
“What are the limits of the body?” (p. 1). While contemporary women’s writing in French is frequently analysed in terms of corporeality, the brilliance of this study lies in the move away from defining or fixing a gendered body through an exploration of the thresholds, limits, and transformation outlined in literary and in philosophical writing. Amaleena Damlé offers intricate interweaving of analysis of Deleuzian thought and contemporary women’s writing in French (not contemporary French women’s writing; the distinction is important, given the writers under review) through a rereading of the dynamic and unstable body in literature and in philosophy. The book focuses on four contemporary women writers — Amélie Nothomb, Ananda Devi, Marie Darrieussecq, and Nina Bouraoui — whose texts reconfigure representations of the (female) body in different ways; where they may be seen to converge is in their inscriptions of becoming. While Damlé refers to becoming in terms of a lifecycle (adolescence, pregnancy, motherhood, ageing), she does not tie it down to physical, hormonal, or emotional changes; the body as represented here is not a marker of predictable temporal changes, but a site of perpetual instability, flux, and displacement. Thus, for instance, Damlé reads Nothomb’s well-known evocations of anorexia and of hunger more widely in terms of a creative expression of a Body without Organs that resists fixed meaning and identity. The risk of attributing a liberating status to a severe eating disorder is both articulated and yet avoided, through the opening up of definitions of writing of anorexia in terms of hunger rather than compliance with or rejection of patriarchal frames of representation. The chapter on Devi engages with Irigaray alongside Deleuze to explore the possibilities of ‘becoming-other’, highlighting the extent to which this process remains open-ended and unstable. Darrieussecq’s texts are analysed in terms of their radical renegotiation of consciousness, surface and depth, mind and body, wherein becoming is disturbingly figured through simulation and dispersal within which the embodied subject is perpetually rethought. The chapter on Bouraoui describes becoming in relation to deterritorialization and nomadism, so that the body is demarcated and constructed not through its location, but through aleatory desires; Bouraoui’s work gestures towards a virtual, formless body, even as it inscribes its materiality. The relation between the literary (female-authored) texts and philosophical theories is beautifully negotiated, staging a mobile dialogue between them that is sparked by conflict as much as by commonality, rather than reading one through the frame of the other. This is a compelling, exciting book that will undoubtedly shape future readings of Deleuzian philosophy (particularly in feminist terms), of discourses around the body in representation, and of recent women’s writing in French; it also raises urgent questions around the ways in which we conceive of embodied subjectivity by rethinking its limits and possibilities.

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This book begins with a central paradox: the emergence, in France’s colonies, of a French-language intellectual tradition and literary corpus the principal aim of which was to put an end to the very mission civilisatrice which had produced them. As Jane Hiddleston notes in her Introduction, Gary Wilder’s antithetical formulation ‘colonial humanism’ (in The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars