

WAR AT THE MEMBRANE

Nicholas Thoburn

Howard Slater, *Anomie/Bonhomie and Other Writings*, London, Mute Books, 2011, 148pp; £9.99 paperback

I first encountered Howard Slater's sharp-witted and inventive writing in the pages of a magazine called *Autotoxicity*. An unholy mix of artists' book and journal of ultra-left theory, *Autotoxicity* exemplified a key principle of Slater's work, that political writing is as much an intervention in textual and publishing *form* as it is the production of critical *content*. It is a principle that, as Walter Benjamin puts it, has tended to favour the 'inconspicuous forms' of writing and publishing ('leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards') over the 'pretentious, universal gesture of the book'.¹ And yet *Anomie/Bonhomie* comes to us in the form of a book, Slater's first venture into this medium. If it was simply a compendium of texts published previously in more inconspicuous forms then this could be a step backwards, as one might assume from the book's acknowledgement of a number of publishing projects that hosted some of these writings and facilitated their development, from Copenhagen Free University, *Datacide*, and *Variant* to the more mysterious Ourganisation. But this acknowledgement is very much an assertion of the present, not the past, of these texts, locating the book in a field of experimental and small-press media as much as in the circuits of consumption for books of critical theory.

Befitting that intimate association with independent media, Slater's book has its own experimental qualities. It is the first volume of a new series of Mute Books, part of *Mute* magazine's shift toward a 'hybrid' publishing model based on experimental testing of the techno-social capacities of new media publishing. In this regard *Anomie/Bonhomie* is an example of what Alessandro Ludovico has called 'post-digital print', a print product of the enmeshing of print and digital technologies that makes critical use of the qualities and properties of each.² Here, 'print on demand' (POD) publishing, among other resources, allows small-press and experimental publishers to move into the previously price-prohibitive terrain of book publishing. And so, though the form of the book still holds its place at the summit of bibliographic respectability, the distinction Benjamin draws between the book and its inconspicuous forms, the publishing centre and its margins, is now less secure, as the post-digital book becomes widely available to critical and formal experiment and alternative modes of production and distribution. The design and published form of *Anomie/Bonhomie* plays with these major and minor aspects of the contemporary book; there is a confident simplicity or even austerity to its design that at once recalls the style of an established and respected imprint, a 1970s Pelican Book perhaps, and asserts the more DIY

1. Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street (Selection)', *Reflections*, P. Demetz (ed), E. Jephcott (trans), New York, Schocken Books, 1978.

2. Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894*, Eindhoven, Onomatopoe 7, 2012.

print, page, and image aesthetics of POD technology, making an aesthetic virtue of what in academic presses usually feels merely like an economy.

The title essay, 'Anomie/Bonhomie: Notes Towards the "Affective Classes"', published here for the first time and filling half the book, is an engagement with the affective conditions of contemporary labour and class. But unlike recent research on the emergence of affective labour in post-Fordism, Slater posits affect at the heart of the class relation, as the disavowed and unacknowledged *suffering* that has been the condition of waged and un-waged labour from the start. In an unsettling and rather moving opening, the essay begins not, as we have grown accustomed, with a manifesto-like narrative of an emerging political subject, but with a mourning for the working class, a litany of worries, anxieties, and sicknesses, a class without any subjective agency beyond a desire to stop: 'all we knew as working class is we didn't want to work for a living, we didn't want to be working class'. The workers' movement, for its part, was as much the problem as the solution, assisting capital in cathecting suffering to the identities of work. Hence its collapse is not greatly lamented here, albeit that it is a key instance of the crisis that faces political thought and practice today, with our failure to effectively challenge neoliberal restructuring and its brutalising effects on the conditions of life.

This is not, then, an optimistic essay, but like recent work in 'communisation' theory, with which Slater shares some interests, the contemporary breakdown of a substantial workers' identity is considered here as an opportunity to develop a politics that turns no longer on the appropriation and management of labour's product, but on the destruction of labour and its identities, a politics immanent to the very conditions of life.³ For Slater, this takes a route through investigation of the fractalisation, exhaustion, and cruelty of labour, its limited agency being a desperate and damaging desire for self-preservation. Take the 'entrepreneurial', an increasingly generalised condition which Slater describes as an imaginary liberation from dependency relations and the constraints of work that functions all the better as a means of self-subjection to capital:

[T]here is a suspension of repression as the drive to accumulate, exploit and be cruel can be given free reign. The drive-energy that needs to be tempered when dealing attentively with another can be unleashed with impunity when the other figures as an object, be it worker, supplier, customer etc. In a society geared towards and actively promoting the entrepreneurial form ... this impunity is guaranteed something like 'diplomatic immunity'. ... We need not care what another thinks or feels as long as we can use them as fixed capital and as a depository for the unconscious anger we feel towards our dependent selves.

With Franco Berardi, whose work has a significant presence in Slater's book, this and broader tendencies toward the industrialisation of sensation call for a

3. See Benjamin Noys (ed), *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique and Contemporary Struggles*, Wivenhoe, Minor Compositions, 2011.

'psycho-politics', something like an ethics of care that seeks to operate at the level of collective sensory and affective experience, hence this book's strong interest in anti-psychiatry and therapeutic practices aimed at politicising pre-personal relations and the 'distribution of vulnerabilities'. We could also call it an 'ethico-aesthetics', after Félix Guattari, for Slater places considerable emphasis on aesthetic form as a route to social transformation.

Aesthetic practices that seek to 'wrest sensuousness from its commodification' feature in a number of the book's accompanying or 'tributary' texts. Most striking and original is Slater's critical investment in counter-strategies of language. It's tremendously refreshing to find poetry and experiment with syntax - theorised and practiced - in a work of communist theory. Poetry here is a means of access to, and experimentation with, pre- and extra-individual association, 'a matter of conjoining the materiality of language with the transitiveness of the psyche'. It's a strategy reminiscent of Russian Futurism, but is given new and contemporary purchase by the increasing centrality of language to capital, with its 'negative poetics' of 'informational utility', 'proceduralism, spin and defensiveness'. Bakhtin and Surrealism are key references for Slater's approach to this decentering politics of language, discussion of the latter featuring in two of the essays, 'Poetry and Self-Exile' and 'Convergent Suggestion'.

This interest in Surrealism exemplifies Slater's insistence that art and experimentation with aesthetic form still hold radical promise, more indeed than much that goes by the way of radical culture. That said, *Anomie/Bonhomie* is clearly concerned to intervene in radical currents and their set of theoretical debates, particularly through the problematic of 'organisation'. In this the book shares something of the reflexive sensibility of Frère Dupont's *Species Being and Other Stories*, which is reviewed in the chapter 'Burdened by the Absence of the Billions' as one of a few contemporary works that break with the identity bound character and 'hermetic orthodoxies' of radical scenes: 'Ordinarily publications from such milieus can hardly be noted for their personal openness, play with form and stalwart exasperation with the seeming shrinkage of their circles'. Surrealism is drawn upon here precisely because it didn't explicitly formalize the organisation question but instead experimented with the ethico-aesthetic conditions of association across the breadth of social and unconscious life, experimentation oriented by affective rather than causative relations: collective publishing, objective chance, sleeping fits, fortuitous encounters, the unknown guest, feature here as experimental actualizations of what Nancy calls the 'singular plural', that sociality which exceeds, and is alienated by, the form of the individual and its correlate, the group.

I mentioned communisation theory, which has recently taken post-ultra-left thought (if I can be excused that clumsy formulation) into a somewhat austere theory of the negative, communism as the non-identity of struggles that can only be apprehended at their 'limits'. Slater's turn to moments of positive experimentation runs counter to that tendency, and that he does so

in part through engagement with Surrealism - that most recuperated of all recuperated avant-gardes - is almost a provocation. But it is a welcome one, so long as it is recognised that Slater holds as much to the critique of identity as does communisation theory, preventing any easy digestion of his argument by refigurative activist aesthetics.

That critique of identity is found also in the book's take on the theme of 'exodus', for which the 'Secessionist Outernational' functions here as something of an auto-destructive myth. Slater is keen to displace topographical models of exodus, for there is no outside to capital to which we might flee. Though he cites Tiqqun sympathetically, this marks an important distinction from the latter's more survivalist tendencies, as well as from the tired theme of the Temporary Autonomous Zone. Instead, exodus becomes the putting into crisis of the structures of identity, a 'going fragile':

[D]emocracy, inspirer of the social pessimism of 'silent majorities', comes to be about accumulation, included and excluded numbers, optimum levels, balance of forces, defensiveness. To 'leave' such a set-up is not to escape it, it is to put it into such sharp relief that it pierces our skin from within. This demands qualitative relational changes, experiential experiments, an aesthetics of the common. As David Cooper has said: 'We have to trace what the person does with what is done to him, what he makes of what he is made of'. ... Exodus is how to live on a rocking ship, under a train, in a burning oil field, in a paid-by-the-hour limbo.

Labour figures in the quotation above and throughout the book as a terrain of struggle, but there is a tension between this and an occasional indication that for Slater radical practice can no longer go by way of the working class. That, in other words, the contemporary overcoming of the working class as *subject* is the loss *in total* of work (waged and unwaged) as a terrain of struggle. That said, the weight of Slater's argument pushes in the other direction, that we should conceive of the transformations of capital - through affect, language, sensation, precarity, debt, surplus population, and so on - as the expanded terrain of class relations.

Some of this understanding of class and politics is developed here through engagement with Marx's concept of 'species being', which is expanded, in a way comparable to Deleuze and Guattari's reading of species being in *Anti-Oedipus*, to include unconscious processes. Indeed, Slater approaches the concept itself as an expression of mythopoetical collective production. Here, and throughout, Slater is concerned to decentre the human subject, to which end Marx's understanding of 'suffering' is artfully mobilised. But the book doesn't take up Marx's suggestion that species being is a means also to conceptualise the *object*, the human relation to 'non-organic life', as Deleuze and Guattari have it. Given Slater's keen insight on the political possibilities of art and aesthetic practice, this would be an intriguing point for further

research, one that might unsettle a tendency in this book, and in broader work on political aesthetics, to foreground the more subjective aspects of art at the expense of its artifactual expressions, where the latter is rarely accorded a role of more than ‘reified “art work”’.

What, then, is the meaning of Slater’s at once disconcerting and playful compound, ‘anomie/bonhomie’? It diagnoses our contemporary malaise, a condition where alienation proceeds through the capitalisation of collective affects, where a compulsory bonhomie takes the form of self-bolstering separation from others, a world where the state meets the crisis with a Happiness Czar and mass unemployment is treated with cognitive behavioural therapy. But anomie/bonhomie names also a quality of politics, an extension of the ambit of that word into psycho-sensory forms and a kind of auto-destructive troubling of our received political subjectivities - a ‘war at the membrane’, a most timely intervention.

UNCONSOLED

James Graham

Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 299pp; £17.99 paperback

It will come as no surprise to those who have followed Neil Lazarus's work over the years to discover, in this collection of essays from the last decade, that he remains resolutely disconsolate at the trajectory the field of postcolonial studies has taken since its inception in the late 1970s. The vital emancipatory premise of this field - the most important designation of the *post* in postcolonial - has been steadily eroded in this period by the dominance of criticism and politics that, as Lazarus would have it, are too ideologically blinkered to be worthy of those names. What is new and indeed most welcome about this book, however, is the desire to explore the dialectical corollary of disconsolation: to 'move from the "negative" moment of critique to the more "positive" moment of reconstruction'(p1).

The first move in this act of critical reconstruction is to historicise postcolonial studies - as an academic discipline that emerged only belatedly, as it were, after the events and ideas which provided its putative subject: the wave of intellectual activism and national liberation struggles that swept through the Third World in the decades following the Second World War. The problem with this belatedness, as Lazarus demonstrates with great eloquence in the chapters that follow, is that its effects are deeply ideological.

The cornerstone of Lazarus's critique is that mainstream postcolonial criticism and theory has overlooked - or ignored, or worst of all, misread - the political and intellectual formations of this foundational period. This is not simply a matter of poor scholarship (though in many cases it is that also). Rather, Lazarus's ire is drawn by the ideological tendency within the field to disavow the social reality of class struggle and nationalism on the one hand, and the interpretive frames of modernism, modernity and Marxism on the other. These categories constituted, and so Lazarus argues with great force in his bid to outline 'a new "history of the present"'(p17), still constitute the political horizon of decolonisation. And yet it is in *opposition to them* that the political project of postcolonial studies has developed.

In the process of its institutionalisation in the Western academy, the theoretical orientation of the field shifted from Third World nationalism to postmodernism. Emblematic of this shift is the work of Homi Bhabha, which 'disavows nationalism as such and refuses an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics in favour of one that emphasises "cultural difference", "ambivalence", and "the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp" of what "modern" philosophy had

imagined as the determinate categories of social reality'(p12). What this 'postcolonial perspective', so defined, has failed to address - indeed, fails even to acknowledge in some instances - is what Lazarus terms the *postcolonial unconscious*, which is to say: the structuring conditions of its own possibility; which is to say: 'the history of capitalist imperialism'(p15).

The ensuing critique follows two paths, drawing from Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson respectively. The first of these, developed in the longest chapter in the book, 'The politics of postcolonial modernism', takes Williams' critique of modernism's hegemonic emergence in literary studies as a model that might be applied to the selective canonisation of *postmodernist* postcolonial literature from the 1980s onwards. Against this tendency, Lazarus urges a more receptive and reflexive intellectual and scholarly project. Not content with calling for the counter-positioning of neglected and alternative literary forms and traditions (as advocated by Williams in *The Politics of Modernism*), Lazarus argues that the entire field needs to be reconstructed around key concepts deriving, in the first instance, from Williams' theory of cultural materialism. The analytic schema that follows is breathtaking in its methodological boldness. So much so, in fact, that (as Lazarus readily acknowledges) it might be construed as partisan - or even (as he is no doubt also aware) downright vulgar:

- i. Mode of production and class relations;
- ii. Land and environment;
- iii. State and Nation;
- iv. Structures of feeling (p35)

But to dismiss as *merely* provocative this brazen presentation of a Marxist/nationalitarian conceptual apparatus would be to miss the thrust of Lazarus's project entirely. Lazarus's argument is that it provides the only credible means for understanding the particularity of postcolonial writing. Moreover, the concepts correspond to the social formations and political ideas on which the movements for decolonisation the world over were *and continue to be* based; by rejecting the Marxism mainstream postcolonial studies has thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Rather than opposing the morphing forms of capitalist imperialism through criticism attentive to postcolonial literature's rendering of the social and environmental realities of this formation, the 'postcolonial perspective' - most recently in the fetish of globalization and cosmopolitanism - too often simply reflects the same. To reconstruct the field we needs must return to first principles.

No doubt there will still be some who find Lazarus's project to be no less tendentious than the 'postcolonial perspective' it decries. There are moments when the book reads more like a revolutionary manifesto than a treatise on postcolonial *literary* studies - again, a 'critical' reading one suspects Lazarus is more than happy to invite. But such a position surely is rendered untenable

in the close readings that follow. From India to Latin America, from Africa to the Pacific Islands, from the Middles East to the Caribbean - Lazarus takes the reader on an extraordinary journey through a panoply of colonial and postcolonial writing. The cultural materialist categories of analysis assume a startling relevance as Lazarus (to take just a few illustrative examples) shows us how the worlds conjured in poetry and prose from across India are literally *unthinkable* outside the over-determination of the mode of production and class relations; how land and environment assume a similar epistemological primacy in writings as distant in chronological history and geography as Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and Patrick Camoiseau's *Texaco*; how the symbolism of national consciousness is voiced in unison in poetry from Guyana to Palestine; and how the phenomenological dimension of literature can be discerned in the 'structures of feeling' that animate writing from Sudan to Bengal. The perspective Lazarus commands here is dizzying. The range of his reading is, as Timothy Brennan puts it in his cover note, 'simply unmatched by anyone'.

So impressive is this first chapter, in fact, that one wishes it was even longer than its present 68 pages (at least twice the length of the other chapters in the book). That is not to downplay the quality and salience of the other chapters, but merely to note that this chapter might well have formed the basis for an entire book - and in fact reads as if that might have been the original intention. However, presented as a 'ground-clearing' (p35) exercise, this discussion does just that: enabling Lazarus to then work through a series of debates with the aim of reconstructing the field: a defence of Fredric Jameson's 'Third World Literature'; the question of representation in postcolonial fiction; and the competing claims over the legacies of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Of these, the 'representation' chapter steers the focus away from the critically disabling, dead-end of 'subalternity' (at least insofar as it is construed in Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?') and toward a consideration of the different ways in which writers *do* attempt to speak both for and as others. Though the discussion of individual critics and authors (Mudimbe and Rigby; Spivak; Seth, Ghosh and Devi) stands on its own, the larger purpose of this chapter is to defend writing as representation - as a political act - in order to reconnect writing and action, criticism and activism.

The three shorter chapters - focusing on Jameson, Fanon and Said - are thus set up to hammer home Lazarus's initial thesis: that postcolonial theory has failed to account for the historical facts of this relationship. The discussions of Frantz Fanon in chapter four - 'the "Fanon" one encountered in postcolonial studies during those years was a post-structuralist *avant la lettre*' (p162) - and of Edward Said in chapter five - "'Edward Said" is the both the name of a particular scholar and also the site of a dispute or battle over meaning, with deep consequences for the field itself' (p184) - are representative of the political unconscious of postcolonial studies. In each example, Lazarus's method is to re-orientate existing discussions around a consideration of the *unevenness* of capitalist modernity and its concomitant

ideological effects, and therefore to the overarching significance of this for postcolonial critique. If 'Jameson had not postulated his 'national allegory' hypothesis', Lazarus writes in the first of these chapters,

we would have had to invent it. This is not primarily for theoretical reasons (though these are not trivial), but in order to keep pace with, to be accountable to, modern and contemporary writings from the 'postcolonial' world, the 'Third World', the 'backward zones of capital' (p107).

To keep pace with, to be accountable to - these are the injunctions Lazarus holds us to in our attempts at interpretation and representation. In their absence, all that mainstream postcolonial studies has to offer is mere consolation.

BEYOND THE EVERYDAY

Keya Ganguly

Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, London, Routledge, 2010, 208pp; paperback, £20.99

Ben Highmore edited the 2002 anthology *The Everyday Life Reader* (Routledge) that first brought him to the attention of readers on both sides of the Atlantic. That collection was among a handful of books highlighting the importance of everyday life in studies of culture, and Highmore's capable editorship introduced readers to the most influential positions on the myriad ways that everyday life simultaneously functions as the terrain of the taken-for-granted as well as the experiential realm in which struggles over meaning, selfhood, belonging, and politics are actively waged. In contextualizing the work of a very wide range of figures - all the way from Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, Leon Trotsky, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer, to Kristin Ross, Erving Goffman, and Mary Kelly - the 2002 collection provides an indispensable archive of statements about the everyday that informs any work done today on the topic. For this reason, his recent single-authored monograph taking up some of the same issues surrounding ordinary life - this time exclusively in his own voice - is once more of interest to readers drawn to the 'stuff' of daily existence.

Between the earlier anthology and his new work, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, Highmore has written three other monographs on related subjects; so perhaps the current study constitutes something of a summary position on the everyday, an attempt both to take its measure conceptually and to promote its legitimacy as a properly aesthetic object. The book reflects his long-standing focus on the everyday and there is a good deal to learn from it; by the same token, there is also much with which to take issue.

If we first consider its strengths, *Ordinary Lives* reprises the question of experience, looking to sharpen its status as an analytic category: how to think it, how to value it and, above all, how to situate it in relation to aesthetics (as a disciplinary mode of knowing and also as a form of being-in-the-world). Highmore does this by usefully situating historical and philosophical conceptions of the aesthetic - and aesthetics - from Alexander Baumgarten's eighteenth-century ideas to the propositions spread across several volumes of Jacques Rancière's contemporary writings. In between, Highmore is assiduous in citing the scholarship on aesthetics that bears on concrete studies of daily experience and its theorization in the discursive registers of cultural and media studies, symbolic anthropology, psychoanalysis, architecture/urban studies and, of course, philosophy. I say 'of course' because in Baumgarten's time aesthetics was only understood as a subset of philosophy per se, but also

because aesthetic considerations are today a common feature of philosophical discourse at large, whether in political philosophy (Heidegger, Arendt, Rancière) or its socio-cultural counterparts (Adorno, Benjamin).

What *Ordinary Lives* elaborates most successfully is the texture and richness of the aesthetic as an epistemological and experiential concept. So, for instance, it is refreshing to be reminded via Michel de Certeau that a classical conception of aesthetics would have subsumed the senses within it - such that 'leading the good life' would include in its meanings passion as much as reflection. This emphasis allows Highmore to promote a return to an earlier conception of the aesthetic, one that rests on everyday experience and ordinary activities rather than on that which has categorically been separated from necessity, feeling, and practicality. In this sense, the project Highmore pursues makes its bid against Immanuel Kant's proposition of 'disinterested contemplation' as well as the epistemological priority given in the Kantian system to 'pure intuition' as appearance (*Anschauung*).

With that said, the author's engagement with Kant is glancing at best, although he does provide a fuller discussion of the ideas of Kant's Scottish interlocutor, David Hume. Chapter Two, entitled 'Everyday Aesthetics', is one in which Highmore concentrates on Hume and Enlightenment aesthetics more broadly; it is, in my estimation, the strongest chapter in the book not least because the two-fold influence of Hume on Kant and post-Kantian European thought on the one hand, and traditions of American pragmatism and phenomenological criticism on the other, has received scant consideration in cultural studies. This chapter addresses the historical continuum that defines the nexus of feeling, taste, experience, and knowledge - even though these dimensions of the human subject are more often seen to contradict each other than to exist in any coalition. Highmore locates in Hume's ideas an aesthetic investigation of the empirical self, providing him with a foundation to anchor the discussion of subjectivity in relation to a philosophy of taste as well as interest. Nonetheless, Highmore ultimately judges Hume to be exclusionary and ideological with respect to his conception of the perceiving subject, an elitist bias that the author attempts to balance by turning to John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy and, more currently, with reference to Rancière's formulation of an aestheticized politics.

The aestheticization of politics is, however, dangerous territory and whatever may be the merits (or demerits) of Rancière's propositions about a 'political aesthetics', Highmore does not take any account of the powerful arguments against this mode of thinking in critical theory - to wit, the unmitigated rejection of an aestheticized politics in the writings of Benjamin, Adorno, Bloch, Kracauer (authors to whom Highmore also professes to pledge theoretical allegiance). It is possible that he in fact considers Rancière to have been successful at transforming what was historically reactionary about the project of aestheticizing politics into its opposite. Either way, in the haste to embrace Rancière's reconceptualization of politics (emblemized in the ideal

of the 'worker-poet', for example), Highmore's ideas acquire a tinny quality that is not overcome by their being fashionable; nor do they convince one about the necessity of relying on Rancière's statements - which often run the risk of sounding confused or outlandish (e.g., 'the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part' [p49]). To take the previous utterance as an example, the equivocations surrounding subjects who can be counted because they are not counted, or in posing a connection between having a part and not having it, produce the kind of circularity that gives with one hand and takes with the other, resting more on rhetorical flourish than substance. One gets the sense here that in taking his cues from Rancière, Highmore is interested in novelty rather than seriousness, although following what is *au courant* is not the best prescription for generating analytic insights that can endure past the moment. As a result, the problems that already dog forms of 'post-political' thinking (Rancière's being one example) - their voluntarism as much as their extremism - make themselves felt in Highmore's account as well.

These days one can scarcely turn the pages of prominent journals and books without hearing the virtues and complexities of affect, feeling, and thingliness being intoned ritually. It is as if the ineluctable problems of social existence that have long been conceptualized in terms of mystification (Marx), reification (Lukács), second nature (Adorno), and habitus (Bourdieu) - concepts that have been central to historicizing everyday life in the modern world - can now be discarded by the revelation of newly forceful terms. Most if not all of these terms turn on the resurgence of ontological and existential themes in cultural theory and the rejection of Hegelian-Marxist perspectives. It is no surprise then that Highmore too seeks a place for his contentions about the everyday by securing them in assertions about possibility and potentiality (notions enshrined in their respective ways by Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze). The disenchantment of existence under capitalism thus seems to have produced its own contradiction: what used to be theorized as the phantasmagoric forms that the commodity takes under reification are - with complete disregard for entire traditions of critique - revalued in the current critical dispensation as the 'sensible' bases of a new perception not only of the living but also the inanimate world. Indeed, it would seem that in the deep night of post-metaphysical thinking, all cows look (post)human.

Ordinary Lives thus makes its bid for relevance on what is by now a common enough move in cultural criticism, though the fact that it is common should not guarantee its acceptance. This move has to do with the eclectic linking of incompatible ideas in the name of a more supple analysis: if Adorno had offered an astringent critique of 'damaged life' in *Minima Moralia*, it can now be said that his was 'a willfully negative critique of ordinary subjective life' (p68) which, moreover, needs to be corrected by juxtaposing it with Bruno Latour's version of materialism where 'things are social agents too' (p69).

But this is going too far. Even if machines and gadgets (like the device that automatically closes doors behind you) have taken on tasks previously performed by human subjects, this is not evidence of their becoming-subject! Whatever the utility of Latour's hyperbolic contentions, they simply do not bear scrutiny next to Adorno's arguments about the object world - which, it should be recalled, turn on his complex proposal of 'natural history', itself incomprehensible without a dialectical understanding of reification.

Likewise, Benjamin, another of Highmore's apparent theoretical sources, conceived his 'philosophical anthropology' on the principle that the inanimate world can, but *only* through the conscious activity of the historical materialist, shed light on its correspondences with archaic nature on the one hand, and human history, on the other. Severing the work of the Frankfurt School critics from an investment in immanent critique is to distort their unmistakably humanist (but emphatically anti-ontological) arguments about exploding the world of appearances in order to expose the social contradictions that govern them. In this respect, neither Benjamin's nor Adorno's work resembles the primitive, and at best, mechanical, materialism of Latour - whose system renders the conception of agency hollow by aligning it with the 'morality' of the thinking machine.

Unlike Latour, Adorno understood that life is not a Fritz Lang film and, consequently, if the intervention of non-human forms (technology being the most visible) reshapes human experience, it does so as a mark of the withering of subjectivity. For his part, Benjamin sought to conceptualize how the damage to consciousness under capitalism might be overcome, but this was less to celebrate the impact of technology on human existence than to imagine the *détournement* necessary for transforming ordinary habits into the critical attitude required of a revolutionary (or proto-revolutionary) proletariat. It is in his discussion of the concept of distraction (in Chapter Five) that Highmore comes closest to recognizing the dialectical bases of this idea, though he does not mention a key element in both Benjamin's and Kracauer's proposals about distraction: innervation. This term refers to the physiological response of the human nervous system to a technologized environment and is used by both Kracauer and Benjamin along lines derived from the dual influence of Georg Simmel, who first linked innervation to metropolitan life, on the one hand, and on the other, the discourse of Soviet bio-mechanics, a theatrical practice that mimicked mechanical gestures and thereby sought to convert innervated human energies into a positive, as well as collective, social charge.

In each case, distraction and innervation are seen as dialectical hinges for transforming perception and, therefore, as a prerequisite of social transformation rather than as possibilities for the 'creative' appropriation of existing social arrangements or experience. And, yet, in the studied avoidance of anything that might sound so last-century as the idea of social transformation, Highmore repeats the gesture that has become all but

ubiquitous today: ambiguating the stakes of criticism which, no longer wishing to be attached to anything as allegedly doctrinaire as critique, is content to wander lonely as a cloud (or more pertinently perhaps, crowd).

Still, there is a moment in the conclusion where Highmore questions the viability of refashioning the existent as the terrain of a different future. As he says, 'After all, the stress on the singular person and occasion, an emphasis on sensual experience (rather than social structures, for instance) and emotions (rather than political economy, for instance) might not, in the end, be incompatible with the individualizing tendencies of neoliberalism' (p166). That said, he quickly resolves the doubt in favour of the so-called 'new materialism' - defined as 'a materialist turn towards the immaterial, toward affect, toward thingyness, the senses and so on'. Contending that this approach avoids having 'to go in search of material that would be usable for an interpretative framework already established' (p167), that is to say, an approach whose criteria are given *a priori*, Highmore also makes such immersion in the given out to be a political project. But does one have to accept that a focus on the superficial aspects of daily living can generate, on its own, an escape from neoliberal thought? This seems no more convincing than the idea that readings of immaterial affect, sensation, habits or objects somehow occur without an assumptive framework or theoretical predisposition in place. Why should one concede that to valorise the sensory world bespeaks a new materialism and not the return of a Heideggerian jargon of authenticity? It is precisely the snare of spontaneity that the authors in the Marxist and critical-theoretical traditions - whom Highmore draws into his discussion, albeit to idiosyncratic ends - were committed to overthrow. In their radically different vision, the horizon of criticism needs to reach beyond what is practically, pragmatically given; without it, criticism becomes affirmative, ideological. A different book that does not view this philosophical legacy as an embarrassment remains to be written.

POST-CINEMATIC EFFECTS

Paul Bowman

Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, London, Zero Books, 2010, 191pp;
£10.99 paperback

Steven Shaviro's *Post-Cinematic Affect* engages with the effects of post-cinematic technologies on our experiences, orientations, emotions, feelings and lives. 'Post-cinematic' technologies include all that is associated with the rise of interactivity, gaming, multimedia, and the proliferation of different internet platforms, as well as various new types of text, such as the music video, the new ways, modes and contexts of experiencing and consuming them and the effects they have on consciousness and perception. Shaviro considers the rise to dominance of these 'post-cinematic' technologies in terms of a transformation of 'affects': mutations of experiential landscapes, emotional geographies, and perceptual and sensorial ecosystems. Using Raymond Williams' term, yet following and developing a distinctly Deleuzian paradigm, Shaviro characterises this as an epochal transformation in dominant 'structures of feeling'.

If such post-cinematic technologies have transformed structures of feeling, this is not the first time this has happened. Consider the emergence of cinema itself. Rey Chow opens her 1995 book *Primitive Passions* with a reconsideration of the famous story of the turn towards a writing career of the monumental figure of Chinese literature, Lu Xun. Whilst a medical student at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Lu Xun watched with horror newsreels depicting atrocities committed in the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria, including the executions of Chinese people. Chow emphasises the significance of the fact that this new technology (the *cinematic* apparatus) precipitated a peculiar response from Lu Xun: he turned away from medicine and towards *literature*, believing that he could do more to improve the health of China by cultural (or ideological) intervention than by medical intervention.

Central to Chow's reading of this famous narrative is the following: Lu's response to the new cultural technology (cinema) sends him into a relationship with an older technology (literature). From this, Chow proposes that it is possible to perceive the effects of *cinema* in (and on) Lu's *literature*. From this point, one may broaden the perspective and begin to grasp the significance of the emergence of *cinema* in much, if not all, subsequent developments in *literature*. Indeed, we might begin to regard the majority of twentieth-century literature as 'post-cinematic', insofar as it is literature produced in a cultural world into which the cinematic apparatus has intervened. In other words, in the wake of cinema, literature could never be the same again. In this sense, Lu Xun's story is exemplary of the epochal mutation entailed in the shocks

of modernity. Literature in modernity is itself post-cinematic, even if this reverses the chronological periodization and emphasis that organizes Shaviro's title. For, the 'post-cinematic' that Shaviro refers us to is of course all that new stuff that comes *after* cinema: computers, the internet and so on. But, as with Lyotard's 'post-modern', one of the key points about the postmodern is that the 'post' is there at the outset. Postmodern thinkers of the postmodern have long pointed out that the postmodern is implied in and active in the emergence of the modern, right from the start.

Chow's reading of Lu Xun's affective response to these early experiences of (or encounters with) cinema demonstrate this explicitly. The new technology intervenes into, informs and thereby transforms the cultural landscape in ways which have knock on (albeit unpredictable) effects on other forms of cultural production and reception. To see this at a basic level, one need merely consider the extent to which so many literary best-sellers today have clearly been written with the production requirements of the standard Hollywood film form firmly in mind. This is but one register of the hegemony of the cinematic form and its 'hegemonization' of so-called literature.

Nevertheless, Shaviro's book argues that contemporary cultural conditions are such that the cinematic epoch is coming to a close. We are now at the end(s) of the cinematic. This is being registered within cinema, even as cinema remains strongly influential across all of cinema's inheritors. (Hence, the times are 'post-cinematic' and not 'anti' or 'non-cinematic'.) Thus, gaming, all things interactive, the music video, and so forth, all remain hugely informed by cinematography, but they move away from its technological limitations.

Meanwhile, cinema itself attempts to incorporate the new technological advancements: from DVD menus, extras, commentaries, outtakes and other supplements, all the way to the inclusion of forms of interactivity that ultimately signal the demise of the older form. According to this perspective, films like *Blade Runner* or *SI mOne* are not post-cinematic, whilst *The Matrix* and even *Old Boy* are. The former are films about future technologies, whilst the latter incorporate future technologies into themselves, insofar as both films famously affect the styles of computer simulated choreographies in their most famous fight scenes, albeit in different ways: *The Matrix* employs the sharpness and precision of arcade game fights, whilst *Old Boy* incorporates the two-dimensional plane of older forms of computer game, but it counterbalances this with the inclusion of all of the scrappiness, imprecision, stumbling, gasping, moaning and, indeed, *messy brawling*, that almost all action films exclude or repress (as exemplified by the ultra-precise choreography of *The Matrix* or *The Bourne* trilogy).

Quite what the 'affect' of all of this 'is' - if it necessarily has 'one' or if indeed there necessarily *is* 'one' - is, to my mind, irreducibly debatable. In my own first viewing of the famous fight scene in *Old Boy*, for example, I distinctly remember perceiving passion, enjoyment, delight: Oh Dae-su was enjoying his vengeance, I thought. And this reading was eminently in keeping with

the theme the film had introduced earlier, upon Oh Dae-su's first release from his five years of sensual deprivation in captivity: the film showed us his inability to resist, and his delight in, each and every kind of sensual experience. Accordingly, this fight, I supposed, was simply a continuation of that theme: a real orgy of violence. Yet, the director's commentary later informed me that the scene was conceptualised as one of loneliness: Oh Dae-su was the loneliest man in the world; his lack of fear was the lack of fear of someone who has lost everything, all fear, all hope (*anelpis*), all passion ...

So whose reading is 'right', mine or the director's? And what is the 'affect'? To my mind, this 'affect' is not 'one'. There is not one 'affect', nor even one economy, ecosystem, ecology, or whatever of affect(s); just as there is not one reading of one text. Post-cinematic effects, yes, certainly; Shaviro makes an important observation. But affects? I'm not so sure why or how they would be different from everything that postmodern theorists have long been saying about postmodernity. The ultimate question, to me, and the only one which matters, is the extent to which approaching the world in terms of affect offers or adds (or indeed takes or denudes) anything specific for cultural theory and the understanding of culture and politics.

BALDWIN'S ATLANTICS

Babacar M'Baye

Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011, 259pp; paperback \$24.65

James Baldwin: America and Beyond makes forceful contributions to the transnational scholarship on Baldwin's life and works by embedding selected writings of Baldwin within both the national and international contexts that influenced them. The edited book of Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz is an excellent addition to black Atlantic studies by providing essays that reveal Baldwin's complex relationships with America, Africa, France, Turkey and other parts of the world. Without a doubt, this volume provides the first extensive study of Baldwin's relationships with the world outside of the United States.

James Baldwin: America and Beyond is a unique contribution to the transnational study of a major African American writer whose works have increasingly received the attention of scholars attempting to link America to the rest of the world, but not to the broad extent to which the essays of this volume have done. Before the publications of pioneer works such as William J. Weatherby's *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (1989), Michel Fabre's *Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (1991), and David Leeming's *James Baldwin: A Biography* (1994), the scholarship connecting Baldwin to the world outside of the United States was rare. With Ernest A. Champion's *Mr. Baldwin, I Presume: James Baldwin - Chinua Achebe, a Meeting of the Minds* (1995), the three books above opened up the transatlantic study of Baldwin's writings with such varied emphases as Baldwin's initial impressions about racism in France, the legacy of colonialism in Africa, and the influence of this knowledge on the African American writer's identity. Complementing these works, Femi Ojo-Ade's introduction to his book, *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive: African Perspectives on African-American Writers* (1996) and Babacar M'Baye's essays, 'The Image of Africa in the Travel Narratives of W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr' (2003) and 'African Retentions in Go Tell It on the Mountain' (2006), helped bring Baldwin back to transnational studies by revealing his ambivalent relationships with Africa and some of the Francophone African participants at the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris. The interpretation of Baldwin's works in a transnational framework is an ongoing endeavor that was tremendously enhanced with the publication of Magdalena J. Zaborowska's book, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (2009) and her essay, "'In the Same Boat': James Baldwin and the Other Atlantic' (2009), which both show the significance of Baldwin's works in Turkey, beyond the local and international settings in which they used to be confined.

Kaplan and Schwarz's book make tremendous contributions to the above scholarship, since the essays within it effectively study both the local and transnational relevance of Baldwin's life and works. The first six chapters of the book examine Baldwin's life and works as the development of a black writer who always searched for his identity both within and outside the boundaries of America's national character. These chapters interpret Baldwin's intellectual heritage as the legacy of an American patriot who perfectly understood and embodied the exceptional qualities of his national identity to a point that he also knew its limitations. In this sense, as Cheryl A. Wall suggests, Baldwin was a master of the art of 'strategic American exceptionalism', since he 'repudiates in particular the myths and illusions of the American exceptionalism proposed by American studies scholars' while he 'extends this genealogy and affirms the democratic ideals enunciated in the letters of the republic' (p37). Wall's essay suggests the complex duality in Baldwin's perception of America that many of the contributions in the collection also reveal. While he valued the significance of American national symbols, Baldwin did not perceive these identity markers as unique and perfect. For instance, as Wall points out, 'Baldwin was always aware of the connections between Europe and the United States and noted that the principles of democracy of which Americans were so proud were in fact the legacy of European thinkers. The larger question that the American experience raises is whether such a thing as a multiracial democracy is possible' (pp37-38).

Moreover, Baldwin was a firm believer in America's potential to create and enhance a society whose diversity could become the envy of the rest of the world. Yet he was occasionally doubtful about the subsistence of this hybrid and inclusive nation in which white supremacy, sectarian thinking, and ruthless Cold War politics threatened to destroy the foundations of possible democracy. Therefore, Baldwin's diagnostic of American society was both personal and acerbic, since it reflected his desperate attempt to prevent a troubled nation that he loved greatly from going asunder. Colm Tóibín captures Baldwin's interiorization of this national predicament when he writes: 'He saw the dilemma his country faced as essentially an interior one, a poison which began in the individual spirit and only made its way then into politics. His political writing remains as raw and vivid as his fiction because he believed that social reform could not occur through legislation alone but through a reimagining of the private realm' (p57). By examining this 'private realm' through the music of Miles Davis and Ray Charles where he searched for 'melancholy beauty' and 'solitary pain' that resonated with 'his prose style and the structure of his novels' (p54), Tóibín's essay reflects the tragic duality that permeates Baldwin's relationships with America.

In a similar way, the last six essays of Kaplan and Schwarz's volume explore Baldwin's personal and conflicted evaluation of America's psyche. Yet these essays stand apart from the previous ones, since they also focus on the transnational importance of Baldwin's life and works. For instance,

Kevin Birmingham's essay is centered on Baldwin's diagnostic of the anguish of American society within a transnational framework. Birmingham writes: 'Baldwin diagnosed the United States as a global disaster whose epicenter was the individual's nonexistent private life' (pp142-143). According to Birmingham, Baldwin used *The Fire Next Time* as an opportunity to help America confront its dilemma by establishing the direct links between this predicament and those of African Americans (p143). Expanding this impasse into the transnational sphere, Birmingham shows the important role that Negritude and the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris played in Baldwin's global understanding of the problems facing blacks at the middle of the twentieth century. This transnational focus is apparent in Birmingham's representation of Baldwin as a writer who appreciated how the 1956 Congress 'fueled' his 'nascent interest in collective memory by generating in him a deeper appreciation for collective memory's relationships to the land' (p146). Such an emphasis on land is important since it suggests what Birmingham calls Baldwin's 'imagining [of] a negritude native to American soil' (146). By studying the extent to which Baldwin's participation in the 1956 Congress influenced his perception of his national character, Birmingham refocuses critical attention on the crucial issue of African American relationships with other blacks who were in France in the middle of the twentieth century.

In a similar vein, Douglas Field's brilliant contribution to the book refocuses critical attention on Baldwin's relationships with black intellectuals who participated in the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris. Placing Baldwin's relations with Africa in the tradition of African American writers who had what Ojo-Ade calls the "love-hate relationship" between "Blacks from Africa and those in the United States" (p211), Field examines the personal and ideological disagreements that Baldwin had with the African participants of the congress, such as Alioune Diop and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Field writes: 'Baldwin in fact claimed that the participants at the conference "disgusted him", keenly aware that "this meant sooner or later a great clash between myself and someone like that"' (p216). Illustrating Baldwin's apprehension about the ideas of some of the African participants of the 1956 Congress, Field suggests the dismissive attitudes the African American author expressed towards Diop. According to Field, 'Singling out Alioune Diop, Baldwin recollected that the Senegalese writer "frightened me because of his extraordinary way of being civilized and primitive at the same time"' (p216). Yet, according to Field, Baldwin had a somewhat different attitude towards Senghor since, he was 'attracted to Senghor's theories on the lack of division in African culture between life and art', although he questioned 'Senghor's claim that the heritage of the African American is straightforwardly African' (p218).

Moreover, Field's essay shows that Baldwin had a deep appreciation of Chinua Achebe whose *Things Fall Apart* he regarded as a book about his father (p222). Likewise, Eleanor W. Traylor suggests close connections

between Baldwin and Achebe. Using Joseph Harris' concept of '*diaspora*' (meaning new space for being)' as a 'conceptual and methodical comparative approach [that] clearly has potential for the reconstruction of African history' (pp229-230), Traylor provides a compelling study of the relations between Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Things Fall Apart* (1959). Her essay suggests the similar ways in which Baldwin and Achebe appropriate a common language for depicting the pain of living in societies in which the options of difference were limited by taboo and tradition. Overcoming this restriction, Baldwin and Achebe, as Traylor argues, 'restaged profound insights that shatter idols of the clan and had made visible spaces that liberate discourses of the wonderful' (p239).

Kaplan and Schwarz's volume also includes the excellent contributions of Kevin Gaines, D. Quentin Miller and Magdalena J. Zaborowska, which also give thoughtful insights about Baldwin's relations with America and the rest of the world. In his essay, Gaines argues that Baldwin was entangled in America's Cold War politics. He states: "To be sure, Baldwin could not escape Cold War tensions. His interest in specifying his relationship to America as an African American abroad was fodder for US propaganda defending the image of America overseas. In "Princes [and Powers]," Baldwin notably contrasted what he called the relative openness of American society with the absolute exclusion practiced by colonial societies' (p176). Therefore, Baldwin consciously defended American exceptionalism even if he might have done so for both strategic and genuine reasons. One such genuine reason could be to achieve the political maturity Baldwin gained between his early days in France and the early 1960s when he became more aware of the global nature of oppression. Focusing on Baldwin's experiences after he was released from a French Prison on December 27, 1949, Miller effectively examines the African American writer's failed suicide attempt and his representation of the law in both his book, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), and his later-published essay, 'Equals in Paris'.

In a comparable way, Zaborowska's essay provides a persuasive analysis of the transnational meaning of Baldwin's third play, *The Welcome Table* (1987). Discussing the strong impact that Baldwin's experiences in Turkey had on this book, Zaborowska observes: '*The Welcome Table* can be seen as a work that represents Baldwin's Turkish decade, most clearly in its genesis in Istanbul but also in his preoccupation with new literary forms and themes that he first embraced while living in Turkey and that he was to develop further in his later works written in France' (p189). In this sense, Baldwin experimented with multiple cultures and artistic expressions, revealing the complexity that Hortense Spillers nicely encapsulates in her 'Afterword' to the book where she writes: 'Baldwin, then, remained true to what otherwise might have been a stark, if not untenable, contradiction, except that his giftedness worked it out as the seamless fabric of a prophetic commitment' (p243). Baldwin's commitment is visible in the tireless struggle for freedom from oppression

that he showed throughout his life and works while incessantly valuing the special viewpoints that his life abroad gave him about the meaning of American identity.

James Baldwin: America and Beyond is a major contribution to the study of Baldwin's life and works. It provides compelling insights on Baldwin's thoughts about the meaning of race, class, sexuality and other important themes during times when he lived or traveled outside of the United States. While exploring these insights, the essays show the constant ways in which America's exceptionalism, ambiguities, racism, and other conditions influenced Baldwin's life and works abroad, during years when he attempted to understand and articulate intricate relationships between both his American legacy, his African American heritage, and his personal identity abroad.

RESISTING DECONSTRUCTION

Molly Macdonald

Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference*, Carolyn Shread (trans),
Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011, 180 pp; £14.99 paperback

Catherine Malabou's *Changing Difference* is a deeply personal work. The rawness of her intent is found peppered through this intellectually complex and suggestive text. At times it strikes the reader as a kind of defensiveness, for example: 'And at this point in the argument don't tell me that I hide behind the "authority" of Hegel or Heidegger too often. I've worked hard in my own way to make their lives impossible too' (p137). At others, a strange kind of intimacy: '(And, dear sisters, I tell you now in confidence that even today I enjoy the satisfaction and secret joy of having "become just as strong as them" during this time and of having very soon lost all fear of anyone in philosophy)' (p 114). These rather unexpected moments offer respite from the complicated arguments that she is putting forward, but in the end can be seen as essential to them. As readers we are prepared for an intimate address. There is nothing hidden in her declaration that she starts from her 'own personal situation', and if the reader is a woman, Malabou's address feels particularly personal. Malabou notes in her introduction that, 'first and foremost, I write for the women I love, the ones I do not know and who suffer mistreatment. I write, too, for the women I know, the ones who, in their very way of being, carry with them something like an un-lived memory of the others, a fragility that does not try to hide. I write for these women, who, for this reason, are my friends' (p4). It is all too rare in academic work of this calibre to find such a heartening and earnest address.

I highlight this personal nature of Malabou's work because it is at the foundation of her politics, is perhaps even the ethical core of her project, and because it is crucial to understanding the movement of thinking that takes place in *Changing Difference*. Malabou is drawing a road map of sorts which she hopes other women can follow, a set of interventions, a model of resistance against the deconstruction of the feminine and, against, or at least a way out of, the intellectual work of Deconstruction itself. Readers who have come across Malabou before will know that she is a former student of Derrida's and indeed he is a powerful presence in her body of work, both explicitly (for example, he wrote the introduction to her first book *The Future of Hegel* (2004), which was based on her doctoral thesis, completed under his supervision; and co-authored *Counterpath: Travelling with Derrida* (2004) and so on) and implicitly, as most intellectual mentors might, haunting work of their students. Yet *Changing Difference* seems finally to be a distinct breaking away from the intimacy of this particular relationship and Malabou does not

hold back from expressing how charged this particular bid for intellectual freedom might be, or what kind of grief it might cause, or come to. The work, in part, charts the difficulty of stepping out of the shadows and the realities of violence - theoretical political, and physical - to which women are subjected on a daily basis. We must here take the meaning of deconstruction as it has become bound to Derrida's thinking and to a concept of 'writing', alongside a political and physical deconstruction of women the world over (although what this means on the level of the particular, rather than the universal, is never specified.) Malabou asks that we walk the line between these arenas so that we can 'displace the concept of writing' (p3) as the site of importance, and presumably so that Malabou herself can explain the freedom from the legacy of Derridean deconstruction that she is able to achieve, and simultaneously so we can begin to form a new set of responses to the violence done against women.

At stake in this project is Malabou's attempt to find a way out of the impasse of modern feminism, out of what she characterizes as the two types of feminism at work today. The first is one that circles around the question of sexual difference and which thus analyses notions of power and domination. The second type of feminism she locates as arising out of American gender studies and queer theory, which 'challenges the binary division of the "genders"' (p1). Malabou contends that the question of sexual difference has never been considered as an ontological question and she wishes to put into conversation queer theory, deconstruction, and these two strands of feminism. Yet, as the text unfolds we find that Malabou sees traps set down in all existing avenues of exploration: 'Philosophy is woman's tomb' (p100); deconstruction does not 'offer women any freedom to create' (p118); and feminism, alongside deconstruction, has misunderstood and, wrongly, distanced itself from the idea of essence, depriving woman of any state of being except one defined by a kind of negation, a 'hollowing out' (front matter). In place of essence as substance, either ontological or natural, then, Malabou wants to conceptualize essence as the 'originary movement', as 'transformability' (p136-37) as woman's possibility, and more than that, a kind of resistance, 'an essence that is resistant because empty' (front matter). Hers is a process of 'un-marrying, de-coupling, divorcing' herself 'a little from philosophy' (p141) and of moving away from the confines of deconstruction towards this new possibility.

To this end, *Changing Difference* is organized as a set of four essays, the first three of which work with one another and towards the fourth, but not in any systematic manner. In her first essay, 'The meaning of the "feminine"', Malabou interrogates the concept of the 'feminine' as it relates to the category of 'woman' while acknowledging that the idea of the feminine cannot necessarily be confined to woman. Here she engages with Butler, Heidegger, Levinas, Irigaray, Jean-Luc Nancy and Derrida in some philosophical gymnastics about the ontology of sexual difference. She credits Irigaray with being 'one of the only people to think explicitly together ontology and gender

differences' (p10) and poses the question 'What is feminism if it involves eradicating its origin, woman?' (p36). Malabou cautions against turning femininity into a fetish, purely a site of fragility, but she is also suspicious about modes of caution that warn us *against* the reductions, the essentializing, of woman. Underlying the twists in her thinking, there is a move Malabou begins to make here to try and find or perhaps rescue a kind of essence for woman that is not a simple biological reduction but is ontological.

'Grammatology and Plasticity', the second essay, finds Malabou tarrying with Derrida and his project as set forth in *On Grammatology* and elsewhere, and it is here that we see the strength of the burgeoning bid for freedom that Malabou let us know about in the introduction. She explores the concept of difference as arising out of Derrida's notion of writing and finds there is a dead end in the concept of writing and specifically of the trace, or at least enough of a dead end that we have a choice if there is to be any kind of philosophical creativity. We must either 'recognize that deconstruction is dead and repeat that this is the case, or we accept the new change in modification, in other words a change of difference. If the second option carries the day, then philosophical invention consists in refusing to repeat or pastiche a gesture that can no longer produce difference' (p66). As Malabou notes, this is a move that Derrida himself saw in *Margins of Philosophy*, and in so noting, Malabou is rejecting Derrida but seemingly with his permission.

Arguably, the biggest theoretical tool in Malabou's arsenal is the concept of 'plasticity', a concept that she has consistently harnessed in her work, from *The Future of Hegel* to *What Should We do with our Brains* (2008) and elsewhere. In *Changing Difference* the working through of the concept of neuronal plasticity, particularly in 'Grammatology and Plasticity' and the third of the four essays, 'The phoenix, the spider, and the salamander', is Malabou's route out of the Derridean trap of writing and deconstruction. For Malabou, 'we no longer live in the epoch of writing' (p57) and her appeal to neurobiology comes in order to explore the concept of the 'graphic trace'. If writing refers, according to Malabou's reading of Derrida, to 'coincidence between the production and opening of difference' (p50), then we must attend to her push to move beyond 'writing' as the scene of production into a world of plasticity. This means that, as her title indicates, there is a shift, a change, in the idea of 'difference'.

Readers of *What Should we do with our Brains* will be prepared for this shift into the language of synaptic plasticity as Malabou draws it out of neurobiology. I find her arguments entirely compelling and the concept of plasticity to be vital to the way in which we can think, metaphorically and very literally about our brains, our selves, our sense of agency and of the potential for freedom that plasticity offers. Malabou explains: 'As we know, plasticity refers to a dual ability to receive form (clay is plastic) and give form (as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery). The deconstruction of concepts must therefore now be apprehended as a change of form, a metamorphosis'

(p63). What is most inspiring about the concept of plasticity is the manner in which it has shifted how we look at ourselves; it is the way in to seeing our brains as constant works in progress, not a fixed entity that our lived experience simply inscribes and sets. Therefore, as Malabou discusses, our brains are not simply to be 'read', the 'neurobiologist is not, or is no longer, a grammatologist' (p62). If following Malabou we take plasticity seriously, then we must also re-consider the meaning of writing. The task is no longer 'the tracing of the trace' and instead we should be concerned with the 'formation of form' (p63). Malabou takes us through a thrilling reading of a passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he states "'the wounds of spirit heal and leave no scars behind'" (p73) in order to give us a model of the 'process of recovery, healing, return, the re-knitting of the skin after the wound, in other words, the plasticity that appears as the very movement of the absolute' (p73). She reads this alongside *differánce*, which also leaves no scar. The 'text always reconstitutes itself' after the violence of reading and interpretation, while the traces remain. Yet, much as she engages with Hegel here, she is attempting to move away from him, just as she is attempting to move away from Derrida, to think about plasticity as 'the resistance of *differánce* to its graphic reduction' which really means something that is not written (p87). What this all means for her project regarding feminism comes to fruition in the fourth and final essay.

In 'Woman's possibility, philosophy's impossibility', Malabou is at her most personal and passionate about the deadlock that previous forms of thinking have left the category of woman in. There is no conceding here on the 'fight for women's liberation' and what Malabou wants to know is 'what remains of the feminine after its deconstruction'. What remains is 'woman's overexposure to dual exploitation', in society and at home (p93). It is this very real violence that is coupled with the violence taken by deconstruction and queer theory that has emptied woman of her essence, has not allowed her to define herself 'except through the violence done to her' (p98) and here Malabou turns to her own experience as a 'woman philosopher' in order to explore the repercussions of this hollowing out.

Changing Difference has much in common with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The two texts share an impulse to 'think back through the mothers' to try and locate a kind of history to which modern women can turn to find bolstering inspiration for their own endeavours, literary in the case of Woolf and philosophical in that of Malabou. For Woolf, there is the question of writing both without being completely bound to the idea of 'woman' and Malabou, in her turn, is asking, 'What is the life of a woman philosopher?' (p99). She argues that the term itself is inane and that women do not do "'women's" philosophical work' (p102). Yet herein lies one of the central problems that Malabou diagnoses. They do not do 'women's work' because the only option open to them is to become brilliant mimics of male philosophers. Recall above her confession to her 'sisters' that she fought to

become 'just as strong as' the male philosophers. She further admits that with Derrida as a supervisor she was 'doomed to mimic a double mastery', the first that of the classical philosopher and second 'the mastery of a feminine or feminist Derrida' which caused her to suffer from 'the violence of this double mimicry' (pp107-108). Here, her kind of divorce from deconstruction comes to fruition. I will not spoil the fullness of her confessions and story here, because these are some of the most powerful sections of her text to be experienced by the reader. Much in the same way that Woolf offered the power of the androgynous mind (although this, too, is not without its critics) as a way out of the impasse of being a woman writer and as a way of carving out a presence for herself and those that would follow, Malabou offers to women philosophers 'the beginning of a new fire; the prelude to new forms' (p93) a kind of map of resistance, to a life of mimicry, to a presence as a hollowing out.

A criticism that can be, and most likely will be, launched at Malabou is that her engagement with other feminist philosophers and theorists is predominantly limited to a handful of end notes (and the absence of Kristeva in all but one note is a bit puzzling). Fair recognition is given to de Beauvoir, Butler and Irigaray, but if this were a text with a different form, there would be space for an engagement with contemporary thinkers like Elizabeth Grosz or indeed any of the women found in the volume of essays *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (1997). However, I think it is important to keep in mind that Malabou seeks recognition for a kind of feminine space that very well may be impossible, but one that lies beyond the dispute of 'is there or is there not an "essence" of woman'. Clearly, the range of works on the topic of essentialism is vast and as generous readers we must first take on board that Malabou's own intervention has no claims to a system or allegiance to the body of existing work as such. We then must assume that Malabou's engagement with this debate is more implicitly than explicitly traced and part of this loops back to her claims that the idea of putting into question sexual difference and the shift from one feminism to the other has never been considered from a philosophical point of view, that gender has never been taken back to its ontological source. So, although there will be criticism that she has not engaged with the wider debates here, she shores her own argument up against this by setting forth these new parameters, by attempting to redraw the boundaries. There may be readers who are frustrated by this approach but I would argue that Malabou's attempts to separate herself from all existing routes of engagement, as she writes 'to "do without"', to leave behind the masculine, the feminine, and all the other models' needs to be given space and time to breathe. She asks that we take on board that 'A time comes when we know that philosophy has nothing more to offer, that it cannot welcome the fugitive essence of women, that gender studies or deconstruction cannot do so either' (p140). For Malabou this means it is time for a new way of thinking.