My fascination with Norway begun early on, before I ever visited the country. Admittedly, it had little to do with the country itself, and its focus was exclusively cartographic. I spent hours musing over the map with a concentration frissoning through my very body and making my skin tingle. The reason? To my eyes, Norway looked like a human arm that was being slowly, painfully but pleasurably gnawed by the incoming fjords. Its coast emerges like a moth-eaten lace, with its play of blue and yellow that defies the usual clean-cut depiction of cartographic boundaries. I would then compare Norway’s coast to the line that separates Algeria from Mauritania and Mali, a straight, brutal, metallic line cutting the desert in two arbitrary sides. There, my feeling would be one of cleanliness and purity but also incomprehension, suspicion even at how straight it was. And I would return to the intricacy of the coast. I was 6 years old.

This fascination has not left me, but I now understand it better. First of all, it would seem that these different ends of the spectrum work together. Not in some sort of Hegelian dialectics that cannot wait for their synthesis, nor in the positive/negative understanding of mutual constitution. Saharan desert and Norwegian sea operate on the same cartographic continuum, each one a desire to spread out one’s body differently. Each spread is a way of affecting and being affected by other bodies. Each spread captured my eye and my fingers, tracing the lines that were thrown into relief merely by their black ink. I now understand that my cartographic fascination was double: on the one hand, the need for knowing with certainty oneself and specifically one’s limits; and on the other, the assemblage-spread of a body that comingles with other bodies. The latter is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call haecceity, a body’s “relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be
affected.” 1 Haecceity opposes standard conceptions of identity and reinterprets them as difference. It plays with the blue of the sea and the yellow of the land. This smudged sort of identity is a funambulist perilously balancing on the straight black line across the Sahara.

The Norwegian body is one that neither ends nor begins. Liminality at its most luminous, the coast bases its Escher-like structure in a simple but indisputable fact: a fjord is not the open sea. It is an incubation of water within the land, a tellurian hug strengthened by gentle lapping across glacier eras. It is an invitation by the land extended to the water. At the same time, it is an aquatic invasion that slowly but surely eats up the entrails of the inner lands. On the prime-coloured, spreadable map of my childhood, attempts to keep land and water separately were not always successful: there were stretches where the fjord was turning a little too abruptly in, or the land was protruding too much out in the blue, so that the black typographic outline could no longer follow faithfully the interlacing and the colours would bleed into each other in a sort of myopic double-take. These were the bodies I knew existed all around me: a body was always a continuum with space. No line clearly separating this side from that. No desert to split, only a continuum to dive in and out. And there were other continuua: space as a continuum, and the bodies leaking into their surrounding space also connected with folds of space opening away from them, seemingly unrelated to their skin, their beliefs, or their physical functions. Henri Lefebvre has been writing on how bodies produce space: “each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space.” 2 Bodies and space are not found in a relation of foreground/background but fully folded to the extent that, ontologically, bodies are space and vice versa. I knew that, although I could not cite Lefebvre.

And then there were the Saharan desert bodies. Strong, bounded, contained, closed, certain about their limits, secure in their contours. These were bodies brimming with a self-aggrandising sense of identity and filled with a certainty of emplacement as of right. They belonged squarely within their body-contours, accepting as unintended but not unwelcomed consequences the displacement they caused and their radiating connection to all the space they colonised just by being there, secure in their all-thematising presence. These bodies were bodies to aspire to, solar strongholds of solidity. They were also bodies to dislike because of their strong positioning, their unyielding lines. I was being suspicious of them while pining for them. I even wanted to become one of these bodies myself. This is the way I was brought up: seeking a solid identity, defining oneself against the


world without constantly thinking of who or what might question my contours. I am a child of identity politics.

But one forgets that there are always fjords seeping in like somnolent underground waters and eventually corrupting any linearity. A body is not a neatly defined, contour-bound entity. The body is not defined by its outline. If they were a painting, bodies would be Venetian sprawls of colour without drawn boundaries, staging through their expansive leaking a radical withdrawal from the Florentine canon of humanist containment. Deleuze writes

the edge of the forest is a limit. Does this mean that the forest is defined by its outline? [...] We can’t even specify the precise moment at which there is no more forest.³

All bodies are leaking. By ‘all bodies,’ I mean human and nonhuman. While usually, whenever included, nonhuman bodies are either resource, context or the negative of the dialectics of humanity, the conceptualisation of bodies has now expanded to include human and nonhuman, geological and psychological, animal and vegetal bodies. This is what the schools of thought largely identified as new materialisms, non-representational theory, speculative realism and object-oriented ontologies maintain, themselves generally drawing from a Spinozan/Deleuzian understanding of the body.⁴ Thus, for Deleuze “a body can be anything: it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity.”⁵ What is more, all bodies are assemblages, namely aggregations of human and nonhuman bodies that are contingent upon the conditions of their emergence and that do not presuppose the centrality, and certainly not the exclusive presence, of the human. Bodies are both actual, namely space and matter, and virtual, namely potential but still real. Actual and virtual are not found in a dialectical opposition; nor does the actual determine the virtual.⁶ Rather, there is no ontological distinction between the two, and if anything, the actual is determined in its folding with the virtual. Each body has a spatiality and materiality that is both, schematically speaking, its own (actual), and part of the wider continuum with other bodies (virtual).


Bodies are properly speaking geophilosophical, namely spatial and temporal, part of the great earth continuum yet individually different to each other.⁷

How does a body differentiate itself from its continuum with space and other bodies? For, is this not at least one definition of identity, namely to become an identifiable, recognisable, contoured-body? Let us take a step back and see the whole map continuum. What I am looking for is not the continuum but its assemblage. See how it is constantly ruptured? Cartography is a continuum of ruptures, and rupture is the locus of corporeal singularity. Ruptures can be Deleuzian folds, namely co-emerging assemblages, and therefore ontological differentiations. Or they can be relatively arbitrary distinctions between an interior and an exterior, and therefore epistemological differentiations, such as the Saharan desert boundaries.⁸ They can also be necessities, such as the withdrawing sea from the land; or an effect of political and legal strategising, such as the cutting possibility of a new state. Whatever they are, they are part of the continuum, constituting it in difference. The continuum of bodies is always ruptured by distinctions on its surface.

Ruptures are the locus of singularity in the continuum. Through ruptures, bodies differentiate themselves from other bodies. Ruptures are the outcome of withdrawal. Every body withdraws from other bodies and from their space. Even haecceity, that most connected of states, needs withdrawal in order to come forth, and bodies need to withdraw from connections as much as they need leakages and smudges. In his work on Bruno Latour, Graham Harman writes: "objects are not defined by their relations: instead they are what enter into relations in the first place. Objects enter relations but withdraw from them as well; objects are built of components but exceed those components. Things exist, not in relations but in a strange sort of vacuum from which they only partly emerge into relation."⁹ I understand objects and bodies as synonymous yet coming from slightly different theoretical trajectories.

On that basis, and replacing objects with bodies in the above quote, bodies are at the same time assemblages of other bodies, part of assemblages with other bodies, and withdrawn from every relation. Withdrawal is ontological: every body is a closed, autopoietic system that withdraws from full openness, connectivity or exteriority, and into a monadic singularity that is gathered around its autopoiesis, its self-

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perpetuation, its conative desire. Its openness rests on its closure. Its connection with the exterior takes place only through the systemic interior. Assemblaging does not take place in an exterior but in a fractalised interior. Withdrawal is taken inside the body, takes place from within the body, and ultimately becomes self-withdrawal. Assemblage rests on withdrawal. The world is what each body makes of it. But this is not relativism or subjectivism. The world withdraws as much as the body withdraws. “Nothing ‘points’ toward anything else or bleeds into anything else. Everything withdraws into itself.”

The commonality of withdrawal is, therefore, the main tool of differentiation between bodies. The continuum is not threatened by this — on the contrary, precisely because the continuum is a series of ruptures, ruptures do not rupture the continuum as such: they are all inscribed within. So, the continuum is crossed by lines that produce meaning, while continuously being ruptured by them. In her seminal work on the body, Lisa Blackman has called this the problem of ‘the one and the many,’ namely the ontological difficulty of being coherent yet multiple, in other words, self yet othering. The main challenge is how to avoid categorising either of these as inferior, namely how to escape the trap of mapping the continuum and the rupture “onto differentiations made between the civilized and the primitive, the superior and the inferior, the simple and the complex, and the impulsive and the environmental.” Indeed, how not to make rupture and continuum a dialectic of opposites, namely a question of positive presence and negative absence, but a co-emergence.

This is not an easy struggle. But it is a common struggle. It is the struggle of each and every body that attempts to define itself without losing its continuum with other bodies. It is a struggle of survival that often dictates political cut-offs or atmospherics of illusionary comfort while conflict rages outside. At the same time, it is a question of retaining the responsibility of the continuum, and the constant questioning of one’s spatio-corporeal boundaries. It is a question of retaining both a Saharan and a Norwegian spread of one’s body on the map.

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11 Harman, Prince of Networks, 113.
13 Ibid., 59.