Summary

Theology in the flesh: exploring the corporeal turn from a southern African perspective is inspired by the book of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Philosophy in the flesh. The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought (1999), who define “philosophy in the flesh” as a way to see how our physical being and all the things we encounter daily make us who we are. It is also an acknowledgement of the far-reaching and pervasive influence of philosophy in Christian thinking and in this research, doing theology from the body. The second part of the title, “exploring the corporeal turn from a southern African perspective” reflects the main research question: how did the corporeal turn manifest within other academic disciplines, within the history of Christianity and within theology, and how can the corporeal turn be integrated into a contemporary theological anthropology from a southern African perspective? While the research for this thesis lies at the junction between practical theology and systematic theology, it is mainly approached from the perspective of systematic theology. The sensitivity to the concrete context, in this case the life-world of southern Africa was sharpened by practical theology. The model proposed in the last chapter for a contemporary theological anthropology as embodied sensing captures this emphasis on the crucial importance, also for systematic theology of the bodily experiences of real people in concrete life-worlds.

A postfoundationalist theology opens the door very wide to interdisciplinary dialogue, and especially in the context of initiating deeper and deeper levels of inquiry into the body and the experiences of the body within a specific and concrete life-world. A postfoundationalist notion of reality enables us to communicate across boundaries and move transversally from context to context, from one tradition to another, from one discipline to another. It is the weaving together of many voices — the voices of Church Fathers, mystics and Protestant Reformers, of philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, artists, cognitive scientists, anthropologists, molecular biologists, and novelists. It brings together the voices of flesh and blood people in southern Africa with that of theologians that take the body and the experiences of the body seriously.

The corporeal turn is explored in philosophy, sociology, somatic psychology, paleoanthropology and anthropology, and within cognitive science and molecular biology. The corporeal turn is evaluated in the light of this interdisciplinary exploration in an effort to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the body. The body is furthermore investigated
in colonial and post-colonial southern Africa, as well as within apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and an appeal is made to the bodily experiences of southern Africans in evaluating the corporeal turn. If social location is known in the body, and if recent research in molecular biology suggesting that trauma can be inherited up to a hundred generations is incorporated together with the notion of implicit memory, then it is reasonable to conceive that there is a transmission of these corporeal narratives from generation to generation. This is a kind of “embodied history” (a history of bodily knowledge of social location) which comes into being “as flesh gives birth to flesh”. Knowing this, the past, inclusive of the trauma inflicted by apartheid, the ravages of wars, and the exploitation of colonialism cannot easily be forgotten and are not easily erased from memory.

Corporeal dynamics in early Christian communities are studied, as well as perceptions of the body in the work of the early Church Fathers, such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine. Bodily perceptions are investigated in the time of the Desert Fathers, within female mysticism during the Middle Ages, and during the Reformation. The question is asked whether one can refer to these perceptions and experiences of the body/soul in Christian history as a dualism or an ambiguity; or as a unity; or should there be more nuance in the interpretation of these perceptions and experiences?

The corporeal turn is investigated in the body theology of the Protestant theologian James B. Nelson and Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body. The difference in the interpretation of the sexual revolution, as has become clear in the difference between body theology and the theology of the body, is reflected in the deep split within many churches on the place of gay and lesbian marriage in the church, on gays and lesbians in ordained ministry, and on the ordination of women in recent decades. As a result of the different interpretations of the impact of the sexual revolution, some protestant, gay and feminist body theologians are comfortable to take the body and the experiences of the body as a starting point for theology and also interpret the body as an important site of knowledge and a source of revelation on par with Scripture and tradition. They tend to share the awareness in other disciplines like sociology, philosophy and psychology that the approach must be from the body and not merely about the body. Roman Catholic theologians of the body tend to diverge on the point of accepting the body and the experiences of the body as a source of revelation, and to take the body seriously enough as a site of knowledge and as a site of resistance against various forms of oppression emanating from patriarchal heterosexism.
The body is further investigated in contemporary theological anthropologies. The quest is for a theological anthropology that reflects a deeper understanding of the rich and complex dimensions of bodily life. The landscape of contemporary theological anthropology is explored, and contemporary theological anthropologies that take the body seriously are evaluated. The theological anthropologies of Wesley Wildman, Wentzel van Huyssteen, Nancey Murphy, Fount LeRon Shults and Andrea Ng’wesheni are discussed with a focus on the Trinitarian theological anthropology of David H. Kelsey. Kelsey develops a contemporary theological anthropology that consistently takes the body seriously as an organising principle, and he expounds it further with notions of the “proximate context”, “the living body” (a theology of creation and birth), “personal bodies”, “flourishing bodies”, “eschatologically fully consummated living human personal bodies”, and Jesus Christ as “imager of God in his humanity” and as the “grammatical paradigm” of human being. His work is evaluated as a contemporary theological anthropology with a sentiment of the flesh.

The corporeal turn in evaluated within theology and theological anthropology. It is clear from the enquiry regarding an interdisciplinary perspective on the corporeal turn that it is not tenable to speak only of a corporeal turn. As the corporeal turn gathered momentum after the Second World War, spurred by the ideas of the French phenomenological philosophers, it gained insights from social sciences and the humanities (sociology, psychology), and later, also from natural sciences, and in particular cognitive science. It incorporated insights from cognitive science, evolutionary biology, palaeoanthropology, and linguistic philosophy, evolving towards the 1990s into a corporeal-linguistic turn; or what I refer to as a third-generation corporeal turn. A model for theological anthropology as embodied sensing is proposed within the context, and from the perspective of southern Africa. It is a contemporary theological anthropology with a sentiment of the flesh and a sensitivity to the textures of life, which functions within the intricate and complex connection of the living body, language and experiencing in a concrete life-world with an openness to the “more than”.