

**thinking without monsters:
the role of philosophy in
moira gatens**

timothy laurie

*We must become strong enough to take
responsibility for what we are in order to
become something else.*

—Moira Gatens¹

Moira Gatens poses questions that challenge the social and institutional worlds that sustain what we call philosophical thinking. This does not mean that Gatens pillories philosophy to secure polemical victories. It does mean that, drawing on Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza's parallelism, Gatens does not presume that the best ideas will always prevail through philosophical argumentation, or that the battle of ideas can proceed indifferently to the embodied conditions of speech and sociability. We are invited to consider not simply whether arguments are true, but to better understand the society, community or polity for which the truth of an argument could hold force. Gatens takes philosophy outside philosophy and reinvents the role of the philosopher in the process.

This article examines the role and purpose of philosophy through Gatens' engagements with four areas of inquiry. Firstly, I locate intellectual disagreement and ideological struggles, which profoundly shape the day-to-day business of philosophical knowledge production, within what Gatens calls "social imaginaries." Secondly, the article examines the relationships between thought and the body, noting the distinctions Gatens makes between Spinoza's parallelism and other efforts to link corporeality to ideas (e.g. contemporary affect theory). The article then considers the ways that social imaginaries and mind/body parallelism may contribute to a reworking of debates within feminist philosophy about the conditions and limits of individual agency. Finally, I consider seemingly monstrous individuals through public debates around acts perceived to violate community norms. Throughout, Gatens invites us to reconsider the communities we form in and through philosophical thinking, including those communities that may decide, at important junctures, that professional philosophers are no longer needed.

PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENT

Philosophy demands a taste for disagreement. It aids the casual retelling of the history of philosophy as a litany of quarrels, and the more systemic business of evaluating students—knowing the difference between two canonised names is knowing what those names were *really on about*. The adversarial mode carves away the trivial features of philosophy from the more essential matters of principle. To call someone a "Foucauldian," for example, is to present the influence of Michel Foucault as essential to the way this someone thinks. For such an approach to philosophy, thinking begins with essential claims, moves calmly toward inessential examples and situations, and finally toward entirely trivial matters of stylistic presentation. We may, in turn, direct our disagreements toward the interpretation or application of Foucault, or to the choice of Foucault altogether, should we happen to prefer someone else. But we do not say that someone is a Foucauldian simply because they share his interest in prisons. Every person who is imprisoned or works in prisons could, after all, become an overnight Foucauldian. But of course, maybe they can. The difference between the specialist and non-specialist may not be how well a person thinks, or how grounded their discourse may be, but how well the non-specialist's speech can become commensurate with the communicative norms of philosophy.² These latter may include a clear demarcation between the (perceived to be) contingent and passing features of speech produced in such-and-such a time and place, and the features of speech understood to be relevant for any-time, any-place, any-people. When we talk about philosophical disagree-

ment, then, we are telling stories about how speech is constructed and mobilised, and how it produces its most important effects. We may disagree with this or that claim generated by a philosopher, but agree that we should treat each other as exactly that—claims-generators, combining and colliding with other claims-generators.

One oft-reviled bundle of claims in contemporary feminist philosophy has come to be labelled “essentialism.” In certain institutional spaces, gender essentialists are read as a monstrous type mired in unforgivable analytical sins. Correspondingly, a certain mode of philosophical commentary prides itself on uncovering essentialism wherever it lurks. Spring the monster in its lair and chase it from the village. In *Imaginary Bodies*, Moira Gatens offers a different approach. Closely reading *The Sexual Contract*, Gatens outlines Carole Pateman’s influential argument about the fraternalism at the heart of early liberal political thought in Europe. Pateman emphasised the ways that status-based hierarchies organised around the “rule of the father” gave way to a contract-based hierarchy organised around revised political and civil social roles for men, such that “social contract” theories could be understood as simultaneously anti-patriarchal (in the classical sense of the term) and decidedly patriarchal (in the modern sense of the term). Throughout, Gatens documents the vacillating claims in Pateman’s work about the origins of gender inequality and offers a sharp criticism:

[Pateman] assumes a linear chain of causality, where sexual difference, sexual relations and the sexual contract are the successive links which together enchain us all in the tyranny of our current social and political institutions. However... our past is open to constant revision and retelling as our understandings of how we became what we are change. In this sense, one is confronted not so much with a ‘chain of necessity,’ relentlessly linking the past with the present, as with competing ‘sets of narratives’ which are open to contestation.³

Gatens could have concluded by highlighting this distinction between two competing frameworks, with a nudge toward the latter: history as a linear narrative to be regarded from a transcendent point in the present; or, history as a space of narrative contestation, to be negotiated in and through ever-changing identities in the present. But instead, Gatens makes a second move:

[Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract*] is a partial genealogy of the narratives

that have formed around our socio-political present—it comprises the first moment of genealogy. But it is the second moment which is crucial—it is the critical moment which asks: what form of life is made possible by the telling of such stories? What is the nature of the will and the desire which drive such narratives?⁴

Gatens opens the theme of story-telling and of the possibilities of the imagination. Stories about the origins of gender inequality cannot simply be debunked like the blockbuster clichés exposed by Canadian television program *Mythbusters*. Rather, these stories are social phenomena tied to histories of gendered experience and those efforts made to articulate this experience.

In reading Pateman as a storyteller, Gatens locates *The Sexual Contract* within a history of “social imaginaries.”⁵ This concept has been popularised in different ways by Cornelius Castoriadis and Charles Taylor, but serves a distinct and original purpose in Gatens’ *Imaginary Bodies* and later in *Collective Imaginings* (with Genevieve Lloyd):

[Every] community exists in time and so will be faced with the necessity to construct, and reconstruct, an imaginary ‘we’ which founds and maintains any given form of sociability. The wise polity will not be one in which passion, imagination and difference are shed but rather one in which citizens will participate in the ongoing formation of the structures and institutions through which passion and difference are negotiated.⁶

If we are prepared to question essentialism as a way of telling monolithic stories about the singular origins of sexual inequality, then one must be prepared to question the story told about essentialism itself—namely, that it originates in one single, monolithic error, unmodified by its conditions of utterance or transmission. A reductive approach to essentialism (or any other “ism”) can lead to critics to unwittingly accepting the most conservative reading of philosophical texts, rather than examining how this reading may have become the preferred one for this community, in this time and place.⁷ If essentialism is the monster, Gatens does not chase the monster from the village. Instead, she develops a lucid political analysis about what feminist theory can and cannot do: “[There] cannot be an unadulterated feminist theory which would announce our arrival at a place where we could say we are ‘beyond’ patriarchal theory and patriarchal experience.”⁸ Making claims to an undiluted feminist theory, as the endgame of

analysis, is to misunderstand the variety of effects truths may express and produce as they bubble through social worlds. Gatens' work constantly enlarges the spaces available for transformative criticism without negation, reformation without excommunication.

Philosophical disagreement can be understood differently from this viewpoint. The proper object of disagreement *could* be an idea that we attribute to a thinker who simply thinks poorly. Or, an idea can be treated as an index for a social and political world, one that marks our own storytelling with the imprints of history quite beyond the control of any single author.⁹ From this latter perspective, philosophy is fundamentally social project, rather than an analytical or methodical project, although of course, analysis and method can still be used to advance social purposes. Its objects and tools exist in and through the affordances of social relations, and its truths exist immanently to these affordances. Gatens' understanding of truth and falsehood is worth quoting at length:

The capacity to imagine is essential to what it is to be human. To exist as an embodied being in culture is to exist as more than a mind or a rational will. Truth is the wrong register in which to attempt to understand the generation of the kind of meaningful behaviour — supported by social “fictions” — that is vital to all forms of sociability. In this context, imagination and fiction are wrongly conceived as truth's contraries. Rather, it should be acknowledged that sociability itself depends on the power of the imagination to bind together individuals, both temporally and affectively. To exist with others in communities of shared meanings is to be confronted every day with decisions about how to behave, how to pursue one's projects without provoking enmity, and how best to preserve oneself, one's family, friends and goods. Our relations with others are more often sustained by social fictions of various kinds than they are by notions of “truth.” Our day-to-day encounters are embodied encounters guided by both habitual and practical orientations toward the general business of living. All this takes place against culturally specific normative backgrounds that are largely taken for granted.¹⁰

Each social imaginary may contain its own distinct variations, debates, memories, joys and sadness, and so on. While social imaginaries may help to sustain representational practices, imaginaries themselves cannot be evaluated according to a correspondence theory of knowledge: they are constitutive of social realities,

rather than seeking merely to re-present or reflect them.¹¹ For this reason, Gatens argues that Baruch Spinoza's *Tractus Theological-Politicus* (TTP) should not be read simply as an indictment of religion in the name of reason. Instead, the religious imagination "is a power, rather than a defect, and the knowledge to which it gives rise—though partial or inadequate—is of enormous social utility."¹² To disagree with extant social fictions, simply for the reason that they are not commensurate with our own professional discourse, is to misrecognise the power of imaginaries in sustaining the wider social worlds on which philosophical activity depends.

SPEECH, EMBODIMENT, OTHERS

The approach to social imaginaries presented thus far may be understood, by a sceptical reader, as a defence of moral relativism, political quietism, or both. In prioritising "meaningful behaviour" over questions of truth, do we not abandon our responsibilities as agents involved in concrete struggles over social injustices? By using the concept of social imaginaries to describe both embodied actions and the production of knowledge, important ideals of human freedom and responsibility seem to have been sacrificed. Gatens responds by clarifying the specific role accorded to free thinking in Spinoza's philosophy:

Without necessity, human freedom would remain as chimerical as the assumed freedom of the infant who believes he freely wants milk or the drunkard who believes he freely speaks his mind. Put differently, human freedom would amount to little more than the false assumption that, because we are conscious of our appetites, we must also be their cause. This is a crucial aspect of Spinoza's account of human psychology and the imagination: the "illusion of consciousness" encourages the habit of mistaking the "will" as the origin of our affects, that is, we "experience" the affect but are often ignorant of the chain of causes which determine that affect.¹³

The concept of social imaginaries does not render ideological struggles meaningless, but it does reframe the purpose of such struggles. Rather than relying on appeals to individual "responsibility" to ground human conduct, we look to the multiplicity of causes acting on the individual *such that they can act responsibly*. This holds for good philosophy, too. We should not expect good ideas to appear *sui generis*, but must instead consider the collective conditions by which new kinds of thinking become possible—not always in philosophy, not always in

universities.¹⁴ To further understand why Gatens' concept of social imaginaries is not an argument for the equal value of all ideas, we need to engage in more depth with Gatens' Spinozism.

In the *Ethics* of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, published posthumously in 1677, "causes" can be understood differently, depending on whether we regard them from the viewpoint of the attribute of thought or the attribute of extension. Mind-body parallelism in the *Ethics* is most succinctly expressed in Book II, Proposition 7: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."¹⁵ Spinoza invites a consideration of thought and extension as existing in non-hierarchical relation. For example, what Gatens calls the social imaginary is not an idle fiction that grafts itself upon, and therefore obscures from view, the real story of "how society actually works." Rather, social imaginaries express something about the corporeality of society that produces them, which does not make such expression representational. One common reading of this relationship between ideas and bodies is that material relations underpin in the production of ideas, because ideas are derived from things we have heard, seen, felt, and so on. Gatens suggests that the concept of "affect" is used in much this way by Brian Massumi to describe pre-ideological encounters.¹⁶ For feminist scholars, a turn toward affective relations has been useful for authorising embodied forms of knowledge without any need for recourse to metaphysical propositions. Gatens and Lloyd together appear to make an argument of this kind in their commentary on the body politic:

The embodied presence of women, and other historically marginalised groups, in political, legal and other institutional arenas, is thus crucial if their changed formal status is to be practically recognised. Such recognition can not be reduced to mere cognitive change but must involve an affective and corporeal transformation of the way we experience self and other, identity and community.¹⁷

This critical appraisal of "mere cognitive change" points toward a contextualist understanding of knowledge production, wherein deep "affective and corporeal" forces underpin the ideological surfaces continue to be the privileged sites of philosophical labour.¹⁸

However, Gatens' reading of Spinoza introduces two important complications for any conception of the body as the prime mover of ideas. Firstly, by placing ideas

downstream from bodies, we may hope to emancipate ourselves from well-worn struggles over ideology. Rather than the old scholastic debates, it may be that novel, pre-ideological forces—affects, events, things—that will unsettle our received habits of thought. Nevertheless, this can easily lead to a devaluation of social imaginaries, and an overestimation of our capacities to describe the pre-ideological Real.¹⁹ At worst, we may be tempted to dismiss inherited political ideas as mere abstractions, while insisting that our own neologisms have a more profound connection to the thing-stuff of existence. This remains a representational understanding of thought, wherein the significance of ideas is reduced to their fidelity to the objects of experience, and the result may be a reduced capacity to think through alternative social imaginaries. Commenting on the negative freedoms that she identifies in Massumi’s affect theory, Gatens notes that “it is freedom *from* power, and freedom *from* ideology, because affect is here posited as an *atopos* that is free *from* signification, representation, and meaning. It does not involve a ‘freedom to’: to act, to deliberate, to flourish.”²⁰ We need to acknowledge the productive and creative work that fictions can perform in constituting new relations and shared futures.

This leads to a second issue around the role of speech in constructing imaginaries. The capacity of a collective to produce its own fictions is both an enactment of power and an effect of power; in this regard, speech does not just exist downstream from affective and corporeal forces, but is a corporeal activity that shapes how social spaces come to be occupied, used, and changed. For example, in “Feminism as ‘Password’: Re-Thinking the ‘Possible’ with Spinoza and Deleuze,” Gatens considers the diversity of speech practices that attend many documented instances of sexual assault. Drawing on Sharon Marcus, Gatens notes that “the materialisation of men as aggressors and of women as victims is, in part, achieved through language and those assemblages which support some utterances while disqualifying others (for example, the courts, the police).”²¹ There is the flow of words that harass, threaten or intimidate; there are words that accompany physical attacks; there are the words forced through testimony and cross-examination; and there are the everyday, casual social encounters that naturalise ways of speaking and being spoken to. Such speech is certainly political, but not simply as “a struggle over *ideas* and formal status. It also involves the struggle to embody and embed the desires, needs and imaginings of those whom democratic political structures in the present fail to adequately represent.”²²

Speech is not the epiphenomena of embodiment. Society is not held together exclusively by pre-ideological forces of a material, affective, embodied kind, nor can we attribute group formation to collective investments in a single principle, idea, or concept. Rather, Gatens invites an interrogation of historically changing connections, or what Stuart Hall might have called “articulations,”²³ between an arrangement of ideas and an arrangement of bodies. These connections become most pertinent when certain speaking bodies are silenced. Reflecting on the legacies of colonialism in knowledge production, Lewis Gordon also highlights the importance of the corporeal dimensions of speech:

It is not that colonised groups fail to speak. It is that their speaking lacks appearance or mediation; it is not transformed into speech. The erasure of speech calls for the elimination of such conditions of its appearance such as gestural sites and the constellation of muscles that facilitates speech—namely, the face. As faceless, problem people are derailed from the dialectics of recognition, of self and other, with the consequence of neither self nor other.²⁴

The subtlety of Gordon’s observation contains important resonances with Gatens’ Spinozism. His argument is not that colonised people have had experiences that need to be more accurately described, or that more discussions are needed about colonialism in extant philosophical discourse. Rather, the dialogic imagination of philosophy itself—who speaks about what to whom—exists in parallel with an arrangement of bodies within which certain embodiments of institutional spaces and certain ways of speaking are pushed outside the limits of recognised interlocution. These are not mere metaphors. There are tangible geographical divides and arrangements of urban space that ward off the kinds of interaction often imagined when philosophers talk about “recognising the Other,” “encountering the Other,” and so on.

In the following two sections, I will explore these issues around embodied difference and otherness in social imaginaries by way of two contemporary debates: the first around the agency of women perceived to be conservative and/or anti-feminist; and the second around the status of “monstrous” acts in relation to collective and cultural norms.

RETHINKING AGENCY

There have been longstanding debates in philosophy, sociology and anthropology about the ontological preconditions for individual self-determination. Gatens' approach to social imaginaries forces a reconsideration of the particular ways that "agency" has been valorised in relation to feminist concerns.²⁵ As noted above, Gatens rejects the humanist ideal of the individual as autonomous agent unaffected by social relations or historical change. Nevertheless, as Talal Asad has noted, a rejection of the concept of agency does not lessen its significance in contemporary social imaginaries, especially in cases where "triumphalist" stories about agency are used to exalt the virtues of European modernity.²⁶ Scrutinising the ways that European philosophers have constructed metaphors for political agency and the "political body," Gatens notes that the only properly agential body is imagined to be the man's body, perhaps epitomised by Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*: "the artificial man incorporates and so controls and regulates women's bodies in a manner which does not undermine his claim to autonomy, since her contributions are neither visible nor acknowledged."²⁷ Bodies that do not conform to dominant understandings of what a political body is, or could be, are regarded via their distance from the male body-politic.

Despite the dramatic increase in participation of women in politics since Hobbes, social imaginaries continue to constrain understandings of women's political agency. Gatens notes that assessments of female agency continue to turn on some conception of "authentic femininity":

[The] false/true dichotomization of [authentic femininity] is untenable. It results in the positing of a hierarchy of types of women: the oppressed woman who cannot, because she lacks education or opportunity, see through her condition; the complicit woman who chooses not to acknowledge her condition through fear of losing class privilege and having to accept responsibility for her own life; and the authentic woman who recognizes her oppression and chooses to struggle to overcome it.²⁸

Contained within these first two "types of women" is an implied relationship to patriarchy. The woman who lacks authentic self-recognition must, in some direct or indirect way, aid in her own oppression. Such assumptions can be particularly damaging for women who experience intimate-partner violence, given how commonly people assume that "good feminists" can easily leave "bad men."²⁹ Ques-

tions around embodiment of political ideals also become fraught when members of oppressed and marginalised groups voice conservative or right-wing ideas in the public domain. To think through this, I want to consider a recent example from U.S. politics.

On January 23rd in 2017, at the presidential inauguration of Donald Trump in the United States, a video segment went viral of Melania Trump, the First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS hereafter). The video seemed to show Melania faking a smile for her husband. The fake smile snowballed, from detailed analyses of the frown, to speculation that Melania may be a hostage to her husband, to a Twitter hashtag #freemelania (the hashtag has since faded from prominence). This hashtag built on the “Save Melania” trope that was already visible on placards during the 2017 Women’s March on Washington.³⁰

This brief cycle of speculation about FLOTUS condensed a thickly layered social imaginary around the terms of gendered agency. In certain renditions of the #freemelania meme, Melania Trump’s political agency appeared to be reduced to signs of her relationship to the patriarch—admittedly, a patriarch who has become notorious for making misogynist claims in both private and public. The meme seems to imply that there can be no conservative women thinking conservative thoughts, only varying degrees of entrapment of women by men. Furthermore, references to #freemelania in digital spaces construct FLOTUS through a piecemeal taxonomy of expressions and postures, as if women in politics have forfeited any claim to unified personhood. In the streams of captioned images, we have an online scramble to make sense of what Gatens calls “female bits, fragments to be consumed, taken a bit at a time.”³¹ The face of Melania: does it *really* smile? The *who* of the subject is lost in the *it* of the face. As sceptical commentators noted at the time, the seemingly pro-feminist stance that women allied with Trump must suffer false consciousness required the deliberate elision of statements and interviews made by Melania Trump herself.³² Finally, subtending this semiotic objectification and erasure of speech, we have an investment in the monstrosity of Trump, as if he alone were required to “keep her hostage.” Rather than being an effect of a deeply misogynist political and social milieu, Trump himself becomes the miraculous pseudo-cause of patriarchy in American politics.

Political caricatures are not intended to accurately capture the real psychic lives of the individuals concerned. Nevertheless, to borrow from Gatens’ *Imaginary Bodies*:

Like all caricatures they capture a truth in and through their very distortion. What would it mean to argue that these “caricatures” capture a truth concerning dominant social habits, practices and beliefs—in short, that they capture something about social attitudes to women and marriage that are embodied in our civil existences?³³

In this #freemelania meme, we can see the operation of a caricature that expresses some deep discomfort with the active participation of women in politics as political agents, rather than as prisoners unable to think through their situation. It does need to be acknowledged that the oppressed can become complicit in their own oppression; indeed, the concept of the social imaginary is particularly useful for thinking through how such complicity becomes part of everyday meaning-making in social worlds. Nevertheless, this important observation can sometimes drift toward a peculiar moralism that places unique burdens on oppressed individuals to prove themselves capable of exercising agency. As Gatens argues in her discussion of the masculinised body-politic in European philosophy, challenges must be made to the schema of intentionality that understands masculinity as coextensive with coherent political *causes*, and femininity with a series of *effects* resulting from an external stimulus. Of course, Melania Trump is a divisive example. The #freemelania memes notwithstanding, FLOTUS does exercise extraordinary political power.³⁴ Drawing on Gatens’ concept of social imaginaries, I want to briefly examine two further examples of agency in relation to different forms of oppression.

Firstly, elective cosmetic surgeries have frequently come under scrutiny as sites where oppressed groups potentially invite their own oppression. Cressida Heyes provides the example of Asian-American women, who are commonly held to account for their choices to engage cosmetic surgery procedures that others perceive to be whitening or “deracialising”: “It is quite common to see soul-searching features on whether having eyelid surgery means young Asian women want to look white that castigate those women for their race treachery.”³⁵ In a high-profile incident on *The Tyra Banks Show*, the host “lambasts Liz—a 25-year-old Korean American woman guest—with extraordinary vigour for being deceitful about her own participation in racist norms.”³⁶ At the same time, white American women are rarely scrutinised for choosing similar surgeries organised around the same conceptions of beauty. Joanne Elfving-Hwang and Jane Park document similar issues in the Australian context:

[The] bodies of Asian–Australian women who choose to undergo cosmetic surgery can only be considered within a binary of racial authenticity and inauthenticity that effectively forecloses the possibility for the Asian–Australian subject to possess any form of agency through surgery. While white subjects are usually ascribed agency as ‘competent actors’ who have ‘carefully weighted up how to position themselves in relation to social and cultural imperatives and opportunities’ (Jones 2008, 24), Asian-Australian ones are not afforded this position within the existing Australian cultural imaginary.³⁷

In both U.S. and Australian contexts, women are accorded differential capacities to exercise agency, depending on their perceived racial grouping. This happens partly through a general disregard for the diverse imaginaries that give plastic surgeries social meanings, and partly because, as Elfving-Hwang and Park suggest, the concept of agency itself is culturally loaded, with heightened responsibilities placed on marginalised groups to perform agency in “authentic” ways.

Secondly, the suspicion that women from non-white and/or non-European backgrounds may suffer from false consciousness has acquired a distinct character for women engaged in religious practices. This has been especially so in the wake of the United States’ “War on Terror” and its attendant rhetoric around the liberation of Muslim women, both in discourses about women in Muslim-majority nations (e.g. Afghanistan) and Muslim women in European nations (e.g. France).³⁸ Throughout, the metonymically charged trope of the “Third-World Muslim woman,” always-already unable to exercise her agency, has been a mainstay of Islamophobic polemic worldwide, and provides a context for Saba Mahmood’s critical interventions in the *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. In an anthropological study of a piety movement among Muslim women in Egypt, Mahmood documents a variety of exchanges between four women in their thirties, who would meet regularly to read the Qur’an and discuss ethical practices in Islam. On one occasion, the women discuss wearing the *khimār* and the *hijāb*, and reflect on the struggles that some have experienced when trying to embody their faith. One of the women, Nama, insists that “you must wear the veil, first because it is God’s command [*hukm allah*], and then, with time, because your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable [*mish rādī*] about it.”³⁹ While noting that many feminist commentators would read this as “obsequious deference to social norms,” Mahmood arrives at a different conclusion:

[If] we think of “agency” not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action, then this conversation raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them.⁴⁰

Mahmood would seem to be prioritising bodily practices in ways that resemble Massumi’s affect theory. “Natural feelings” are understood to “issue” from embodied actions, such that ideological content—say, ideas about masculinity and femininity—becomes less important than material transformations. On closer inspection, though, these actions also acquire their initial meaning through a social imaginary: that is, the wider social imaginary of Muslim communities in Egypt, and the localised cultures of interpretation exemplified by the women’s Quranic reading group. “[Any] discussion of the issue of transformation must begin,” writes Mahmood, “with an analysis of the specific practices of subjectivation that make the subjects of a particular social imaginary possible.”⁴¹ The collective social imaginary embedded in the women’s social relationships supports the routinisation of embodied practices, and this, as Nama puts it, allows the “inside” to “learn.”

THINKING WITHOUT MONSTERS

The social imaginary is a fiction-in-progress that produces real effects. Like any good page-turner, it has its heroes and villains. We have already encountered monsters of various kinds. Critics cut their teeth uncovering monstrous essentialisms wherever they may hide, while the monstrous president of the United States imprisons the hapless Melania Trump, who becomes the Bride of Frankenstein writ large. Monsters lurk in body and mind at once. We do not *feel* before we think or *think* before we feel, but rather we inhabit worlds where disgust and repulsion travel wildly across word and page, touch and sight, habit and memory. Disgust is not a pre-political category and monsters do not stumble, uninvited, upon communities of innocents.⁴² In this final section, I want to examine two different ways that Gatens has approached acts of violence, drawing on Spinoza’s understanding of embodied relationality and the role of the imaginary.

For Spinoza, a body is enmeshed in its encounters with other bodies, and these relations produce affections, or transitions in the state of the body that either enhance its powers of acting, giving rise to joyful affects, or diminish its powers of acting, giving rise to sad affects.⁴³ We form ideas corresponding to these transitions, but these ideas remain inadequate if we remain ignorant of the causes that determine us to be affected in these ways. When we find something to be repellent, for example we may attribute this affect to the inherent properties of the thing itself, rather than seeking to understand our relationship to it, or that which, within us, is most affected by it. This does not mean that affects are obstacles to understanding, only that inadequate ideas lack a relational understanding of the ways we can be affected or affect others. In this context, “evil” is a name we give for affections that produce in us strong sad affects, and for which we have not yet adequately understood its cause.⁴⁴ The attribution of disgust to a social Other that we deem monstrous is an example of an inadequate idea: we experience both joyful and sad affects throughout our everyday social encounters, but we are likely to attribute joyful encounters to our social milieu (“people like us”), while attributing sad affects either to those outside our milieu (“people like them”) or those placed outside society altogether (“the monster”). Othering elides our own relation to acts that produce sad affects, and overlooks the multiplicity of relations that cause the other to act in such-and-such a way. Should the concept of evil be retained at all, it could only describe actions borne of passive affects and inadequate ideas—that is, things that people do because they seek no understanding of the causes that determine them to act, or of the wider social relations within which their actions produce effects. In Gatens’ reading of Spinoza, “the meaning of human actions as well as the moralities of individuals are not ahistorical constants but rather are developed in particular historical and political contexts,” and why correspondingly, the actions we call evil involve relations between multiple bodies, such that “a community of rational beings would assume some responsibility for its particular constitution.”⁴⁵

This Spinozist reading of good and evil has direct bearing on notions of moral responsibility for heinous acts. Gatens considers the case of David Helsby, who—according to reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1993—had been abusing his wife, and was subsequently murdered by his stepson, Steven Helsby.⁴⁶ Gatens considers the Helsby murder alongside the case of Brian Maxwell, who broke his restraining order to kill his ex-wife Marilyn Maxwell. Gatens does not accept the dominant narrative that this violence is monstrous and therefore alien to our sensibilities:

A community of rational beings would look to the structural, as well as to the immediate, causes of violent behaviour and assume responsibility for such causes where appropriate—for example, attitudes to women that are embedded in the customs and laws of the civil body. Perhaps then the construction of men as essentially violent or of the criminal offender as a distinct “species” would be understood as symptomatic of our ignorance concerning the type of body complex of which we are a part. Such an understanding would, in turn, be the harbinger of the death of a “type”: the intrinsically and wilfully evil criminal.⁴⁷

This is a compelling analysis of the monster as a moral personage in the social imaginary. The sad affects produced by disgust at monstrosity can lead toward adequate ideas, once we understand that this sadness stems, at least in part, from our complicity as members of a shared community. This is not argument for the lofty, sentimental humanism that Hannah Arendt criticises among those who, during the 1960 trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann, would seek to discover an “Eichmann in everyone one of us.”⁴⁸ That bodies exist in relation to one another does not mean that each shares a common sin by analogy. We share things in common with others only because we engage common projects, and we each increase our individual powers by increasing the collective powers of the communities to which we belong. In turn, this demands some degree of community accountability for its members’ actions.⁴⁹

In more recent essays, Gatens has complicated the notion of “community” that might be held responsible for individual action. In ‘Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?’ Gatens examines an Australian legal case where Indigenous cultural traditions were presented, in questionable circumstances, as an immediate proxy for “unchanging” community norms. Monstrosity becomes, in this instance, a question loaded by intersecting considerations around gender, cultural identity, and institutional power.

In 2001, Jackie Pascoe Jamilmira, an Indigenous resident of an outstation east of Maningrida in Arnhem Land (Northern Territory), was accused of unlawful intercourse with a minor (an adolescent Indigenous girl). In a Court of Appeal defence in 2002, *Jamilmira v. Hales*, the appellant claimed that his actions formed part of a cultural norm of arranged marriage, and supplied evidence of his longstanding arrangement with the girl’s parents.⁵⁰ This defence resulted in a significant mitigation of his criminal sentence (this was later overturned by the Court of Appeal). In

the evidence submitted to *Jamilmira v. Hales*, no space was made available to hear the testimonies of both men and women in the community. However, Jamilmira's defence did cite the claims of non-Indigenous anthropologists, including studies from 1981-1987 corroborating evidence of traditional marriages in the region.⁵¹ This gave rise to a series of damaging headlines around the case: "Aboriginal men 'twisting customary law'" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*), "Aborigine insists tribal law gives right to underage sex" (*The Independent*), and so on. Delicate conflict resolution with Indigenous communities is often overburdened by such media sensationalism around "Indigenous violence."⁵²

Gatens maps the various dichotomies that the media employed to frame the Jamilmira court cases: collective versus individual, Indigenous rights versus women's rights, race versus gender. Linking these dichotomies was the presumption that tradition is an obstacle to be overcome, and that communities must either hold on to traditions or abandon them. Kyllie Cripps and S. Caroline Taylor have subsequently noted that "at no time did any court qualify what was meant by the term traditional," and that the careless usage of "traditional" can imply "that the defendant comes from a culture with knowledge and practices that are immutable ... [despite evidence that] cultural practices are not static and change as the environment changes."⁵³ These considerations prompt Gatens to consider the ways that traditions are positioned within wider social imaginaries around Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities in Australia:

The question of the link between culture and agency, or "societal culture" and freedom, is especially pertinent for indigenous peoples who did not choose to share their land and resources with the colonizers, and who continue to survive against all odds... The conditions under which traditions are perpetuated change and so require constant reinvention and renegotiation The point is not that if a tradition changes then it loses its claim to "authenticity" or legitimacy. Every tradition that survives does so by changing and adapting to new circumstances. Rather, the salient points remain: who has the authority to define tradition? Who is entitled to participate in the reinvention of tradition across time? These questions are pertinent for women worldwide.⁵⁴

In the *Helsby* and *Maxwell* cases, Gatens had questioned our impulses in extracting monstrous individuals from their wider social and cultural contexts. In the case of *Jamilmira*, however, the notion of "culture" becomes entangled with West-

ern social imaginaries about Aboriginal cultures, which are too often presented as *either* pristine and “pre-colonial” *or* as suffering from perpetual decline.⁵⁵ These are problems for the cultural identities of philosophers, as well as for lawyers and anthropologists. Gatens’ argument invites re-examination of the discursive role philosophers might play, given that the question, “who has the authority to define tradition?,” may not produce answers that preserve a place for professional philosophers. Or rather, it may be that philosophy can make better contributions to intercultural conversations around power and justice, but only once a different kind of “social imaginary” exists for philosophy itself, one that might be more attuned to the collective, material conditions that exist in parallel with the adventures of thought.⁵⁶

This returns us to a distinctive feature of Gatens’ work. She takes philosophy outside of itself and makes philosophy vulnerable in the face of what it discovers. We do not often ask whether a philosopher is capable of exercising agency, or whether the collective conditions of philosophical practice may produce uncomfortable gaps between what we say and what we, as a collective, are capable of enacting. Recall that in her anthropological study, Mahmood demonstrated how women can work together, through critical conversation and routinised practices, to arrange their ideas and bodies in ways that support a profound experience of faith and community. We need to acknowledge, with some humility, that much philosophical labour is oriented toward similar ends, and that philosophers may be relatively inattentive to the role of bodily practices in helping the inside to learn. One step in this direction may be, following Gatens, to not allow ideological disagreements, the shaming of abject political figures, or disgust toward acts and behaviours, undermine collective projects for inventing more compelling social imaginaries. These imaginaries would need to support a multiplicity of social meanings attached to different modalities of agency, including those situated within or between different cultural settings. This may mean, in turn, learning to think without monsters.

TIMOTHY LAURIE is a Scholarly Teaching Fellow in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney. His core research interests include cultural theory, popular music studies, gender and sexuality studies, and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. He is Managing Editor of *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*.

NOTES

1. Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 88.
2. On commensuration in critical theory, philosophy and cultural studies, see Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
3. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 81.
4. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 87.
5. See also Louise Richardson-Self, “The Reflections on Imagination and Embodiment in the work of Moira Gatens, 1983—2008,” *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, this issue.
6. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 128. See also Moira Gatens, “The Politics of the Imagination,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Moira Gatens (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).
7. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 228.
8. Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 98.
9. On indexical signs see Charles S. Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955).
10. Moira Gatens, “Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights? Towards an Embodied Account of Social Norms, Social Meaning, and Cultural Change,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 3:3 (2004), 282. See also Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, 89; Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 123.
11. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 143.
12. Moira Gatens, “Spinoza’s Disturbing Thesis: Power, Norms and Fiction in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,” *History of Political Thought* XXX:3 (2009), 458.
13. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 128.
14. This theme is also discussed in Timothy Laurie, Hannah Stark, and Briohny Walker, “Critical Approaches to Continental Philosophy: Intellectual Community, Disciplinary Identity, and the Politics of Inclusion,” *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, this issue.
15. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), 119.
16. Moira Gatens, “Affective Transitions and Spinoza’s Art of Joyful Deliberation,” in *Timing of Affect: Epistemologies of Affection* ed. Marie-Luise Angerer, Michaela Ott, and Bernd Bösel (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2014).
17. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 131–32.
18. See Lawrence Grossberg, “Pessimism of the Will, Optimism of the Intellect: Endings and Beginnings,” *Cultural Studies* 32:6 (2018).
19. This issue is also discussed in Timothy Bewes, “The Surge: Turning Away from Affect,” *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 12:3 (2018).
20. Gatens, “Affective Transitions and Spinoza’s Art of Joyful Deliberation,” 26–27. Emphasis in original.
21. “Feminism as “Password”: Re-Thinking the “Possible” with Spinoza and Deleuze,” *Hypatia* 15:2 (2000), 72.
22. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 130.

23. See Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
24. Lewis R. Gordon, "Disciplinary Decadence and the Decolonisation of Knowledge," *Africa Development* 39:1 (2014): 88.
25. A useful commentary on theories of "agency" in feminist social research is provided in Kelsy C. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches," *Sociology Compass* 6:2 (2012).
26. This argument is developed across Talal Asad's survey of "agency" in sociological and anthropological literature. See Talal Asad, "Agency and Pain: An Exploration," *Culture and Religion* 1:1 (2000), 29-60.
27. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 23.
28. Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, 88.
29. See Karen Kendrick, "Producing the Battered Woman: Shelter Politics and the Power of the Feminist Voice," in *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy Naples (New York: London, 1998).
30. See Carley Petersen Durden, "Authoring Melania Trump's FLOTUS," in *Women, Social Change, and Activism: Then and Now*, ed. Dawn Hutchinson and Lori Underwood (Maryland, USA: Lexington Books, 2018).
31. See also Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, 9, 10, 24; *Imaginary Bodies*, 24.
32. One interesting public response to "Free Melania" can be found in Megan Garber, "On Pitying Melania," *The Atlantic* (January 25, 2017).
33. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 119.
34. See Durden.
35. Cressida J. Heyes, "All Cosmetic Surgery Is "Ethnic": Asian Eyelids, Feminist Indignation, and the Politics of Whiteness," in *Cosmetic Surgery: A Feminist Primer*, ed. Cressida J. Heyes and Meredith Jones (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 197n5.
36. Heyes, 197n5.
37. Joanna Elfving-Hwang and Jane Park, "Deracializing Asian Australia? Cosmetic Surgery and the Question of Race in Australian Television," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 30:4 (2016), 397-407.
38. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104:3 (2002); Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
39. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 157.
40. Mahmood, 154.
41. Mahmood, 154.
42. Michael Richardson, "The Disgust of Donald Trump," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 31:6 (2017).
43. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 49. See also "Of the Affects" in Spinoza, 152-197.
44. "[We] desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call it good because we desire it. Consequently, what we are averse to we call evil." Spinoza, 175 [EIIIP39D]. See also Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 49.
45. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 118.
46. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 118-119.

47. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 121.
48. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 286.
49. See “Responsibility for the Past” in Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 136-149. On this reading of the “common” in Spinoza, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 43.
50. Kylie Cripps and S. Caroline Taylor, “White Man’s Law, Traditional Law, Bullshit Law: Customary Marriage Revisited,” *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism* 10 (2009), 66-67.
51. Sonia Smallacombe, “Speaking Positions on Indigenous Violence,” *Hecate* 30:1 (2004); ‘Jamilmira v Hales [2003] NTCA 9,’ *Supreme Court of the Northern Territory (Court of Appeal)* (April 15, 2003), URL: <http://www7.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/nt/NTCA/2003/9.html>
52. Smallacombe, 49-50.
53. Cripps and Taylor, 66-67. Sonia Smallacombe, a member of the Maramanindji people from the Northern Territory and longstanding Social Affairs Officer at the United Nations, also argues that broad patterns of non-Indigenous representation of Indigenous peoples in Australian legal settings implicitly position Indigenous communities as incapable of self-representation. See Smallacombe.
54. Gatens, “Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?,” 292-93.
55. These issues are discussed throughout Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).
56. See Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004). See also Laurie, Stark, and Walker.