



‡‡ TRANSITIONS

*Collana di studi
sulla traduzione e l'interculturalità
nei paesi di lingua inglese*

V.

La collana intende investigare la centralità del concetto di interculturalità nei paesi di lingua inglese offrendo una prospettiva interdisciplinare tra lingue, letterature, culture e media. Il termine “traduzione” è dunque inteso nella sua accezione più ampia che prende in considerazione non solo gli studi di traduzione interlinguistica ma anche intersemiotica e si apre ad un discorso sulla traduzione come trasposizione, adattamento e ibridazione tra generi e arti. Il discorso sull’interculturalità, sempre più centrale anche in un’Europa multietnica e multilinguistica, è fondamentale nelle aree anglofone dove il processo di decolonizzazione poi globalizzazione ha portato ad un ripensamento dei concetti di lingua, identità, nazione e cultura. La collana intende proporre strumenti di analisi per approfondire competenze linguistiche e culturali muovendosi tra diverse aree di studio come gli studi di traduzione, gli studi postcoloniali e di genere, gli studi culturali, la sociolinguistica (in particolare le varietà della lingua inglese), la critical discourse analysis e i linguaggi specialistici. Se come afferma Adrienne Rich “negli interstizi delle lingue si nascondono significativi segreti della cultura” è proprio dallo studio di diverse tipologie testuali che può iniziare un percorso critico verso un approfondimento di ciò che viene definito come interculturalità.

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THE BODY METAPHOR
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LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATIONS

edited by Eleonora Federici, Marilena Parlati

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INTRODUCTION¹

[*Eleonora Federici, Marilena Parlati*]

The body is a central topic in all arts, it has become a point of intersection between various fields because it has always been a powerful metaphor for the understanding and exploration of social issues, sexual controversies and cultural debates. As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out “the body is at once the final point of resistance to the global imperatives of postmodernism and the first to be affected by them” (1995: 1). The body is a complex site of interdisciplinary debates, a central category in cultural constructions which has been widely analysed through different theoretical perspectives. The body is a sign expressing a variety of metaphorical meanings which visualize a ‘bodyscape’, a cartography of the body in different historical periods and spatial contexts. It is shaped by different cultural, political, scientific and social discourses. Within postmodern discourses the notion of a ‘natural’ body has been challenged and it is treated as a

1. Ringraziamo con affetto Donata Bulotta, per averci aiutato a portare a termine l’impresa faticosa.

polysemic metaphor (Davis 1997; Laqueur 1990). The body however, is also materiality, and this matter strikes back.

In the last few decades, the sociological, phenomenological, cultural, medical category of ‘the body’ has often been revisited and discussed. Judith Butler’s work on gender and the cyborg have long ago alerted to the narrative and performative line she saw implied in the ‘selection’ of identities (see Butler 1990). Undoubtedly, again, her work marked a faultline, and no discourse on embodiment can overlook the importance of her reflections. Many scholars have also started to pinpoint the imbricated, to some, veiled, assumptions underlying those suggestions: the master narrative that the cyborg (re)presents is founded on health, on a body which can be augmented and carefully moulded according to one’s will and power. Yet, since not *every* body has the same access to that power of self-construction, this has been considered a major faultline in Butler’s initial discourse (she has moved to more sensitively nuanced positions). Lennard Davis, one the earliest champions of disability studies, points to its roots and outcomes with precise clarity:

The disabled body is a nightmare for the fashionable discourse of theory because that discourse has been limited by the very predilection of the dominant, ableist culture. The body is seen as a site of *jouissance*, a native ground of pleasure [...] The nightmare of that body is one that is deformed, maimed, mutilated, broken, diseased. (Davis 1995: 5)

In the works by Lennard, Shildrick, Siebers, Couser, Mitchell, Snyder, to name the most relevant and well-known cases, disability studies have strongly advocated a “more visceral engagement with bodies” (Mitchell, Snyder 2005: 2). Not that ‘disabled’ bodies are to be conceived as more

intrinsically ‘natural’ than any other, as more fundamentally fettered by the tethers of ‘mere matter’. All bodies, every body partakes the delicious crux of materiality, but it is true that disability, as Ato Quayson contends:

[...] joins the sublime as marking the constitutive points of aesthetic representation. Aesthetic nervousness is what ensues and can be discerned in the suspension, collapse, or general shortcircuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation that may have governed the text. (2007: 26)

Thus, theoretically, and aesthetically for Quayson and us in this context, tracing ‘embodiment’ is at once an impossible yet undelayable and compulsory task. Disability and disability studies can force theory and scholarly practice to reconfigure one’s basic assets: this lies at the root of the so-called “turn to affect” (Leys 2004), by which, as Teresa Brennan suggests:

What is at stake now is how the idea of transmitted affects undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social.(2004: 7)

Affect is an ‘entrainment’ (Brennan 2004: 9), a relationality which involves the human, post-human, not-at-all human in an engaging commonality. While some might accuse affect theory scholars (as much as early disability theory scholars) of reverting back to an old-fashioned and unjustifiable biological determinism, it is the fiction of bodily and identity self-containment that is put in the pillory. That is one of the grand narratives that should have fallen out of favour long ago.

No 'body' can be essentialized, nor should a theoretical, model 'body' be set as stifling standard by which all and every body else can be evaluated, invited, marginalized, expelled. Jean Luc Nancy starts his meditation on the issue of *Corpus* by his own body, or rather by himself as body, his body as self. Due to an invasive heart surgery, he must come to terms with his perception of his own limits and, to use Diane Perpich's words, he suggests that we avoid any attempt at pinning down 'the' body, "substituting in place of the corps a corpus or catalogue of singularities that evoke bodies without essentializing them." (Perpich 2005: 84)

His intensely 'incarnated' argument does not simply undermine any self-conceited sense of personal boundedness, it truly disperses 'the body' into segmented, hormonal, molecular relations which tinge embodiment with an impassable complexity one must never attempt at obliterating or diffusing. In the words of Tobin Siebers, "the theory of complex embodiment raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body... [it] theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative." (Siebers 2008: 25) It is with an eye to the transformative possibilities of thinking the body as bodies through the grid of "peripheral embodiment" (Mitchell, Snyder 2005) that I wish to conclude by allowing an excerpt from a very lyrical essay by disability scholar and artist Petra Kupperts resonate with this short introduction, and proceed in concert with her view that the rootedness of human flesh informs our dealing and reading with bodily matter.

Poetry is biology: our sounds are shaped by our being in the world. But poetry is also treachery: "biology" and

“individuality” both slip out of grasp in its lines. Performing determinism: in the act of articulation, certainties shift. See that the images you hold of us are not who we are. See that the images and sounds we all hold are who we are. See that we can make up sounds and images for all that we are, with blanks in between. See the blanks. See that these patterns do not necessarily make sense, even when repeated. (Kuppers 2007: 104)

1. *Into (the) Matter*

As we see their work, the scholars who contributed to this collection have all engaged with the complex interplay between bodies as “recalcitrant corporeal matter” (Mitchell 2002: 17) and linguistic, metaphorical, representational entities.

In her essay, Africa Vidal also reminds us, via Spivak, that the ‘body cannot be thought as ‘such’. Her essay sees and looks at the bodies of women, the ‘obscenity’ underpinning non-homogeneous, non-homogenized, bodies: in the prescription of hypothetical models of beauty which forever doom every woman, to experience their/them ‘selves’ as predicated, as always beyond the pale of an impossible, naturalized, homogenized, image.

Carla Riviello and Donata Bulotta take us back in time in their respective careful perusals of Anglo-Saxon England. Riviello focusses on the topic of elegy and the tradition of suffering women in the Middle Age as both physically and lexically located in texts such as *The Wife’s Lament*. Bulotta connects Christianization and the representation of femininity, which she aptly reconstructs by criss-crossing her

sources and attempting to display a portrait which, fragmented and partial by necessity due to the fragmentary nature of its available documentary history, showcases medieval England as a vivid arena for the reciprocal fertilization of discourses and images.

Massimo Rinaldi contributes to this collection with an essay on Renaissance emblems on medicine, underlining how the figure of Asclepius and the paraphernalia attached to it in emblematic literature offers anatomy the opportunity for a crucial renovation of the medical arts. The Vesalian anatomist is emblematically entitled to becoming the most powerful writer and reader of the human body.

Rinaldi also provides an analysis of the work of a famous early modern Portuguese physician, Rodrigo de Fonseca, as efficacious example of the genre of ‘de sanitate tuenda’, a carefully set agenda of rules and interdictions aimed at the preservation of health. In this case, the body – with all the categorical subdivisions that are clarified by the scholar – features as literal (and literal as well, since evacuation fares prominent in the text) locus of fundamental exchange, interchange, and attempted closure.

Andrea Bernardelli and Eleonora Federici take us ahead in time, and semiotically interrogate the categorical boundaries of space and time to deal with the genderization of Bakhtinian chronotopes in science fiction, namely in feminist utopian and dystopian works of the late twentieth century.

Federici plunges deep into the work of a very famous SF writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, whose intensely conscious feminist take unmasks gender stereotypes. She radically rewrites the traditional assumptions which to non-alert eyes seem to have moulded the body, and projects female

(and male) bodies into futurescapes where embodiment takes variable, mutant, dissoluble forms. In her novels the language of the body visualises a strong debate on issues of masculinity and femininity.

An attempt at unmasking very recent cultural and neo-liberal stereotypes triggers Alessandra De Marco's essay. She investigates the very complex issues of capitalism and its alleged 'virtualization': via a careful reading of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, she manages to prove that contemporary discourses of delocalization and disembodied economies only mask the always starkly material and painful exploitation of the invisible, sacrificial bodies of labouring others.

Marilena Parlati reflects on the turn – or re-turn – to affect in contemporary theoretical works on embodiment and pain. She restricts her attention to a few examples of late twentieth-century pathographies, ie more or less autobiographical testimonies of illness and non-normative, complex embodiedness. Her examples all deal with the fragility of physical boundaries when eating and personality disorders are at stake, and the unforeseeable new bodily formations which may result from hospitalization and writing as a cure.

Manuela Coppola also investigates the writing of/ on the body in her work on Patience Agbabi. The codification of bodies has proven particularly dramatic and politically fundamental in the case of Black bodies, whose 'naturalization' has often been a criminal imposition and appropriation not only, and not just, of meaning but of the actual, living and at times no longer living, flesh of enslaved, commodified humans.

Thus, through different means and textual proxemics, our contributors have all had their say in what remains

an 'impossible' body of evidence. Bodies, the real bodies that real people *are* in this globalized and often painfully dehumanizing world are all but free to operate on themselves. While sharing the same constricted rules, equally inscribed within the same set and codified normative apparatuses that everybody and every body must experience, we mean to acknowledge the privileged position in which we stand and from which we allow ourselves to observe. We are sorely aware that being and trying to make others aware of the pain of others is necessary but remains insufficient, we do wish to pay our respects to those whose suffering and plight will remain unseen, unheard, unmourned.

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