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Reviews

Netzwerk Körper, ed. (2012), *What Can a Body Do? Praktiken und Figuren des Körpers in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 434 pp., € 25.00, ISBN 978-3-593-39641-5.

Form matters when discussing *What Can a Body Do?*, since one of the interdisciplinary volume's core messages is transported by how it has been physically put together. Edited by members of the DFG-funded research group "Bodies in Cultural Studies", and published – despite its English title – in German, this collection of articles presents itself as two-books-in-one, split down the middle. One part of it is dedicated to "Praktiken des Körpers" ("Bodily Practices"). If one wishes to access the rest, reserved for "Figuren des Körpers" ("Bodily Figurations"), one has to flip the book upside down and read, as it were, from the 'other' side. Providing the volume with two 'first' halves, neither of which necessarily 'comes before' the other, since chance alone determines which way up the reader holds the book when opening it, is a fortunate decision of far-reaching consequence. 'Practices' are defined as preceding 'figurations', while both crossing and extending beyond them ("Practices" 14). Nevertheless, the rigid linearity of having part one of the book followed by part two, which would suggest a fixed sequence and, thus, inevitably imply primacy, is sidestepped. Refusing to subject to either of the possible resulting orders, the volume, by its very layout, performatively undermines rather than merely denies the notion that the unavoidable pervasion of linearity by power cannot but produce hierarchies.

What Can a Body Do? thus cleverly avoids making use of a binary in its form, which would contradict the poststructuralist consensus upon which its content is based. Instead, it seems to connect its two 'first' halves like the sides of a coin or – to borrow de Saussure's metaphor for the linguistic sign – like the sides of a sheet of paper. The connections between the collection's parts, however, are not arbitrary; they are multiple and organised in a complex, netlike, yet also dynamic fashion, for which neither the coin nor the sheet-of-paper metaphor is a perfect fit. First and foremost, the thirty-six short pieces, which make up "Bodily Figurations", and the ten longish articles in "Bodily Practices", are sprinkled with cross-references that point to other contributions in both of the volume's flapsides. The effect of these indices is that one gives up reading in the traditional manner, from the beginning to the end of one part, almost instantly. Instead, one finds oneself browsing the book much like a hypertext: sometimes reading a whole article and continuing with one that

– as indicated by a (→ LINK) – connects thematically; at other times interrupting one article's perusal repeatedly, either to fill in background information provided by other contributions or simply because one has been pleasantly led astray, while blithely flipping one's way back and forth through the volume. Putting it in a nutshell, this book's form demonstrates what a body of printed matter – even before its content has been taken into account – can do. That this is not a coincidence but a carefully constructed effect is made clear by the meticulous doubling (or omission) of all potentially treacherous paratexts, such as title pages, acknowledgements, bibliographical information, page numbers (or blurbs). Full points, therefore, for the cultural practice of 'editing a volume'. Now, for the collection's performance as a figuration of the genre 'handbook'.

The term is never actually used by Christiane König (film and media studies), Massimo Perinelli and Olaf Stieglitz (both history) who, on behalf and in the name of "Netzwerk Körper", have provided two short introductions to "Bodily Practices" and "Bodily Figurations". Yet the label seems to fit the forty-three authors' joint effort to capture 'the body', a topic so far from new, yet so persistently discussed in the humanities that it is best called a 'classic'. The project's patron saints are revealed early on: apart from the inevitable Foucault, Butler, Deleuze & Guattari, and Haraway are most quoted. This rather predictable basis in well-digested theory means that hardly anything in this volume is radically new or comes as a complete surprise. But it seems fair to say that *What Can a Body Do?* is representative, in this respect, of the fact that humanities scholars in the twenty-teens think and write about bodies – as effects of power, as discursive sediments shaped by both stabilising and dissolving forces, as sites of in- and exclusion – in a manner both structured and completely shot-through by theses first presented in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. To deduce from this a damaging lack of innovation, however, would be doubly wrong. While displaying originality is not the foremost task of a 'handbook', which candidly states its goal as introducing readers to the dominant discourses on the body, the familiarity of theories that provide the collection with its bones does not mean that there are no new folds of flesh to be found. A host of scholars is referenced in the individual articles, whose work on gendered, ethnic, socially classified, aging, postcolonial or queer bodies has freshly combined and developed further concepts put forward decades ago by the usual suspects named above.

Against the backdrop of the collective's agreement on the most important discursive coordinates in the field of cultural theory about the body, it makes complete sense that the entries in "Bodily Practices" share one long bibliography. Presented in alphabetical order, they take their titles from verbs like "to move", "to modify", "to have/make sex", "to speak" and "to die". Equally ordered, the pieces collected in "Bodily Fig-

urations", each of which is provided with its own list of works cited, are titled by nouns. They deal with phenomena like "avatar", "beauty queen", "bodybuilder", "dancing couple", "digital body", "flâneur", "gambler", "hypocrite", "Jesus", "pheromonist", "planned child", "porn star", "provider", "punk", "racing cyclist", "the rejuvenated", "secretary", "surrogate mother" or "the wild child". One piece, "cokehead", is journalistic or (mock?) autobiographical rather than academic in tone; another, "consumptive", comes in the shape of a poem. Two of three artistic contributions, which are not textual but visual – namely the collages "Muster 1 und Muster 4" ("Pattern 1 and Pattern 4") and the digital panorama "Replika" – might have profited from some sort of comment. Without it, they remain cryptic. Of course one could argue that this underscores that a body's mere image, without any discursive supplementation, can be unintelligible. But this seems too facile and unsatisfactory a response. The photographic series "the girls' rooms", although equally without comment, is less obscure, offering itself for the reader's reflection on the relations between gendered teenage bodies and their personal/ised spaces.

It is not likely that any two readers will pick the same path through *What Can a Body Do?*, and this is one of the volume's strengths. I flipped and read my way through it during a vacation on Bonaire. Still in the thralls of everyday life, I started, on the transatlantic flight, with the pieces on "to work" and – it seemed logical – "the unemployed". A day later, Caribbean warmth had me most curious about "sunbather". Since I was on the island specifically to do some diving (hoping to avoid ending up as a "drowned corpse"), both "to exercise" and things that my body could do with the help of technology (like breathing under water; or seeing without distortion my buddy signalling 'turtle') were very much on my mind. This had me delve enthusiastically into "sign language user" and "posthuman", which made me recognise the subaquatic body/machine-assemblage into which I turned myself twice per day by gearing up as one of my cyborg-selves. At breakfast, a white male guest's annoying ogling of a black female employee who had just passed provided a spot-on illustration of what I had read minutes before in "waitress". During dinner, at a table next to ours, a few veterans of the US army were discussing whether "to eat" European, American or local specialties. For years, it turned out, the wounded warriors-programme has been sending a group of paraplegic and amputee ex-soldiers to this particular resort for rehabilitation. Seeing some of them go diving, with or without their prosthetic limbs, made me read "war invalid" (and then "tortress", about women in the military) with an interest I might not otherwise have mustered. Not all entries connected this directly to my specific reader's situation, though some easily resonated with courses I had recently taught ("clone"; "to reproduce"; "to perform") or with other books I had brought with me in

preparation of term ("big game hunter" with Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*; "butch" with Sarah Waters' *Tipping The Velvet*). Other entries, of course, did not open up any immediately relevant connections at all. But I know that it won't be long before especially the more general articles in "Bodily Practices" will prove helpful. Like all collections, *What Can a Body Do?* has weak moments, gaps and highlights in store. I would not expect other readers, however, to point to the same spots when identifying what disappointed or inspired them. Surely, this is all one can desire from a collective effort to capture the flip-sides of discursive physicality.

Sylvia Mieszkowski (Zürich)

Ines Detmers & Birte Heidemann, eds. (2013), *From Popular Goethe to Global Pop. The Idea of the West between Memory and (Dis)Empowerment*, with a Foreword by Aleida Assmann, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 257 pp., € 55.00, ISBN 978-90-420-3749-6.

In contrast to postcolonial literary and cultural studies which, following Said's *Orientalism* (1978), tended to approach the 'West' from a socio-historical perspective, the editors of *From Popular Goethe to Global Pop*, Ines Detmers and Birte Heidemann, maintain that their essay collection sets out to focus on narrative practices, rhetoric as well as genre-specific formats. The volume brings together four German and eight English contributions and intends, as the editors propose in their introduction, to analyse the normative potency of the 'West' by looking at its persistent construction with specific attention to a paradigm change, that is, a reversal of the hierarchy "the West and the rest" (Stuart Hall) to "the West as the East's other" (14, my translation). The idea of the 'West' is, as Aleida Assmann seems to propose in the preface, not necessarily restricted to the binaries of Orient/Occident, capitalist 'west'/communist 'east', modern and democratised west/fundamentalist Islam, West/the rest. Globalisation, postcolonial perspectives as well as the ascendency of new cultures may dissolve such binaries in a merging of heterogeneous cultures and lead to a decline of the 'West' as the superior agent of civilisation and modernity. Following A. Assmann's idea to consider the 'West' as a transnational culture-, value- and memories-based community rather than a confederation of states (8), Detmers and Heidemann, in their introduction, further develop this theoretical framework. Their concept is based on Jan Assmann's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1997) and reminds of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities'. They conclude that "the collection's contributions read the West as a socio-topographical model case

which serves to observe and describe the instability rather than the stability of a collective of experiences" (16, my translation).

The collection covers a vast thematic, chronological and geographical range. While nine of the twelve chapters focus mainly on Anglophone phenomena, only three contributions are dedicated to continental and Asian perspectives. The first two contributions focus on Goethe within the East/West dichotomy. Anil Bhatti (in an essay reprinted from the *Goethe-Jahrbuch 2009*) reads Goethe's enthusiasm for the Orient in his *Divan* (1819) as working against the contemporary colonial discourse and thus playing with a fuzzy East/West boundary. Katrin Schmeißer analyses Goethe's reception in Italy (Benedetto Croce, 1918/19) and Spain (José Ortega y Gasset, 1932) as operating outside of the general genius cult in reaction to the national/European crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. Michael Ostheimer points towards the contemporary insecurity and the decline of the Western bourgeoisie in the face of China's economic success. In a second step he turns to a discussion of the domination of Western standards within the Eastern Asian hemisphere. This is exemplified through two Chinese bestsellers, Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* (2004) as well as Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* (1918).

The other contributions address (postcolonial) British, Irish, US-American as well as Canadian cultural (yet mainly literary) phenomena. With their British, North American and Irish perspectives, Kathleen Starck's, Oliver Lindner's and Susan Nitzsche's chapters indicate that parts of this book can be read as a continuation of debates raised in Barbara Korte et al.'s *Facing the East in the West* (2010), published in the same series. Starck approaches the East/West dichotomy by analysing the Eastern-European main protagonist of Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* (2007) with regard to his relationships with Eastern and Western women. She concludes that the novel reinforces the normativity of the 'West' as civiliser, as it remains within Cold War thinking in its character depictions. Lindner sees the idea of the end of the world, and more specifically of the West's decline as one of the most popular themes in contemporary Anglophone science fiction and dystopian fiction. Thus, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) projects a (negative) progression of the history of Western civilisation, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) depicts a void future dystopia reminiscent of American capitalism and consumerism, and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) warns of an ecologically and biotechnologically induced crisis of morality. All three novels, Lindner argues in his convincing analysis of narrative patterns, project a future downfall of the 'West' and form part of a "counter-discourse that defies hegemonic Western self-perceptions rooted in ethnocentrism and an unquestioned affirmation of capitalism" (73), signified here through the recurrent image of cannibalism. Nitzsche takes a different approach to