that privileges certain bodies over others.

By examining some of the ways in which materiality is produced discursively, I seek to provide one particular account of the ways in which hegemonic

constructions of the body are produced. In doing so, my intention is not to posit an end-point solution to matters of materiality and embodiment, but rather to call into question some of the taken for granted assumptions that shape what I refer to as 'the hegemony of the body'. Here I am referring not only to the hegemonic status that is accorded to 'the body' as one of, if not the most, important site of difference between people, but also to the ways in which particular bodies are granted privilege as a result of their approximation to particular social norms.

In order to examine one of the particular ways in which certain bodies are marginalised, and how embodiment in general represents a liminal state that in many ways exceeds the discursive/real binary,<sup>5</sup> I provide some examples from both a television documentary and radio programme featuring Kath Duncan – journalist, academic and sometimes spokesperson for amputees. With a particular focus on the work that Kath Duncan has done with 'devotees' (people who are attracted to amputees), and 'wannabes' (non-amputees who wish to be amputees), I explore some of the discourses that surround 'the body', and I outline an understanding of materiality that recognises its simultaneously discursive and 'real' effects. In this way, I hope to demonstrate the importance of conceptualising embodiment as a thoroughly social practice that, through its production of very 'real consequences', holds the potential for reinscription and challenge.

### **Engaging with/in Critical Disability Studies**

In elaborating the theoretical framework that I employ to examine the liminal status of embodiment and materiality in this paper, I first outline in this section the location of this paper in regards to critical disability studies, and my own location as an academic writing about issues of embodiment from a relatively privileged position. In particular, I wish to explore the implications of using the work of Judith Butler in my examination of embodiment, and to reflect upon what it means that the data I examine are taken from a documentary and radio programme written by someone who self identifies as a congenital amputee. Perhaps the simplest way to introduce this discussion is to first outline why it is that I felt it important to engage with the work of Kath Duncan, and to follow that by discussing why I found the work of Butler to be a useful framework through which to do this.

In part my interest in engaging with the work of Kath Duncan was premised on the intensely theoretical aspects of her work. I had originally taped the

documentary *My One Legged Dream Lover*<sup>6</sup> as I had heard Kath speak before on triple j and was interested to hear more of her work. What drew me into the documentary, and what has drawn me back to watch it time and time again, was not Kath's status as an amputee *per se*, but rather how her status was so radically visibilised and critically interrogated at the same time. Somehow, at least for myself as a viewer, Kath appears throughout the documentary clearly marked by herself as an amputee (in her self-representation, in her focus within the documentary, and by the visual markers that I read as signifying someone who is differently abled to myself), yet she also appears as someone whose relationship to ability is so clearly marked as one thoroughly mediated by social context. It is impossible to read Kath within *My One Legged Dream Lover* as being solely an amputee, or a white woman, or an academic, or a desiring individual, or a feminist, or any of the identity categories that she inhabits. In my reading Kath is only readable as a subject located at the intersections of multiple discursive positionings.

These types of statements, of course, may no doubt sound like the views of a 'well-meaning' normatively abled white gay man. My intention in outlining my own reading of Kath's work is not to necessarily claim a common ground with Kath, nor to somehow position myself outside of the ableist discourses that position my body as somehow inherently more human or 'complete' than Kath's body. Nor is my interest to suggest that Kath presents herself as a 'whole being' who does all that she does *despite* her amputee status. Rather, my interest is to signify that Kath's work both engages a form of critical disability studies, whilst also challenging the very limits of that field of study itself. Kath's theorising within the documentary is always already produced by the identity categories that she inhabits, whilst simultaneously showing how those identity categories forever fail to capture or constrain her within them. In other words, Kath appears to speak as a woman *with* two limbs, rather than as a woman *missing* two limbs.

This type of logic is of course fundamental to the development of the field of disability studies, within which the voices of those labelled as disabled are privileged, and where constructions of disability and ability are interrogated and examined for their normative assumptions. Where Kath takes this to a different place – where she produces, as Ellen Samuels calls for, "a new body of thought"<sup>7</sup> – is in her refusal to simply reduce the category 'amputee' to a collection of limbs, and where she instead constructs a reading of materiality that exceeds a normative,

individualised account of what it means to be an embodied being. To state this in yet another way, Kath appears to provide a thoroughly embodied account of bodily differences that is achieved not *per se* because it is Kath speaking as an amputee, but rather because of the ways in which she deploys her status as an amputee to critically interrogate discourses of normality and materiality.

My interest in examining Kath's work is thus not yet another example of ableist discourse, where I seek to parade the amputee body for the sake of theorising how materiality is produced. Rather my attempt within this paper is to engage with Kath on the terms she sets, where I use the theories that she carries out *through her embodiment* to locate both the limitations of current understandings or prescriptions of the category 'human', and the potential for everyday subversions or reinscriptions of this category as they may occur. My approach thus follows in part one developed by Kim Q Hall<sup>8</sup> in her introduction to a special issue of the NWSA Journal on feminist disability studies, where she asks how materiality is produced via certain forms of looking or seeing, and how these forms may at times be reproduced within disability studies. Hall questions any logic which sees the term 'disability' as signifying a lack, rather than as a normative state of being for an individual. Her question thus presents a challenge to theorise the individuality of bodies without depoliticising or decontextualising the status of such bodies within Western societies. Thus as Robert McRuer suggests, "To 'claim [critical] disability', it would seem, is to reject the cultural devaluation of disability and to recognize disability as a vital force that constantly reshapes culture despite ableist norms that would relegate it to a supporting role".<sup>9</sup>

This brings me to my use of Butler within this paper, and the role of queer theory more broadly for looking at issues of embodiment. In her aforementioned paper, Ellen Samuels elaborates the ways in which the work of Butler has been drawn upon (often in limited ways) within the field of disability studies, and she outlines the potential overlaps with Butler's theory, and the possible dangers that lie in attempting a wholesale grafting of Butler's work onto disability studies. In particular, Samuels suggests that a simplistic mapping across of critiques of (hetero)sexist norms onto critiques of ableist norms will potentially fail to explore the intersecting functions of these norms. Butler herself, however, has gone some way towards addressing these issues within some of her more recent work, where she suggests that:

If we consider that human bodies are not experienced without recourse to some ideality, some frame for experience itself, and that this is as true for the experience of one's own body as it is for experiencing another, and if we accept that ideality and frame are socially articulated, we can see how it is that embodiment is not thinkable without a relation to a norm, or a set of norms. The struggle to rework the norms by which bodies are experienced is thus crucial not only to disability politics, but to intersex and transgendered movements as they context forcibly imposed ideals of what bodies ought to be like. The embodied relation to the norm exercises a transformative potential. To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is. If we accept that altering these norms that decide normative human morphology give differential 'reality' to different kinds of humans as a result, then we are compelled to affirm that transgendered lives have a potential and actual impact on political life at its most fundamental level, that is, who counts as human, and what norms govern the appearance of 'real' humanness.<sup>10</sup>

This quote, clearly outlines the theoretical framework provided by Kath Duncan, and anchors it in a critique of the category 'human' in a way that provides the potential for considering the 'body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is'. As I will outline in my analysis later in the paper, this is precisely what I read Duncan's work to be doing, but before turning to elaborate this I first further outline in the following section the theoretical underpinnings of this paper in regards to embodiment and normative understandings of materiality.

### **Embodiment and Exclusion**

In attempting to further outline in this section the ways in which I understand bodies as being materialised, I first focus on the ways in which the hegemony of the body is shaped through a series of inherently exclusionary practices. Intimately related to this are the ways in which certain intelligible subject positions would appear to be made possible through the construction of the body as a privileged site within Western cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Hegemonic understandings of 'the body' are shaped by assumptions about what constitutes 'a body', and how this relates to the (assumed-to-be corollary) category 'human'. Predominantly, these assumptions are structured through an exclusionary network of 'embodied subject positions' that privilege white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied men.<sup>12</sup> Whilst it may be argued that such a position of privilege is mediated by the contingencies of place and time, it is also

fairly safe to say that access to such privilege is made possible via the exclusion of embodied subject positions that have historically been deemed as being 'less than human'. In this way, the assumption that particular bodily forms can be taken to represent 'all bodies' is itself an inherently colonising act – the universality accorded to particular (white, heterosexual, middle-class, able, male) bodies is premised upon the overwriting of difference, whereby those bodies positioned outside the norms for embodiment as set under white heteropatriarchy are expected either to identify (where possible) as embodied subjects on the terms set by the majority, or to not be identified at all.<sup>13</sup>

Edward Sampson<sup>14</sup> suggests that such hegemonic constructions of the body demonstrate an "ocularcentric bias (i.e., vision dominated)" in their ranking of bodily difference according to what *can be seen* (and moreover, what can be seen by particular dominant group members, and according to particular normative understandings of embodiment). Thus the hegemony of certain bodies is made possible through the prioritising of those markers which are valourised as indicative of embodiment within a particular cultural framework. Such visual encodings of subjectivity have formed the basis of racist, (hetero)sexist and ableist practices (to name but a few). In this way the category 'the body' is based upon a set of ocularcentrically orientated normative assumptions about what constitutes membership of the category 'human'. The aforementioned privileged subject position is thus reified as representing a 'universal humanity', with the corollary being the imposition of this particular world-view upon a wide range of people who do not share it.

In this sense, it may be useful to understand embodiment within Western cultures as producing a particularly ageist, (hetero)sexist, classist form of whiteness, or put another way, a white-heterosexual-middle-class-male-able-bodiedness. Understood in this way, normative embodiment is not produced through any one particular axis of identification – it is produced through a simultaneity of subject positions that are configured as the norm. To be 'missing' one of these normative markers, in differing times and places, may mean being considered to be a facsimile of a human – as accruing some, but not all, of the cultural capital accorded through white-heterosexual-middle-class-male-able-bodiedness. Those markers accorded various degrees of acceptability will shift over time and, as I will suggest later, can be reinscribed according to various social

contexts, but it is nonetheless the case that the category 'human' is reserved in Western societies for particular bodily configurations.

One of the ways in which it may be possible to challenge the hegemony of the body is thus to examine sites where there exists a potential for a subversive reinscription of discourses of materiality – where the status of the body as a liminal object is rendered most obvious. As Judith Butler<sup>15</sup> suggests, materiality acquires its very real effects through reiteration – the work of constructing 'the body' is never complete. Nick Fox's<sup>16</sup> work on health, postmodernism and embodiment is one example of an attempt at understanding the possibility of approaching materiality from a vantage point that need not seek to necessarily arbitrate over whether bodies are either discursive or 'real'. Fox suggests that instead of simply disposing altogether of *any* understanding of the 'realness' of the body, we need to reconsider how we understand materiality. Such an approach may steer us away from attempts at developing explanatory models, and instead towards focusing on an examination of the ways in which various embodied realities are constructed (and possibly transformed). Following Derrida, Fox suggests that by reintroducing that which is 'left outside of the frame',<sup>17</sup> it may be possible to understand the everyday ways in which bodies are treated 'as if they were real'.

In examining the hegemony of the body, then, it is important to question that which has traditionally been taken for granted. Which bodies are granted sanction? How is this achieved at the expense of bodies that are positioned as being outside the norm? And how is it that institutional practices constitute intelligible ('embodied') subject positions, and how do such subject positions serve to reiterate the normative status of these institutions? Asking these types of question may afford a space within which to explore materiality as a commonplace form of identification, but also to work through the limitations that this places upon critiques that are made in regards to the hegemony of the body. In the examples that follow, I work through some of the ways in which discourses of materiality may be understood as having shaped Kath Duncan's experiences of materiality, and the corollary potential for reinscription contained within her television documentary and radio programme.

#### **Data; Context; Method**

The examples in the following section are drawn from two transcripts taken from a television documentary and a radio programme featuring Kath Duncan, a white Australian woman who has spoken out about her experiences as someone who self-identifies as a congenital amputee. The television programme, entitled 'My One Legged Dream Lover', focuses on a journey that Kath made to America to attend the meetings of two very diverse groups: the Amputee Coalition of America, and 'Fascination', a meeting of 'devotees'. Devotees define themselves as people who are attracted to amputees. Devotees are predominantly heterosexual middle-aged men who seek to develop relationships with women who have had one or more of their limbs removed, or who were born with less than four limbs. Devotees themselves acknowledge the erotic component of their attractions to amputees, but also insist that there is much more than eroticism that shapes the attraction they feel towards amputees.<sup>18</sup>

The radio programme, simply titled 'Wannabes', focuses on a series of interviews conducted by Kath with a number of men who may loosely be identified as 'wannabes'. Men who identify with this term feel that they were born into the wrong body, and that in order to feel 'complete' they need to have one or more limbs removed. Such feelings have been likened to the experiences of transgendered people, and there is currently much debate as to whether wannabes should be allowed to access medical services in order to achieve their 'ideal body'. Within the medical literature, wannabes are diagnosed with 'apotemnophilia' – the desire to be an amputee.<sup>19</sup> Yet whilst this 'diagnosis' infers some form of perversion, fetish or pathology, most wannabes state that their desire to have a limb removed has nothing to do with sexuality *per se*. Thus in contrast to devotees, wannabes suggest that their desires are self-directed. In other words, the desire for limb removal is intended to bring them closer to the person they wish to be *themselves*, whereas devotees desire relationships with amputees *as a source* of their attractions.

Obviously these categories are highly contested, and my attempt at describing them already demonstrates some of the issues that circulate around particular hegemonic forms of embodiment and their limitations. In particular, they point towards the ways in which a reliance upon normative categories of embodiment to understand or define our selves renders problematic any identifications that do not conform to the hegemonic ideal. Yet, as I will go on to demonstrate, such (potentially) subversive identifications demonstrate the instability of positioning

that shapes the hegemony of the body. Thus rather than understanding wannabes and devotees as ‘deviant cases’, it may be possible to examine the ways in which their identifications are formed in a relation to a wide range of bodily practices, and to explore from this how all embodied identifications involve the privileging or dismissing of particular ways of ‘being a body’. Having said that, the examples that I provide focus specifically on the experiences that Kath Duncan had in her interactions with devotees and wannabes, and what this appears to mean for her experiences as an amputee. Moreover, I pay particular attention to the ways in which materiality is worked up discursively in the programmes, and the possibilities and limitations that it places upon Kath Duncan’s experiences of ‘being a body’.

The ‘analysis’ that I provide is loosely based on a number of connected approaches to the analysis of discourse, specifically, the work of Foucault,<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, and work in the broad field of critical psychology, particularly that contained in the text *Changing the Subject*.<sup>21</sup> Whilst these approaches represent a wide range of theoretical traditions, I believe that together they allow for a thorough-going method of examining processes of subjectification, and particularly the means through which specific embodied subject positions are produced. Indeed, the analysis itself is more precisely an exploration of the discursive practices that would appear to structure the examples. Thus rather than paying attention to the ways in which materiality is constructed within particular utterances, the exploration that I provide concentrates on the relationship between the experiences that Kath Duncan elaborates in regards to materiality, and what this may mean for an understanding of materiality and embodiment as ‘liminal artefacts’.

Finally, the analysis that follows represents my own synthesis of a number of key points that arise from the extracts in my reading of Duncan’s work. This reading may differ greatly from that of the participants themselves, and it may neglect to focus on points that they feel to be important in their lives. As such, the examples focus on a very small portion of a much wider set of social frameworks through which ‘the body’ is constructed within Western societies. Yet at the same time I employ these particular extracts as I feel them to be fairly representative of the exclusionary practices that shape the hegemony of the body.

### **Doing materiality: On ‘being human’**

I've only got most of what it takes to be recognized as human – 'cos there's bits missing.<sup>22</sup>

As Kath Duncan suggests in this quote from the radio broadcast 'Wannabes', constructions of what it means to be human are often closely connected to what it means to have a particular 'type' of body. As such, the notion of a 'shared humanity' is taken as existing primarily at a material level – as experienced at a bodily level. Assumptions such as these enact a series of exclusionary practices that inform who will, and who will not, be included as full members of the category 'human'.<sup>23</sup> In a similar way, a focus on the body as the primary locus of human relations works to construct particular groups of people as sharing the same experiences, whether or not this is actually the case. As can be seen in the following extract, Kath struggles with her own identifications as she is faced with the disjuncture that exists between herself and other amputees. What this extract demonstrates is the limitations that are placed upon people when particular expectations surrounding embodiment are taken to be central to our understandings of our selves.

I: So what is at stake here between you and him [Steve, one of the organisers of the Amputee convention and someone who is against devotees being there]?

K: It's a loyalty thing – it's hard to, to put your own, your fellow amputees off – it's hard to be rude to someone that you share...

I: But is that that thing like the homeland thing – what makes him more special?

K: It's the body thing, the body thing. I mean it's the ideas, this commonality of ideas. There's no doubt about that – when it comes down to it I have more in common with [the devotees]. But on the body level – you can't ignore the body.<sup>24</sup>

As we may see from this extract, Kath feels she should have some 'loyalty' to her fellow amputees. In this way, the category 'amputee' is taken as representing an important site of difference with which she should identify. Yet throughout the programme Kath seems to find herself much closer to the world of the devotees than that of the Amputee Coalition. As the interviewer suggests – is the fact that it is hard to 'put your... fellow amputees off' emblematic of 'the homeland thing'? Here the interviewer is referring to a statement that Kath makes earlier in the

programme, where she stated that she had ‘a vision of finding my homeland – a place where I won’t be weird’. Thus in believing that a particular aspect of her embodiment would be of great significance to her experience, Kath accepts the notion that a particular form of bodily identification should be privileged as the primary site of identification. When this lets her down (in failing to produce a satisfactory identification with her fellow amputees), Kath is led to question how she can manage the contradictions that this presents to her – on the one hand she feels a ‘commonality of ideas’ with the devotees, but on the other hand she feels compelled to focus ‘on the body level – you can’t ignore the body’. This structuring of the dilemma as being either/or may be seen as symptomatic of the hegemony of the body itself. Constructions of bodies as being ‘real’ in an *a priori* sense render seemingly impossible the transgression of boundaries such as amputee/non-amputee. Yet the identifications that Kath experiences with the devotees demonstrate the multiple ways in which we may experience bodies as being thoroughly social objects, thus undermining the ‘abled/disabled’ binary itself.<sup>25</sup> Later on in the programme, Kath attempts to work through some of these issues by exploring the body and the locus of ‘difference’.

It was actually funny when Steve picked me up on how is the Fascination culture [the devotee meeting] any more comfortable, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. I can’t quite work it out, I mean maybe it’s as simple as I’m a bit more known there than I am at the [Amputee convention] so that is why I feel more comfortable there. Yet it’s a looser environment there – it’s a bit more ‘we’re all marginalised in this bizarre way, so anything goes’. Ah, yes – that’s what it is – A lot of amputees want to be ‘normal’ – these guys [the devotees] have given up on being ‘normal’, and so have I. It’s not a body that makes us different, it’s what’s inside and they’ve accepted that they are different on the inside.<sup>26</sup>

Issues relating to constructions of normality appear to structure this extract. One of the key points that it suggests to me is that the body can be a useful tool for rallying for social change, and particularly, equal rights and opportunities. Yet, at the same time, maintaining a focus solely on the body may often serve to exclude particular people from developing relationships that exceed those based on category membership or which prioritise bodily connections. We see this when Kath discusses how Steve questioned her allegiances in regards to the devotees. In this particular instance, there is an expectation that Kath should justify her decision to ‘ignore the body’, and more specifically, to choose those who could be seen as ‘objectifying’ her over those who are ‘just like’ her.

These problems with identification, normality and embodiment are highlighted in the work of McRuer, who suggests in the following quote that notions of difference are always limited if they are understood within a normative framework. As he suggests;

[A] multicultural model takes note of difference but cannot comprehend the transformation of the structures that privilege heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. Queer theory, which has critiqued minority identity precisely because of the tendency of the resistant sense of minority identity to devolve into mere celebration of difference, posits instead a more contingent, fluid sense of identity. Disability studies' current emphasis on a strong (and non-essentialized) minority identity emerging from a common experience of able-bodied oppression, however, might usefully inform, and reinvigorate, understandings of minority identity in and around queer theory.<sup>27</sup>

In the way that McRuer frames it, attempts at coalitions on the basis of a shared difference will often fail if what is being celebrated is a difference from what is positioned as the norm, rather than a difference that radically destabilises the very function of said norm. Organising around any identity category can of course involve a shared experience of oppression, but this need not be taken as an automatic signal of a shared sameness, nor does it need to be the case that a shared experience must equate with an *essentialised* identity or sameness.

This point about allegiances demonstrates the liminality of embodiment – the fact that Kath 'felt more comfortable' with devotees may be understood as the result of the multiple identifications that she makes as an embodied person, ones that transgress bodily and affective boundaries. Thus instead of 'finding her homeland' *per se*, Kath finds that identifications need not necessarily relate strictly to bodies, but rather to social relations. Thus, as she suggests, 'it's not a body that makes us different, it's what's inside'. Here we may take Kath's reference to 'inside' as referring primarily not to a person's 'inner workings' or 'individual psychology', but rather to how we are constituted as subjects *within* a particular set of social relations and contexts. In this sense, what is 'inside' is actually the liminal space through which bodies are shaped, and thus accorded a semblance of materiality or fixity, as Butler<sup>28</sup> suggests.

In addition to these points about liminality, the above statement by Kath demonstrates both her own and the devotees' shared rejection of the hegemony of the body, and the normative constraints that it places upon them. Such potentially subversive reiterations render visible how materiality is shaped not in a relation to

some 'real object', but rather at the intersection of any number of competing discourses. Thus in recognising the boundary maintenance that is involved in perpetuating the categories of normal/different, Kath explores an approach to embodied identification that goes beyond the body as an 'objective' material practice, and instead recognises its location within particular social frameworks. As the next extract shows, such an approach creates a space for a non-essential understanding of the body and materiality.

When I ask Roger [a wannabe] why [he self-mutilates], he says 'for freedom', and I say 'freedom from what?', and he can't tell me what it is... Could it be that we hold many bodies within us, and drift consciously or unconsciously between them? Do we all walk around with visions of our bodies that conflict with the reality? Are we all made from the same stuff? What if I'm not so special after all? What about my complex, everyday rituals – putting on my leg, my moments of transformation – from being a one-legged, to a two-legged creature, and back again. Perhaps they're just ordinary parts of life, instead of being like I see them – mystical practices, where I have to find my own path....<sup>29</sup>

In this extract Kath explores what Roger means by the word 'freedom'. She asks whether it could be that Roger is trying to put into words the limitations that are placed on him through normative discourses of the body and materiality. When Kath asks about the possibility that we may have 'visions of our bodies that conflict with reality', her suggestion appears to be not that 'our visions' are the problem, but that the imposition of one particular 'reality' is what limits our potential identifications. If we are to take the term 'reality' as referring to a set of hegemonic practices shaped around the norms of white-heterosexual-middle-class-male-able-bodiedness, then it is relatively simple to understand the ways in which this reality shapes 'embodied subject positions' as sites of difference. As Kath goes on to discuss, instead of understanding her materiality as being different (to the above norm), it may well be that her 'complex, everyday rituals... are just ordinary parts of life' – as examples of the 'doing' of materiality – 'instead of being... mystical practices'. In this way, as Kath so cogently suggests, 'could it be that we hold many bodies within us'? This suggests that the intelligible subject positions available to us within a particular cultural context (e.g., those of race, gender and ability) are the product of particular historically contingent power relations, rather than being based upon some form of *a priori* truth.<sup>30</sup> This is of course not to deny the very 'real' ways in which power differentials shape our lives, but rather to acknowledge that such differentials are open to challenge or reinscription.

In these complex ways, materiality is shaped as being something very real that impacts upon the experiences that we have as embodied subjects, yet there is also a potential for challenging (and indeed exceeding) these limitations by examining our own complicity with the hegemony of the body. As long as particular bodily 'types' continue to be promoted as 'normal', there may be a great deal of utility in arguing not for all bodies to be classified as 'normal', but rather to explore how categories of normality are produced, and how notions of equality are productive not of greater equity between people, but rather of further acts of exclusion.<sup>31</sup> In other words, and as Kath suggests in the final extract below, whilst a great range of bodies are indeed recognisably 'human', this does not change the fact that the forms of embodiment we adopt are constituted by multiple layers that are accorded differing social values, and which are not all constituted as equal:

K: I'm starting to wonder about the layers of body we carry with us. I'm beginning to have this ghastly realisation that I might be human after all.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusions

In elaborating one particular understanding of materiality as a discursive practice, I feel that it is important to point out that I am not suggesting that we should not talk about or theorise the 'body'. Indeed, there is a pressing need to speak out about the ways in which particular bodies are subjected to violent and exclusionary practices. My point within this paper has instead been to suggest that an understanding of 'the body' as a discursive practice may allow us to focus on the ways in which such forms of violence work to prop up dominant systems of representation. Moreover, if the hegemony of particular forms of embodiment are challenged, then it may be possible to reinscribe the ways in which we engage with one another on a 'bodily level'. Of course this does not mean that those points of difference that are presently taken as being important in regards to the body will disappear – challenging the hegemony of the body does not mean that a person's skin colour will change, or that they will grow another arm or leg. My point is that if these markers are recognised as being thoroughly social practices that are the result of histories of exclusion, then we may be better placed to challenge the body as being *the* site of difference.

Through an exploration of some of the exclusionary practices that would appear to have shaped the experiences of Kath Duncan, I have thus hoped to demonstrate the potential for the subversive reiteration of experiences of

embodiment. Thus, as Kath suggests, rather than accepting the ‘visual reality’ of materiality as being ‘a fact’, we may instead look at the ways in which materiality is worked up between people in our everyday interactions. As opposed to relying upon a notion of embodiment as being located in the ‘extra-discursive’, or accepting embodiment as founded upon some ‘real object’, I have hoped to outline some of the ways in which embodiment acts as one of the constitutive forces that shape subjectivities.

In regards to the liminality of ‘the body’, throughout this paper I have suggested that the hegemonic forms that bodies take (i.e., white, middle-class, male, able-bodied etc.) achieve their semblance of normality only through reiteration within the framework of particular power relations. This does not, however, prevent these relations from being reinscribed in ways that challenge or undermine their authority. As such, bodies understood *as discursive practices* may be conceptualised as very real sites through which borders can be crossed or overwritten – indeed the notion of bodies as liminal artefacts reminds us that borders themselves are only ever as ‘real’ as the current cultural and social context within which they are located. What counts as a ‘human’, and what is recognised as ‘a body’, is always already open to slippages and revisionings that far exceed the confines of embodiment as they are typically enforced.

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