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- 1 Blackman, Lisa. *The Body*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008. 160 pp.
- 2 “Is there anything *natural* about the human body?” (1). This is how Lisa Blackman begins her all too daunting task of reviewing and critically evaluating what has come to be known as “body theory” in the field of sociology. Carefully picking her way among numerous theories on the corporeal that have been produced across the humanities in the last twenty years, Blackman lays out her problematic from the start by asking to know what kind of body needs to be brought into social theory. The task she sets herself is threefold: to chart the centrality of the concept of the body for sociological thought, to draw out the key concepts for navigating the literature on the subject and to identify the exciting new directions that are opening up for body thinking as it brings together work from the biological and psychological sciences and work on becoming within social theory, feminism and philosophy.
- 3 One of the central ideas in the book’s argument is that the “naturalistic” body, with all its attendant assumptions of autonomy, singularity and self-containment, is shaky and well on its way out of social theory. In fact, the point Blackman makes is that this bodily configuration has never appealed to sociology, and initially caused it to refrain from any engagement with the biological. The early sociologists were especially suspicious of the biological determinism underwriting the idea of the “natural” body which is conceived, in opposition to the mind, as a fixed set of physical processes that are closed off from cultural influences and, consequently, cultural analysis. To offset the reductionism of naturalism, social theory, as Blackman argues in chapter 1, moved towards “cultural inscription” models that developed a view of the subject as symbolically constituted. Central amongst them are Michel Foucault’s theories of the *docile* or *disciplined* body which Blackman, however, critiques for having substituted social for biological determinism. In her view, although approaches to the socially constructed body recognize its capacity for malleability, they continue to regard it as “inert mass” that is passively written on by social regulation and deprive it thus of the ability to protest and resist the workings of disciplinary power. In other words, social constructionism, in spite

of its anti-essentialist politics, continues to sideline the body by configuring it as closed and subordinate to the mind.

- 4 The shift towards more embodied perspectives in social theory begins as a reaction against social constructionism in the 1980s. This is the time when new idioms develop to enable the reclaiming of the body's viscerality as a way of articulating a new bodily awareness that relies on affectivity, connectivity and permeability. For Blackman, what is rapidly replacing the "molar" body, fixed and bounded in its physicality, is an understanding of the body as "multiple," open to other bodies, human and non-human, leaky, porous and "processual." Four out of the book's five chapters are devoted to unfolding the crossdisciplinary research that lays out the new sets of concepts behind the variously called "somatically-felt," "vitalist," "affective," "networked" or "enacted" bodies. Differential as they may be in their inception, these bodily configurations all break down the mind and body dichotomy by promoting connectedness, communication and affective exchange between bodies. Equally, they renegotiate the relationship between regulation and corporeal agency by investing the body with a "different form of intelligent thinking that is felt and sensed rather than verbalized and articulated through language or cognition" (86). "Skin knowledge," which allows Henry David Thoreau to find his way back home in the dark (86-87), and "muscular bonding," which refers to the kinds of emotional experiences that are often produced when people move together rhythmically in time (30), are only two examples of the kinds of somatic knowledge that escape the subject's cognitive control and mobilize alternative modes of affective action and connection.
- 5 Blackman's call to reinvent the questions we ask about bodies is timely both for body theory and for body awareness in the public sphere where cyborg and cloned bodies are rapidly transforming the rules of corporeal normativity. Her focus on the "affective turn" is also apt and in tune with theorizing in a number of different disciplinary fields, including that of art (which is not one of her immediate concerns here). Moreover, in her concluding statements, she rightly alerts us to the need to investigate how we can assume a sense of coherence in the face of process, movement, multiplicity and becoming without assuming the body as substance (138). By the end of the book, she has come full circle back to discussing and raising questions about culture and subjectivities, concepts that remain at times dormant or straightjacketed in the course of her argument. In her discussion of Foucault's contribution to social constructionism, for example, her understanding of discourse as operating wholly on a "cognitive level," as precluding resistance and as being imposed from above on an already existing, passive organic essence certainly lends support to her critique of social construction. However, it also inevitably sidelines readings of Foucault's concept of discursive practice (coming often from outside the field of sociology) as fundamentally unstable, written into by the possibility of resistance and affected, as all meaning-making processes, by the same psychic and affective states that Blackman openly associates with the bodily. More than conceptual problems in the book's theoretical positions, however, these are points of fruitful tension that emerge when knowledges from different disciplinary fields enter into dialogue with each other.
- 6 All in all, this is a well-informed and at once clear and sophisticated account of contemporary body theories and their relationship with the social, and is addressed to the newcomer in the field. Though deliberately non-linear in its structure, it is stylistically accessible and offers comprehensible descriptions and analyses of complex

theoretical thinking, which are illustrated through selected case studies in each chapter and further complicated in the questions for essays and classroom discussion located at the very end of the book. Given the proliferating number of body theories in academia today, Lisa Blackman's book is a useful and challenging guide for both students and teachers of social and cultural theory.