

## POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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*Hinter deinen Gedanken und Gefühlen, mein Bruder, steht ein mächtiger Gebieter, ein unbekannter Weiser – der heisst Selbst. In deinem Leibe wohnt er, dein Leib ist er. (...) Der schaffende Leib schuf sich den Geist als eine Hand seines Willens.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 40

At the beginning of the third millennium one could think that, more than ever, we live in a completely somatized society in which the body rules as much as it is ruled in turn by all forms of coercive apparatuses. Identity – whatever we might mean by such a term, and it is not altogether clear that we can be sure of agreement – would seem to have become foremost an instrument of the body, or at least of a certain type or form of image of the body. Politics, and not just the body politic, would also appear to be informed more and more by bodily regimes. And, even if I think no one will deplore the abandonment of the rhetoric of a politics of the spirit – always suspect as an instrument of enforcing and regulating peoples to the ideas of ruling elites, certainly and visibly so in the case of Portugal during most of the past century – I am not so certain that its replacement by a mediatic display of bodies necessarily signifies any real change.

When I accepted the invitation to present this paper, I had in mind talking about the controversial issue of identity politics and its relation to the practice of academic criticism because of what seems to me to be a wide-spread feeling of inadequacy on the part of those of us engaged in the study of the humanities when it comes both to our function in the preparation of younger people to assume their role in society as intellectuals, or our own role in a society dominated more and more by what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has termed as a "savage capitalism"

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which only too-readily co-opts critical thought and represents it as one of its own achievements. My argument, I thought, would attempt to demonstrate how, regardless of one's actual standpoint on the issue of identity politics, the very intensity of the debate could serve as proof for the critical role and importance of the humanities for assessing society and cultural practices in a way that bears or can bear directly on "real" politics. I have changed my purpose because, rather than simply touch lightly on a whole set of complex issues – the surfacing of identity politics as a means for minority groups to assert their claims to recognition in society, the perhaps inevitable falling back into some forms of essentialism, the rejection by some intellectuals at the validity of such a form of politics and such a form of criticism and the consequent fear that to do so would mean an abandonment of left aspirations towards a transformation of society and acceptance of the *status quo* – I would prefer to take on something which, although quite related, is nonetheless much more restricted. As such, I would like to focus on the relation between the body and identity, or rather between bodies and identities, focusing on the constitution of an embodied self in relation to alterity. Far from constituting even a preamble to a form of critical theory such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues for in *Towards a Common Sense* (1995).<sup>1</sup> I nevertheless hope that such a discussion can serve to highlight some aspects of the question of identity in a way that is not content with just describing social conditions as they are.

Flawed mirror that it might be, the Internet constitutes itself a form of constantly mutating body whose parts do exist someplace but whose projected image is more important than any materiality one might still insist on ascribing to it. With that in mind I decided recently to try out which image it would return on a set of queries to body and identity. The search for "body" yielded 18 and a half million pages instantly, whereas "identity" turned out a mere million and some pages. More interestingly,

perhaps, is the fact that the very first hit on "body," that is, the page which cyberlogically appeared to conform most directly to my desire, was a page for "Autobody" – no, not the intensely intriguing notion of an absolutely self-sufficient body but the mundane site for a garage. Likewise, the first hit on "identity" was also revealing because it was for "identity theft" an indication of the all-too real dominance of that other form of body, the corporation. Finally, a look at "body identity" turned up an ad for a book studying the practice of tattooing, something I shall still return to. The notion of a self-producing body, the theft of identity and the inscription of writing on the body are all aspects that I will want to address. But first of all, I would like to mention something about the notion of difference. On the one hand, difference is of course the principle behind identity politics or even just behind identity itself, because if identity presupposes sameness, a self that is identical to itself, or a group of individuals whose shared attributes, cultural, political, racial, or sexual make them into a common group, that sameness can only be affirmed and recognized by contradistinction to others who must be different. And many of the advancements brought out by academic study as well as by political activist movements have to do with the recognition of, and respect for, difference as a principle. But of course, difference and its deployment are never so easy. Lest any one have doubts, it suffices to point out to nation states, those modern collective bodies which have imposed themselves for the allegiance of "citizens" above kinship, religion, and ethnicity, but which are just as, if not more, jealous of the allegiance of their members and still try hard to impede any one from acquiring multiple citizenship. For the most part, identity politics is based on the differences between specific groups of human beings. When it falters its own impulse for political advancement is when it insists too rigidly on the criteria for identification and falls back into essentialism. But one other, more radical, aspect of difference involves not so much the

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difference between specific groups of people but rather difference between humans and non-humans, between humans and machines, or between humans and animals, or even between the human and the inhuman. None of this of course is new, but then I would also argue that the whole problematics of identity and the body, even if it seems to have received an extra impulse in the last quarter of the past century, is also very ancient. What might have changed perhaps is the way in which we tend to weigh the possibilities, or which side we might choose to take, if we would be credulous enough to believe that it is a question of taking sides at all. The dichotomy subjacent to that between the human and the non-human, to use a perhaps less charged term for the moment, is also in a certain sense that between the body and the spirit, at least as far as the question of identity is concerned.

In the opening to *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz still saw it as compelling to charge that

[t]he body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory. (...) Feminists and philosophers seem to share a common view of the human subject as a being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body (...) The subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term, its fall from grace; the primary term defines itself by expelling its other and in this process establishes its own boundaries and borders to create an identity for itself. Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term. (Grosz, 1994: 3)

Now, it can be argued that Grosz necessarily exaggerates the situation, that the division between body and mind was always contested by some since antiquity and that as far as philosophers are concerned, at least one, whom she also discusses towards the end of her book, Nietzsche, thoroughly rejected such a distinction. As far as feminist theory is

concerned, of course the suspicion of the body as a privileged term is dependent on the biologism against which feminists always had to struggle although in certain cases one could also see an attachment to the body as constitutive of a positive female difference, which in itself also bordered again on the very essentialism feminist theory initially assailed. When reflecting on Nietzsche and his advancement of the body as the site and producer of knowledge Grosz roughly sketches a very brief trajectory that includes phenomenologists and other philosophers such as Deleuze and Foucault who also reflected systematically on the body and subjectivity, so one can take her initial statements about philosophy's disdain of the body with a grain of salt. And if one were to look at other humanities disciplines, such as literary theory and the social sciences, the focus on the body could be seen as gradually expanding so that by the 90s it was a considerable boom area for scholars. Miguel Vale de Almeida, in his introduction to a volume of anthropological essays he edited in 1996, *Corpo Presente*, does not fail to remark precisely on these conditions, even if he notes that this has been especially true of scholarship produced in English. Nonetheless, there is something to Grosz's claim that is worth keeping, namely, the fact that the notion of the body still too often appears as in opposition to that of spirit, because what interests me here is precisely their relation in terms of constituting or problematizing the concept of identity. And for that, it is perhaps most useful to start with the epigraph from Nietzsche, the first part of which Grosz also quotes. >>

Two points in those statements from Nietzsche interest me especially: one, is the notion of the Self being the body, which implies that it is the body which has will and consciousness. The other is the image, the metaphor, deployed by Nietzsche, when he affirms that the creating/working body made itself Spirit as a hand of the will ("Der schaffende Leib schuf sich den Geist als eine Hand seines Willens"). Thus, for Nietzsche, the dichotomy between body and mind is a false one

and if there is still any distinction between the two, if there is still any privileging to be done than it would appear that it is the body and not the mind which is the dominant term. But of course Nietzsche not only subverts the hierarchy but dissolves it because if the body is the producer of the mind it is the mind, which perceives that same body as its producer, so that there is no either or, no opposition between the terms but rather an organic complementarity. And the image of the hand is especially relevant because it at once suggests the body as a sort of mutant worker producing a prosthesis to bring about what it desires. But of course this hand is itself corporeal, so that the Spirit becomes doubly embodied, as it issues forth from the body and as a bodily part. And Nietzsche, in the same movement also reconfigures another key distinction pertaining to identity, because if what distinguishes the human from the animal for long was thought to be the Spirit, by making the Spirit issue forth from the body and be itself not only embodied but body as well, an extremity of the body, one could say, he in fact is annulling that distinction between the human and the non-human. This is not to say that Nietzsche would reduce all that is human into animality or that he would want to see a continuum between the two, but rather that he rejects the difference between body and mind as the significant difference. After all, the human body does issue forth a Spirit, in the form of a hand, so as to execute its will to power. I will want to return to the issue of hands and identity but for the moment I would like to turn to another philosopher, who has also long reflected on the body and who, in a recent text, specifically addresses the issues of identity through the body in a way that problematizes the difference between the human and the non-human.

In a text first presented at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1997 and published subsequently in 1999 with the title "L'Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)", Jacques Derrida offers an extended reflection on many issues surrounding the construction of identity in relation to one's body, to the other, and to the non-



human, more specifically, the animal. As the title already intimates, the question of being itself is already doubly inscribed as both being and as following, which will be developed into a form of following one's prey, that is, of hunting, that is characteristic of the animal, so that the subject of the enunciation already cannot escape his own animality at the very moment of reflecting upon his human identity. But I am already advancing too much in the argument because that is a supposition, which Derrida does not allow himself until he has exposed a series of points. He starts by announcing that his subject in this essay will be foremost that of nudity and will indeed reflect on the condition of being naked, of feeling nakedness and shame at such nudity, as elements of a post-lapsarian human condition, which is his as well as ours. One of the references invoked by Derrida already from the start is Nietzsche who would have described himself as an animal in spite of himself. And another important reference, besides the text of Genesis, will be Kafka, whose texts are suffused with animals. The one animal Derrida confronts us with, in its confrontation with Derrida himself, is a cat, his cat, who follows him in the morning into the bathroom:

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Depuis le temps, peut-on dire que l'animal nous regarde?  
Quel animal? L'autre.

Souvent je me demande, moi, pour voir, *qui je suis*, — et qui je suis au moment où, surpris nu, en silence, par le regard d'un animal, par exemple les yeux d'un chat, j'ai du mal, oui, du mal à surmonter une gêne.

Pourquoi ce mal?

J'ai du mal à réprimer un mouvement de pudeur. Du mal à faire taire en moi une protestation contre l'indécence. Contre la malséance qu'il peut y avoir à se trouver nu, le sexe exposé, à poil devant un chat qui vous regarde sans bouger, juste pour voir. (Derrida, 1999: 253)

This scene, which Derrida insists in dismissing as in any way originary, serves as a platform to question what is proper of man and of the cat, that is what separates the human from the animal and in which measure identity can be derived from a confrontation with the other, which is specifically the animal ("Quel animal? L'autre"). And of course that other animal is also always the human animal, the conscious subject, who is aware of being looked at and who feels shame at his nudity. The condition of being naked, and knowing it, is what Derrida seizes upon as being characteristic of the human: "(...) le propre des bêtes, et ce qui les distingue en dernière instance de l'homme, c'est d'être nus sans le savoir" (*Idem*, 254). Nakedness then, by itself, is not sufficient to distinguish man from the animal; indeed, that might only in ultimate instance approximate them, or, as Derrida maintains, by not knowing that it is naked, the animal is not properly naked. Conversely, the act of dressing himself would have to be considered one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity, as no animal, that is known, has thought of putting on clothes. One could be tempted to think that, were it not for the fact that Derrida insists on the real existence of that cat, even classifying it as a female cat, ("ce chat qui est aussi une chatte" (*Ibidem*), this figure of the animal was merely a prop designed to evoke some form of radical alterity in the shape of the familiar – one's house pet as the real other instead of some monster or deformed alien being. But Derrida insists in separating this one cat from a myriad of literary cats that he also invokes, from the Cheshire cat from *Alice in Wonderland* to Sarah Kofman's analysis of Hoffman's Kater Murr: "(...) le chat dont je parle est un chat réel, vraiment, croyez-moi, un petit chat. Ce n'est pas une figure du chat" (*Idem*, 255). But is Derrida here really concerned with the otherness of the animal? Certainly he shows that he is aware of the danger of anthropomorphism, but in insisting that the cat watches him, to see, and not only to see him but to see his sex, "pour voir, sans se priver de plonger sa vue, pour voir, en vue de voir, en direction



du sexe" (*Idem*, 254), is he also not projecting a form of his consciousness into the body, into the eyes, of the cat? Perhaps the necessary question is not that but rather, can one ever avoid doing such a projection? For if what characterizes the human, by contradistinction to the animal, is not nakedness but consciousness of such a condition, then how can one, if one is to remain human at all, avoid looking at the animal with human eyes and see reflected in the animal, not so much the animal, or whatever the animal might "really" be but that which we, as humans, make of it?

It would be naïve to the point of arrogance to assume that Derrida has not also, before anything else, put himself such questions. But let me suspend for a brief moment this line of thought to refer to another problem, another question. The reason why Derrida puts an emphasis on the consciousness of nakedness as one, perhaps the ultimate, but nonetheless, just one, of the characteristics separating the human from the animal, and as such constitutive of what would be a human identity, an identity thus already informed by the body, must be understood as a refusal to privilege voice as the border between the human and the non-human. Indeed, voice, the ability to speak and to control language, was – and still is, although constantly challenged by new research – regarded as the separating line between humans and other animals. But, given Derrida's investment in a critique of logocentrism, on the primacy of the voice, it is hardly surprising that he would set such a characteristic aside. Not that he ignores it. Quite on the contrary, a great part of Derrida's subsequent argument will revolve around the issue of Adamic speech, the gift and task, given and imposed, by God on Adam to name the animals and through such an act to dominate and subjugate them. Derrida attacks the presumption of humans who would thus pretend to erect a barrier between them and animals, designating all as the "animal" based on human subjectivity, and rationality as expressed through language:

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Chaque fois que "on" dit L'Animal (...) en prétendant désigner ainsi tout vivant qui ne serait pas l'homme (l'homme comme "animal rationnelle", l'homme comme animal politique, comme animal parlant, *zoon logon ekhon*, l'homme qui dit "je" et se tient pour sujet de la phrase qu'il profère alors au sujet dudit animal, etc.), eh bien, (...) ce "je" dit une bêtise. (*Idem*, 282)

In refusing the Aristotelian typology of humanity – but the question of man as the political animal is never really addressed, or not yet, in this preliminary text which promises (and that is Nietzsche's definition of man in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* as the animal who has learned to promise, as Derrida alludes to, right at the beginning) to be continued ("à suivre"), is Derrida pursuing a new form of identity, an identity based on the body, or informed primarily on the subject's consciousness of the body? The one question he puts forward as really new is the following: "L'animal que je suis, parle-t-il? C'est une question intacte, vierge, neuve, encore à venir, une question toute nue" (*Idem*, 283). The ambiguity cannot be escaped. Which animal are we, is Derrida, talking about? The animal that he is, or the animal, that particular, real, pussy cat – and now it should be obvious why Derrida's cat cannot be a figure of a cat, because in order to represent the other, his other, it has to be individualized, cannot be simply the name given to all non-human beings? Or perhaps both at the same time? The question on whether animals can talk always already was foremost a theological question.

Derrida, inasmuch as he read that essay at Cerisy, addressed an academy, and I would like to turn into another report to an academy, Kafka's "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie", of 1917, without forgetting that I too have promised to return to a couple of dangling strings, Nietzsche's hand of the will, and Derrida's inadvertent, inevitable, anthropomorphism, but also the autonomous body and the theft of identity. Derrida himself refers to Kafka's use of animals in his texts as an "immense

zoopoétique" and Elizabeth Grosz also presents an abbreviated analysis of one of Kafka's stories to continue her discussion of the body after Nietzsche. That story, "in der Strafkolonie," is curiously also the one western text which merits extended discussion by José Gil, certainly along the lines of the critique first developed by Deleuze and Guattari, in his book on the body, *Metamorfoses do Corpo*. Of course it is no coincidence because the central image of that story is the machine which punctures the bodies of the condemned, slowly inscribing their sentences on their bodies, in an agonizing process, in which the machine and the body, as if symbiotically, performed the execution and the revelation of the sentence, which is literally written with the blood of the condemned and inscribed on and into his body. In our current society, with its taste for tattooing as a form of expressing one's "identity" such a text will reverberate with many connotations that are not just negative. Or, to put it in the terms of the ad for that book on tattooing which was the first hit for "body identity", "The language of the body cannot be denied".<sup>2</sup> What is being understood here as identity might actually be an attempt to escape the constrictures of what is deemed the bourgeois body and identity, but the question that imposes itself is that when everyone decided to become different in the same way, there is not much difference left to enjoy. And, of course, such an attitude completely ignores the only too real circumstances of real torture, neither a ghost from the political past nor so removed from our comfortable western sites of enunciation.

In "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie", as will be remembered, the central figure is an ape, Rotpeter. The name is not insignificant of course, because, rather than serving as guarantee for his identity, it is a source of rage for him, having been "given" to him due to a red scar he has on his cheek, the trace of his capture. Kafka thus, with great economy, immediately foregrounds precisely that which Derrida comments on as the violence of naming, of the Adamic speech,



which man employs so as to subjugate the animal. What makes Rotpeter unique, however, is his capacity to speak, which he demonstrates in his report to the academy. At first, one could be tempted to view in this speaking animal, a curiosity, a circus freak, an allegorical figure, in other words, a fully anthropomorphized character. But nothing could be further from the circumstances of the text. In his speech the ape narrates the story of his capture and his subsequent adaptation, or maladaptation, to life within a human community. Kafka, with this story, places himself within a line of great writers, Flaubert, Joyce, Dinesen, to mention only some, who have employed simian characters, a quasi-apocryphal tradition which still continues in the present. But, unlike those before him, Kafka was not interested in speculating on pre-darwinian theories of evolution. Instead, if anything, Kafka is more interested in de-evolution than in evolution.

But the point that interests me here is the fact that what makes Rotpeter unique is his capacity to speak, which he acquired as a form of survival since death was not allowed him as a form of freedom and only through his acquisition of speech could he escape the greatest of humiliations, to be exhibited in a circus. Kafka's description, or rather, Rotpeter's narration – which animal speaks here? – of the ape's entry into language and through that, into the human community, is masterful. As the chimpanzee is kept in a cage aboard a ship bringing him to Hamburg, the crew entertains itself by forcing him to drink schnapps, something which he does under extreme duress and always with the utmost disgust. But one evening, as a gramophone is playing, Rotpeter himself grabs a bottle of schnapps, empties it, throws it away no longer as someone desperate but as an artist ("als Künstler") and because he was driven to it and could not avoid it, called out clearly Hallo: "(...) weil ich nicht anders konnte, weil es mich drängte, weil mir die Sinne rauschten, kurz und gut 'Hallo!' ausrief, in Menschenlaut ausbrach, mit diesem Ruf in die Menschengemeinschaft sprang

(...)” (Kafka [1917], 1999: 331). One should take care to note that Kafka preserves voice, speaking, language, as the border between the animal and the human. It is only after Rotpeter in a human voice says hallo that he is admitted into the human community. Until then, even though he had been given a name, it was a name, which was forced on him and served as a reminder of his capture and physical torture, so that the name in a sense, instead of providing for an identity merely reflected the inscription of violence on his body. And even though he could copy some of the actions of the crew and indeed, seemed more civilized than them, he was still classified as completely other, as animal.

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The circumstances under which Rotpeter crosses the border from the animal into the human are also all significant, starting with the gramophone, a mechanical reproduction of the human voice as background for the animal voicing of human language. Likewise, what brings Rotpeter into speaking is not rationality but rather the loss of his senses as he is completely inebriated. Moreover, if the human voice (“Menschenlaut”) issues from his animal body it does so because of the spirits, the schnapps, he consumed. Clearly this text by Kafka, like so many of his texts, is an extremely bitter and ironic commentary on human nature. But Rotpeter, in spite of his human voice and his entry into the human community does not acquire a human consciousness. For one, he does not feel shame at his nudity, even though he is incensed at the newspaper reports that he had not completely repressed his ape nature because he likes dropping his pants before visitors in order to show the scar of the second shot that hit him. As he asserts his right to do so, he stresses his self-identity: “Ich, ich darf meine Hose ausziehen, vor wem es mir beliebt” (*Idem*, 324). And, more importantly, his consciousness of being other, and of not being able to return to his lost identity, the identity which men stole from him, is evident when he describes the deranged look in the eyes of a half-trained female chimpanzee with whom he amuses himself

at night, avoiding her during the day because he cannot stand her gaze, a gaze which only he can recognize: "Bei Tag will ich sie nicht sehen; sie hat nämlich den Irrsinn des verwirrten dressierten Tieres im Blick: das erkenne nur ich und ich kann es nicht ertragen" (*Idem*, 333).

Like Rotpeter, who cannot stand the gaze of his female companion, Derrida cannot stand the gaze of his pussycat. But, whereas Derrida sees himself being seen by a cat, and wonders what the cat might see, Rotpeter, sees a trained chimpanzee looking at him, who used to be a chimpanzee but became a man. Both see difference in the gaze of the other. But of course only Derrida sees, or imagines that he sees, a difference both radical and incommensurable because divided by species, gender, and language or the lack of it. And so he must, even if not project his own view into the gaze of the other, at least remain forever – in this text at least – ignorant of what the cat sees as a cat. Not so with Rotpeter, who, though still having to deal with the otherness of gender, and the lack of language, can both remember what it was like to be a chimpanzee (his memory is fading but not dissolved) and thus can imagine what the trained chimpanzee sees when she looks at him. Rotpeter does not need to project himself into the other because, in a way he really is the other, in a way not dissimilar to when Nietzsche's Zarathustra says that the self not only inhabits one's body, the self *is* one's body. In a sense, Rotpeter, and Kafka through him, already asked the question that Derrida posits as new, as completely naked: "L'animal que je suis, parle-t-il?" If this question seems only to be rhetorical, I would like to stress the fact that it is, above all, a political question. Not only does "voice" ("Stimme") literally mean "vote" in German, but, obviously, the ability to speak as a subject is a preliminary condition for political life in all of its ramifications, as indeed, the diverse groups involved in "identity politics" always made clear. Yet, in another sense, Rotpeter's report functions as a counterpart to Derrida's text. One of the ways in which Derrida demonstrates his awareness of the pitfalls of projection is his consideration that



no matter what one says a cat never answers — or answers in a way so as to constitute no intelligible answer. But Rotpeter, in a great inversion, gets an answer from his human watchers for as soon as he shouts "Hallo!", the crew, as if echoing him, shout back, "Listen he speaks", something which feels to him as a kiss on his body: "(...) und ihr Echo: 'Hört nur, er spricht!' wie einen Kuß auf meinem ganzen schweißstriefenden Körper fühlte" (*Idem*, 331). And the answer from the humans, which was but an echo of his own human voice, becomes a kiss on his animal body.

There are many other issues that I have not yet begun to approach, but to conclude I would just like to return to that image of the hand as issuing forth from the body as a figure of the Spirit, to leave with a question concerning the situation our technological society places us: in a recent edition of the German weekly *Der Spiegel* there was a report of a double-hand transplant. The reporters speculated on what might it feel like for a woman to be caressed by the patient's new hands, which in effect will have been the hands of a dead donor, which were attached to the recipient's arms. Yes, the nineteenth-century's preoccupations with the inhuman in the guise of Frankenstein have caught up with us, and we may as well ask ourselves how embodied our identity will remain. One thing might be embracing a hybrid or mobile identity as one no longer accepts the unified subject as anything but a construction, another one embracing a body that is literally composed of disparate fragments. Of course the borderline between the live and the dead is what was at issue in the reporters' minds, a line possibly as significant as that between the human and the animal. But that is also not the only border crossing raised by modern technology. After all, the only requirements from a medical point of view in the case of hand transplants are that the donor be brain dead, and that there be a match in size and blood type between the deceased donor and the expectant recipient. All other issues such as sex and race are just mere personal preferences, something that certainly should raise concerns for essentialists. <<

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[1] An excerpt from the Portuguese translation, in the form of an article, has recently been published as "Porque é tão difícil construir uma teoria crítica?", *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*, 28 (2000), pp. 83-100.

[2] Jacket blurb for Kim Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink*, Bowling Green, OH, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997.

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