



# Introduction: Building Bodies for Thought

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While academic thinking increasingly shapes itself along the structure of the scientific journal article, compelling steadfast arguments that smoothly steer readers from question to conclusion (Grünfeld 2020), a growing volume of work



pushes back; pushes for thinking, analysis and theory characterised by “openness, attunement, and responsivity” (Throop 2018), that “stays with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) and “acknowledge[s] the uncertainties of interpretations and knowledge-making” (Andersen and Høybye 2021). Rather than argumentative linearity, such work creates “zones of undecidability” (Badiou 2009, 45) – zones where theory stands forth “as a mode of thought that takes place (...) in the middle of attachments and threats, of what lingers and what jumps” (Stewart 2017, 196). But what does such thought and thinking entail in practical terms?

With this thematic thread, we suggest that this kind of theorising and thinking requires another body than the one traditionally trained for academia – a body that is more receptive, more sentient, more response-able. It is no secret that the notion of the body upon which we draw is Merleau-Pontyan. For Merleau-Ponty the body-subject was the zero-point of our engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012); it embodies our trajectory as historical subjects; frames our thinking through image schematas (Johnson 1990); reflects upon itself as a ‘thing’ in the world and becomes other to itself (Leder 1990). But we are here less concerned with the question of what a body is. Rather, inspired by Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza (1988), the question we are engaging is what a body might be able to do – and what kind of thinking that becomes with such body-doings.

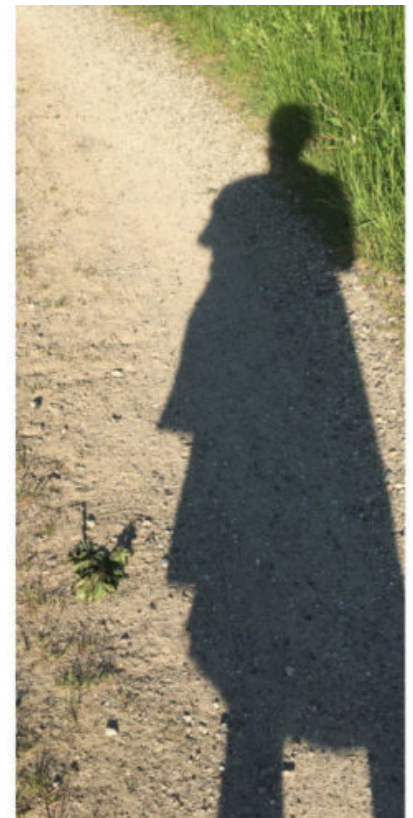
*With this thematic thread, we suggest that this kind of theorising and thinking requires another body than the one traditionally trained for academia – a body that is more receptive, more sentient, more response-able.*

There is no standard body in the texts we feature here, only bodies in the midst of diverse doings; knitting, singing, crowing, imagining, walking on eggshells or dancing with sticks, moved by ghosts, a bug, maelstroms of blood or photosynthesis. These bodies did not at first or at all times feel fine in such doings; all academically trained, most of them anthropologically so, many found themselves cramped with embarrassment when asked or wishing themselves to be more sentient, receptive, response-able in their academic practices. Trying to





sense affective responses to an academic article (cf. Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019), move with a concept (Dumit 2017) or experiment with attuning to other perspectives than human ones (Myers 2014), is indeed a risky endeavour within many academic communities – it makes you vulnerable to accusations of being unacademic, unscientific, too subjective; too much. No wonder then, that to think other thoughts, we need other kinds of training than those most commonly favour in academia; methodologies that take advantage of rather than shy away from the fact that all activities involve not only intellectual but also affective and bodily engagement (see e.g. Andersen and Høybye 2021; Ballestero & Winthereik 2021; Dumit 2017; Myers 2014; Schoeller & Thorgeirsdottir 2019). The specific methodologies we are interested in here all aim to train bodies for the kinds of thinking that can “defrost” (Mattingly 2019), “sensitize” (Latour 2014) and “enliven” (Guyer 2013) concepts; thinking that moves and flexes in response to the weights, wonders and worries of worlds beyond their own.



So, what are these methodologies? With the explicit aim of featuring work by



people with varying degrees of academic experience *and* a willingness to experiment with the academic style and genre, the essays in the present thematic thread spring from three workshop-series, we have facilitated the past couple of years: a six-week course for MA anthropology students; a two-day workshop for Ph.D. students from art and design; and a three-day collaborative seminar for anthropologists trained in body-based methodologies. In addition, we have invited a contribution from Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir, one of the initiators of the program, [Training Embodied Critical Thinking](#) - a training in which we ourselves have participated. This training has informed the design of parts of the workshop-series, as has also Berlant and Stewart's writing format *The Hundreds* (2019). In all three workshop-series *hundreds* has served as a template for thinking the complexities, contradictions and questions to which the other bodily-affective methodologies gave rise.

*Hundreds* is text written in exact hundred-word sections and is based on concrete observations of the worlds of others as well as your own. The format compels you to pay careful attention to every single word; each word counts "one", each "one" is a singularity, each gap between words potentially meaningful. Writing *hundreds* means cultivating, exploring and refining perception as you word by word must ask yourself: Is this *really* what I want to say? Really what I saw? What I heard, sensed, what I thought? Similar to a poem, writing *hundreds* may induce a particular kind of layered and rhythmic writing, which amasses atmospheres and compresses temporality. It is a writing capable of expressing the bodily, compositional and often contradictory nature of life (Stewart 2013). Each new image or sensation evoked by the text, adds not simply another layer but generates "collateral vibrations" (Eisenstein 1949, 66) between the different layers, in turn fostering a "generative instability" that leaves readers with a sense of surplus and contradiction (Willerslev and Suhr 2013, 1; Stewart 2013). But more fundamentally, writing from bodily, affective and material experiences in *hundreds*, pushes the writer to *think* differently; to think along with hesitancy, contradiction and surplus - instead of against them. As such, the built-in capacity for generative instability in the methodologies we employed in all three





workshops, was transferred to us as “thinkable” through *hundreds*.



The three workshop series each had a particular pedagogical ambition: The MA course was designed and taught by Aja Smith to let students experience the embodied nature of all scientific knowledge-making and attune them to the scientific potentials of their affective and bodily capacities. The Ph.D. workshop was co-facilitated by professor Jyoti Mistry, University of Gothenburg, and Anne Line Dalsgård with the main purpose of ‘getting to get the core’ of each project by engaging material objects and through exploratory writing. The three-day collaborative seminar was conceived by the two of us as an exploration of the somatic and affective experience of understanding; of the quality and anatomy of moments when understanding takes shape. Besides these particular ambitions of the workshops, all were more fundamentally developed to foster and further thought by making the body integral to thinking.

Inspired by Claire Petitmengin’s (2016) analysis of the “genesis of an idea” as occurring through three micro gestures, we see a related triad at stake in the design of these workshop series: each involving particular sets of methods for



respectively engaging, exploring and expressing theory. In the MA course, we engaged theory through multispecies approaches (e.g. Myers 2014) and contemplative methods such as “focusing” (Gendlin 1981); explored these engagements through interviews inspired by micro-phenomenology; and advanced engagements and explorations by expressing them in *hundreds* (Berlant & Stewart 2019). In the Ph.D. workshop we used objects to engage already conceived projects, *hundreds* to explore new theoretical insights, and visual or other media to express these insights. The final workshop series was a co-created examination of the concept of “understanding”, engaged through contact improvisation, voice-based methods, Body-Mind-centering, eurythmics, trance and guided meditations, explored in collective drawings and scribbles, bodymapping (de Jager et al. 2016), phantasmal writing (Desjarlais 2018) and focusing, and expressed in *hundreds*.



Five different body-maps created as part of workshop series.

Nine of the contributions in this thematic thread figure *hundreds* from the workshops, while one is written in ten sets of *hundreds*. Therefore, the **first section** of the thread introduces the method of **Writing Hundreds as Exercising Thought**. Here we meet Vanessa Graf’s writing where the hundreds serve as a vehicle for ideas; Ida Appel Vardinghus-Nielsen’s for whom *hundreds* became a way of exploring and sustaining sensorial experience of otherness; and Katie Stewart’s reflections on her and the late Berlant’s joint work with *hundreds*, words and writing.



In the **second section**, the four contributors are all in their way in the pursuit of **Destabilising Concepts**: Clara Fuglsbjerg Ebberup reworks her bodily experience of limitation into a concept and method for approaching multispecies and other worlds; Katrine Frank Jørgensen delves bodily into the concept of response-ability and lands with uncertainty as an academic quality; Brendtner unsettles the concept “understanding” by sending it through veins and arteries in a recalibrating dance practice; and in the final piece of this section, Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir sketches a philosophy that brings bodily and affective experience into concepts and thinking, asking us to think for ourselves.

In the **third section, Understanding as Resonance**, the essays explore that which happens when words are approached as sounds; what may thinking be, and with it understanding, if we take the idea of resonance literally? We walk with Mark Tatlow and an old cantata as he interrogates past and present meanings of listening and knowing; we run with Mona Nicolaysen, sensing the hefty heart-beating of staying with the trouble of murder, rape and geopolitics; and we move with Stine Simonsen Puri, as she teaches us how we may, eurythmically, share sounds with crows.

*Moving with the opaque, with blood, to the music made by a crow or a heartbeat, along our bodily and sensorial limitation, we find ourselves in a sounding landscape where we may stretch our perceptive capacities towards new understandings through the soles of our feet and spectral hauntings, knowing we are always at the mercy of others and other forces than our own, even when we resonate in our own frequency.*

From resonance, we turn in the **fourth section** to three texts that in each their way unsettles traditional ideas of **Whose Thinking** thinking really is. In Joseph Dumit’s text, sticks serve as partners in a movement score, mediating somatic experiences of opacity and fostering shared misunderstandings; Robert Desjarlais’ text is a chasing of traces of a life once lived and a poetic argument about the spectral dimension of life and death and such spectrality’s significance



for anthropology; and in Ida Sofie Matzen's writing, it's the soles of her bare feet and a raging anger that sets thoughts in motion and troubles our thoughts about thinking and theorising.

Not simply exploring what building a body for thought may mean, but actually "trying it on" and writing from such re-built bodies, the essays in this thread keep returning to the "border region where lived experience overflows our knowledge" (Lévi-Strauss in Siegel 1991, 477); where body and affect are part of thinking; where the sense of surplus, contradiction and hesitancy generated by bodily-affective methodologies and formative writing practices are allowed to destabilise concepts, thought and thinking. Moving with the opaque, with blood, to the music made by a crow or a heartbeat, along our bodily and sensorial limitation, we find ourselves in a sounding landscape where we may stretch our perceptive capacities towards new understandings through the soles of our feet and spectral hauntings, knowing we are always at the mercy of others and other forces than our own, even when we resonate in our own frequency. To stay there for a while, at the edge of the sensible, at the limits of the expressible, not knowing exactly the origin of your thinking, requires sustained training (Dalsgård 2018; Smith 2022). Such bodybuilding is indeed hard work, not least because it includes letting go of what each of us took to be 'my body'. It makes us stay somatically with the trouble (Haraway 2016), as raw as it may be, neither pretty nor pleasant (Matzen this tread). Yet it yields the much needed "muscles of response" (Berlant & Stewart 2019, 44) to become, eventually, continually, response-able.

In his generous review of this present introduction, Adolfo Estrella posed the basic yet essential question why "a different mode of thinking" requires a "different kind of body" - a question which inspired us to bring also this, the collective nature of thinking to the fore. Thinking does not end at the skin of any individual body; transpiring as a continual conversation with self, others, writing, the world - "with all the its encountered without quite touching or owning anything" (Stewart, this thread) - it requires relation. In a reflection of and paying respect to the collective nature of thinking, we have chosen to cite central aspects of each of the reviewers' comments in the respective section. We hope that this





openness shall inspire conversations to continue beyond the thread – beyond this present thinking.

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