Shannon Sullivan. ***Living Across and Through Skins. Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism.*** **Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001**

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1 Sullivan's *Living Across and Through Skins* is dedicated to an investigation of Dewey's concept of transactional bodies and the implications this concept has in various philosophical fields (such as ethics and epistemology) as well as in the cultural, social, and political realms. In her reading of pragmatist, phenomenological, feminist and poststructuralist philosophers such as Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Harding and Butler, Sullivan presents us with an intricate analysis "of corporeal existence as transactional" (1), emphasizing the benefits as well as some of the dangers of this concept for theories concerned with gender, race, and the subject.

2 In opposition to interaction, in which static, atomistic substances existing apart from each other come into contact without being essentially changed by it, transaction denotes "an active and dynamic relationship between things such that those things are co-constitutive of each other" (12). Subject and object, self and world, are not seen as substantially separated but as mutually affecting and constituting one another continually. As Sullivan convincingly shows, the implications of this are (at least) twofold in that the concept of bodies as transactional, firstly, no longer conceives of body and mind as two separate and essentially different substances, and, secondly, does away with a notion of bodies as "lumps of passive matter" (2) that are inscribed by culture. Conceiving of bodies as transactional construes them "as patterns of behavior" (3, emphasis in original) that do not passively wait to be influenced by their environment, but that themselves exert an influence on this environment. This means that "culture does not just effect bodies, but bodies also effect culture" (3) and therefore have an (albeit small) power by which to imprint culture. Sullivan is anxious to point out, however, that by describing bodies as transactional she does not favor a process metaphysics in which the distinctions between things are erased completely. Instead, in the process of transaction, things "permeate one another in a constitutive way" (16). Thus perceiving bodies as transactional implies that stability is achieved through continual changes in which continuity is preserved.

3 As Sullivan describes bodies as activity rather than substance, she is in need of a unifying principle which neither turns the bodying (as Sullivan prefers designating the body) into a static substance nor causes it to turn into a fluid and ever-changing process. This unifying principle she

finds in Dewey's notion of habits, "an organism's acquired styles of activity that organize the energy of its impulses" (30) and thus supply one's bodying with a pattern. However, habits are not an order imposed on a body from the outside, but that which constitutes it as a self in the first place. Before acquiring habits through our transaction with our environment, a self does not exist - from the outset our bodying is organized by habit, and it is thus habit that provides us with "will and agency" (ibd.).

4 After expounding Dewey's concept of transactional bodies in the first chapter, Sullivan applyies it to various fields and concepts of philosophy: the question of the existence of a nondiscursive body (Chapter 2); Merleau-Ponty's account of communication (Chapter 3); the relation between body, sex, and gender (Chapter 4); a concept of feminist somaesthetics (Chapter 5); the development of a pragmatist-feminist standpoint theory departing from Harding's feminist standpoint theory (Chapter 6) and, finally, the question of the constitution of races (Conclusion).

5 In Chapter 2, Sullivan applies the concept of transactional bodies to the problem of the existence of a non- or prediscursive body. Here, according to her, conflicting opinions between phenomenologists and poststructuralists arise with regard to the possibility of "resistance to oppressive cultural norms" (41), often using biological|anatomical differences for their justification. While phenomenologists, such as Gendlin, argue that without the existence of a nondiscursive body untouched by cultural inscriptions any resistance to oppressive cultural norms is rendered impossible, poststructuralists claim - in Sullivan's account - that the positing of a nondiscursive body can only ever result in a strengthening of the oppressive norms, since what is perceived as natural is perceived as such through the lens of the cultural. Therefore, positing a nondiscursive body does not help to undercut the oppressive norms but assigns them an even greater inscriptive power (cf. 41).

6 By reading discursivity along the lines of transaction, Sullivan provides convincing arguments for the rejection of the concept of the nondiscursive body, and succeeds in showing that this does not result in a need to renounce the possibility of "corporeal resistance to oppressive societal norms" (43). At the same time, Sullivan arrives at a decisive clarification and enrichment of Butler's thought by aligning Butler's concept of the discursive body and the concept of transactional bodies, and she thus provides a powerful tool for saving Butler from the reproach of attending to a linguistic monism. More specifically, Sullivan suggests that

> when Butler insists that one cannot posit a nondiscursive body without that positing itself being a discursive practice that effects the body that is posited, she is [...] insisting [...]

> that human beings are not passive spectators of a ready-made world who can observe and record it without making any impact upon it. (56-57)

Accordingly, bodies and their environments do not exist apart from each other but are always, from the beginning on, transacting. When referring to a natural body, this reference exerts an influence on the body thus evoked. As transactional, however, the body is also "actively constitutive of the [...] discourses that constitute [it]" (57). This brings us back to the question, how a body, in the transactional relationship to its environment, can effect a significant change rather than monotonously reiterating the oppressive norms. Sullivan addresses this latter question in Chapter 4 of *Living Across and Through Skins* where she reads Butler's notion of performativity, i.e. "the process of repetitive activity that constitutively stylizes one's being" (88), in alignment with Dewey's notion of habit. This implies a reworking and extension of Butler's concept, in order to not only include the linguistic but also the social in the notion of performativity. Through this reworking Sullivan is able to account for the possibility of an enactment against oppressive cultural norms without having to have recourse to a natural body.

7 According to Sullivan, just as habit denotes that which provides our bodying with a certain structure and stability, Butler conceives of a person's gender as a "domain of constraints without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its way" (Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993: 94). Thus gender, as well as habit, is not something imposed onto a body from the outside, but that which constitutes it as a self in the first place, i.e. that which provides it with will and agency. However,

> because individual habits are formed under conditions set by cultural configurations that precede the individual, cultural customs delimit the particular [...] options available to individuals. (92)

8 Thus, in their transaction with culture, bodies tend to reproduce and reinforce the norms in relation to which they are formed. It is this "force of sedimentation, which seems to make change improbable" (95). At the same time, however, the fact that every norm relies on its reiteration by the individual in order not to lose its impact on it is exactly that which Butler as well as Sullivan conceive of as an inherent weakness of all norms (cf. 97).

9 In the following Sullivan discusses two approaches to the change of oppressive cultural norms offered by Butler. Rejecting Butler's notion of bodily excess as adhering to the concept of a nondiscursive body, Sullivan shows that Butler's second approach, a modification of Derrida's account of iterability, is fully convincing - especially when understood in terms of transaction. In *Excitable Speech* Butler, according to Sullivan, "locates the transformative power of

performativity in its ability to function in contexts different from that in which it originated" (102). It is by (repeatedly) reiterating a norm in a different context that human bodying is able to effect a change in the norm. Of course, the dislocation of a norm into a different context cannot bring about abrupt and major changes that completely alter the environment with which one transacts. But in her reworking of Butler's concept of performativity Sullivan convincingly shows that in conceiving of corporeal existence as transactional, the enactment against oppressive cultural norms becomes possible without having to recede to the dubious concept of a prediscursive body. At the same time her account presents a significant enrichment of Butler's work, freeing it from the often issued reproach of pertaining to a linguistic monism, and thus allowing for an even more productive application of Butler's concepts to cultural, political, and societal questions, such as the reconfiguration of gender.

10 In the remaining chapters of *Living Across and Through Skins* Sullivan critically applies Dewey's notion of transactional bodies to philosophical concepts by Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche and Harding. Thus, in Chapter 3, Sullivan directs her criticism at Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of communication. Even though valuing the attention paid to bodily lived experience, Sullivan - along with other feminists - criticizes Merleau-Ponty for his adhering to a non-gendered, anonymous body that reintroduces the solipsism it was meant to counteract. Sullivan argues that the common ground which Merleau-Ponty poses as the basis of all communication is exactly that which - by causing misunderstandings - keeps us from communicating with one another. Our bodying is very seldom unambiguous, and positing "an anonymous body [. . .] is merely to impose one person's way of understanding her world on another" (74).

11 In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's account of communication as "boomerang perception" (74), Sullivan proposes a model of communication based on "hypothetical construction," a process, in which I do not impose my own meaning on another but put forth a hypothesis, a possible meaning, which is then subject to negotiation. In the resulting transactional non-dominating process both I and the other are mutually affected, reworking the ideas we have of our own as well as the other's self.

12 In Chapter 5 Sullivan attempts to apply the concept of transactional bodies to Nietzsche's various remarks on the "correlation between 'little things' of the body and the condition of the spirit" (115) in order to arrive at a pragmatist-feminist transactional somaesthetics. The aim of this somaesthetics is an improvement of "women's somatic experience" which, in Sullivan's eyes,

can then provide women with "the knowledge and motivation needed to initiate social political changes" (ibd.). More particularly, Sullivan suggests that, because our bodying tends to be non-transparent, women should rely on the "help of others to determine whether particular changes to [...] somatic experience are desirable" (123). This determination by others, however, seems highly problematic and should induce further discussions resulting, eventually, in a reworking of the concept of somaesthetics.

13 However, Sullivan's criticism and pragmatist reworking of Harding's feminist standpoint theory in Chapter 6 is much more convincing. Sullivan describes Harding's theory as directed against a view which claims that "objectivity is attained when humans know the world as impartial, neutral observers" (133). In opposition to this, Harding proposes an objectivity in which not the cultural dominant perspective, but the perspective of the marginalized Other, i.e. the perspective of women, is taken into account when negotiating "knowledge claims" (135). Sullivan convincingly shows that Harding's account of the perspective of women as "less partial and distorted" (136) than the masculine perspective still implies that "accurate reflection" (137) of reality is, at least in principle, possible. Therefore Harding does not abandon the belief in impartial, neutral observation of the world enabling a true knowledge.

14 In applying the notion of transactional bodies to the concept of truth and the process of attaining knowledge, Sullivan arrives at a definition of knowing as "a dynamic activity by which organisms guide and are guided by their transactions with the world" (142). In consequence, a notion of truth as accurate reflection of reality can no longer be maintained - truth is something that cannot be stated but something that "occurs when humans and their environments respond to and transact with one another in such a way that flourishing is achieved for both" (144). Even though one would have to ask who decides what this flourishing is (especially in a male-dominated discourse), Sullivan's account of transactional knowing might present an alternative to traditional accounts of truth, successfully mediating between an objectivism, which can never be achieved, and a judgmental relativism in which anything goes.

15 In her conclusion, Sullivan applies the notion of transactional bodies to the concept of race. She shows that if race, like gender and habit, is transactionally constituted, the need to transform "the rigid binaries of white and nonwhite [...] into fluid categories that are open to ongoing reconfiguration" (167) will not result in an erasing of all differences between the races. Instead, an active co- and reconstitution of race, and Whiteness in particular, is made possible. According to Sullivan, in this dynamic and reciprocal process the concept of Whiteness can be

reworked to denote something non-racist, thus offering an "important opportunity for white people to address their past and current racism in productively antiracist ways" (169).

16 The strength, and also the novelty, of Sullivan's *Living Across and Through Skins* certainly lies in its aligning of Dewey's pragmatist concept of transactional bodies with the works of various theorists, such as Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Harding, and Butler. By supplementing these with the concept of transactional bodies, Sullivan often arrives at interesting conclusions. This aligning of concepts is most convincing, and most rewarding, in the case of Butler's theory, whose concepts of discursivity and performativity Sullivan shows to be compatible with the pragmatist notions of transaction and habit. There are shortcomings concerning the theory of somaesthetics, in which the determination by others will have to be reconsidered. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of Dewey's concept of body-mind would have to show whether it indeed does not, as Sullivan claims, conflate body and mind into one. These blind spots, however, should be viewed as points of departure for future works in the field of pragmatist-feminism, rather than subtracting from the study's success. In conclusion, *Living Across and Through Skins* certainly presents an interesting contribution to the exploration of the connections between feminism and pragmatism offering various starting points for future studies.