

BODIES OF WORK: AN INTRODUCTION

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THIS TWENTY-SIXTH ISSUE of *Philament* is based on a conference held at the University of Sydney in 2019. With the theme “Bodies of Work,” the event brought together interdisciplinary research exploring how the body shapes our mind, interactions with others, and the creation of self and art. The breadth and depth of the speakers’ different perspectives compelled the conference organisers—Vivien Nara, Ruby Kilroy, and me—to facilitate a broader forum for these discussions. With that goal in mind, this special issue of *Philament* was born.

Corporeality has long taken centre stage in the humanities, propelled by feminist and postcolonial studies. Both fields of scholarship position the body as a vocabulary and a site for the continued violence of empire and patriarchy. Recently, concepts of embedded, embodied, and extended cognition have interacted with theories of transhumanism and posthumanism in ways that make us question the limits of the body. The questions have been useful prompts for new inquiries into the demarcation between the mind, body, and world.¹ Problems of bodies and their boundaries challenge not only normative performances of the “human” but reframe the question of what it means to be human. These are always already ethical questions. After all, to see a mind embodied and embedded in the world is to explicitly destabilise the idea of a discrete and autonomous

1. “Embodied” and “embedded” cognition are terms associated with second-generation cognitive science, which deals with “the embodiment of mental processes and their extension into the world”: see Karin Kukkonen and Marco Caracciolo, “Introduction: What Is the ‘Second Generation?’,” *Style* 48, no. 3 (2014): 261. Recently, neuroscientists have found that embodied cognition, which reframes our understanding of the cognitive processes and perhaps consciousness itself, is likely spurred on by the creation of “additional structures” in the brain, including the somatosensory cortices, “which enable our brain to create an ‘embodied mind.’” See Michael Schaefer and Georg Northoff, “Who Am I: The Conscious and the Unconscious Self,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 11 (2017): 1–5.

humanist subject. While academic emphasis on the body may seem a well-worn focus at this point, there is still more that we may learn from the biological conditions of existence.

Although the body constitutes a considerable presence in much scholarly thought, recent events have brought the body from academic sphere into public life. Sick bodies and black bodies are no longer peripheral subjects in public discourse, with the novel coronavirus making its home in more than 50 million bodies worldwide. That number will be much higher by the time this issue is published. In the search for a vaccine, it is understandable that a general perception has formed that science will save humanity. Yet ironically, it is the humanities that have proved necessary to save science. It has become clear that we need an interdisciplinary approach to understand the widespread mistrust and rejection of medical advice and scientific reasoning: 5G conspiracies, extreme partisanship, and mask wars cannot be defeated with science alone. Furthermore, the virus has exposed sociological problems that extend beyond science's grasp: racial inequalities, unequal access to medical care, mental health crises, and antisocial behavioural patterns.

The humanities are called on to analyse these areas. Why, for example, do we comply with social distancing regulations but make almost no effort to examine the activities that likely led to the emergence of the virus, such as wet markets or ecological destruction? There are also questions surrounding the unfolding biopolitics of the pandemic. As social anthropologist Sarah Czerny asks, will COVID-19 become a "trojan virus," smuggling unrelated agendas into our public discourse?² The long-term impact of the deployment of emergency powers is yet unknown. In this new world, hypervigilant surveillance and sousveillance—surveillance from beneath, often recorded on smart phones³—render our bodies objects of inquiry, sites of compliance or deviance. The

2. Sarah Czerny, "Why We Need Social Sciences and the Humanities to Live with Covid-19," *Corona Times*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.coronatimes.net/why-social-sciences-humanities-covid-19/>.

3. See Kelly Ross, "Watching from Below: Racialized Surveillance and Vulnerable Sousveillance," *PMLA* 135, no. 2 (2020): 299–314.

disciplinary character of measures used to control the movement of bodies in space (quarantine, lockdowns, social distancing) are fairly clear, as are the resulting optics.⁴ The hypervisibility of the body (and black bodies in particular) is linked to the foreground/background logic of disciplinary power. As people stay at home, those remaining in public spaces are thrust into the foreground—something the *Courier Mail* made blatantly clear by doxxing two POC teenagers who breached quarantine measures.⁵

The ethics of these policies and reactions requires a humanities perspective; yet the pandemic has placed the humanities under significant pressure. For one, it has brought into focus how much the body matters in the humanities. Even as we write about the importance of the body in our research, our work is considered to be somehow separate from the body that produces it. The assumption is that this work is something we do only with our minds: “We humanist intellectuals generally take the body for granted because we are so passionately interested in the life of the mind and the creative arts that express our human spirit,” writes Richard Shusterman.⁶ Yet the pandemic has exposed how much academic work relies on the material conditions that surround it. Without access to the offices, libraries, or public spaces in which we share ideas, our research changes—or even disappears. A survey of 1,020 students at the University of Sydney found that 45 percent of these students expect to be forced to suspend or withdraw from their studies in the next six months due to financial hardship.⁷ In-person classes, meetings, and conferences have been a particular loss to our academic life. The proceedings giving rise to this issue, the “Bodies of Work” conference, was a fertile forum to consider the collisions and commonalities of many interdisciplinary perspectives. The productivity of these kinds of spaces cannot be adequately replaced by a computer screen.

4. See Matthew G. Hannah, Jan Simon Hutta, and Christoph Schemann, “Thinking Through Covid-19 Responses with Foucault—An Initial Overview,” *Antipode Online*, May 5, 2020, <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/05/05/thinking-through-covid-19-responses-with-foucault/>.

5. Ahmed Yussuf, “Media Reporting of Two Queensland Teens: A Form of Doxxing,” *The Feed*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/media-reporting-of-two-queensland-teens-a-form-of-doxxing>.

6. Richard Shusterman, “Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40, no. 1 (2006): 2.

7. Rebecca Johnson et al., “The Quiet Crisis of PhDs and COVID-19: Reaching the Final Tipping Point,” *Research Square*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-36330/v2>.

In the COVID-19 environment, with the humanities both under threat and increasingly necessary to analyse our changing world, the Australian Liberal–National government’s proposed changes to student fees seem to be moving in the wrong direction. According to Professor Joy Damousi, President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, these fee changes are “potentially the greatest hit to Australia’s humanities sector in a century.”⁸ At the moment, federal funding covers around 60 percent of the cost of a degree. This will fall by about 20 percent under the proposed budget cuts, so that only about 40 percent of a degree’s cost will be publicly funded. On average, university fees will need to increase by 30 percent to compensate for the loss.⁹ This move is implicitly ideological. As Commonwealth Minister for Education Dan Tehan asserts, the changes are intended to incentivise students to “study in areas of expected employment growth.”¹⁰ Such an emphasis on vocation is propelled by a utilitarian, anti-intellectual impulse. These proposals will hamstring an already limping sector. The loss of income from international students in the context of the neoliberal model of the modern university has dealt a devastating blow to most Australian universities. And with 70 percent of staff working casually on semester-to-semester contracts, the academic community will suffer.

Journalist Jeff Sparrow has likened the experience of the sector’s casual staff to that endured by members of the Waterside Workers’ Federation—the “wharfies”— who walked the so-called Hungry Mile of Sydney’s waterfront, hoping to be picked for a day’s work.¹¹ For casual staff at Australian universities, it may indeed be a hungry mile for the next few years. A contingent labour force is not a resilient one. Hundreds of full-time jobs are being cut, and casual positions are drying up in many disciplines. A government report from May 8, 2020, estimates that some 7,000 full-time research-related academic positions will be lost in

8. Wade Zaglas, “This Should Alarm All Australians’: The Australian Academy of the Humanities and DASSH Outline the New Funding Flaws,” *Campus Review*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.campusreview.com.au/2020/06/this-should-alarm-all-australians-the-australian-academy-of-the-humanities-and-dassh-outline-the-new-funding-flaws/>.

9. Chris Pash, “The Cost of Getting a University Degree in Australia is about to Change: Here’s What You Need to Know,” *Business Insider*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/the-cost-of-getting-a-university-degree-in-australia-is-about-to-change-heres-what-you-need-to-know-2014-6>.

10. Hayley Hands, “Humanities Students to Be Hit Hardest by ‘Appalling’ University Fee Changes,” *ANU Observer*, June 19, 2020, <https://anuobserver.org/2020/06/19/humanities-students-to-be-hit-hardest-by-appalling-university-fee-changes/>.

11. Jeff Sparrow, “Workplace Insecurity Pervades the Whole Economy, Just When Every Job Is under Threat,” *The Guardian*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/25/workplace-insecurity-pervades-the-whole-economy-just-when-every-job-is-under-threat>.

the coming months.¹² The University of New South Wales has announced cuts of 493 full-time positions, and these reductions will see the Arts and Social Sciences and Art and Design faculties merge with the Built Environment faculty.¹³ Even for the beleaguered humanities, well used to political, cultural, and economic attacks, things are looking particularly grim.

Many aspects of the challenges facing the humanities (and humanity) are explored in this issue's contributions. The experience of having just emerged from a period of lockdown (only to look down the barrel of another) has brought the affective and political dimensions of confinement to the fore. Relevant to these ideas is Eliza Victoria's article on Shirley Jackson's gothic fiction, which shows how being confined to the home is a familiar form of oppression for female bodies. Victoria's article analyses how Jackson's gothic fiction estranges—and thus makes visible—the entrapment of women in the domestic space. Clare Pryor, in her article on the poetry of Terrence Hayes, explores how various forms of being “boxed in” have harmed Black Americans for centuries, including through segregation, injustice in the justice system, and racial stereotyping. Pryor's article is particularly resonant at this moment as the global Black Lives Matter movement intersects with the global pandemic. (It is no coincidence that those most at risk of dying from institutionalised racism are also most at risk of being harmed by the virus.¹⁴) Pryor's analysis of Hayes's poetry and the metapoetic images it encodes illuminates both the confines and potentialities of the sonnet form, and its complex relationship with the oppressions it observes.

The tension, identified by Pryor, between the body as a subject and a consumable object becomes equally apparent in Julia Cooper Clark's analysis of Melinda Bufton's ekphrastic poem “Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I*

12. Australian Government, “Impact of the Pandemic on Australia's Research Workforce,” Rapid Research Information Forum, May 6, 2020, <https://www.science.org.au/sites/default/files/rrif-covid19-research-workforce.pdf>.

13. See Claire Annesley, “New Faculty Announcement,” *UNSW*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/professor-claire-annesley/news/new-faculty-announcement>.

14. Richard A. Opiel Jr. et al., “The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html>.

luv you sculpture, 1993.” Clark’s analysis shows how late capitalism has frayed the boundary between inanimate other and biological self. A capitalist critique aimed in another direction appears in Jebun Geeti’s article. Geeti shows how the capitalist impulse has operated throughout the colonial history of India. In an historiographic analysis of Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Geeti examines the impacts of inequality, poverty, and addiction on coloured bodies in the name of “free trade.” Of course, the body is not only a site of oppression but one of collective humanity too. This point is advanced in Luke Beattie’s analysis of *The Eric Andre Show*. Beattie’s article examines Andre’s provocative comedy through the lens of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque and its vision of the “collective body” as a source of radically egalitarian power. Finally, in Martín García Calle’s historical article, Calle reflects on the untimely death of the Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca and his long literary afterlife. One of Calle’s most interesting contributions is to underline the interaction between an author’s physical body—which, in the case of Lorca, has never been found—and the author’s body of work.

Though a number of this issue’s contributions were received prior to “The Bodies of Work” conference, they still find consonances with its theme. The interdisciplinary turn has brought new meaning to “the body” as well as to “bodies of work,” throwing up new ontologies and epistemologies. This point is reinforced by Roger Hansford’s exploration of received reception in musicology. In his article, Hansford argues that interactions between bodies of work—music and literature—may guide contemporary theory and criticism. Moreover, Hansford draws attention to the importance of literary and musical reception, where authors’ and composers’ identities intersect with the scholar, listener or reader’s body. In a different vein, Ella Collins-White, in her article on Nathaniel Rich’s novel *Odds Against Tomorrow*,

explores how the embodied mind functions in relation to place and space. Collins-White takes up the problem of the Anthropocene and reviews its critiques of the damaging ways that humans—and human bodies—engage with the physical world.

The issue's excursions (creative works) include Allan McCay's "Alternative Possibilities," which revisits the problem of free will through a pinhole camera. In McCay's short essay, photography and philosophy weave together what may or not be, represented by an image of his own body simultaneously occupying three possible worlds, unsettling received understandings of space and time. Finally, in Phillip Dupesovski's excursion, the author engages with a personification of death, which in turn describes its own various embodiments in myth and art. Here the biological is held in tension with the divine, only to be dissolved into the infinity of the universe.

I extend many, many thanks to all of our contributors, both for their research and patience during the publication process. I also wish to express enormous gratitude to my co-editors, Vivien Nara and Ruby Kilroy, and to managing editor Chris Rudge, for making this volume possible. Last year, in 2019, when we received the bulk of the submissions published in this issue, we could not have imagined what lay ahead in 2020. Yet each of these contributions offers unexpected insights into our current predicament, variously reflecting on the body and bodily experiences of oppression, inequality, capitalism, determinism, and death. In doing so, each also makes a powerful case for the importance of the humanities—even in a period of global emergency.

