

At the Limits of One's Own Body*

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines phenomenology's idea of the body as «one's own» by establishing a dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and the Brazilian novelist, Clarice Lispector. Central to this study is the question of to what extent the anonymous undercurrent of existence is threat to bodily integrity. In response to this question, the paper unfolds in two stages. First, I pursue an analysis of the body in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, giving special focuses to the role anonymity plays in the constitution of the body as one's own. Arguing that Merleau-Ponty tends to underplay the disruptive implications of his thought, I then turn to Clarice Lispector's novel *The Passion According to G.H.* The motivation for pairing Lispector and Merleau-Ponty is twofold: first, Lispector provides a subtle and incisive analysis of the affective experience of anonymity; two, Lispector issues a challenge to phenomenology to rethink the division between selfhood and elemental materiality.

KEYWORDS. Body. Anonymity. Neutrality. Anxiety. Merleau-Ponty. Clarice Lispector.

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Dedicated to the memory of Alina Popa (1982-2019)

«A living body seen from too close, and lacking any background against which it could stand out, is no longer a living body».

Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

«The body is as alien as the world. And we have to embrace its strangeness».

Alina Popa, *Disease As An Aesthetic Project*

1. Introduction

We awake each morning only to discover that our bodies are already there. We go about our day, imbued from the outset with a certain confidence in the inseparable confluence between our sense of self and our body. At dawn, we walk from one corner of a room to another. Our feet follow and our hands take up a rhythm that is neither calculated nor thought about in abstraction. We reach for things in the world; gloves, books, pens, fossils, burnt leaves, mud and soil, feathers and ashes. We think nothing of it. Throughout, our bodies are pre-empting the direction we take at all times. At night, we submit to sleep, wilfully and passively. We entrust that our bodies will traverse the gap between sleepfulness and wakefulness without suspending us in a void.

In hallways and meeting rooms, we meet other human beings. We know from their expression and gait that a certain atmosphere surrounds them. From afar, we see that our friend is in mourning or celebration. Of the faces of other people, we may see only a glimpse, but their existence is tied up with an expressivity that is unwavering and unbroken. In cultures other than our own, other people's bodies

contest our own habits. In public space, they become too close, too far, too observant, or not observant enough. Our bodies serve as a zero point for our interaction and actions in the world, and we seldom feel the need to interrogate our corporeality as though it were made of inert matter.

At times, however, our confidence in things breaks. The body will evade us; it will become a foreign matter, breaking the identity that we had constructed in and around it. At times, the ostensibly familiar image you have of yourself undergoes a loss of form. A gap transpires, equivalent to that separating your pelvis from your torso, or dividing the wall of your apartment from the neighbour's apartment next door. In the darkness, a series of spaces begins to crystalize, which over time sediment themselves into your dreams. In moments of weakness, those same gaps appear in waking consciousness. The body disembarks on a life of its own; it becomes ill, sick, tired, hung-over, weary, phobic. The limbs of the body are subject to amputation; the individual parts that constitute the whole can be dissected and studied. As the body reaches its end in life, the organs that previously kept a subject alive fail. Questions will be asked by the patient why the body is doing this to him or herself, as though the body had a life of its own. The body will refuse to articulate a series of answers. But in the silence, there will be uncertainty. In moments of anxiety and horror, you will reflect to yourself on where you begin and where your body ends, and at which point you cease to be you.

In this paper, I would like to engage with a phenomenological study of the limits of the body. From the outset, phenomenology has been committed to the centrality of the body, not only as a phenomenal aspect of human experience, but as a constitutive structure in perception itself.¹ Whether it be in a classical or contemporary setting, a core methodological commitment of phenomenology is that issues

1 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012.

related to subjectivity, intersubjectivity, spatiality, affectivity, and temporality remain inextricably tied up with the body. In contradiction to a Cartesianism, which would seek to place the body outside of the mind, phenomenology begins from the point of departure that cognition is inherently and irreducibly embodied.²

Much of the impetus for this research can be traced back to the Husserlian division between the body as a physical object (*Körper*) and the body as a zero point of expression and perception (*Leib*), a distinction elaborated on at much length in Merleau-Ponty.³ Far from being one object among many, my body is a special kind of object, insofar as it both serves as a the «zero point» (*Nullpunkt*) of intentional awareness while in the same measure presenting itself as an object of perception to other living subjects.⁴

Phenomenology's focus on the primacy of the body in its lived – and living – dimensions has led to a specific characterisation of the body. From the outset, it is an account of the body that centralises themes of integrity, mineness, and the capacity of the body to be engaged in the world as an *I can* rather than an *I cannot*. The phenomenological body is thus a body that takes as its point of departure an affirmative stance toward the world. It is a body that is best understood – indeed, *only* understood – as a lived body (*le corps vécu*) situated in relation to a referential world, of which it is inextricably interwoven.⁵ Conversely, it is a body that is poorly understood when taken as a set of discernible parts, each of which is approached from a third-person perspective. Above all, it is a body that is understood as a zero point of perceptual awareness, in and through which cognitive and subjective processes are not simply shaped, but fundamentally constituted. It is, in a word, a body that is always already *one's own*.

The phrase «one's own body» (*le corps propre*) is synonymous with the thought of Merleau-Ponty.⁶ As one's own, the body is lived as an

2 GALLAGHER 2005.

3 HUSSERL 1970; MERLEAU-PONTY 2012.

4 HUSSERL 1977.

5 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012.

6 MERLEAU-PONTY 1968/2012.

opening onto the world, and an opening which circumvents any form of dualism between mind and matter, or self and world. This presentation of the body as always already one's own leads to a specific kind of formulation of the body in its pathological status. In contrast to the body as one's own, the pathological body is understood for the most part in its thinglike (*Körper*) existence, now presented as being distant and anonymous. In moments of exhaustion or illness, the body is experienced as an affront to who I take myself to be. A human being becomes ill and their body is no longer the basis of prereflective motility, but instead an obstacle that curtails freedom. Of the limbs that were once united together, now they emerge as a series of discrete nodes of activity, each of which have no overarching relationship to another other than spatial proximity. Likewise, whereas the body was once a tacit ground of perception, it now accents itself as a thing to be vigilantly monitored.

Such a body ceases to be marked by an irreducible singularity – a body that is mine and mine alone – and instead becomes a vehicle of anonymity and generality. The ill body thus impedes the life of the subject, both foregrounding itself in its brute materiality while concurrently fragmenting the integrity of the self. Seen in this way, pathological conditions such as anxiety, depression, and melancholia are thus not only mental affairs characterised by cognitive states; understood phenomenologically, they are also disorders of the body, such that the body one *is* becomes the body that one *has*.

But what does it mean to speak of the body as «one's own»? This question can be raised against a general concern in phenomenology, namely; that in framing the pathological body in terms of a distanced and alienated body – i.e., a body that is no longer one's own – phenomenological research *prima facie* evinces a presupposition that the body was one's own to begin with.⁷ One of the dangers of such a conviction is that it carries with it a tacit privileging toward a certain modality of embodied existence, framed under the rubric of

7 Cf. LEDER 1990.

«humanism».⁸ In this essay, I would like to employ *phenomenology against phenomenology* in order to unfold what it means to attend to the body without presupposing how it is determined in advance.⁹ Far from undermining phenomenology's treatment of the body – much less undermining the method itself – this attempt at renewing what is ostensibly a taken-for-granted understanding reinstates phenomenology's fundamental commitment to re-examining the basis of pregiven everyday life without presupposing anything in advance about the world of perception. Such a methodology, which I have developed elsewhere at length, does not seek to dispense with human experience nor does it venerate any form of post-human or post-phenomenology as an antidote to the method's humanistic tendencies.¹⁰ Instead, the approach retains and centralises human experience as a point of departure for investigating the non-human elements that are prefigured in human experience. In this respect, the methodology advanced in this paper posits that it is only through the inclusion of human experience that we can begin to gain sight of the limits of the body as one's own.

Thematically, the current paper hinges around a central question; namely, to what extent is the anonymous or neutral undercurrent of existence a threat to bodily integrity? How we respond to this question generates a very different picture of both the foundations of phenomenological research and also of the conception of the body itself. One way to capture this question in thematic form is through a close study of varying affective states, especially states of subjectivity that call into question the limits of selfhood. Anxiety and the experience of horror are two such states that force to the surface the question of where the body as one's own comes to an edge, be it an

8 Cf. TRIGG 2014.

9 Cf. NORWOOD 2018.

10 Cf. TRIGG 2012, 2014, 2016.

experiential or conceptual edge, revealing therein an anonymous level of materiality that disrupts the concept of selfhood as integrated. Furthermore, affective states of this sort tend to problematize a series of tacit claims concerning the notion of the body as being constitutively integrated.

In this respect, the mood of anxiety is instructive. In Heideggerian terms, anxiety is methodologically valuable insofar as it discloses the contingent foundations upon which sense and meaning are instituted.¹¹ One way anxiety does this is by effectively performing a reduction of the world. From a Heideggerian perspective, anxiety disrupts our taken-for-granted and sedimented attitude toward the world, as he puts it: «Everyday familiarity collapses».¹² In anxiety, the everyday world, ostensibly a site of familiarity and dependability, undergoes a transformation. Instead of being a foundation, delineated by borders and boundaries, the world now appears for us as poorly defined and ambiguously structured. This modification does not, however, spell the dissolution of the world, much less its end. Rather, anxiety generates the possibility of seeing the world anew, now stripped of the personalized attributes that render it «one's own».

By employing anxiety as a methodological tool, the paper proceeds in two ways. First, I will pursue a phenomenological analysis of the lived body through forging a dialogue with Merleau-Ponty, focusing especially on the themes of anonymity and impersonal existence. In turn, this analysis will provide a groundwork upon which the central claim of the paper can be posited; namely, that anxiety calls into question the boundary line between self and the non-self through generating an experience of the lived body as anonymous and impersonal. In distinction to Merleau-Ponty, who tends to neutralise the affective register of the body's anonymous structure, I take the anonymity of the body as a zone of existence that destabilizes, threatens, and dissolves the image we have of who we are.¹³ In other

11 Cf. HEIDEGGER 2008.

12 HEIDEGGER 2008, 233.

13 TRIGG 2016.

terms, the theme of impersonal existence is taken, not as an innocuous structure of subjectivity, but as a presence that haunts the very image of selfhood.¹⁴ In turn, what I seek to demonstrate is that if the body is «one's own», then it is such only in a partial sense. Anxiety and accompanying moods such as horror reveal how the body leads a life of its own, to some extent irrespective of how «I» assume it as a personal dimension.¹⁵ Furthermore, anxiety attests to the way in which this independent bodily existence presents itself as an affront to the integrity of selfhood, suggesting a dualism central to the structure of lived experience and raising the question of to what extent I am identifiable with the body.

To flesh these claims out, I will pair Merleau-Ponty with the Brazilian novelist, Clarice Lispector. The literature of Clarice Lispector presents us with a detailed – indeed, forensic – analysis of the shifting sense of the body as being both mine and not-mine concurrently. More than this, her rich elaborations of the rapport between corporeality and selfhood amplify the discordant affective tonality that is all too often overlooked in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body, which tends to overplay the felicitous instances of bodily life while underplaying the nebulous undercurrent of bodily subjectivity.

2. Phantoms of the Body

In order to approach the limits of the body as one's own, it is first of all necessary to situate the body within the context of everyday experience. To this end, it is beneficial here to turn to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body, especially as it is formulated in *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹⁶ What is central to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body is the notion of *ambiguity*. The theme of ambiguity emerges in the work of Merleau-Ponty in a series of ways, with each expression serving to

14 TRIGG 2014.

15 TRIGG 2011.

16 MERLEAU-Ponty 2012.

reinforce the body's capacity to consolidate identity in and through space and time. One such illustration of this is Merleau-Ponty's venerated analysis of the phantom limb.¹⁷

The problem is well known. A human being has lost a limb; let us imagine it has been physically severed from the torso and is now an independent object. In the face of this absence, the limb does not remain a mute presence within the life of the amputee; instead, it returns in the form of a phantom presence. How to explain this spectral apparition? There are several options. The first is to consider the return of the limb from a third-person perspective; that is, in strictly causal terms. Yet such a perspective neglects the way in which a phantom limb assumes a specificity of the limb as *his own*, anchoring itself in the personal identity and memory of a subject.¹⁸ In the same measure, however, the attention toward the psychological and biographical aspect of the phantom limb does not lead Merleau-Ponty to phrase it in terms of a psychic process, and that alone; that the phantom limb is unable to be conjured by means of a «positive judgement» is thus evident that its origins lie elsewhere.¹⁹

In response to this dialectic, Merleau-Ponty engineers a middle path, which he phrases as an «organic thought» situated between the material and the mental.²⁰ The notion of an organic thought captures Merleau-Ponty's insistence on how human existence is characterised by an overarching sense of integration and continuity, subtended at all times by a prepersonal level of corporeal perception, which serves to both cohere the past into the present while at the same time developing an *intentional arc* that establishes the «unity of the senses».²¹ In developing the concept of the «intentional arc», Merleau-Ponty posits an integrative framework that not only accounts for the structure of perceptual unity, but also for the meaning-laden relationship between body and world. The establishment of the world

17 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 80.

18 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 79.

19 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 82.

20 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 80.

21 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 137.

as meaningful is stipulated on a pre-reflective act of instituting meaning prior to meaning itself becoming an object of abstract reflection. Seen in this context, the phantom limb is far from a «substitute» employed to replace one missing body part with another; more than this, the phantom limb belongs to the totality of a «world», and it functions less as the means to fulfil specific tasks within a discernible frame of references and more to generate a diffused sense of continuity between divergent worlds.

Beyond and beneath our own experience, another level of intentionality is thus at work, resistant to personalisation and yet at the same time shaping – indeed constituting – the expressivity of personal perception as it is thematically manifest in the world. Merleau-Ponty puts the issue as follows: «Prior to stimuli and sensible contents, a sort of inner diaphragm must be recognised that [...] determines what our reflexes and our perceptions will be able to aim at in the world, the zone of our possible operations, and the scope of our life».²² This prepersonal – or, *impersonal* – inner diaphragm determines not only a highly complex relation to the world, but also the levels and sub-levels of human subjectivity.

It is thanks to the body in its anonymity and generality that the personalised «I» is able to be situated in the world in the first instance. The anonymous body serves to establish a «knowing relation» with the world, founding a sense of unity in and through the modifications of our «being-in-the-world».²³ Thus, Merleau-Ponty's account of the phantom limb is instructive for the nature of perceptual life more generally. Phantoms from the waking world haunt the present, and in doing so, provide threads of continuity that form seamless spatio-temporal arcs in the midst of a contingent existence. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty speaks of blinded subjects, some of whom retain their «world» while other patients «lose their world as soon as the contents begin to slip away».²⁴ Likewise, phantoms unfold in the midst of

22 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 81.

23 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 81.

24 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 81.

where other people once stood: «The amputee senses his leg, as I can sense vividly the existence of a friend who is, nevertheless, not here before my eyes».²⁵ In each case, the phantoms of our waking life are not returned to us as «representations» of a lost world, but are instead returned as an «ambivalent presence», which is enacted on an operative level.²⁶

Once again, it is critical to note that the emergence of the phantom – be it of the limb or otherwise – is not reducible to an act of volition. It is not that «I» summon a phantom to appear before me, much less that «I think that» the arm of a person returns to me.²⁷ Rather, it is the «I» that is implicated by and subjected to «our inherence in a world».²⁸ Far from destroying our access to the world, the emergence of a perceptual phantom generates an on-going connection with a «definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein».²⁹

For Merleau-Ponty, then, the organisation of the body is not reducible to thematic experience, but instead hinges at all times on another layer of intentionality that renders thematic experience possible in the first place. These «regions of silence [which] are marked out in the totality of my body» generate an ambiguous depth in his phenomenology of the body, ambiguous not only in the sense of being a particular kind of object, but also in the sense of never being entirely possessed by the subject, both temporally and spatially.³⁰ In an especially critical passage, he writes as follows:

A margin of *almost* impersonal existence thus appears around our personal existence, which, so to speak, is taken for granted, and to which I entrust the care of keeping me alive. Around the human world that each of us has fashioned, there appears a general world to which we must first belong in order to enclose ourselves within a particular

25 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 83.

26 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 83.

27 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 83.

28 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 83.

29 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 84.

30 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 84.

world [...] my organism – as a pre-personal adhesion to the form of the of the world, as an anonymous and general existence – plays the role of an *innate complex* beneath the level of my personal life.³¹

Merleau-Ponty presents us with a complex account of the body, shaped by an intimate and pre-given trust in a set of processes that are largely impersonal and anonymous, and which transcend me. This peculiar structure renders the body a double-sided entity. Just as it reveals itself to me as an expressive and irreducibly personalised body, so it simultaneously evades me. We are thus subjected to our bodies in a quite literal way, as Merleau-Ponty has it, «my life is made up of rhythms that do not have their *reason* in what I have chosen to be».³² This independent bodily life mediates with the world prior to «my» engagement with experience. Indeed, insofar as it belongs to *all* bodies, then the anonymity of the prepersonal body does not belong to me, but instead underscores my personal life with a depersonalized foundation that is common to all bodies without ever rendering them the same.³³

Critically, the impersonal existence that forms an arc in and around personal existence only does so *partially*. Thus, that Merleau-Ponty speaks of an «*almost* impersonal existence» is worth noting.³⁴ As an «*almost* impersonal existence», my body is never entirely anonymous but nor is it unquestionably singular; rather, it is a strange hybrid of rhythms, habits, and processes that are conceived in the midst of finite life and which simultaneously belong to an older order of life. «Personal existence», Merleau-Ponty writes decisively, «is intermittent».³⁵ Behind the surface of being a discrete self who is identifiable with «one's own» body, there exists another kind of existence, indifferent to the self that assumes a relationship to it.

31 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 86.

32 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 86.

33 Cf. TRIGG 2015.

34 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 86.

35 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 86.

3. From Phenomenology to Non-Phenomenology

As we see it in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is careful to avoid reducing the body to our lived subjectivity. What presents itself in and through the lived and personal body is a partial glimpse of a reality afforded to me only through the consolidation of an anonymous existence, which is both beneath and before me, as Merleau-Ponty states: «He who sees and touches is not exactly myself».³⁶ Far from simply «one's own», the living body is as much a part of the present as it is an immemorial and anonymous time, which dovetails with the present without ever fully being integrated. In this respect, perception is not something that only derives from «me» as a personal ego, but instead «takes place within an atmosphere of generality and is presented to [me] as anonymous».³⁷

When faced with the question of who is perceiving, therefore, the more accurate formulation is to speak of the «one [who] perceives in me, and not that I perceive».³⁸ Thus, Merleau-Ponty advocates a «depersonalization» of perception, as he writes of «the life of my eyes, hands, and ears, which are so many natural selves»³⁹ and argues that «there is always a depersonalization at the heart of consciousness».⁴⁰ This «depersonalization» of sensation positions the materiality of the body outside of the experience of the ego, an ego which is never the «true subject of my sensation»; rather the latter is made of the *prima materia* through which perception operates.

These reflections on the nature of perception do not concern simply the logic of sensation, but instead hinge on the experience of oneself as being involved with «another self that has already sided with the world» long before I myself as an ego have conceptualised that existence or even experienced it.⁴¹ This self-alienation from both the

36 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 224.

37 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 223.

38 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 223.

39 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 224.

40 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 139.

41 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 224.

structure of the body together with its sensing apparatus means that I am never the «author» of sensation, but instead the means through which «general existence» is «destined to a physical world».⁴² As such, lived experience is not a transparent level of existence identifiable with itself, but is instead a configuration of an inhuman existence that transcends personal perception. In effect, such a stance entails recognising that «I never have an absolute possession of myself by myself» and, in the same measure, that «the anonymity of our body is inseparably both freedom and servitude».⁴³

These ideas of a human world built upon an elemental and inhuman existence are given additional expression in Merleau-Ponty's lectures on aesthetics. Thus, in his early lecture on Cézanne he will speak of how the painter «suspends [human] habits and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself».⁴⁴ Into this «frozen» world, we come into contact with a landscape «viewed [as if] by a creature of another species».⁴⁵ This frozen and inhuman world, all too often overlooked in phenomenological research, does not appear for the human as a space of reciprocity and kinship. Rather, it is «an unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness».⁴⁶

Merleau-Ponty's admission to a world prior to human sense and meaning is a recurring theme in his work, evident as much in *Phenomenology of Perception* as it is his final works on psychoanalysis and nature.⁴⁷ In an especially telling passage in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he echoes the reflection found in his essay on Cézanne, but directs it to the realm of perception more generally. «We have not», so he begins, «exhausted the sense of the thing by defining it as the correlate of our body and of our life».⁴⁸ This claim emerges as the

42 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 224.

43 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 87.

44 MERLEAU-PONTY 1993, 66.

45 MERLEAU-PONTY 1993, 66.

46 MERLEAU-PONTY 1993, 66.

47 Cf. TRIGG 2016.

48 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 336.

opening to a side of the world that is resistant to integration, indeed repelling any such drive toward unification.

As ever, Merleau-Ponty introduces this series of reflections by appearing to endorse a form of Husserlian phenomenology bound by the correlation between subject and world: «One cannot», he writes, «conceive of a perceived thing without someone who perceives it».⁴⁹ But this apparent circle is not unbreakable. As he makes these remarks, he acknowledges that such thoughts are not equal to the real, stating that «if we want to describe the real such as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it burdened with anthropological predicates».⁵⁰ Under certain modes of perception, so he suggests, the habitual way in which we perceive things in their relational context is ruptured by a recognition of the «nonhuman element which lies hidden» in all things, and which is «unaware of us, it remains in-itself».⁵¹ In turning to things with a «metaphysical and disinterested attention», things reveal themselves as being «hostile and alien, no longer an interlocutor, but a resolutely silent Other».⁵²

This focus on phenomenology's anterior limits runs parallel to his commitment to what he will eventually call a «non-phenomenology».⁵³ Non-phenomenology is not to be conceived of as something other than phenomenology, but rather as that which constitutes phenomenology in the first instances, as he puts it: «What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the 'barbarous' source Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it».⁵⁴ Thus, the philosophical methodology Merleau-Ponty is developing in these works retains the term «phenomenology» only through the inclusion of a non-phenomenological, which resists reflection while retaining what exceeds subjectivity itself, thereby concerning itself with a «latent intentionality like that which animates

49 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 336.

50 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 334.

51 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 336.

52 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 336.

53 MERLEAU-PONTY 1964.

54 MERLEAU-PONTY 1964, 178.

time, more ancient than the intentionality of *human acts*».⁵⁵

Notwithstanding these rich trajectories of thought, what Merleau-Ponty tends to overlook is how impersonal, wild, and brute dimensions of existence are given to experience, either directly or indirectly, in an affective sense. For the most part, his thought is grounded in a principle of integration, such that the different levels of perceptual life fold into one another without any fault lines developing in the process. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty tends to underplay or neglect the shadowy aspects of his own philosophy, gesturing toward the unsettling implications of his thought without following it through.

What is thus lacking is an attention on how anonymous and impersonal processes impinge upon the conception of the body as one's own. It is true: for the most part, such reflections are absent in lived experience; carnal life is given to experience in and through the lens of a personal sphere, which provides an atmosphere of familiarity and constancy not only to the body but to the surrounding world more generally. But as Merleau-Ponty indicates, personal existence is intermittent, and alongside physical pathologies, affective states such as anxiety, fear, and horror can play a key role in giving expressive form to the underside of the lived body. What remains to be done in this paper is to explore how the affective experience of anonymity and neutrality, already tacit in Merleau-Ponty, breaches the integrity of the self as a unified entity. To undertake this task, we will situate Merleau-Ponty's account of the body within the fictional world of Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*

4. A Form Shapes the Chaos

«I get so scared», so Clarice Lispector writes in her novel *The Passion According to G.H.*, «when I realize I lost my human form for several hours. I don't know if I'll have another form to replace the one I lost».⁵⁶

55 MERLEAU-PONTY 1964, 165.

56 LISPECTOR 2012, 6.

Lispector's novel is important for several reasons, not least because it serves as a series of reflections on the limits of language, thought, and, above all, the materiality of the body. The plot, such as it is, is minimal: a sculptress – G.H. – enters a room in her apartment, sees a cockroach in a wardrobe, and proceeds to slam the door on it, thereby severing it in half. G.H. is as much repelled by the sight as she is fascinated. Unable to scream, she remains transfixed by the dying roach while her human form dissolves, motivating the onset of a crisis that calls into question the fundamental structure of the world. Having taken leave of her senses, by the end of the novel she takes the anonymous ooze, which belongs to both the roach and G.H. in equal measure, and consumes it.

The event is the site of a disaster broader than that of the death of a cockroach. At stake in the encounter is a spiritual and existential crisis that centres on the disintegration of identity and the emergence of a body that is marked by its anonymity and resistance to being personalised. The slow death of the roach, from the initial blunt force trauma to its squirming demise, complete with the discharge of a white guttural slime from its black body, generates the ground for a complete revaluation of everything hitherto deemed pre-given. Lispector reflects:

But I also don't know what form to give what happened to me. And without giving it a form, nothing can exist for me [...]. And that this is my struggle against disintegration: trying now to give it a form. A form shapes the chaos, a form gives constitution to the amorphous substance – the vision of an infinite piece of meat is the vision of the mad, but if I cut that meat into pieces and parcel them out over days and over hungers – then it would no longer be perdition and madness: it would once again be humanized life.⁵⁷

At the outset, we are introduced to a problem that is latent in

57 LISPECTOR 2012, 6

phenomenology but largely overlooked; namely, the dehumanization and adjoining rehumanization of one's own body. As it is presented in *Lispector*, the body is not given to appearance as an already formed and already unified mould of human existence; rather, it is understood as a forever mutable and forever mutating mass of flesh and matter, the salient characteristic of which is a «slow and great dissolution».⁵⁸ In this respect, Lispector's insistence on giving form to shape and contain chaos is instructive insofar as it issues a challenge to phenomenological research in its tendency to compartmentalize the body in advance of its findings. In the same measure, however, *The Passion According to G.H.* is a work of phenomenological literature *par excellence*. What the book sets out to do is examine the world without attempting to organise that world into a cluster of sense and meaning in advance. Such a project is entirely consistent with the mission of phenomenology to perform a «second seeing» of the world, such that the method returns the world to us anew, if not heightened in its strangeness.⁵⁹ «Humanized life», as Lispector writes, «I had humanized life too much».⁶⁰ The antidote to this sedimentation of perception is to attend to the natural world in an unnatural manner, and in effect to forge a resistance against reducing the world – including the body – to one's own.

The Passion According to G.H. bears witness to this struggle between reflection and resistance, and the stage for this dialectic is a penthouse stationed high above Rio. «The apartment reflects me. It's on the top floor, which is considered an elegance».⁶¹ It is a space devoid of disorder, an artifice that strives toward detachment and irony. Here, everything is smooth, centred, and ordered. It is a place of belonging and of edges that fold into one another without drawing attention to the cracks between. Domesticity is framed as a shiny surface that reflects the desires and memories back to the dweller. As with the body that inhabits it, the penthouse is a personalised and

58 LISPECTOR 2012, 6.

59 Cf. TRIGG 2012, 2014, 2016.

60 LISPECTOR 2012, 6.

61 LISPECTOR 2012, 22.

personalising space; if it is an artifice, then it is an artifice that is reinforced through habit and routine.

And then something from the outside ruptures the veneer of referential meaning, «a cockroach that was slowly moving toward the gap» of the wardrobe». ⁶² Betraying its function as an inner sanctum, the wardrobe reveals itself as a host to something abject, infecting objects within its reach with a tenebrous atmosphere. Into this space, the cockroach engineers a new mastery of space, such that it had become the «true inhabitant of the room». ⁶³ But this invasion of another species is more than a straightforward anxiety concerning brute otherness. «What I had always found repulsive in roaches», G.H. reflects, «is that they were obsolete yet still here». ⁶⁴ The encounter carries with it a series of aftershocks:

Knowing that they were already on the Earth, and the same as they are today, even before the first dinosaurs appeared, knowing the first man already found them proliferated and crawling alive, knowing that they had witnesses the formation of the great deposits of oil and coal in the world, and there they were during the great advance and then during the great retreats of the glaciers – the peaceful resistance. ⁶⁵

G.H.'s response to this knowledge consists of at least two main strands: repulsion and attraction. In the first case, her repulsion finds root in the expression of an archaic life resistant to progress and anthropomorphization, which is blind, impersonal, and without a discernible purpose other than brute persistence. That which ought to have been consigned to a prehistoric archive has somehow managed to find a way to persist in time, stubbornly and knowingly adapting to the modifications of nature and culture. «It was», she writes, «as

62 LISPECTOR 2012, 39.

63 LISPECTOR 2012, 41.

64 LISPECTOR 2012, 40.

65 LISPECTOR 2012, 40.

ancient as a legend». ⁶⁶ This elemental sublime breaches the veneer of rational thought, establishing a geological depth to the everyday world that has a transformative effect upon those who fall into the «vast, natural hollow hall». ⁶⁷ But in the midst of this domestic landscape, there exists a more subtle anxiety at work. This anxiety centres on G.H.'s mystical identification of the living subject within the archaic and anonymous structure of the roach; and it is this anxiety that closely encircles phenomenology's treatment of the body.

Because rising to my surface like pus was my truest matter – and with fright and loathing I was feeling that «I-being» was coming from a source far prior to the human source and, with horror, much greater than the human. ⁶⁸

How can we understand such passages from a phenomenological perspective? G.H. is in the room not only transfixed by the vision of the cockroach but also transfigured by it. From repulsion there emerges an astonishment spurred by a loosening of the sense of selfhood. This mutable sense of self forges a novel space, in which the boundaries and limits ordinarily masking the sense of self as one's own are momentarily bracketed, and in the suspension another modality of perception is enacted:

Opening in me, with the slowness of stone doors, opening in me was the wide life of silence, the same that was in the fixed sun, the same that was in the immobilized roach. And that could be the same as in me! ⁶⁹

We come to a point of indistinction between G.H. and her surrounding world, such that the dividing line between self and other is no longer as stable as it once was. Like Merleau-Ponty, Lispector recognises depersonalization as «the great objectification of oneself». ⁷⁰ It is in and

⁶⁶ LISPECTOR 2012, 48.

⁶⁷ LISPECTOR 2012, 53.

⁶⁸ LISPECTOR 2012, 52.

⁶⁹ LISPECTOR 2012, 52.

⁷⁰ LISPECTOR 2012, 184.

through depersonalization that we come to «truly live at the level of sensation».⁷¹ Living at the level of sensation means stripping consciousness of its personal attributes, suspending those habits of thought that would assign a fixed character upon things, and thereby coming to recognise that the «I» is simply the spokesperson for a «pre-history» that I have an «ancient pact» with.⁷² As depersonalized, the world, in its everyday sedimented constancy, can no longer be taken-for-granted as given. In parallel, the sense of self that governs the consolidation of space and time, fusing the world into a personalised zone of habitude, no longer commands the authority it once assumed. What remains is a world divested of the limits; domestic space becomes a vast abyss while time ceases to be contained by personalised perception.

5. The Thinglike Body

In these dense elaborations of a crisis that appears spiritual in nature, Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* confronts us with a problem that is emblematically phenomenological in nature; namely, to what extent does the anonymous, general, and neutral division of life play a role in the constitution of the subject? Lispector's response to this question is to issue a challenge to the notion that the lived and living subject occupies an innocuous relationship to the undercurrent of life, which assumes the term «the neutral». «To escape the neutral», she writes, «I had long since forsaken the being for the persona, for the human mask. When I humanised myself, I'd freed myself from the desert».⁷³

Yet the work of moulding masks to form the image of humanity is never complete; there always remains the risk that the mask will inadvertently let something other than its own reflection in, thus

71 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 223.

72 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 265.

73 LISPECTOR 2012, 92.

producing a multiplicity of anxieties. These anxieties take shape in the deformation of space and time; in the encounter with the other *as* other; and, above all, in the dispossession of selfhood in the face(lessness) of a neutral existence. What generates the opening of this manifold anxiety is the act of seeing the world without the primacy of the I as the guiding light: «Because I was no longer seeing myself, I was simply seeing».⁷⁴

To see without presupposing anything in advance is central to the work of phenomenology. Thus, in its classical formulation, phenomenology advocates a suspension of «any critical position-taking which is interested in their truth or falsity, even any position on their guiding idea of an objective knowledge of the world».⁷⁵ Only in sharp distinction to the Husserlian articulation of phenomenology, the phenomenology suggested in Lispector's novel does not restore and reinstate the integrity of the lifeworld, but instead leaves it in ruins.

In this respect, Lispector brings to the surface the affective register of phenomenology's methodological orientation, in the process denying the reader the neutrality offered in Husserl. To see without presupposing anything in advance means to see outside of oneself, outside of the confines imposed by the suggestion of a centralised «I»; in a word, it means *to see without an I*. Under such conditions, to see oneself is to see oneself as the expression of the world without drawing any distinction therein: «I finally see it outside myself – I am the roach, I am my leg, I am my hair, I am the section of whitest light on the plaster of the wall – I am every hellish piece of me [...] Everything looks at everything, everything lives in the other».⁷⁶

In recognising how all things live within the other, Lispector again returns us to the world of Merleau-Ponty. «In a forest», so Andre Marchand notes in a passage cited by Merleau-Ponty, «I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me. I was there,

74 LISPECTOR 2012, 58.

75 HUSSERL 1970, 135.

76 LISPECTOR 2012, 60-1.

listening».⁷⁷ Sentiments such as these populate Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy in abundance. In his final work, he develops an ontology that moves beyond the subject-world distinction marking his earlier work, now augmenting it with an appeal to a reversibility between the perceiver and the perceived, which he terms «flesh» (*chair*).⁷⁸ Such a concept, as he famously remarks, «has no name in any philosophy» and is best construed of as an «element» insofar as it is a «general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being».⁷⁹

Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh appears in Lispector's novel in the idea of a «great neutral reality», which acts as a «vital element that binds things».⁸⁰ As with Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh, the neutral is manifest in all things without being reducible to those things. Moreover, like the flesh, it is mute and silent; lacking all discernable form of its own, it makes itself known only through the guise of other things. In each case, there is a silence that «exists in the cockroach, the same in the stars, the same in the self – the *demonic* precedes the human».⁸¹

To see the indifference of the flesh in things is not to enact an innocuous stance with respect to the world; it is to expose oneself to the erosion of selfhood without ever actually losing the germ of selfhood. In Merleau-Ponty, we find little evidence that this dissolution of the I into flesh carries with it any aspect of rupture. For him, the boundaries and edges of the body soften into the flesh, such that «[t]hings are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body».⁸² In moving beyond the relational phenomenology of his earlier thought, Merleau-Ponty advances an

77 MERLEAU-PONTY 1979, 63.

78 MERLEAU-PONTY 1968.

79 MERLEAU-PONTY 1968, 139.

80 LISPECTOR 2012, 101.

81 LISPECTOR 2012, 101.

82 MERLEAU-PONTY 1979, 58-9.

ontology, in which all things derive from the same root. That the world is made from the same stuff of the body means that genuine separation from the world is impossible. We remain tied up in the thick corporeality of the world, sharing an elemental existence not only with cockroaches, but with all living and non-living things.

For Merleau-Ponty, anxiety is nowhere to be found within these reflections. For the fictional entity of G.H., however, the story is different. «The worst discovery», so Lispector writes, «was that the world is not human, and that we are not human».⁸³ Such a horror is only tenable because a part of me remains present to myself as I become the spectator of my own loss of form. This much is as evident in *The Passion According to G.H.* as it is in clinical cases of anxiety disorders.⁸⁴ A subject in the midst of anxiety is not at risk of having their subjectivity annihilated. If that were the case, then the affective weight of anxiety would lose its vitality and we would be left with a pacified subject. As is borne out in clinical studies, the inverse tends to be the case; anxious subjects remain present to themselves and it is precisely because this self-reflexivity is still operational that anxiety assumes the threat it does. The same is no less true of G.H. That she remains still intact, now gazing upon the surrounding world through an almost impersonal – indeed, *depersonal* – lens, means that the intervention of another order of life appears for her as a source of anguish.

But why should this suspension of selfhood provoke anxiety? After all, it is not obvious that the expansion and contraction of a sense of self should induce disquiet. In certain cases, the boundaries between self and other(ness) are porous if not elastic, and gradients of ambiguity, uncertainty, and even depersonalization are experienced without any considerable peril to the integrity of selfhood. In other cases, such as people suffering from phobic anxieties, the «gap» between one's sense of self and what lies outside of this sense is rigidly construed, such that there is an intolerance of uncertainty and

83 LISPECTOR 2012, 64.

84 Cf. TRIGG 2016

anonymity.⁸⁵ Faced with the elementality of existence, the human meaning ascribed to things dissolves and those same things reveal themselves in their thinglike status, as Lispector puts it: «[...] the inhuman part is the best part of us, it's the thing, the thing-part of us».⁸⁶ Nowhere is this sentiment clearer than in the human body.

In classical phenomenology, the thinglike nature of the body is that dimension of corporeal life that makes itself known in pathologies and dysfunctions – that is to say; it makes itself known only insofar as it deviates from how the body ought to be. Indeed, on a prereflective level, we take the body to be irreducibly one's own. The emergence of the body as a thing is often taken as an affront to a sense of self. Thus, when agoraphobic patients experience their bodies as being unable to move in certain spaces or otherwise feeling as though the body is on the verge of collapse, then this emergence of the body as an obstacle is stipulated against a horizon of referential meanings, of which the thinglike body betrays.⁸⁷ From this perspective, the thinglike body involves a movement of self-alienation, whereby it is not *my* body that appears before me but rather *the* body, as though the body were a distinct area of experience.

Lispector issues a challenge to the idea that the thinglike aspect of the body is a deviation from how the body ought to be. As the «best part of us», the inhuman element counters the insistence on unifying the body into a «sentimental and utilitarian construction».⁸⁸ The world is experienced as a source of anguish, not because of a malign agency that would set out to destroy human existence, but because an anonymous and neutral life underscores the structure of selfhood: «The great neutral punishment of general life is that it can suddenly undermine a single life; if it isn't given its own power, then it bursts as a dam bursts – and arrives pure, unadulterated: purely neutral».⁸⁹

Here, Lispector arrives at the centre of the problem. In

85 TRIGG 2017.

86 LISPECTOR 2012, 64.

87 TRIGG 2018.

88 LISPECTOR 2012, 65.

89 LISPECTOR 2012, 66.

phenomenology, neutrality is itself neutered in several ways: as a methodological aim, as a substructure of subjective life, and as a thematic presentation in the perceptual world. Methodologically, Lispector underscores how seeing without an I is not a neutral affair devoid of affective implications; it is an affectively-laden act that risks leaving the natural world in ruins. As a structure of subjective life, «general life» (or what Merleau-Ponty calls «general existence»⁹⁰) is not a thread of life that always already corresponds with a sense of the body as one's own; it is what Levinas calls an anonymous «there is» (*il y a*) that haunts waking life, without ever being possessable by that life.⁹¹ Thematically, neutrality is not given to perception as an extension of the story one tells to oneself about who one is; it is felt as a force that comes back to life from a prehistory anterior to experience: «The possessed are not possessed by what is coming but by what is coming back».⁹²

6. Disorders of Home

In divesting the world of its familiar tonality, what we are left with is the affective sensation of being «ill-at-home» in a world that is both homely and unhomely in the same measure.⁹³ To be «ill-at-home» means to be disjointed from that which is familiar and taken-for-granted, including both a general atmosphere but also localised attributes such as the body and the home. From a phenomenological perspective, that G.H.'s crisis rakes place in the home is especially telling. In Gaston Bachelard's account of domestic spatiality, the home is understood as a sanctuary sealed off from the outside and constituted through a rapport between memory and imagination.⁹⁴ For him, the home is not simply the physical place of dwelling; it is also

90 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 234.

91 LEVINAS 2001/2005.

92 LISPECTOR 2012, 66.

93 HEIDEGGER 2008.

94 BACHELARD 2014.

the manifestation of an «earthly paradise» that prevents human beings from fragmenting in time and space.⁹⁵

This cosmic vision of the home as a restorative origin leads to a specific characterisation of its thematic qualities. The home protects the dweller both from the world but also from the eyes, which would otherwise have access to an interior place were those boundaries more porous. «We may», so Bachelard writes, «perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human; pre-human, in this case, approaching the immemorial».⁹⁶ This notion of the home as a welcoming harbour in an otherwise hostile world is foreshadowed in his earlier work, *Earth and Reveries of Repose*, where Bachelard will phrase the home as a protection «against the night», appearing for the dweller as a felicitous nest in the midst of vast space.⁹⁷ In opposition to the voided night, «nocturnal life» of the home places itself between worlds, fending itself against that «huge beast that is everywhere, like some universal threat».⁹⁸

Like the body that dwells within it, phenomenology's home is one that is irreducibly one's own. As such, just as the pathological body is understood as an alien body, thematically given in its thinglike status, so the same is true of the pathological home; it too breaks away from the dweller, inviting into its domain a dimension of horror. As evidence of this, consider here Bachelard's reflections on the home that is exposed to the outside. Losing its protective seal, the home becomes a «sonorous echo from the vaults of hell».⁹⁹ This characterisation of the home as a hellish place is grounded in the conviction that the home and dweller operate in harmonious accordance with one another.

Lispector's articulation of home revises this idea of home by rendering it the ambassador of a different order of existence. For her, a revelation takes place in home that effectively turns the home inside

95 BACHELARD 2014, 29.

96 BACHELARD 2014, 32.

97 BACHELARD 2011, 82.

98 BACHELARD 2011, 83.

99 BACHELARD 2014, 2017.

out. The sanitized space, in which G.H. dwells, living «on the top floor of a superstructure», reveals itself as being founded in «layers and layers of human archaeology» nestled deep in the wardrobes and windows, cupboards and shelves, shadows and corners of the place.¹⁰⁰ Thus the apartment opens itself in its real dimensions, as spatial and corporeal, contemporary with the present while at the same time being out-of-joint with time. The repulsion central to G.H.'s roach is thus not simply a repulsion of foreign matter; rather, it is a repulsion grounded in the opening of a «truth that I'd come not to want, an infamizing truth that would make me crawl along and be on the roach's level».¹⁰¹

7. Anxious Times

In parallel with the dissolution of spatial integrity, temporality is also called into question in *Lispector* interrogation of the natural world. In everyday experience, time appears for us as a seamless arc, in which past, present, and future form discrete but fluid sectors. We find ourselves at the centre of things, both in terms of an intentionality toward the surrounding world and as a temporality, which finds root in the primacy of perceptual experience. «My body», Merleau-Ponty writes, «takes possession of time and makes a past and a future exist for a present; it is not a thing, rather than suffering time, my body creates it».¹⁰² As ever with Merleau-Ponty, his thought operates on both a principle of integration and a principle of resistance. In the case of the former, time is understood as a series of temporal modalities, each of which blur into one another thanks to the unifying structure of the body. Memories, dreams, and hopes gain expressive value through the «intentional arc», which moulds sensible life into an overarching whole. Yet alongside this focus on integration, Merleau-Ponty also

100 LISPECTOR 2012, 66.

101 LISPECTOR 2012, 54.

102 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 249.

points to an immemorial and anonymous time, which exceeds lived experience. Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, time is not reducible to a level of thematic experience nor is it irreducibly captured in and through his notion of the intentional arc.

My hold on the past and my hold on the future are precarious and my possession of my own time is always deferred until the moment when I fully understand myself, but that moment can never arrive since it would again be a moment, bordered by the horizon of a future, and would in turn require further developments in order to be understood.¹⁰³

Beyond the level of reflective experience, Merleau-Ponty will speak of an anonymous time that runs alongside lived experience. In a well-known formulation, he speaks of an «original past, a past that has never been present».¹⁰⁴ This original past is not one that is recouped upon philosophical reflection. Rather, in speaking of an «original past», Merleau-Ponty refers to precisely the anonymous level of perception, which is at work in «my perceptual organs and of which these organs are merely the trace».¹⁰⁵ Given this original past, which is never truly my own and yet plays a constitutive role in the structure of sense and meaning, time remains that which is out-of-joint in the human subject. On the one hand, the lived body is a unifying organ, insofar as it anchors time in the present, generating the conditions for a subject to have a world. In parallel, lived duration is doubled by a prehistory, which exceeds me while in the same measure implicating my existence. In a word, time is no less a source of my existence as it is the site of alienation from it. In a final note, which is worth quoting at length, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this point:

My voluntary and rational life thus knows itself to be entangled with another power that prevents it from being completed and that always gives it the air of a work in progress. Natural time is always there. The transcendence of

103 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 362.

104 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 252.

105 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 367.

moments of time at once establishes and compromises the rationality of my history: it establishes it since it opens me up to an absolutely new future in which I will be able to reflect upon what is opaque in my present; it comprises it since from the perspective of that future I will never grasp the present that I am living with apodeictic certainty, since the lived time is thus never entirely comprehensible in this way (which I understand never precisely links up with my life), and since, in short, I am never at one with myself [...] This anonymous life is merely the limits of the temporal dispersion that always threatens the historical present. To catch sight of this formless existence that precedes my history and that will draw it to a close, all I had to do is see, in myself, the time that functions by itself and that my personal life makes use of without ever fully concealing.¹⁰⁶

Let us think through this passage in correspondence with *Lispector*. At the outset, Merleau-Ponty underscores how personal time – the time of memory – is entangled with «another power», which prevents the process of rational life from ever being complete. Natural time – the time of anonymous, elemental, and neutral life – both constitutes and obstructs the structure of time as one’s own. Time is thus both on my side but also outside of me, as that irreducible anonymity that I am never able to grasp. Never at one with myself, in order to survive as a personal and unified self, there is a need to accept the paradox of both existing inside and outside of time concurrently. To do this – to fend off the threat of impersonal being – a face must be applied to the body while the body itself must be divided into navigable parts, each of which are offset by the surrounding world. The work of renewal is thus never complete and always exposed to the risk of disintegration.

With *Lispector*, we reached the borderlands of this work of renewal. For G.H., time breaks free from its moorings; contracting, expanding, and diminishing in the same instant. «And unexpectedly the approaching eleven o’clock seemed to me an element of terror – like

106 MERLEAU-Ponty 2012, 362

the place, time too had become palpable, it was like wanting to flee from inside a clock». ¹⁰⁷ The time of G.H.'s passion is an over-saturated and all-encompassing *now*, which neither points toward the future in a movement of protention but nor does it seal itself from the retention of the past. Rather, time unfolds in a vast instant, accumulating everything within a singular glance.

This is the time of Nature in its neutrality, a time devoid of artifice and form, in which pastness and futurity occupy the same space simultaneously. It is a time that belongs to the ancient past («I was seeing [...] shadows and people, like those of the first Assyrian merchants») but also of a biographical past («like a child dressed as a friar, a sleepy child»); it involves both the occupancy of an unbroken present («My life was as continuous as death»); and of a prehistory embedded in the present («I had already lived with the first creatures of the Earth»). ¹⁰⁸ These lapses do not mark some form of time travel, where such a travel would consist of a linear pathway pointing ahead or behind the present; rather, it is only in and through the present that the diffusion of time is articulated, as Lispector has it, «the present was opening gigantic perspectives onto a new present [...] I was living the pre-history of a future». ¹⁰⁹

Such is the world Lispector gives to us. It is a vision of being exposed to this time outside of oneself precisely from the vantage point of still being inside time. This time which is not my own, renders me a stranger to the body I both am and have. Time enacts itself through perception, which I myself take up in the sensual world. But in advance of the I, there is «another self which has already sided with the world». ¹¹⁰ In liminal states such as anxiety, depersonalization, and the sort of mystical fervour G.H. finds herself in, we come to the periphery of this anonymous time, the point where the body ceases to be a source of expression for a given life, and instead becomes the trace of a life in its brute generality.

107 LISPECTOR 2012, 42.

108 LISPECTOR 2012, 60, 108.

109 LISPECTOR 2012, 109.

110 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 251.

8. Conclusion

By the end of Lispector's novel, the fear and anxiety that motivated the urge to give a human form to an impersonal chaos has dissipated. In its place, G.H. has summoned the courage to accept that «the basic error in living was being disgusted by the roach».¹¹¹ This error is stipulated on the conviction that disgust is a contradiction, insofar as it «contradicts my matter within him».¹¹² To be disgusted with the roach, where the roach is an expression of elemental and neutral life, is to be disgusted with one's own body, insofar as both are «made of the same stuff».¹¹³ This dissolution between G.H. and the flesh of the world leaves no space for human artefact separating herself and the roach. Following this reasoning, G.H. affirms both the reversibility between herself and the world and the temporal inheritance, of which she is but an expression, by putting the desiccated roach paste in her mouth: «Through the living roach I am coming to understand that I too am whatever is alive [...] Being alive is inhuman».¹¹⁴ In recognising that being alive is inhuman, Lispector issues a demand to both the reader and to phenomenology more generally: «We shall be inhuman – as the loftiest conquest of man. Being is being beyond human».¹¹⁵

Lispector's demand, of course, can never be entirely fulfilled; as soon as we turn toward those «regions of silence» that surround perceptual life, they become personalised and humanised.¹¹⁶ Notwithstanding this impossible demand, affective states such as anxiety and depersonalization are beneficial in generating a passing glance at the limit where the body as one's own is called into question. As we have seen in *Lispector*, anxiety does this through disrupting the referential meaning instituted in things over time. In the space where meaning

111 LISPECTOR 2012, 171.

112 LISPECTOR 2012, 171.

113 MERLEAU-PONTY 1979, 59.

114 LISPECTOR 2012, 181.

115 LISPECTOR 2012, 182.

116 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 84.

decays, the elemental and anonymous undercurrent of life is given a voice through the materialization of the body in its thinglike status. Whereas phenomenology is often motivated by a restorative instinct, Lispector is prepared to dwell alongside this anonymous materiality without succumbing to the urge to rehumanise it. In this respect, in her devotion to the passion of elemental neutrality, Lispector advances phenomenology's concept of the body, expanding it beyond the remit of human life, and placing it on the interstitial edge where I begin and where I end.

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