

Kirby, Merleau-Ponty, and the Question of an Embodied Deconstruction

Jack Reynolds

In *Telling Flesh: the Substance of the Corporeal*, Vicki Kirby suggests, among other things, that it is not in the interests of feminism to propound what she describes as an ‘inessentialist’ position in regards to embodiment. While she objects to undifferentiating biological givens that might, for example, attempt to construe women as confined to a nurturing role, she also does not want to simplistically insist that embodiment has nothing to do with subjectivity. To pose the problem in terms more closely aligned with her own, Kirby is wary of the tendency to simply reverse binary oppositions, to swap nature for culture, reality for representation, and originary cause for interpretive effect. According to her, themes like ‘textuality’, and linguistic ideality have all but replaced the notion of ‘reality’. As arguably the pre-eminent ‘continental’ philosopher of our generation, the work of Derrida is invariably associated with this reversal of binary oppositions that seem to prohibit recourse to questions concerning embodiment. Several critics have even suggested that deconstruction is nothing but semiological reductionism in disguise. However, Kirby’s thesis, via an extended meditation upon Derrida’s claim that “there is nothing outside of the text,” constitutes an important attempt to redeem him from such criticism. Rather than eschewing any and every reference to the body, she wants to insist that deconstruction cannot be contained within such a framework, and that it makes sense, within the logic of *Of Grammatology* (and she also pays cursory attention to Derrida’s “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject”), to conceive of embodiment in deconstructive terms. Examining the coherence of this claim will be the main focus of this paper, though in order to facilitate this task, this paper will also compare the notion of embodiment that Kirby espouses, to a curiously similar conception of the body that Merleau-Ponty theorizes in his unfinished text *The Visible and the Invisible*.

While Kirby’s references to Derrida are often quite allusive, he is an important background figure in her work, because many of the feminists that she seeks to criticise use Derridean deconstruction as an intellectual support. According to Kirby, recent

feminist articulations of the body have a tendency to rely heavily upon the linguistic emphasis of certain early Derridean texts, and in this respect she finds theorists like Drucilla Cornell and Judith Butler to be complicit in something akin to the semiological reductionist reading. That is, they take Derrida as something of a linguistic idealist, even if they generally endorse this position rather than reject it, as the more unsympathetic critics of deconstruction have done. Kirby contends that Derrida actually resists any such reading of his work, and has an implied conception of the body that avoids this mere reversal of binary oppositions.¹

Dissatisfied with what she takes to be the postmodern refusal to consider the question of the body, Kirby seeks to transplant, with slight variations, certain post-structuralist insights regarding language onto the contours of the body. She hence asks, “Is it absurd to assume, that if there is no outside of textuality, then the differential of language is articulate in/as blood, cells, breathing and so on?” She suggests that “the complexity of the sign is inseparable from the riddle of the copula.”² From the beginning then, it is obvious that her project is vastly different to that which has been exemplified by theorists like Martin Dillon, who accuse Derrida of semiological reductionism.³ Rather than interpreting Derrida’s use of terms like ‘textuality’ and ‘writing’ narrowly, and hence envisaging his significance as being confined solely to the realm of the linguistic, Kirby endows these terms with their widest possible significance. According to her and Derrida alike, terms like writing and textuality bear an applicability beyond the literal conception of the written word or text, and hence have a relevance that extends beyond their traditional domains. However, Kirby quickly adds an important proviso to this proposed generalization of writing and textuality. She suggests that:

I am not content to pose such an inquiry in a way that leaves the categories of nature and culture intact, as if the charge in my question only acknowledges the permeability of the body of nature to the inscriptive penetrations of the writing machine we call culture. I want to suggest instead that something a little more perverse and interesting might be going on.⁴

Admittedly, Kirby’s book leaves this question regarding the nature of this perversity, somewhat unexplored, and we shall return to this issue towards the end of this paper. For the moment though, it suffices to point out that Kirby’s explicit interactions with Derrida begin by way of disassociating him from Saussurean linguistics. According to her, Derrida’s use of the Saussurean thesis regarding the “arbitrary nature of the sign” is intended simply to blur the difference between arbitrariness and systematicity, rather than suggesting, *a priori*, that all signs have no reference point whatsoever.⁵ Her point seems to be that rather than merely exalting the ‘free play of the sign’, and hence coming close to reinstalling a version of linguistic idealism, Derrida is more intent to reveal that the arbitrariness that we associate with the sign is also always involved in the most apparently systematic of activities. In this respect, it is worth acknowledging that rather than merely adopting or reinventing Saussure’s thesis regarding the arbitrary

nature of the sign, Derrida does claim that he chooses to focus on what he takes to be this thesis' indispensable correlate, that being a more general argument regarding difference as the source of linguistic value.⁶ Kirby's version of events goes one step further and makes an even more general point. She suggests that the paradox of the sign's identity (i.e., that it is dependent upon difference) is symptomatic of the paradox of identity generally.⁷ In other words, Derrida's point is not so much that everything is semiotic (and this is something that he explicitly denies), but that the processes of deferring and differing found within linguistic representation are symptomatic of a more general situation (hence the neologism *différance*) that afflicts everything that one might wish to keep sacrosanct, including the body and the perceptual.

Kirby attempts to reaffirm this distance between Derrida and Saussure by suggesting that "although it may be allowed that the precise break between nature and culture, or reality and representation, is now undecidable, we are left with a sense that (*for Saussure, and for much of postmodern thought since*) these realities are in fact discrete."⁸ For Kirby at least, Derrida's work avoids these discrete realities, that is, the maintaining of the antinomies like nature and culture, and it also avoids separating language and all that we take to be its other.⁹ However, Kirby is not content to merely refute the claim that Derrida is a semiological reductionist. She also offers some further ruminations on what her proposed intertwining of the ideal and the material might mean for notions like materiality, and objects. According to her:

If the critique of the sign is to be taken seriously, if materiality is a type of writing wherein difference is its defining force, then we would have to concede that objects are entirely permeable to what we describe as culture, and that the transformational plasticity that identifies the latter must also inhabit the former.¹⁰

This insistence that just as objects are influenced by what we describe as culture, so is culture influenced by materiality, appears to me to be intimately related to Merleau-Ponty's lifetime efforts to avoid the dualisms of the Western tradition. Whether that be in his affirmation of an embodied intelligence, or the transformational possibilities that perception has for him, Merleau-Ponty has consistently embarked upon the type of project that Kirby is now delineating in only slightly different terms. Rather than being able to separate perception from culture, Merleau-Ponty insists that perception "already stylises,"¹¹ and in the *The Visible and the Invisible* he also suggests that what we have termed the object, always encroaches upon us, just as we encroach upon it.¹² These two claims ensure that rather than being conceived of as merely brute facts of the world, objects are capable of the same transformations that are commonly associated with our understanding of culture. The curious proximity that Merleau-Ponty's sentiments bear to Kirby's above encapsulation of her project, indebted as it is to Derrida, is important. It suggests that the traditional phenomenologist vs post-structuralist schematic might not be an adequate theoretical framework for attempting to get a grip on the more valuable contributions of both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

Returning to Kirby, at a later stage in her book she is also moved to ask, “if the nature of matter is generative—if it conceives and construes itself through an involved representation, or differentiation of itself—then why must we presume that thought/language is alien to its identity or to this process?”¹³ Once more, this blurring of the boundaries between ideality and matter is related to Merleau-Ponty’s later work, but more importantly, Kirby’s descriptions of matter being generative through differentiation with itself would seem to be precisely how our embodiment works according to Merleau-Ponty. Particularly in *The Visible and the Invisible* it becomes apparent that, as Thomas Busch has suggested, “in the body’s touching of itself is found a differentiation and an encroachment which is neither sheer identity nor non-identity.”¹⁴ It is this very differentiation that is generative and makes subjectivity possible at all.

To substantiate this claim in adequate detail would take us far afield of this paper’s main concerns, but it is important to recognize that according to an example that Merleau-Ponty uses fairly regularly, it is through the differentiation (or divergence) between our left hand touching our right hand that we gain an apprehension of ourselves. Merleau-Ponty’s initial, and I think permissible presumption, is that we can never simultaneously touch our right hand while it is also touching an object of the world. He suggests that “either my right hand really passes over into the rank of the touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted, or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it.”¹⁵ There is then, a gap (or *écart* in French) between ourselves as touching and ourselves as touched, a divergence between the sentient and sensible aspects of our existence, but this gap is importantly distinct from merely reinstating yet another dualism. Touching and touched are not simply separate orders of being in the world¹⁶ since they are reversible, and this image of our left hand touching our right hand does more than merely represent the body’s capacity to be both perceiving object and subject of perception, in a constant oscillation (e.g., the Sartrean looked at, looked upon dichotomy, as well as the master-slave oscillations that such a conception engenders¹⁷). As Merleau-Ponty suggests:

I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching... In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries... to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection.¹⁸

This suggests that the hand that we touch, while it is touching an inanimate object, is hence not merely another such ‘object’, but another fleshy substance capable of reversing the present situation, and being mobile and even aggressive. Given that we cannot touch ourselves, or even somebody else, without this recognition, it seems that the awareness of what it feels like to be touched, encroaches upon the experience of

touching. Any absolute distinction between being in the world as touching, and being in the world as touched, deprives the existential phenomena of their true complexity. Our embodied subjectivity is hence never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the intertwining of these two aspects, in an awareness that is predicated upon our bodies reversible differentiation with itself. Kirby, we may remember, has also just suggested that a deconstructive notion of embodiment might involve ‘matter’ being generative through differentiation with itself, and this would seem to summarize precisely the *écart*, or divergence, that Merleau-Ponty discerns in our existence. At the very least, Kirby’s suggestion bears some important similarities, admittedly in an undeveloped way, with some major aspects of his later philosophy.

Significantly however, this is also a position that Kirby is now characterizing as indebted to Derrida. And while she admits that “evidence of this extraordinary ‘weave’ is not spectacularly present” and that “the business of proving its existence, when it is existence itself that must be rethought, underlines the question’s labyrinthine dimensions,”¹⁹ she nevertheless endorses this idea of matter being generative through differentiation with itself, as being grounded in Derridean deconstruction. This is a difficult claim to substantiate, but even if we cannot definitively prove that what Kirby is trying to accomplish is through and through deconstructive, it is apparent that deconstruction can be of some benefit in revealing how the logic that sustains and safeguards the mind-body dualism is always already breached.

Now Kirby is certainly aware of the competing tendency towards interpreting Derridean deconstruction as a latter-day re-invention of idealism, and one that deliberately precludes any possibility of thinking about the body. She suggests that the claim that there is nothing outside the text is “most commonly” interpreted in such a manner,²⁰ and like Gasché before her, she concludes that the literary use of terms such as “writing, trace, and text” is partly responsible for this, as it often appropriates these terms for purposes not quite analogous to Derrida’s own, and more often than not, divests them of their radical purchase.²¹ It is also undeniable that Derrida has painstakingly insisted that his comment that there is nothing outside the text has been interpreted far too literally, and that he never intended this to be taken as indicating a complete lack of constraining referents.²² He reaffirms this in *Positions* when he suggests that:

This work cannot be purely theoretical or conceptual or discursive. I mean it cannot be the work of a discourse entirely regulated by essence, meaning, truth, consciousness, ideality, etc. What I call a “text” is also that which ‘practically’ inscribes and overflows the limits of such a discourse.²³

As should be apparent, Derrida certainly does not consider his project to be a mere formalist quibble. While writing is privileged in many of his texts, and certainly used to overcome the tendency of Western metaphysics to exalt speech and phonetics, this is primarily for strategic reasons, and to reveal its root in what he calls ‘arche-

writing’—that is, the way in which all that might be claimed to be typical of writing (for example, a discrepancy between the authorial intention and what is actually conveyed by a particular piece of writing), is inevitably involved in all aspects of our existence. There is equally no absolute presence-to-self that allows someone to definitively claim that their over-reaction to taunts was an expression of a latent class discontent (or whatever else they might in all honesty proclaim), and have the matter thereby closed. There is no secret within a monological consciousness that might somehow be accessed, except perhaps the secret that there is no secret,²⁴ and every claim to a privileged perspective on the truth is merely a text that refers to yet other texts.

However, it is not only the narrow interpretation of Derrida’s main terms that Kirby objects to in the idealist reading. It is the consequent refusal to entertain any thoughts regarding the applicability of his work to embodied matters²⁵ which most concerns her. She suggests that the claim that there is nothing outside of the text

... is most commonly taken to mean that we are caught in an endless slide of referral that leads from one signifier to another signifier, one meaning to yet another meaning, in a vertiginous spiral of implication that never quite arrives at its destination. As a consequence, we can never retreat or advance to some natural, pre-discursive, or extra-textual space in order to test the truth or adequacy of our representations because, as we have seen, intelligibility is reckoned through such system.²⁶

Now the preservation of that natural and pre-discursive space—traditionally the domain of phenomenology and the pre-reflective *cogito*—is also very much what certain anti-Derrideans are concerned about. Theorists like Martin Dillon, among others, want to hold on to a conception of the embodied self that feels and touches, free from the aporias that Derrida associates with the repetition of writing and language.²⁷ However, if we can digress momentarily to consider this claim, it is worth recognizing that according to Merleau-Ponty one of the major factors behind him setting out upon his new philosophy was the conviction that the tacit, or pre-reflective *cogito* of his earlier philosophy is problematic.²⁸ Presuming the possibility of a natural, primordial consciousness without language and anterior to thought, *The Visible and the Invisible* attempts to call into question the coherence of this pre-reflective *cogito*, predicated as it is, upon the idea of non-linguistic signification. As Merleau-Ponty suggests:

What I call the tacit *cogito* is impossible. To have the idea of thinking (in the sense of thought of seeing and thought of feeling), to make the phenomenological reduction to the things themselves, to return to immanence and to consciousness, it is necessary to have words. It is by the combination of words that I form the transcendental attitude.²⁹

This giving up on the pre-reflective *cogito* also entails something like a giving up on

phenomenology, because Merleau-Ponty's problematizing of the distinction between language and the perceptual ensures that the outside world can never be effectively bracketed away and excluded from consideration. Language is always already implied: the famous phenomenological reduction to the things themselves (as they present themselves to consciousness), which wants to bracket out the outside world, can no longer be envisaged as a real possibility, but only as a misplaced nostalgia.³⁰

Merleau-Ponty even goes on to speak of the "mythology of self-consciousness to which the word consciousness refers," and contends that "there are only differences between significations" and language.³¹ If there is no consciousness that is ever entirely present-to-itself and there are only differences between significations, it seems that the notion that there is "nothing outside the text" is not as antithetical to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as many presume, and this is particularly so if we, like Kirby, interpret Derrida's famous provocation as having an embodied relevance, rather than enclosing all of us in some prison house of language.

While Kirby never attempts a sustained critique of the desire to find some type of original presentation in the body that is not subject to the difference and instability that Derrida so powerfully discerns in representation (and phenomenology's pre-reflective cogito is one such attempt), she does offer a powerful counter-example, and one which is aligned with the position of Geoffrey Bennington. In *Jacques Derrida*, a text co-written with Derrida himself, Bennington paradoxically suggests that "we have to cast doubt on everything that can apparently limit deconstruction to language (and this is our only chance of understanding that there is nothing outside of the text)."³² Kirby obviously agrees and her own approach, which exceeds any conventional limits of language, involves acknowledging

... an inseparability between representation and substance that rewrites causality... a writing that both circumscribes and exceeds the conventional divisions of nature and culture (mind and body). If we translate this into what is normally regarded as the matter of the body, then, following Derrida, "the most elementary processes within the living cell" are also a "writing" and one whose "system" is never closed. This would mean that the body is unstable—a shifting scene of inscription that both writes and is written.³³

Such a project compromises the common understanding of materiality as a 'rock-solid' something, but the important question for us is what might this body that both writes and is written be? Kirby never makes this entirely explicit, but clearly it is not diametrically opposed to the Merleau-Pontyan conception of the body that is not so essentialist that it constitutes the world, and yet nor does it allow of some absolute, Sartrean type of freedom in regards to the world. Between the pillars of freedom and determinism, Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment is very much one that writes and is written, one that moulds the world in which we seek to live, but is also constrained and defined by those others—'objects' as much as people—who invariably also write

us. In regards to whether such an understanding of the body is in anyway indebted to deconstruction, one important passage from *Of Grammatology* seems to help Kirby out, and is worth repeating in its entirety. Derrida suggests:

Writing, sensible matter and artificial exteriority: a “clothing”... One already suspects that if writing is “image” and exterior ‘figuration’, this “representation” is not innocent. The outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa.³⁴

Derrida clearly recognizes that the debate between writing and speech is one that posed significant ramifications for that between body and mind, despite the fact that he never undertook to elaborate upon this at any length. He even draws an analogy between writing and sensible matter, and implies that just as writing is not the ‘clothing’ of speech, sensible matter and the body are not the clothing that prevent us from seeing some inaccessible mind. Like Merleau-Ponty, he is dissatisfied with the onto-theological conception of a monological consciousness, that resides beneath our embodied exteriority, and that might somehow be disclosed, but for an unfortunate lack.

However, it is perhaps more important to ascertain that in the above quotation Derrida also strongly emphasizes the mutual implication of speech and writing, the inner and the outer, that Saussure wanted to keep separate. The idea of speech conceived of as a discrete field—not even considering the fact that it is also the privileged term of that opposition—also partakes in the dichotomous vision of human existence that Derrida seeks to deconstruct. Such passages seem to agree with Kirby’s assessment that were Derrida to state his position in terms of ontological import it would involve acknowledging that the written is not beyond speech, so to speak, even if “arche-writing” is, but that the example of writing serves to elucidate a type of breaching that is in existence in speech, and indeed, all ‘phenomena’. In other words, Kirby implies that Derrida’s primary goal is to reveal the mutual inextricability of the inner and the outer, or as she eloquently puts it, to establish that “the matter of difference is also the difference of matter.”³⁵ In this respect it is worth recalling that one of Derrida’s chapters in *Of Grammatology* is titled “The Written Being/The Being Written,” and for this more generalised writing, evoked as it is by Derrida’s references to “the scene of writing,” Kirby comes up with the term ‘corporeography’. Corporeography is intended to describe the mutual implication of the writing of the body, and the body of the written.³⁶

Later in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida reaffirms this type of reading when he suggests that:

Writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by the Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breathe, to speech, and to logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived

from the problem of writing from which it seems—conversely—to borrow its metaphors.³⁷

In this passage, Derrida again points towards a correlation between these two problems (that is, the denigration of the written in relation to the spoken, the disparaging of the body in relation to thought and/or the soul), and he also implies a specific affinity between writing and the body.³⁸ If the problematic of the body is tacitly related to that of writing, then the efficacy of Derridean deconstruction clearly depends on a complex understanding of ‘writing’ and the body, and a greater appreciation of what the materiality of the written might consist in. This understanding would seem to involve emphasizing that both the notion of writing, and our thinking regarding embodiment, need to pay attention to their dependence upon difference, or in the terms of Merleau-Ponty, the divergence (*écart*) and dehiscence that typify our situation in the world. It is that difference, between what we mean to write and the way the other interprets it, or between being touched and touching, that allows any form of writing, and equally embodiment (of which we could not conceive were we completely self-present), to be possible at all.

In an evocative passage, Kirby also tries to reconcile the famous Derridean emphasis upon temporal deferring with a notion of the body, that ‘thing’ which at least *appears* to be most ‘present’ to us of all. Her discussion also bears an applicability to Derrida’s later emphasis upon the ‘to come’ that has never yet been present, but let us remain within the logic of Kirby’s text, and hence *Of Grammatology*, for the time being. In this attempt to describe what an embodied, Derridean temporality might be, she suggests that:

If we think temporality as textuality in the Derridean sense, we are reminded that the grammatological textile does not wait in anticipation of time’s coming (a coming into presence) through the promise of the punctum, a lineal unfolding through an evolutionary march of different, separate, self-present moments. Time is not so much a thing—divisible into moments... rather, we must think of a moment as the body of time, the marking of an anterior future, which we will have been in the already not yet of the present. Opening itself to the differential pulse of otherness within itself, the fold of temporality differentiates itself by touching itself.³⁹

In the above motif of the fold of temporality touching itself, the work of Merleau-Ponty becomes supremely relevant, achieving, as I think it does, this very instantiation. Her suggestion is that rather than attesting to some type of primordial and undivided presence, our embodiment actually inaugurates the famous priority of the future anterior and Derrida’s “always-already” motif, or as she puts it, “the already not yet of the present.” What exactly does she mean by this strange use of apparently incompatible tenses, the “already, not yet of the present”? She seems to be suggesting that the

temporality of an embodied moment involves nothing that could be construed as a presence-to-self, but it is also important to note that she does not restrict herself to merely valorising the ‘not yet’ of the present, the Godot-like wait that ultimately becomes an insistence upon the priority of the ‘to come’. Time for Kirby is also already there, even if in an internally divided way, and our embodied experience is hence not only about waiting and deferral. In wanting to maintain the ways in which our body does more than merely posit a messianic wait, this version of embodied time is, once more, quite closely related to Merleau-Ponty.

It cannot be disputed that Kirby’s position is also very suggestive in linking itself to Derridean deconstruction. However, despite the insistence with which she attributes this type of embodied temporality to Derrida, her reading is one that attempts to make a lot from relatively scarce resources. This is not necessarily to suggest that her reading is a falsification. It is perhaps overtly faithful to the spirit of deconstruction in that it traces that which the author himself is largely unaware of.

In the spirit of just such a deconstructive retrieve, Kirby also makes interesting use of a cryptic comment of Derrida’s in *Of Grammatology*, where he suggests that it is “the game of the world that must be first thought; before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world.”⁴⁰ She cites this comment primarily as evidence that the play of semiosis is not all that he is on about, but we might elaborate upon this quote to make more interesting use of it. To place this comment about the game of the world in context, Derrida is attempting to suggest that to think play radically (and this seems to remain his overarching intent), and hence without being empirical or metaphysical, “the ontological and transcendental problematics must first be seriously exhausted.”⁴¹ For Derrida then, transcendental philosophy, as exemplified by thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger, is part of the game of the world that must be thought through before we can even begin to contemplate the play. Such a precondition would also seem to include the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, as the question of the body would seem equally necessary for us to understand the game of the world before we can begin to contemplate the play of the world in the precise way that Derrida demands of us.

Kirby also points out that, for Derrida, it is within “regional limits” that this play takes place, and while what these regional limits might be is left ambiguous, she takes it upon herself to propose that embodiment must be, at the very least, one important factor. According to her, the body can and should be conceived of as “the spacing of this game, the ma(r)king of an uncanny interlude.”⁴² For Kirby then, the body is envisaged as being both the spacing of the game, and also as marking an interlude, with all of the references to temporality that this term implies. Spatiality and temporality are also necessarily intertwined by such a statement, just as Derrida has famously declared that the spatial differing and temporal deferring of differance manage to escape a dualistic structure of an opposition. According to Merleau-Ponty’s ontological thesis of reversibility, the body also escapes this structure of opposition, as we are never merely looked at, or looked upon, and temporality and spatiality are invariably conjoined by our experiences of our body. So there is a sense in which the body can be productively

viewed as further exemplifying Derridean notions like differance and the trace, and in a way that Derrida himself never attempted. By emphasizing the possible applicability of Derridean thought to the body—as tentatively indicated by Derrida himself—Kirby hence tacitly reconciles Merleau-Ponty’s focus on embodiment with Derrida’s own reluctance to confront the problematic.

While it should not be suggested that there is a latent return to phenomenology within Derrida (though a trace must persist as Levinas has suggested⁴³), it is interesting to speculate upon exactly what regional limits might be involved in the play of the world. Or, more accurately, it is difficult to see how embodiment (albeit in an immensely complicated fashion) would not affect the structure of this world. This is not to affirm that our body has any conceivable empirical limits, but—and axiomatically—that the very possibility of communication is predicated upon us being embodied, and more importantly, being embodied in a manner that is itself predicated upon a divergence, upon an alterity ‘within’ that makes possible the experience of an alterity ‘without’ (and *vica versa*).

It seems that we have returned to the problem with which we began. Word and flesh, sign and matter, language and perception, are all utterly implicated for Kirby, as they are for both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. But despite her attempt to deconstruct traditional antinomies such as mind/body, nature/culture, Kirby does not want to commit to a monism and suggest that they are exactly the same thing. The body is not mere signification, or certainly not signification traditionally conceived. Her recognition of the possible applicability of such Derridean ideas to the problematic of the body still leaves some questions unanswered, and certainly questions that Derrida himself hesitates to explore. As she suggests:

This (generalizable mutability) doesn’t mean, however, that we can simply add what we conventionally regard as the stuff of matter and substance to the soup of textual dissolution. The difficulty here is that we are bound to work at the interfacings of these binary borders in order to question the very notions of identity and separability that they maintain. Nevertheless, the displacement of matter from its oppositional stance over and against form, opens the question of matter, as indeed it must also open the question of ideality.⁴⁴

Ultimately this paragraph seems to imply that as something of a pioneering work, the inter-relations of form and matter can be taken up again by others, and without doubt *Telling Flesh* does open up valuable questions regarding form and matter that might otherwise be ignored. That said, it is also significant that both her work, and Derrida’s, seem to reveal a similar aphoristic tendency that ensures that some important questions regarding the body are never quite followed through.

For example, at one stage Kirby asks: “And how is the body itself a scene of writing, subject to a sentence that is never quite legible, because to read it is to write it, again, yet differently?”⁴⁵ Unfortunately the answer to this question is largely deferred. Exactly

what type of relationship obtains between language and embodiment—if a difference is somehow maintained between the two, as she suggests immediately above, and yet is nevertheless united by a governing dictum such as ‘there is nothing outside of the text’—is a question that, at least as far as I can discern, is ultimately unanswered.

Moreover, in her analysis of the behaviour of hysterics at a 19th century Parisian hospital, she also convincingly suggests that mind and body, subject and object, far from being autonomous, separable entities, actually intertwine with each other in a complexity that is only just beginning to be appreciated. Interestingly enough, this is not unlike what Merleau-Ponty wanted to achieve in his own analysis of the sexual dysfunctions of Schneider in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, even if the saliency of his project is partly obscured by his presumptions about the universal applicability of a sexuality that looks suspiciously like male heterosexuality. However, returning to Kirby, whatever relationship does obtain between mind and body is still somewhat unclear, and while we should not discount Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “one cannot make a direct ontology,”⁴⁶ this is something of a problem. It can be speculated that this intertwining of the ideal and the material, the mind and the body, could never completely efface the difference between thought and its object, for that would be to advocate either a relativism capable of no discrimination, or some ecstatic union with Being, both of which deconstruction could clearly never contemplate. An enmeshment of the ideal and the material, might however conceivably problematize, without ever quite transcendently annulling, the difference between thought and its object. The difference between thought and its object might hence become undecidable.

Kirby is elusive about the nature of this enmeshment, and it seems that we might need to subtly alter her claim regarding the viability of an embodied deconstruction. It might be worth suggesting instead that deconstruction *prepares* for such a conception of the body, and I emphasize prepares, because literally taken, deconstruction can do little more than deconstruct.⁴⁷ By insisting on this apparent tautology, I mean that deconstruction reveals how oppositions are always already breached; more often than not it doesn’t concern itself with positively framing a new and original way of thinking about the mind-body relation. This is not to suggest that deconstruction is purely negative and that its interventions have no enabling or restructuring component. It is also not to suggest that deconstruction is irrelevant to questions concerning embodiment—on the contrary, it has been illustrated just how provocative and helpful it can be. It just seems that there are other resources, and other theoretical frameworks, that might have helped Kirby in moving beyond the aphorisms of early deconstruction, and in hesitantly posing an answer to many of the important questions that she raises.

The work of Merleau-Ponty would seem to be one such resource, given that a new and positive conception of what it is to be embodied is something that his philosophy clearly does want to achieve.⁴⁸ It has already been shown how *The Visible and the Invisible* was capable of shedding some substantial light on Kirby’s interesting, but ultimately unfulfilled suggestion, that matter was generative through differentiation with itself, and elsewhere this paper has used the work of Merleau-Ponty in a manner

which has deepened our understanding of both Kirby and, to a lesser extent, Derrida. It is also interesting to recognize that though Kirby has taught Merleau-Ponty for years, and though his project seems supremely relevant to her intents in *Telling Flesh*, he does not even merit a passing mention. This is not only perplexing, but I would suggest, an oversight that ignores a valuable conceptual tool. Merleau-Ponty can elucidate, a little more clearly than early deconstruction, the interdependence and breaching involved in form and matter,⁴⁹ and a thinking between phenomenology and deconstruction would seem to be what is required here. While Kirby realized that the negotiation of deconstruction with questions concerning embodiment is potentially a very productive line of thought, it seems that the interaction of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on such a thematic promises to be of an even greater benefit to both phenomenologists and deconstructionists alike.

Jack Reynolds
University of Tasmania

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Society for Continental Philosophy, November 22-24, 2000, at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

Notes

1. Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 83-128.
2. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 4.
3. Martin Dillon, *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995).
4. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 4.
5. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 45.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976) 52.
7. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 45.
8. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 52.
9. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 53.
10. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 56.
11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964) 54.
12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968) 123.

13. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 115.
14. Thomas W. Busch, "Introduction:... Being... which is Staggered out in Depth," *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State U of New York P, 1992) 110.
15. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 148.
16. The difference between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is evident in the following quote of Sartre's: "To touch and to be touched, to feel that one is touching and to feel that one is touched—these are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try and reconcile by the term 'double sensation'. In fact, they are radically distinct and exist on two incommunicable levels." See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay of Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958) 304.
17. Also see my chapter "Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on the Master-Slave Dialectic: An Onto-Ethical Dissonance," in forthcoming thesis.
18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) 93.
19. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 56.
20. In an interesting passage in her interaction with Drucilla Cornell (Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 93), Kirby suggests that this type of interpretation of Derrida tends to also induce the conclusion that deconstructive politics will be either a utopian gesture or a prophetic cry. Kirby thinks deconstruction is much more promising politically.
21. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 252.
22. Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," trans. Samuel Weber, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston. Northwestern UP, 1990) 148.
23. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981) 59-60.
24. Jacques Derrida, "Passions: "An Oblique Offering," trans David Wood, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) 29-30.
25. Interestingly enough, Kirby's following descriptions of this position rather concisely paraphrases the claims of Martin Dillon.
26. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 60-1.
27. Martin Dillon, *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995) 77-78.
28. Merleau-Ponty suggests that while the concept of the pre-reflective cogito can make understood how language is not impossible, it nevertheless cannot make understood how it is possible. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 176.
29. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 171.
30. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* xiv.
31. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 171.
32. Geoffery Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 84.
33. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 61.
34. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 35.
35. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 54.
36. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 83. Some brief illustrations of what Kirby believes are feminist misinterpretations of Derrida would prove efficacious in exploring further what her 'corporeographic' reading of Derrida entails (and the significance of her feminist revisions), but unfortunately space constraints will not allow that to take place in this essay.
37. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 35.
38. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 60. It is worth briefly recognizing that Derrida also equates Saussure's repudiation of the written, with the denial of passion and sensibility (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 37-8) that typifies the theologians of sin. According to Derrida, Saussure's argument hinges on interpreting the written, the body, and also the passions, as immoral and a deviation

from nature (the “natural” bond of sound). When Saussure decries the ‘tyranny’ of writing that distorts and contorts the pronunciation of words, he is, according to Derrida at least, expressing his discontent with the body for usurping the rightful privilege of the soul (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 38).

39. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 94.

40. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 50.

41. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 50.

42. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 63.

43. According to Levinas, phenomenology has always threatened to return and haunt Derrida, whose dismissal of it was peremptory and the methods he used to do so were those that always encourage the return of that which is ostensibly dismissed. For further reading, and an understanding of Levinas’ arguments in this respect, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 160.

44. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 96.

45. Kirby, *Telling Flesh* 56.

46. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 179.

47. In the terms of Derrida’s later philosophy, deconstruction’s preparation for the coming of the other can only prophesize messianically, rather than with a concrete historical messianism. See Jacques Derrida, *Reading DeMan Reading*, eds Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 56. To briefly define some terms which will be of more importance to us then: the messianic structure that Derrida advocates calls for surprise, alterity, and the other generally, rather than for the specific messianisms of Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, which all call for a specific other of known characteristics.

48. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 130-55. Rather than positing a traditional dualism in which mind and body, subject and object, sentient and sensible, are discrete entities, Merleau-Ponty wants to maintain that they are associated chiasmically. Basically, this is to suggest that perception and experience is born where the subject seeing and the object that is visible cross, and the chiasm is merely an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment takes place. The body is neither sentient nor sensible, but exists in their intersection, where the two lines of the chiasm cross.

49. Such a synthesis of structuralism (as preoccupied with form) and phenomenology (as preoccupied with the content, or the ‘matter’ of consciousness) remains to be attempted. It seems to me though, that both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty’s work troubles this form/content distinction, albeit in very different ways.

Copyright©2002 Jack Reynolds, *Contretemps*. All rights reserved.