

# CORPUS INTERRUPTUS

## An Introduction to the Forum Kritika on Theorizing Corporeality in the Climate Change Era

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### About the author

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**CORPUS INTERRUPTUS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE “BODY FORUM KRITIKA”**

This Forum Kritika was interrupted in many ways at many points by the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that reminded a global population of its delicate corporeality and its vulnerabilities to interruptions from the very smallest to the very largest of things, from viruses to climate, from the microscopic to the hyperobjectively large. It was like the Officer of the Court knocking at your door and serving you notice of your duties to appear in court, but this Officer is doing something else—namely, confirming your corporeality (rather than your identity) and *then* serving you notice:

“Do you have a body?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been served.”

It was neither a subpoena to appear nor a warrant; rather, we have been given notice that we are vulnerable and that this vulnerability may prove a liability at any point from this time forward. Each of the articles in this Forum Kritika engages with this notice of corporeal vulnerability through perspectives that reveal deep and important connections between theorizing about the body and theorizing about the environment.

The two-day international conference itself out of which this Forum Kritika grew was interrupted, and although there were a handful of actual physical participants, the bulk of the presentations were virtual. The pandemic was just beginning as the dates of the conference approached. Many other conferences were canceled, but we decided to run ours. “Bodies in the Climate Change Era”—co-hosted by Sungkyunkwan University (Seoul), Konkuk University (Seoul), and Sichuan University (Chengdu)—ran from May 29th (at Konkuk) to May 30th 2020 (at Sungkyunkwan). A few of the papers at the conference and in this collection reference the pandemic, but we all know the immensity of its corporeal impacts.

We collected the articles that comprise this Forum Kritika around the belief that theorizing about the body has never been more urgent than in our current era of climate change. There are, as Stacy Alaimo has written, “potent ethical and political possibilities [that] emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” (2). In the decade or so since she first penned those words, these ethical and political possibilities have become even more urgent, and the borders of the contact zones themselves have become more blurred. Climate change has had increasingly intimate corporeal implications (especially in the Global South), and the widening gap between the rich and the poor has only exacerbated these matters, as has the global rise in right-wing

extremism. And while exciting advances in genetic research, stem cell technologies, and silicon-based prosthetics offer startling rewards of comfort and longevity, they also prompt concern about corporeal borders and boundaries—physical and ethical. One of the concerns of this collection has been to have nuanced analyses about these matters. We may live our days thinking that we are untouched by or that we can avoid genetic engineering, as if eating non-GMO foods and living well is enough, but this is all very delusional.

I write in the waning days of my sabbatical on a late June afternoon, Vancouver sweltering below me with record-breaking heat, no breeze blowing, unwelcome smells of marijuana and traffic oozing through my open window, the sun reflecting blindingly off of English Bay, the Lions Peaks still bright with snow (but less than is usual for this time of the year), jackhammers and sirens in the distance, a dog barking closer at hand, and the roar of the city constant. A regular summer day, except for the heat (as I write, the town of Lytton, British Columbia just hit the highest temperature ever recorded in North America, at 49.6 Celsius). There is, apart from the heat, another very irregular thing going on: inside my body, a small amount of genetically modified messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) is quietly re-programming some cells in my body. I chose to have injected into my body genetic sequences that had been manipulated and reconstructed to encode proteins unique to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes the disease called COVID-19 (the corona virus disease of 2019). Simple English: I got my COVID-19 vaccinations. The genetically modified material injected into my arm prompts cells to produce spike proteins similar to what enables the coronavirus to penetrate healthy cells in infected people. The injected material (the mRNA vaccine) causes my immune system to produce antibodies and T-cells that, ideally, will fight off the coronavirus, if I should become exposed to it. I mention all of this for two reasons: firstly, at this point in our history, wholesale condemnations of genetic engineering are untenable; and secondly, the global climate is changing, with record-setting temperatures each year surpassing the record-setting temperatures of the year before. Our bodies clearly are subject to many things that are not going away any time soon: Pandora's Box has been open for a while now.

This Forum Kritika analyzes some of the material that has spilled out of that box and has tried to address, with quite varying degrees of success, several questions. It has sought both theoretical understandings of literary and cinematic corporeality in the climate change era as well as to discuss the ways in which various natural materials threaten human corporeal integrity. Now more than before COVID-19 perhaps, we may wonder about the microbial threats we face as the organisms our vaccines and antibiotics control become immune—not a topic that the Forum explicitly addresses but one that is tacitly wound up in some of the discussions. The

threats are many indeed. If Ed Yong is correct in asserting that we have been, are now, and always will be living in an age in which microbial organisms determine virtually everything (hence prompting Yong to prefer the term “Microbiocene” over “Anthropocene”), then how might we talk about “human” corporeality (given the fact that we are genomically only a fraction human, most of our bulk consisting of symbiotic nonhuman microbes)? What are the relationships between violence (ecological, cybernetic, psychological, physical, symbolic, racial, and so on) and the imagined integrity/*dis*integration of the body as both an ontological and material space, and how are these relationships impacted by climate change? How can we theorize about the ways in which our phobias (ecophobia, transphobia, germophobia, homophobia, and so on) compromise modalities of the production and transformations of bodies? This Forum Kritika is informed by New Materialist theories about agency and matter that have led to productive analyses of intersections among gender, race, food, sexuality, class, and species as they relate with corporeal issues and climate change (what E. Ann Kaplan refers to as “border events” of extreme weather, such as Hurricane Sandy or Typhoon Haiyan). Perhaps above all, this Forum raises far more questions than it answers—timely questions as we tentatively and nervously put our bodies back out into the dangerous world after exasperating isolations and quarantines and lockdowns. As humanity creeps out from hiding, the body is the battleground.

This Forum Kritika is broken into three roughly even sections: the first, comparative literary analyses of the impacts of climate change on the body; the second, discussions of literary and filmic representations of physical landscapes and comparative corporeal theory; and the third, examinations of different modes and means of conceptualizing the body.

In the first section, Chao Xie’s “Reading Corporeality in the Climate Change Era: A Comparative Study of Seamus Heaney’s and Hua Hai’s Ecological Poetry” compares the British poet Seamus Heaney’s and the Chinese poet Hua Hai’s ecological poetry by drawing on corporeal theories of the West and the East. Xie argues that both authors write with deep concern about climate change and stress the prominence of corporeality in addressing current climatic issues. Xie shows how Heaney emphasizes the material agency of and the immediate bodily responses to climate, which material ecocriticism and affective theory advocate for. Hua, on the other hand, is greatly influenced by Confucian and Daoist philosophies of the body and offers a non-Western perspective which views the human body and nature as both materially and spiritually interrelated. Under Hua’s pen, Xie shows, different bodies, whether human or nonhuman, can communicate and transform into each other, because they constitute different but equal forms of *qi* that are non-static and forever moving. By reading the work of the two poets in different cultural

contexts, Xie points out the necessity and importance of engaging with theories about corporeality in current climate change discourse.

Also in the first section, Young-Hyun Lee's "Body, Genetic Manipulation, and Climate Change in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*" shows that the impact of climate change on our bodies has become more evident than ever before. With the dependence on genetic technologies sharply increasing, as the development of vaccines shows, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, our concerns are also growing because genetic engineering has profound consequences for human corporealities. This importance is represented in the Paradise Project episode in the novel. As human and nonhuman animal bodies are used as materials for the gene industry, the possibility of their being mistreated is growing. Our failure, though, to notice the important agencies within human and nonhuman genes might result in dismissing the entanglement between human and nonhuman nature. As demonstrated by the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, it is becoming hard to answer in a word whether humanity can do without gene technologies.

The second section of this Forum Kritika begins with Péter Hajdu's "Toxic Environments in *The Handmaid's Tale*, its Sequels, and Other Feminist Dystopias," which analyzes the usually spare hints that recent feminist dystopias share about the reasons for the somber future they represent. Hajdu scrutinizes the bodily nature of those reasons and how dystopic societies focus on the female body when they try to cope with their various challenges. Hajdu's argument gives special importance to the sequels of *The Handmaid's Tale*, both in the book medium and the television series. In most of the novels discussed in the paper, some environmental challenges can be detected in the background—such as pollution, climate change, or epidemics. The insights of trans-corporeality make it evident that all the environmental challenges affect the female body and—what is of primary importance for the political focus of dystopic writing—its reproductive organs. However, the oppressive systems of Gilead and its use of fertility crises, Hajdu argues, serve as a pretext to establish a misogynistic society in the narratives.

The other article in this section is Yina Cao's "Bodies and Body Politics of China's Northeastern Rust Belt." Cao argues that the rust belt in China, although less well-known than the American post-industrial areas, is an important topic in corporeal studies. This article uses two works that are representative of the Northeastern rust belt: Zhang Meng's film *The Piano in a Factory* (2010) and Shuang Xuetao's novella *Moses on the Plain*. For Cao, these works reveal the value of the metaphor of body politics for the Chinese situation and, in particular, the implications of "organ" metaphors describing the "rust belt." Cao proposes that even though the social body takes economic growth as a nutrient, the rust belt is generally regarded as a dysfunctional organ in China. Such a view does not promote a sense of self-worth

among the northeastern men but instead traps them within metaphors of death, decay, and decline. Cao shows how both the metaphorical body of China and real physical bodies of men and women are impacted by the decline of industry and the growth of the rust belt.

The final three articles constitute the final section of this Forum Kritika. Peina Zhuang's "A Comparative Cultural Study of the 'Body' in Chinese and Western Scholarship" examines how comparative cultural studies on the body between China and the West has been receiving increasing attention in Chinese scholarship. Zhuang shows that articles and books on this scholarship center on exploring and elaborating the similarities and differences in corporeal theories of each side. These theories, Zhuang maintains, are good sites for showcasing cultural differences in the areas of aesthetics, history, philosophy, and so on. The article analyzes and summarizes the features and problems in the comparative cultural study of the body in Chinese scholarship. It argues that present studies in this respect can best be seen as ways to display or explore the corporeal theories of China and the West, since these studies usually focus on the elaboration of the views about the body from one side or the other. What is needed, Zhuang maintains, is a greater synthesis of material by each side of the other. Only in this way can meaningful global corporeal theory and research move forward.

Won-Chung Kim's "The Nomad of the Naked Body': the Trans-corporeal Eco-poetics of Sunwoo Kim" takes us to Korean corporeality and the work of Sunwoo Kim. This article argues that Sunwoo Kim's trans-corporeal poetics boldly asserts our essential corporeality and embeddedness in nature and that this constitutes the very basis of her feminist and ecological poetry. At the core of Kim's trans-corporeal poetics, quite ahead of the materialistic turn within environmental humanities, is her special sense of the body. For her, poetry is a bodily response to the cries and wounds of the many things in the world. With her nomadic body that freely crosses the boundaries between humanity and nature, she articulates a new poetics through her work on food and love. This is accentuated most poignantly in her poems about eating, as it is an act of traversing the boundary of one's body and incorporating other bodies into one's body. Our ecological crises and worsening climate change are, Sunwoo Kim believes, due to our untenable hubris and our misconception that nature is a dead and inert resource for humanity's use. She unhesitatingly insists that a revolution in our perception is needed: we need to see bodies as living in their ecosystems and to understand that there is a mutual interdependence and interpenetration through trans-corporeal interaction. These are most urgently needed for the continued survival of humanity.

Finally, my own "Humanizing Corporeal Spectacle: Humor and Resistance in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" explains that Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is a

startling set of representations about a man disfigured and disabled by a horrific industrial accident. I argue that because the novel is narrated in the first person from a young man who is so severely deformed that he prefers to be called “Animal,” the reader can poignantly perceive the distance between the impersonal corporation behind the accident and the intensely personal corporeal effects on the people in the area. The narrator’s endearing cockiness and sense of humor drive the plot and the message in ways that are both urgent and intimate, visceral and proximal, intense and shocking. Sinha’s *Animal’s People* reveals that the effects of an environmental disaster linger long after the event itself and that dealing with these effects means recognizing our place in a world inhabited by many other agents—some living, many not. *Animal’s People* complicates what it means to be human, in the process offering the narrator’s body both as a site of spectacle and as a lived site of endurance and resistance. Horrific though the topic is, Sinha’s choice of narrator allows humor—a choice not only viable but, indeed, necessary for the success of the narrative.

The articles collected here all show that the body is the central site through which narratives about environmental problems take form. These problems and their interruptions of the body are far from localized or regional issues, as the diversity and breadth of discussions in this Forum Kritika clearly reveal. We have been given notice that our bodies are vulnerable and that this vulnerability may prove a liability at any point from this time forward. It is a notice that each of the following articles recognize, but in very different ways.

## Works Cited

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