

## Susan Bordo FEMINISM, WESTERN CULTURE, AND THE BODY

### THE HEAVY BEAR

"the witness of the body"  
Whitehead

The heavy bear who goes with me,  
A manifold honey to smear his face,  
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,  
The central ton of every place,  
The hungry beating brutish one  
In love with candy, anger, and sleep,  
Crazy factotum, disheveling all,  
Climbs the building, kicks the football,  
Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city.

Breathing at my side, that heavy animal,  
That heavy bear who sleeps with me,  
Howls in his sleep for a world of sugar,  
A sweetness intimate as the water's clasp,  
Howls in his sleep because the tight-rope  
Trembles and shows the darkness beneath.  
The strutting show-off is terrified,  
Dressed in his dress-suit, bulging his pants,  
Trembles to think that his quivering meat  
Must finally wince to nothing at all.

That inescapable animal walks with me,  
He's followed me since the black womb held,  
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,  
A caricature, a swollen shadow,  
A stupid clown of the spirit's motive,  
Perplexes and affronts with his own darkness,  
The secret life of belly and bone,  
Opaque, too near, my private, yet unknown,  
Stretches to embrace the very dear  
With whom I would walk without him near,

Touches her grossly, although a word  
Would bare my heart and make me clear,  
Stumbles, flounders, and strives to be fed  
Dragging me with him in his mouthing care,  
Amid the hundred million of his kind,  
The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.

*Delmore Schwartz*

### Cultural Expressions of Mind-Body Dualism

Through his metaphor of the body as "heavy bear," Delmore Schwartz vividly captures both the dualism that has been characteristic of Western philosophy and theology and its agonistic, unstable nature. Whitehead's epigraph sets out the dominating, double-edged construction, the one that contains and regulates all the others that of disjunction and connection, separateness and intimacy. "The witness of the body": the body as not "me" but "*with*" me is at the same time the body that is *inescapably* "with me." Like a Siamese

twin, neither one with me nor separable from me, my body has "followed me since the black womb held," moving where I move, accompanying my every act. Even in sleep, "he" is "breathing at my side." Yet, while I cannot rid myself of this creature, while I am forced to live with "him" in intimacy, he remains a strange, foreign presence to me: "private," "near," yet "opaque."

The body is a *beara* brute, capable of random, chaotic violence and aggression ("disheveling all . . . kicks the football / Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city"), but not of calculated evil. For that would require intelligence and forethought, and the bear is above all else a creature of instinct, of primitive need. Ruled by orality, by hunger, blindly "mouthing" experience, seeking honey and sugar, he is "in love" delicate, romantic sentiment but with the most basic, infantile desires: to be soothed by sweet things, to discharge his anger, to fall exhausted into stupor. Even in that stupor he hungers, he craves, he howls for a repletion dimly remembered from life in the womb, when need and fulfillment occupied the same moment, when frustration (and desire) was unknown. The bear who is the body is clumsy, gross, disgusting, a lumbering fool who trips me up in all my efforts to express myself clearly, to communicate love. Stupidly, unconsciously, dominated by appetite, he continually misrepresents my "spirit's motive," my finer, clearer self; like an image-maker from the darkness of Plato's cave, he casts a false image of me before the world, a swollen, stupid caricature of my "inner" being. I would be a sensitive, caring lover, I would tell my love my innermost feelings, but *he* only "touches her grossly," he only desires crude, physical release. I would face death bravely, but *he* is terrified, and in his terror, seeking comfort, petting, food to numb him to that knowledge, he is ridiculous, a silly clown performing tricks on a tightrope from which he must inevitably fall.

The bear who is my body is *heavy*, "dragging me with him." "The central ton of every place," he exerts a downward pull toward the earth, and toward death. "Beneath" the tightrope on which he performs his stunts is the awful truth that one day the bear will become mere, lifeless *matter*, "meat" for worms. And he, "that inescapable animal," will drag *me* to that destiny; for it is he, not I, who is in control, pulling me with him into the "scrimmage of appetite," the Hobbesian scramble of instinct and aggression that is, in Schwartz's vision, the human condition.

The body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects: these are common images within Western philosophy. This is not to say that a negative construction of the body has ruled without historical challenge, or that it has taken only one form, for the imaginal shape of the body has been historically variable. For example, although Schwartz employs Platonic imagery in evoking the distortions of the body, his complaint about the body is quite different from Plato's. Plato imagines the body as an *epistemological* deceiver, its unreliable senses and volatile passions continually tricking us into mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and the real. For Schwartz, the body and its passions are obstacles to expression of the "inner" life; his characteristically modern frustration over the isolation of the self and longing for "authenticity" would seem very foreign to Plato.

Plato, arguably (and as another example of the historical range of Western images of the body), had a mixed and complicated attitude toward the sexual aspect of bodily life. In the *Phaedo* passion distracts the philosopher from the pursuit of knowledge, but in the *Symposium* it motivates that pursuit: love of the body is the essential first step on the

spiritual ladder that culminates in recognition of the eternal form of Beauty. For Christian thought, on the other hand, the sexual body becomes much more unequivocally the gross, instinctual "bear" imagined by Schwartz, the animal, appetitive side of our nature. But even within the "same" dominating metaphor of the body as animal, *animality* can mean very different things. For Augustine, the animal side of human nature symbolized for him by the rebelliously tumescent penis, insisting on its "law of lust" against the attempts of the spiritual will to gain control inclines us toward sin and needs to be tamed. For the mechanistic science and philosophy of the seventeenth century, on the other hand, the body as animal is still a site of instinct but not primarily a site of *sin*. Rather, the instinctual nature of the body means that it is a purely mechanical, biologically programmed system that can be fully quantified and (in theory) controlled.

At different historical moments, out of the pressure of cultural, social, and material change new images and associations emerge. In the sixteenth century the epistemological body begins to be imagined not only as deceiving the philosopher through the untrustworthy senses (a Platonic theme) but also as the site of our *locatedness* in space and time, and thus as an impediment to objectivity. Because we are embodied, our thought is perspectival; the only way for the mind to comprehend things as "they really are" is by attainment of a dis-embodied view from nowhere. In our own time (as another example of the emergence of new meanings), the "heaviness" of the bear has assumed a concrete meaning which it probably did not have for Schwartz, who uses it as a metaphor for the burdensome drag the body exerts on "the self"; my students, interpreting the poem, understood it as describing the sufferings of an overweight man. For Schwartz, the hunger for food is just one of the body's appetites; for my female students, it is *the* most insistent craving and the preeminent source of their anger and frustration with the body, indeed, of their *terror* of it.

Not all historical conceptions view the body as equally "inescapable." The Greeks viewed soul and body as inseparable except through death. Descartes, however, believed that with the right philosophical method we can transcend the epistemological limitations of the body. And contemporary culture, technologically armed, seems bent on defying aging, our various biological "clocks," and even death itself. But what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the construction of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom.) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization.

### **Woman as Body**

What is the relation of gender to this dualism? As feminists have shown, the scheme is frequently gendered, with woman cast in the role of the body, "weighed down," in Beauvoir's words, "by everything peculiar to it." In contrast, man casts himself as the "inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit." According to Dinnerstein, as a consequence of our infantile experience of woman as caretaker of our bodies, "the mucky, humbling limitations of the flesh" become the province of the female; on the other side stands "an innocent and dignified 'he' . . . to represent the part of the person that wants to stand clear of the flesh, to maintain perspective on it: 'Tness

wholly free of the chaotic, carnal atmosphere of infancy, uncontaminated humanness, is reserved for man." The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death.

Although Schwartz's conception of the body is indeed gendered, it is not guilty of such projections. The "heavy bear" is clearly imaged and coded as male (and, arguably, racially and class inflected as well). King Kong is evoked ("climbs the building"), as is male gang warfare ("boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city"), and one of the most striking metaphors of the poem is that of state of nature as football game ("the scrimmage of appetite"). It is not a maternal or feminine primitivity that is constructed, but a lumbering, rough, physically aggressive and emotionally helpless male animality. The feminine presence in the poem consists in the nostalgic memory of womb-life (the "water's clasp") and the present beloved, the "very dear" with whom he yearns for relations unbefouled by the crude instincts of the bear. Woman exists in this poem as a wrenching reminder both of past bliss and of present longing, but a reminder that is experienced without rancor, resentment, or anger at the object of desire. Schwartz, while projecting everything troubling onto the body, does not perform the additional projection of the body's troubles onto the figure of woman. He owns those troubles, albeit painfully and in estrangement, through the "bear" that is his body.

In his ownership of the instinctual, infantile body, Schwartz distinguishes himself from most of the Christian tradition and the deeply sedimented images and ideology that it has bequeathed to Western culture, from classical images of the woman as temptress (Eve, Salome, Delilah) to contemporary secular versions in such films as *Fatal Attraction* and *Presumed Innocent*. On television soap operas, the sexual temptress is a standard type. No show can earn big ratings without a Lucy Coe or Erica Kane; the Soap Opera Awards Show even has a category for Best Villainess. These depictions of women as continually and actively luring men to arousal (and, often, evil) work to disclaim male ownership of the body and its desires. The arousal of those desires is the result of female manipulation and therefore is the woman's fault. This construction is so powerful that rapists and child abusers have been believed when they have claimed that five-year-old female children "led them on."

Conscious intention, however, is not a requisite for females to be seen as responsible for the bodily responses of men, aggressive as well as sexual. One justification given for the exclusion of women from the priesthood is that their mere presence will arouse impure thoughts. Frequently, even when women are silent (or verbalizing exactly the opposite), their bodies are seen as "speaking" a language of provocation. When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, "flaunting": just two years ago, a man was acquitted of rape in Georgia on the defense that his victim had worn a miniskirt. When these inviting female bodies are inaccessible or unresponsive to male overtures, this may be interpreted as teasing, taunting, mocking. In Timothy Beneke's *Men on Rape*, several personal accounts demonstrate this interpretation. For example:

Let's say I see a woman and she looks really pretty and really clean and sexy, and she's giving off very feminine, sexy vibes. I think,

"Wow, I would love to make love to her," but I know she's not really interested. It's a tease. A lot of times a woman knows that she's looking really good and she'll use that and flaunt it, and it makes me feel like she's laughing at me and I feel *degraded*.

In numerous "slasher" movies, female sexual independence is represented as an enticement to brutal murder, and chronic wife batterers often claim that their wives "made them" beat them up, by looking at them the wrong way, by projecting too much cheek, or by some other (often very minor) bodily gesture of autonomy.

My point here, if it requires saying, is not to accuse all men of being potential rapists and wife-batterers; this would be to indulge in a cultural mythology about men as pernicious as the sexual temptress myths about women. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men but also women (since we live in this culture, too) are vulnerable. Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self loathing. For example, anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the "femaleness" of the body and a punishment of its desires. Those desires (as I argue in "Hunger as Ideology") have frequently been culturally represented through the metaphor of female appetite. The extremes to which the anorectic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure "male" will, *or* she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground.

Women may be quite ready, too, to believe the cultural mythology about some other woman or women, as responses to the Patricia Bowman/William Kennedy Smith rape trial demonstrated ("Why did she go home with him?" "Why did she let him kiss her?" "Why, if she only wanted to spend the evening with her girlfriends, did they go out to a bar?"). More striking, given the numbers of women who had had similar experiences, was female skepticism about Anita Hill's sexual-harassment charges against then-prospective Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas ("Why did she follow him to the EEOC?" "Why did she call him on the telephone?" "Why did she drive him to the airport?"). Generally, such questions were raised to attack Hill's credibility rather than to suggest that she had initiated a sexual relationship with Thomas. But it seemed clear to me that underlying the specifics of the attack was a generalized condemnation of Hill's behavior as inappropriate, insufficiently cautious, overly ambitious, and "asking for" *whatever* it was that happened. The intensity and even venom with which some women engaged in such attacks is suggestive of powerful projections at work, projections which may serve to protect women against their own self-doubts. "Why did she wait so long to tell? If what she says happened to her had happened to *me*, *I'd* never let him get away with it!" Thus, at Hill's expense, women shored up belief in the robustness of their own self-respect, self confidence, and "purity."

For African American critics of Anita Hill male and female the situation was more complicated than this, of course. In the face of pervasive ideology that stereotypes black males as oversexed animals, many felt that to support Hill was to lend credence to racist mythologies. Some African American women, while believing Hill's charges, were

furious at her for publicly exposing a black man as she did. Leaving aside the question of to what degree these criticisms were just, what they seem to overlook (and what was certainly ignored by the white, male senators and in the media coverage of the hearings) is the fact that the racist ideology and imagery that construct non-European "races" as "primitive," "savage," sexually animalistic, and indeed more *bodily* than the white "races" extends to black women as well as black men.

Corresponding to notions that all black men are potential rapists by nature are stereotypes of black women as amoral Jezebels who can never truly be raped, because *rape* implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having. Corresponding to the popular sexual myth that black men are genitally over-endowed are notions, harking back to the early nineteenth century, that African women's sexual organs are more highly developed than (and configured differently from) those of European women, explaining (according to J. J. Virey's study of race) their greater "voluptuousness" and "lascivity." "Scientific" representations of the black woman's body, like evolutionists' comparisons of the skull shapes of African males and orangutans, exaggerated (and often created) relations of similarity to animals, particularly monkeys. The "Hottentot Venus," a South African woman who was exhibited in London and Paris at the end of the eighteenth century, was presented as a "living ethnographic specimen" of the animal-like nature of the black woman. Several commissioned portraits depict her with grotesquely disproportionate buttocks, as though she were in a permanent bodily state of "presenting" to the male.

A "breeder" to the slave owner, often depicted in jungle scenes in contemporary advertisements, the black woman carries a triple burden of negative bodily associations. By virtue of her sex, she represents the temptations of the flesh and the source of man's moral downfall. By virtue of her race, she is instinctual animal, undeserving of privacy and undemanding of respect. She does not tease and then resist (as in the stereotype of the European temptress); she merely goes "into heat." Hispanic women are often similarly depicted as instinctual animals. But the legacy of slavery has added an additional element to effacements of black women's humanity. For in slavery her body is not only treated as an animal body but is *property*, to be "taken" and used at will. Such a body is denied even the dignity accorded a wild animal; its status approaches that of mere matter, thing-hood.

Through a cynical and cunning strategy, Clarence Thomas was able to neutralize the damage that could have been done to his case by unconscious racist images of the black man as oversexed animal; by bringing attention to these images and making an issue of them, he engineered a situation in which any white senator who did *not* treat him with the utmost delicacy and respect would seem a racist. Anita Hill, by contrast, bore the weight of the unexamined (at the hearings) construction of the black woman as mere body, whose moral and emotional sensibilities need not be treated with consideration. In the context of this legacy, the cool detachment with which the senators interrogated Hill about penises and pornography, while apologizing profusely to Thomas for the mere mention of such subjects, resonates with the historical effacement of black women's subjectivity.

## Activity, Passivity, and Gender

In "The Heavy Bear" the body is presented as haunting us with its passive materiality, its lack of agency, art, or even consciousness. Insofar as the "spirit's motive" is the guiding force, clarity and will dominate; the body, by contrast, simply *receives* and darkly, dumbly responds to impressions, emotions, passions. This duality of active spirit/passive body is also gendered, and it has been one of the most historically powerful of the dualities that inform Western ideologies of gender. First philosophically articulated by Aristotle (although embodied in many creation myths and associative schemes before him), it still informs contemporary images and ideology concerning reproduction. According to the Aristotelian version, the conception of a living being involves the vitalization of the purely material contribution of the female by the "effective and active" element, the male sperm:

[T]here must needs be that which generates and that from which it generates; even if these be one, still they must be distinct in form and their essence must be different. If, then, the male stands for the effective and active, and the female, considered as female, for the passive, it follows that what the female would contribute . . . would not be semen but material for the semen to work upon. This is just what we find to be the case, for the catamenia [menstrual materials] have in their nature an affinity to the primitive matter.

So conceptually powerful (and perceptually determinative) was this view of things that when Leeuwenhoek in 1677 first examined sperm under the newly invented microscope, he saw tiny "animalcules" in it the form of the future being, to be pressed out of the shapeless dough of the menstrual matter.

The dualism of male activity and female passivity is differently (but not incommensurably) represented by Hegel through an analogy with animals and plants:

The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling. Women are educated who knows how? as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.

Now, notice how these dualities of male as active, striving, conscious subject and female as passive, vegetative, primitive matter shape the following contemporary depiction, from Alan Guttmacher's drugstore guide to *Pregnancy, Birth, and Family Planning*:

Some of the sperm swim straight up the one-inch, mucus-filled canal with almost purposeful success, while others bog down on the way, getting hopelessly stranded in tissue bays and coves. A small proportion of the total number ejaculated eventually reach the cavity of the uterus and begin their upward two-inch excursion through its length. Whether this progress results solely from the swimming efforts of the spermatozoa or whether they are aided by fluid currents and muscular contractions of the uterus is still unknown. The undaunted ones, those not stranded in this veritable everglade, reach the openings of the two fallopian tubes. The one sperm that achieves its destiny has won against gigantic odds, several hundred million to one. No one knows just what selective forces are responsible for the victory. Perhaps the winner had the strongest constitution; perhaps it was the swiftest swimmer of all the contestants entered in the race. If ovulation occurred within several minutes to twenty-four hours before the sperm's journey ends, the ovum will be in the tube, awaiting fertilization; if ovulation took place more than twenty-four hours before insemination, the egg cell will already have begun to deteriorate and fragment,

rendering it incapable of being fertilized by the time the spermatozoon reaches it. On the other hand, if ovulation has not yet occurred, but takes place within two or three days after intercourse, living spermatozoa will be cruising at the tubal site.

So entrenched is our expectation that the male will be the "effective and active" element and that the female must be the one to passively wait for him, that my students were shocked to discover that on most occasions when fertilization occurs it is actually the *egg* that travels to rendezvous with sperm that have been lolling around, for as much as three days, waiting for *her* to arrive. Guttmacher, indeed, refuses to describe the sperm as "waiting" and depicts them instead as "cruising" down the strip, as it were, looking to pick up chicks. Such metaphors are continually reinforced by popular representations of conception such as the opening credits of *Look Who's Talking*, which depict the perilous race of "the undaunted ones" to the tune of "I Get Around" and personify the one sperm "who achieves his destiny," having him provide a running oral commentary on his progress. The graphic simulates the consequences of an act of intercourse at ovulation (our imaginal paradigm, though by no means true of the majority of fertilizations); there at the end of the journey is the giant beach ball of an egg, languorously bobbing, awaiting the victor's arrival. Since the voice of the triumphant sperm is the same as that of Mikey, the baby who is conceived, Aristotle is confirmed: the male really *does* provide the form of the individual.

Clearly, then, mind/body dualism is no mere philosophical position, to be defended or dispensed with by clever argument. Rather, it is a *practical* metaphysics that has been deployed and socially embodied in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the psychological construction of self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture, and advertisements, a metaphysics which will be deconstructed only through concrete transformation of the institutions and practices that sustain it. As a final illustration of how culturally sedimented (and often "innocently" and covertly reproduced) are the gendered dualities that I have discussed in this section, consider a Kmart advertisement for boy's and girl's bicycles. The ad describes three levels of bikes: one for toddlers (three wheelers), one for pre-teeners, and one for teenagers. Each model has a boy's version and a girl's version, each with its own name. The toddler's models are named "Lion" and "Little Angel"; the pre-teeners, "Pursuit" and "St. Helen." But while the duality of male activity and female passivity is thus strikingly mapped onto preadolescence, once sexual maturity is reached other dualities emerge: the teenager's models are named "Granite Pass" and "White Heat"!

The gendered nature of mind/body dualism, and its wide ranging institutional and cultural expression, is a recurring theme of many of the essays in this volume. In "Are Mothers Persons?" I explore how despite an official rhetoric that insists on the embodied subjectivity of all persons Western legal and medical practice concerning reproduction in fact divides the world into human subjects (fetus and father) and "mere" bodies (pregnant women). In "Hunger as Ideology" I consider how representations of men and women eating (for example, in contemporary advertisements) exhibit a dualistic pedagogy instructing women and men in very different attitudes toward the "heavy bear" and its hungers: women's appetites require containment and control, whereas male indulgence is legitimated and encouraged. In this essay, in "Anorexia Nervosa," and in "Reading the Slender Body," "the devouring woman" is seen to be as potent an image of dangerous

female desire (particularly in contemporary culture) as the sexual temptress. I explore, as well, the social contexts that have encouraged the flourishing of this imagery.

In the latter two essays dualism is explored not only via gendered representations but as a more general contemporary construction of self that shapes male experience as well as female. Dualism, of course, was not invented in the twentieth century. But there are distinctive ways in which it is *embodied* in contemporary culture, giving the lie to the social mythology that ours is a body-loving, de-repressive era. We may be *obsessed* with our bodies, but we are hardly accepting of them. In "Anorexia Nervosa" I consider the way in which an agonistic experience of mind/body regulates the anorectic's sense of embodiment, as well as other obsessive body practices of contemporary culture. My aim, however, is not to portray these obsessions as bizarre or anomalous, but, rather, as the logical (if extreme) manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture. I develop this theme further in "Reading the Slender Body," where I decode the meanings of *fat* and *thin* in our culture to expose the moral significances attached to them, revealing the slender, fit body as a symbol of "virile" mastery over bodily desires that are continually experienced as threatening to overtake the self. This construction of self is then located within consumer culture and its contradictory requirement that we embody both the spiritual discipline of the work ethic and the capacity for continual, mindless consumption of goods.

Today, one often hears intellectuals urging that we "go beyond" dualisms, calling for the deconstruction of the hierarchical oppositions (male/female, mind/body, active/passive) that structure dualism in the West, and scorning others for engaging in "dualistic thinking." But it is not so easy to "go beyond dualism" in this culture, as I argue in a variety of ways in this volume. In "'Material Girl'" and in "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism" I consider postmodern culture, poststructuralist thought, and some aspects of contemporary feminism as embodying fantasies of transcendence of the materiality and historicity of the body, its situatedness in space and time, and its gender.

### **Anglo-American Feminism, "Women's Liberation," and the Politics of the Body**

Considering the pervasiveness of associations such as those discussed in the preceding section, it is no surprise that feminist theorists turned to Western representations of the body with an analytic, deconstructive eye. From their efforts we have learned to read all the various texts of Western culture, literary works, philosophical works, artworks, medical texts, film, fashion, soap operas—less naively and more completely, educated and attuned to the historically pervasive presence of gender-, class-, and race-coded dualities, alert to their continued embeddedness in the most mundane, seemingly innocent representations. Since these dualities (although not these alone) mediate a good deal of our cultural reality, few representations from high religious art to depictions of life at the cellular level can claim innocence.

Feminists first began to develop a critique of the "politics of the body," however, not in terms of the body as represented (in medical, religious, and philosophical discourse, artworks, and other cultural "texts"), but in terms of the material body as a site of political struggle. When I use the term *material*, I do not mean it in the Aristotelian sense of *brute* matter, nor do I mean it in the sense of "natural" or "unmediated" (for our

bodies are necessarily cultural forms; whatever roles anatomy and biology play, they always interact with culture.) I mean what Marx and, later, Foucault had in mind in focusing on the "direct grip" (as opposed to representational influence) that culture has on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life. Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is "inner" and what is "outer," which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on. These are often far more powerful lessons than those we learn consciously, through explicit instruction concerning the appropriate behavior for our gender, race, and social class.

The role of American feminism in developing a "political" understanding of body practice is rarely acknowledged. In describing the historical emergence of such an understanding, Don Hanlon Johnson leaps straight from Marx to Foucault, effacing the intellectual role played by the social movements of the sixties (both black power and women's liberation) in awakening consciousness of the body as "an instrument of power":

Another major deconstruction [of the old notion of "the body"] is in the area of sociopolitical thought. Although Karl Marx initiated this movement in the middle of the 19th century, it did not gain momentum until the last 20 years due to the work of the late Michel Foucault. Marx argued that a person's economic class affected his or her experience and definition of "the body." . . . Foucault carried on these seminal arguments in his analysis of the body as the focal point for struggles over the shape of power. Population size, gender formation, the control of children and of those thought to be deviant from the society's ethics are major concerns of political organization and all concentrate on the definition and shaping of the body. Moreover, the cultivation of the body is essential to the establishment of one's social role.

Not a few feminists, too, appear to accept this view of things. While honoring French feminists Irigaray, Wittig, Cixous, and Kristeva for their work on the body "as the site of the production of new modes of subjectivity" and Beauvoir for the "understanding of the body as a situation," Linda Zirelli credits Foucault with having "showed us how the body has been historically disciplined"; to Anglo-American feminism is simply attributed the "essentialist" view of the body as an "archaic natural."

Almost everyone who does the "new scholarship" on the body claims Foucault as its founding father and guiding light. And certainly (as I will discuss later in this introduction) Foucault did articulate and delineate some of the central theoretical categories that influenced that scholarship as it developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "Docile bodies," "biopower," "micropractices" these are useful concepts, and Foucault's analyses, which employ them in exploring historical changes in the organization and deployment of power, are brilliant. But neither Foucault nor any other poststructuralist thinker discovered or invented the idea, to refer again to Johnson's account, that the "definition and shaping" of the body is "the focal point for struggles over the shape of power." *That* was discovered by feminism, and long before it entered into its marriage with poststructuralist thought.

"There is no private domain of a person's life that is not political and there is no political issue that is not ultimately personal. The old barriers have fallen." Charlotte Bunch made this statement in 1968, and although much has been written about "personal politics" in the emergence of the second wave of feminism, not enough attention has been paid, I would argue, to its significance as an *intellectual* paradigm, and in particular to the new understanding of the *body* that "personal politics" ushered in. What, after all, is more

personal than the life of the body? And for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered *on* the body (both the beautification of one's own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture's grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft had provided a classic statement of this theme. As a privileged woman, she focuses on the social construction of femininity as delicacy and domesticity, and it is as clear an example of the production of a socially trained, "docile body" as Foucault ever articulated:

To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves. As for Rousseau's remarks, which have since been echoed by several writers, that they have naturally, that is since birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking they are so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation. That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend to her mother's toilet, will endeavor to join the conversation, is, indeed, very natural; and that she will imitate her mother and aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! is undoubtedly a most natural consequence. Nor can it be expected that a woman will resolutely endeavor to strengthen her constitution and abstain from enervating indulgences, if artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility, have been early entangled with her motives of action . . . Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection, women are everywhere in this deplorable state. Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.

A more activist generation urged escape from the prison, and, long before poststructuralist thought declared the body a political site, recognized that the most mundane, "trivial" aspects of women's bodily existence were in fact significant elements in the social construction of an oppressive feminine norm. In 1914, the first Feminist Mass Meeting in America whose subject was "Breaking into the Human Race" poignantly listed, among the various social and political rights demanded, "The right to ignore fashion." Here, already, the material "micropractices" of everyday life which would be extended by later feminists to include not only what one wears but who cooks and cleans (the classic "Politics of Housework" by Pat Mainardi), and even, more recently, what one eats or does not eat have been brought out of the realm of the purely personal and into the domain of the political. Here, for example, is a trenchant 1971 analysis, presented by way of a set of "consciousness-raising" exercises for men, of how female subjectivity is trained and subordinated by the everyday bodily requirements and vulnerabilities of "femininity":

Sit down in a straight chair. Cross your legs at the ankles and keep your knees pressed together. Try to do this while you're having a conversation with someone, but pay attention at all times to keeping your knees pressed tightly together. Run a short distance, keeping your knees together. You'll find you have to take short, high steps if you run this way. Women have been taught it is unfeminine to run like a man with long, free strides. See how far you get running this way for 30 seconds. Walk down a city street. Pay a lot of attention to your clothing: make sure your pants are zipped, shirt tucked in, buttons done. Look straight ahead. Every time a man walks past you, avert your eyes and make your face expressionless. Most women learn to go through this act each time we leave our houses. It's a way to avoid at least some of the encounters we've all had with strange men who decided we looked available.

Until I taught a course in the history of feminism several years ago, I had forgotten that the very first public act of second-wave feminist protest was the "No More Miss America" demonstration in August of 1968. The critique presented at that demonstration was far from the theoretically crude, essentializing program that caricatures of that era's feminism would suggest. Rather, the position paper handed out at the demonstration outlined a complex, nonreductionist analysis of the intersection of sexism, conformism, competition, ageism, racism, militarism, and consumer culture as they are constellated and crystallized in the pageant. The "No More Miss America" demonstration was the event that earned "women's libbers" the reputation for being "bra-burners," an epithet many feminists have been trying to shed ever since. In fact, no bras *were* burned at the demonstration, although there was a huge "Freedom Trash Can" into which were thrown bras, along with girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, copies of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle*, etc. The media, sensationalizing the event, and also no doubt influenced by the paradigm of draft-card burning as the act of political resistance par excellence, misreported or invented the burning of the bras. It stuck like crazy glue to the popular imagination; indeed, many of my students today still refer to feminists as "bra-burners." But whether or not bras were burned, the uneasy public with whom the image stuck surely got it right in recognizing the deep political meaning of women's refusal to "discipline" our breasts, culturally required to be so exclusively "for" the other whether as instrument and symbol of nurturing love, or as erotic fetish.

And "whither the bra in the 90's?" Amy Collins, writing in 1991 for *Lear's* magazine, poses this question. She answers herself:

Women are again playing up their bust lines with a little artifice. To give the breasts the solid, rounded shape that is currently desirable, La Perla is offering a Lycra bra with pre-formed, pressed-cotton cups. To provide a deeper cleavage, a number of lingerie companies are selling side-panel bras that gently nudge the breasts together. Perhaps exercising has made the idea of altering body contours acceptable once more. In any case, if anatomy is destiny, women are discovering new ways to reshape both.

Indeed. In 1992, with the dangers of silicone implants on public trial, the media emphasis was on the irresponsibility of Dow, and the personal sufferings of women who became ill from their implants. To my mind, however, the most depressing aspect of the disclosures was the *cultural* spectacle: the large numbers of women who are having implants purely to enlarge or reshape their breasts and who consider any health risk worth the resulting boon to their self-esteem and "market value." These women take the risk, not because they have been passively taken in by media norms of the beautiful breast (almost always silicone-enhanced), but because they have correctly discerned that these norms shape the perceptions and desires of potential lovers and employers. They are neither dupes nor critics of sexist culture; rather, their overriding concern is their right to be desired, loved, and successful on its terms. Proposals to ban or even to regulate silicone breast implants are thus often viewed as totalitarian interference with self-determination, freedom, and choice. Many who argue in this way consider themselves feminists, and many feminist scholars today theorize explicitly *as* feminists "on their behalf." A recent article in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, for example, defends cosmetic surgery as being "*first and foremost . . . about taking one's life into one's own hands.*"

I examine this contemporary construction later in this volume. For now, I would only highlight how very different it is from the dominant feminist discourse on the body in the late sixties and seventies. *That* imagination of the female body was of a *socially* shaped and historically "colonized" territory, not a site of individual self-determination. As Andrea Dworkin described it:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* And of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one. In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement. From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting and deodorizing herself. It is commonly and wrongly said that male transvestites through the use of makeup and costuming caricature the women they would become, but any real knowledge of the romantic ethos makes clear that these men have penetrated to the core experience of being a woman, a romanticized construct.

Here, feminism inverted and converted the old metaphor of the Body Politic, found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and many others, to a new metaphor: the politics of the body. In the old metaphor of the Body Politic, the state or society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts symbolizing different functions, needs, social constituents, forces, and so forth the head or soul for the sovereign, the blood for the will of the people, or the nerves for the system of rewards and punishments. Now, feminism imagined the human body as *itself* a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy, and (in the case of the African American slave woman) explicit commodification:

[H]er head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family as domestic servant whether she was technically enslaved or legally free. Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market.

One might rightly object that the body's literal bondage in slavery, described above by Barbara Omolade, is not to be compared to the metaphorical bondage of privileged nineteenth-century women to the corset, much less to the twentieth-century "tyranny of slenderness." No feminist writers considered them equivalent. But at the heart of the developing feminist model, for many writers, *was* the extension of the concept of enslavement to include the voluntary behaviors of privileged women. Problematic as this extension has come to seem, I think it is crucial to recognize that a staple of the prevailing sexist ideology against which the feminist model protested was the notion that in matters of beauty and femininity, it is women alone who are responsible for their

sufferings from the whims and bodily tyrannies of fashion. According to that ideology, men's desires bear no responsibility, nor does the culture that subordinates women's desires to those of men, sexualizes and commodifies women's bodies, and offers them little other opportunity for social or personal power. Rather, it is in Woman's essential feminine nature to be (delightfully if incomprehensibly) drawn to such trivialities and to be willing to endure whatever physical inconvenience is entailed. In such matters, whether having her feet broken and shaped into four-inch "lotuses," or her waist straitlaced to fourteen inches, or her breasts surgically stuffed with plastic, she is her "own worst enemy." Set in cultural relief against this thesis, the feminist "anti-thesis"-the insistence that women are the *done to*, not the *doers*, here; that *men* and *their* desires bear the responsibility; and that female obedience to the dictates of fashion is better conceptualized as bondage than choice was a crucial historical moment in the developing articulation of a new understanding of the sexual politics of the body.

### **Beyond the Oppressor/Oppressed Model**

The limitations of simple antithesis, however, ultimately disclosed themselves. Subsuming patriarchal institutions and practices under an oppressor/oppressed model which theorizes men as possessing and wielding power over women who are viewed correspondingly as themselves utterly powerless proved inadequate to the social and historical complexities of the situations of men and women, and many different foci of criticism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. A good many critics emphasized the necessity of constructing theory that would do better justice to racial, economic, and class differences among women. Others protested against what they viewed as a depiction of women as passive, without agency, a depiction that overlooks both women's collusions with patriarchal culture and their frequent efforts at resistance. Correlatively, the "old" feminist discourse has been charged with portraying men as the enemy and "essentializing" them as sexual brutes and cultural dominators. From more deconstructionist quarters, it has been criticized for its lack of textual sophistication that is, its insensitivity to the multiplicity of meanings that can be read in every cultural act and practice. Within this type of critique, one may find arguments for the "creative" or "subversive" nature of practices and cultural forms, such as makeup, high heels, or cosmetic surgery, which the "old" feminist discourse would view as *simply* oppressive to women. In general, the "old" discourse is seen as having constructed an insufficiently textured, undiscerningly dualistic, overly pessimistic (if not paranoid) view of the politics of the body.

My own perspective on these criticisms will emerge in detail throughout this book. In this introduction, however, I want to provide some very general remarks, focusing in particular on the strengths and weaknesses of the old feminist discourse in the context of our increasingly image-dominated culture. I agree with the textual critique that the "old" discourse did not deal adequately with the multiplicity or contextuality of meaning. Rather, it laid down an initial lexicon, which others have elaborated and complicated. Susan Brownmiller's excellent book *Femininity*, for example, is extremely valuable in its examination of the body as a text saturated with gendered symbols and meanings.<sup>27</sup> The lexicon through which she interprets this text, however, for example, long hair, skirts, and high heels as symbolic of femininity often cries out for further

elaboration, both historical and contextual. With the exception of those eras in which certain styles were rigorously marked as masculine and forbidden to women (for example, trousers in the nineteenth century), the demonstration of "femininity" has involved the arrangement of items within a *system* that gives them their meaning. Context is everything, especially in our postmodern culture of pastiche and rearrangement. So, for example, a crew cut may be seen as "feminine" if the model's mouth is vividly colored and a lacy blouse is worn, but "masculine" when worn with no makeup, but with overalls and a confident body posture; men's jackets are hardly "masculine" when they overwhelm the body of an extremely petite sixteen-year-old, but they *do* carry connotations of maleness when they are tailored, accompanied by briefcase and a no-nonsense demeanor. Long hair on men has functioned as a symbol of resistance against establishment authority (as among hippies, rock stars, and bikers), and it also may function to *highlight* a man's "masculinity": long, straight ponytails are frequently worn by extremely muscular men. As to muscles themselves, are they invariably male, as Brownmiller says? Certainly they have been dominantly coded in this way, but (as I argue in "Reading the Slender Body"), they have also been race- and class-coded, and today they frequently symbolize qualities of character rather than class, race, or gender status.

Given the differences that race, class, gender, ethnicity, and so forth make to the determination of meaning, "reading" bodies becomes an extremely complex business. However, I do not agree with those who claim that images must always be read for First, the representations *homogenize*. In our culture, this means that they will smooth out all racial, ethnic, and sexual "differences" that disturb Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual expectations and identifications. Certainly, high-fashion images may contain touches of exotica: collagen-plumped lips or corn rows on white models, Barbra Streisand noses, "butch" styles of dress. Consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire, and it frequently drops into marginalized neighborhoods in order to find them. But such elements will either be explicitly *framed* as exotica or, within the overall system of meaning, they will not be permitted to overwhelm the representation and establish a truly alternative or "subversive" model of beauty or success. (White models may collagen their lips, but black models are usually light-skinned and Anglo-featured.) A definite (albeit not always fixed or determinate) system of boundaries sets limits on the validation of "difference."

Second, these homogenized images *normalize*, that is, they function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, "disciplines," and "corrects" itself. Cosmetic surgery is now a \$1.75-billion-a-year industry in the United States, with almost 1.5 million people a year undergoing surgery of some kind, from facelifts to calf implants. These operations have become more and more affordable to the middle class (the average cost of a nose job is \$2,500), and almost all can be done on an outpatient basis, some during lunch hour. Lest it be imagined that most of these surgeries are to correct disfiguring accidents or birth defects, it should be noted that liposuction is the most frequently requested operation (average cost \$1,500), with breast enlargement (average cost \$2,000) a close second. Are diverse ethnic and racial styles of beauty asserting their "differences" through such surgery? Far from it. Does anyone in this culture have his or her nose reshaped to look more "African" or "Jewish"? Cher is typical here; her various surgeries have gradually replaced a strong, decidedly (if indeterminately) "ethnic" look with a much more symmetrical, delicate, Anglo Saxon

version of beauty. She also looks much younger at forty-six than she did at forty, as do most actresses of her generation, for whom face-lifts are virtually routine. These actresses, whose images surround us on television and in videos and films, are changing cultural expectations of what women "should" look like at forty-five and fifty. This is touted in the popular culture as a liberating development for older women; in the nineties, it is declared, fifty is sexually more acceptable. They have established a new norm achievable only through continual cosmetic surgery in which the surface of the female body ceases to age physically as the body grows chronologically older.

Even within the context of homogenizing imagery, deciphering meaning is complicated. Female slenderness, for example, has a wide range of sometimes contradictory meanings in contemporary representations, the imagery of the slender body suggesting powerlessness and contraction of female social space in one context, autonomy and freedom in the next. It is impossible adequately to understand women's problems with food and body image unless these significations are unpacked, and this requires examining slenderness in multiple contexts. Although only one of the essays in this book claims to "read" the slender body, in fact all of the essays that discuss eating disorders do so. These are: "Hunger as Ideology," "Anorexia Nervosa," "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," "Reading the Slender Body," and "Whose Body Is This?"

To the extent that feminist discourse *has* employed a framework of oppressors and oppressed, villains and victims (and this, of course, is not equally true of all writers), it requires reconstruction if it is to be able adequately to theorize the pathways of modern power. In this reconstruction, the work of Michel Foucault has proved useful to much feminist thought, including my own work. Since several essays in this volume make use of Foucauldian categories and perspectives, it may be useful for me to provide an overview, in connection with the themes under discussion in this introduction. For Foucault, modern (as opposed to sovereign) power is non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated; yet it nonetheless produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. Understanding this new sort of power requires, according to Foucault, two conceptual changes. First, we must cease to imagine "power" as the *possession* of individuals or groups as something people "have" and instead see it as a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces. Second, we must recognize that these forces are *not* random or haphazard, but configure to assume particular historical forms, within which certain groups and ideologies *do* have dominance. Dominance here, however, is sustained not by decree or design "from above" (as sovereign power is exercised) but through multiple "processes, of different origin and scattered location," regulating the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment.

Here is one juncture where Foucauldian insights prove particularly useful to social and historical analysis of "femininity" and "masculinity." Where power works "from below," prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion (although social relations may certainly contain such elements), but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms. Thus, as Foucault writes, "there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each

individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself."

Now, not all female submission is best understood in terms of such a model; women are frequently physically and emotionally terrorized and financially trapped in violent relationships and degrading jobs. But when it comes to the politics of appearance, such ideas are apt and illuminating.<sup>30</sup> In my own work, they have been extremely helpful both to my analysis of the contemporary disciplines of diet and exercise and to my understanding of eating disorders as arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of power and control. Within a Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus, the heady experience of feeling powerful or "in control," far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of one's social position, is always suspect as itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different.

Foucault also emphasized, in later developments of his ideas, that power relations are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new opportunities for transformation. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance.<sup>31</sup> Dominant forms and institutions are continually being penetrated and reconstructed by values, styles, and knowledges that have been developing and gathering strength, energy, and distinctiveness "at the margins." (This is why, I would argue, affirmative action should not be understood as only about redressing historical exclusions in the interests of justice to those groups excluded, but as essential to the diversification and reinvigoration of the dominant culture.) Such transformations do not occur in one fell swoop; they emerge only gradually, through local and often minute shifts in power. They may also be served, paradoxically, through conformity to prevailing norms. So, for example, the woman who goes into a rigorous weight-training program in order to achieve the currently stylish look may discover that her new muscles give her the self-confidence that enables her to assert herself more forcefully at work. Modern power-relations are thus unstable; resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious.

Within a Foucauldian/feminist framework, it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy: to do so would be to ignore, not only power differences in the racial, class, and sexual situations of men, but the fact that most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control and that they frequently feel tyrannized by. (The best work being done out of the men's movement today explores this enmeshment; unfortunately, it has frequently been eclipsed by best-selling and sensationalistic "reclamations" of masculinity.) Moreover, such a framework forces us to recognize the degree to which women collude in sustaining sexism and sexist stereotypes. For example, the continued popularity of the soap-opera villainess, mentioned earlier, is insured by the thousands of female viewers who delight both in the power and agency such characters manifest *and* in their inevitable neutralization (either through defeat or through personality conversion) by the forces of more conventional female behavior.

Many, if not most, women also are willing (often, enthusiastic) participants in cultural practices that objectify and sexualize us. Here, in its failure to admit female responsibility, I do think that much feminist analysis has been, and continues to be, inadequate though understandably so, given the swiftness with which the

acknowledgment that women *participate* in reproducing sexist culture gets converted to the ideas that we "are our own worst enemies," "do it to ourselves," "ask for it." In this climate of sedimented sexist ideology ready to become activated on the shallowest pretext, certain important discussions may become *verboten* because so strewn with dangerous mines threatening to go off. For example, I have always felt extremely torn, discussing *The Accused* in class, about how to deal with Jodie Foster's erotic dance in the bar. On the one hand, I think it is extremely important that we understand how beauty and sexuality can function as a medium of power and control for the otherwise powerless, and the scene provides an opportunity to discuss this. On the other hand, I *know* that as soon as we begin to discuss the dance in such terms, many students will immediately see this as corroborating that the woman was indeed a sexual temptress who led these men to rape. In the face of such crude but culturally powerful ideas, the relevant distinctions which I would then make stand a good chance of being utterly lost on my students.

### **Feminism as Systemic Critique**

The valuable reconceptualization of power suggested by Foucault should not be interpreted as entailing the view that all players are equal, or that positions of dominance and subordination are not sustained within networks of power. Men are not the enemy, but they often may have a higher stake in maintaining institutions within which they have historically occupied positions of dominance over women. That is why they have often *felt* like "the enemy" to women struggling to change those institutions. (Such a dual recognition seems essential, in particular, to theorizing the situation of men who have been historically subordinated on the basis of their race, class, or sexuality.) Moreover, the fact that cultural resistance is continual does not mean it is on an equal footing with forms that are culturally entrenched. It is simply absurd to suggest, as Dianne Johnson does in reviewing Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, that the development of a "Happy to Be Me" Barbie style doll of nonanorexic proportions signifies that feminist concerns over the cultural tyranny of slenderness are "out of date."<sup>33</sup> In "Material Girl" I strongly argue, against proponents of the absolute heterogeneity of culture, that in contemporary Western constructions of beauty there *are* dominant, strongly "normalizing" (racial and gendered) forms to contend with. To struggle effectively against the coerciveness of those forms it is first necessary to recognize that they *have* dominance, and not to efface such recognition through a facile and abstract celebration of "heterogeneity," "difference," "subversive reading," and so forth.

Recognizing that normalizing cultural forms exist does not entail, as some writers have argued, the view that women are "cultural dopes," blindly submitting to oppressive regimes of beauty.<sup>34</sup> Although many people *are* mystified (insisting, for example, that the current fitness craze is only about health or that plastic surgery to "correct" a "Jewish" or "black" nose is just an individual preference), often there will be a high degree of consciousness involved in the decision to diet or to have cosmetic surgery. People *know* the routes to success in this culture they are advertised widely enough-and they are not "dopes" to pursue them. Often, given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it.

In 1990 I lost twenty-five pounds through a national weight-loss program, a choice that some of my colleagues viewed as inconsistent and even hypocritical, given

my work. But in my view, feminist cultural criticism is not a blueprint for the conduct of personal life (or political action, for that matter) and does not empower (or require) individuals to "rise above" their culture or to become martyrs to feminist ideals. It does not tell us what to *do* (although I continually get asked such questions when I speak at colleges) whether to lose weight or not, wear makeup or not, lift weights or not. Its goal is edification and understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and *systemic* nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning. It is up to the reader to decide how, when, and where (or whether) to put that understanding to further use, in the particular, complicated, and ever-changing context that is his or her life and no one else's.

The goal of consciousness-raising may seem, perhaps, to belong to another era. I believe, however, that in our present culture of mystification, a culture which continually pulls us away from systemic understanding and inclines us toward constructions that emphasize individual freedom, choice, power, ability simply becoming *more conscious* is a tremendous achievement. (As Marx insisted, changes in consciousness *are* changes in life, and in a culture that counts on our remaining unconscious they are political as well.) Feminist cultural criticism cannot magically lift us into a transcendent realm of immunity to cultural images, but it ought to help guard against the feeling of comfortable oneness with culture and to foster a healthy skepticism about the pleasures and powers it offers. I know, for example, that although my weight loss has benefited me in a variety of ways, it has also diminished my efficacy as an alternative role model for my female students. I used to demonstrate the possibility of confidence, expressiveness, and success in a less than adequately normalized body. Today, my female students may be more likely to see me as confirmation that success comes only from playing by the cultural rules. This may affirm some of them, but what about those who cannot play by the rules? A small but possibly important source of self-validation and encouragement has been taken from them. Even though my choice to diet was a conscious and "rational" response to the system of cultural meanings that surround me (not the blind submission of a "cultural dope"), I should not deceive myself into thinking that my own feeling of enhanced personal comfort and power means that I am not servicing an oppressive system.

The "old" feminist discourse may have been insufficiently attentive to the multiplicity of meaning, the pleasures of shaping and decorating the body, or the role of female agency in reproducing patriarchal culture. What it did offer was a systemic critique capable of rousing women to collective action—something we do not have today. True, women are mobilizing around other issues—reproductive rights, for example. But on the sexualization and objectification of the female body contemporary feminism (with some notable exceptions)<sup>35</sup> is strikingly muted. Some forms of postmodern feminism (as I argue in "Material Girl") are worse than muted, they are distressingly at one with the culture in celebrating the creative agency of individuals and denying systemic pattern. It seems to me that feminist theory has taken a very strange turn indeed when plastic surgery can be described, as it has been by Kathy Davis, as "*first and foremost . . . about taking one's life into one's own hands.*" I agree with Davis that as an *individual* choice that seeks to make life as livable and enjoyable as possible within certain cultural constraints and directives, of course such surgery can be experienced as liberating. But since when has the feminist critique of normalizing beauty practice ever been directed against individuals and their choices? Unlike Davis, I do not view cosmetic surgery as

being first and foremost "about" self-determination *or* self-deception. Rather, my focus is on the complexly and densely institutionalized *system* of values and practices within which girls and women and, increasingly, men and boys as well come to believe that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless. In a cultural moment such as the present, within which a high level of physical attractiveness is continually presented as a prerequisite for romantic success and very often is demanded by employers as well, I believe that we desperately need the critical edge of systemic perspective.

My analysis of eating disorders, the core of the critique of normalizing practices presented in this book, is deeply informed by my experiences as a woman who has herself struggled with weight and body-image issues all her life. However, I do not recount that personal story in any of my pieces; I was trained as a philosopher, and that mode of writing does not come easily to me. Instead, I try to preserve the critical edge of the "old" feminist discourse, while incorporating a more postmodern appreciation of how subtle and multifaceted feminist discourse must be if it is to ring true to the complex experiences of contemporary women and men *and* provide systemic perspective on those experiences. Rather than attempt to "explain" eating disorders through one or another available model, I construct what Foucault has called a "polyhedron of intelligibility." I explore facets and intersections: cultural representations of female hunger and female eating, the role of consumer culture, long-standing philosophical and religious attitudes toward the body, similarities to other predominantly female disorders (agoraphobia, hysteria), connections with other contemporary body obsessions, continuities with "normal" female experience in our culture, and so forth. Each of these explorations is systemically located. I do not want the reader to lose sight of the fact that the escalation of eating disorders into a significant social phenomenon arises at the intersection of patriarchal culture and post-industrial capitalism.

My analysis is in this way "political." It is not, however, reductionist, and I hope it will help dispel the misperception, fostered by Joan Brumberg and others, that the feminist cultural model reduces eating disorders to a simple pursuit of slenderness. Rather, such feminist/cultural analysis as Susie Orbach's *Hunger Strike* and Kim Chernin's *The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self* has always stressed the intersection of culture with family, economic, and historical developments and psychological constructions of gender.<sup>37</sup> Insofar as what Chernin first named the "tyranny of slenderness" has been seen as crucial to understanding eating disorders, that tyranny has rarely been viewed by feminists simply as a matter of arbitrary media images but has, rather, been seen as requiring cultural and historical analysis and interpretation. I deal more fully with the feminist paradigm, competing models, and ongoing resistance to the cultural perspective on eating disorders in the essay "Whose Body Is This?"

### **Nature, Culture, and the Body**

Taken together, the feminist critiques of gendered representations and of the politics of the material body can also be seen as an extended argument against the notion that the body is a purely biological or natural form. In this way, American feminism has contributed significantly to what is arguably a major transformation in Western intellectual paradigms defining and representing the body. Within the traditional

paradigms, despite significant historical variations certain features have been constant. First and foremost, the body is located (whether as wild beast or physiological clockwork) on the nature side of a nature/culture divide. As such, it is conceived as relatively historically unchanging in its most basic aspects, and unitary. That is, we speak of "the Body" as we speak of "Reason" or "Mind" as though one model were equally and accurately descriptive of all human bodily experience, irrespective of sex, race, age, or any other personal attributes. That model is assumed to be a sort of neutral, generic core.

Over the past hundred and fifty years, under the influence of a variety of cultural forces, the body has been forced to vacate its long-term residence on the nature side of the nature/culture duality and encouraged to take up residence, along with everything else that is human, within culture. Karl Marx played a crucial role here, in reimagining the body as a historical and not merely a biological arena, an arena shaped by the social and economic organization of human life and, often, brutalized by it. Marx cut the first great slice into the unitary conception of "the Body" assumed by those who preceded him. It makes a difference, he insisted, *whose* body you are talking about one that tills its own field, or one that works on an assembly line all day, or one that sits in an office managing the labor of others.

Gender and race, too, make a difference. The "generic" core is usually in reality a white or male body passing as the norm for all. For example, when the department of health lists "dairy products" as one of the four major food groups essential to health for all people, it excludes from its conception of the human norm those populations (African American, Mexican American, Asian Americans) among whom large numbers of individuals are lactose intolerant. (Advising the inclusion of *calcium* in the diet would be less ethnocentric.) The definition of the "normal" human body temperature as 98.6 excludes most women during their fertile years for about two weeks every month (before ovulation, when progesterone levels should be low and body temperature below 98.6). Even the representation of groups who are themselves frequently rendered invisible in cultural constructions as, for example, in assumptions of heterosexuality in discussions of sexuality, marriage, and parenthood exhibit additional effacements of race and gender. Controversial findings on possible genetic factors in male homosexuality, for example, have continually been misrepresented in mass-media headlines as proposing a genetic basis for all homosexuality. A 1992 *Newsweek* cover story, for example, depicts two men holding hands; but the bold type asks the uninflected question, "Homosexuality: Born or Bred?"

The old metaphor of the Body Politic presented itself as a "generic" (that is, ostensibly human but covertly male) form. (It is interesting to note, however, that when the *natural* world was likened to a body as it is in Plato's *Timaeus* and in many other ancient creation stories it is gendered, and frequently female. It is only when a man-made rational form like the state is symbolized, a cultural invention imagined to bring order to the chaos of the "natural," that the fiction of genderlessness comes into play.) A good deal of feminist scholarship has focused on exposing such fictions and revealing their specificity (as white, male, historically located in various ways, and so forth). Others have focused on the cultural construction and historical experiences of the *female* body. The critique of cultural representations, discussed in the first section of this introduction, has also contributed to the feminist relocation of the body to the culture side of the nature/culture dualism. For one effect of this critique of the pervasive dualisms and

metaphors that animate representations of the body is to call into question the assumption that we ever know or encounter the body not only the bodies of others but our own bodies directly or simply. Rather, it seems, the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature.

In various ways, all the essays in this volume exemplify a cultural approach to the body. My analysis of eating disorders, most explicitly, offers such a cultural perspective. The relevant essays span almost a decade of my thinking about anorexia, bulimia, and related issues and reflect different stages of information and understanding (both my own and the culture's). But although my analysis came to incorporate new elements over time (for example, my earliest essay, "Anorexia Nervosa," reflects my initial lack of knowledge about nineteenth-century anorexia), my understanding of eating disorders as complex crystallizations of culture has remained unaltered. Indeed, the more we learn about eating disorders and about women and their eating problems, both in the nineteenth century and today, the more the cultural model has been borne out, as I argue in "Whose Body Is This?"

In the case of eating disorders, the cultural evidence is by now so overwhelming, and by itself so overdetermines the phenomena, that the hunt for biological *explanations* (I do not deny that there are biological dynamics and effects involved) can only be understood as blind allegiance to the medical model. However, although I am convinced that anorexia and bulimia (as mass phenomena, not as the isolated cases that have been reported throughout history) have been culturally produced, I resist the general notion, quite dominant in the humanities and social sciences today, that the body is a tabula rasa, awaiting inscription by culture. When bodies are made into mere *products* of social discourse, they remain bodies in name only. Unless, as Richard Mohr argues, we are willing to grant that our corporeality is more than a "barren field," an "unchalked blackboard," "ineffective" apart from the social forces and discourses that script and shape it, then *those* forces are the "true body," and they let's face it look suspiciously more like "mind" than body, "emanating" (as Mohr describes it) "from the gas cloud-like social Mind or whatever it is that speaks social 'discourses' as it brushes across the tabula rasa of the body." In some areas biology may play a very great role in our destinies, and it always informs our lives to varying degrees. However, even in those areas where biology may play a more formidable role, its effect is never "pure," never untouched by history. We are creatures swaddled in culture from the moment we are designated one sex or the other, one race or another.

### **Transcendence, "Difference," and Cultural Transformation**

Many feminists remain agnostic or ambivalent about the role of biology and sexual "difference"; justifiably fearful of ideas that seem to assert an unalterable, essential female nature, they are nonetheless concerned that too exclusive an emphasis on culture will obscure powerful, and potentially culturally transformative, aspects of women's experience. Is pregnancy merely a cultural construction, capable of being shaped into multitudinous social forms? Or does the unique configuration of embodiment presented in pregnancy the having of an other within oneself, simultaneously both part of oneself and separate from oneself constitute a distinctively female epistemological and ethical resource? Is PMS merely one more deployment in the ever-advancing medicalization of

the body? Or is it also an opportunity (as Emily Martin argues) to access reserves of emotion, understanding, and creativity that normally remain dormant, repressed?

One could reasonably answer that the female body is *both* construction *and* resource. It is important to recognize, however, that these ideas carry heavy ideological and personal freight. Women who suffer from blinding headaches, incapacitating back pain, and violent mood swings just before their periods may resent any suggestion that PMS is to the slightest degree culturally constructed. Women who have minimal or no symptoms but whose male partners and employers continually sneer or make jokes about women's behavior being dominated by their ovaries (ideas that hark back to nineteenth-century notions that women's physiology and psychology are ruled by their reproductive systems) may find themselves arguing that PMS is simply a cultural myth perpetuating male dominance in the public workplace. Moreover, the polarizing effects of the outbreak of phobias about "essentialism" have often found feminists lining up (or being lined up) on different sides of a divide. Joan Peters, in her witty account of the long, slow slide into menopause, sardonically describes this divide. On the one side are the "Transcenders" for whom the female body, undetermined by nature or history, can be recreated anew by feminism. On the other side are the "Red Bloomers" for whom the female body is a source of pleasure, knowledge, and power, to be revalued rather than remade. Of course, Peters intends these terms as caricatures. But they are useful in highlighting, within the specific context of perspectives on the female body, the tension that Ann Snitow describes as being "as old as Western feminism": the tension between "needing to act as women and needing an identity not overdetermined by our gender."

Clearly, both poles of this tension are necessary to feminist struggle and social change. If the efforts of "Red Bloomers" are needed for the deep transformation of culture, the arguments of "Transcenders" are needed to dismantle the barriers that prohibit entrance to domains reserved for men only. Now that I am a tenured professor, the "female" aspects of my identity, I hope, can operate transformatively, disturbing received notions of professorial and philosophical expertise and authority. When I was a graduate student, however, it was necessary to my professional survival that I demonstrate that I could argue "like the boys." Deciding how much one may "bloom" and how much one has to "transcend" in any given context is a tricky, subtle business (for movements as well as for individuals), and it is easy to lose track of who you are and what you wanted when you started, particularly if you were ambivalent to begin with. And what woman, growing up in a sexist culture, is *not* ambivalent about her "femaleness"?

Today, as I argue in several essays in this volume, the forces of "transcendence" seem to be in ascendance within postmodern feminism. In theorizing that ascendancy, I make use of much the same methodology I apply in my analysis of eating disorders. Rather than offer a causal explanation, I examine various elements as they intersect or crystallize in the phenomenon I am trying to understand. Some of these elements are *general* cultural attitudes; others have to do with *academic* cultures; still others have specifically to do with contemporary *feminism*. Throughout, my perspective on contemporary academic paradigms such as deconstructionism is to explore their *participation*, their embeddedness, in culture as the expression, in an academic arena, of fantasies, anxieties, and fashions being played out in other, more "popular" or public contexts.

Although my language may not consistently reflect this, my overall analysis depends on a distinction between postmodern culture and poststructuralist thought. *Postmodern*, in the most general *cultural* sense, refers to the contemporary inclination toward the unstable, fluid, fragmented, indeterminate, ironic, and heterogeneous, for that which resists definition, closure, and fixity. Within this general categorization, many ideas that have developed out of poststructuralist thought the emphasis on semiotic indeterminacy, the critique of unified conceptions of subjectivity, fascination with the instabilities of systems, and the tendency to focus on cultural resistance rather than dominant forms are decidedly postmodern intellectual developments. But not all poststructuralist thought is postmodern. Foucault, as I read him, has both modern and postmodern moments. In his discussions of the discipline, normalization, and creation of "docile bodies," for instance, he is very much the descendant of Marx, whereas later revisions to his conception of power emphasize the ubiquity of resistance a characteristically postmodern theme.

I view current postmodern tendencies thoroughly to "textualize" the body exemplified in Judith Butler's analysis of drag as parody (see "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies, Postmodern Resistance") and Susan McClary's reading of Madonna's music videos (see "'Material Girl'") as giving a kind of free, creative rein to *meaning* at the expense of attention to the body's material locatedness in history, practice, culture. If the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilizing elements can be emphasized and freedom and self-determination celebrated; but one is left wondering, is there a *body* in this text? In "'Material Girl'" I explore how a similar effacement of the body's materiality is played out *concretely* in our postmodern imagination of the body as malleable plastic, to be shaped to the meanings we choose.

Cultural expressions are all around us. Klan leader David Duke even had his eyes and nose reshaped to appear "kinder and gentler" to prospective voters. Contemporary movies are continually experimenting with the plasticity and deconstructive possibilities of the body: old bodies magically become young (*Sixteen Again*), young bodies become old (*Big*), death is transcended (*Cocoon*) or temporarily suspended (*Truly, Madly, Deeply*), reincarnation themes are played out (*Heaven Can Wait, Made in Heaven, Dead Again*). The extremely popular *Ghost* even plays with the notion that a well disciplined and highly motivated (dead) spirit can push material objects (and living people) around without the aid of body. Talk shows evidence a special fascination with sex changes; one frequent guest is a person who has gone back and forth from man to woman to man several times. And, of course, there are the extravagant claims, made throughout the popular literature on "the new reproductive technologies," that *any* woman, regardless of age or medical problem, can become pregnant. In this literature, the difficult, painful, and disruptive regimes demanded by the new technology are continually effaced or trivialized: "You can still carry your own baby" even after menopause, assures Sherman Silber (currently the leading fertility expert/darling of the mass media); "*All that is needed* is an egg donor" (emphasis mine).

My point here, I hope it is apparent, is *not* to criticize people who have plastic surgery, sex-change operations, or gamete intrafallopian transfers. It is to highlight a *discourse* that is gradually changing our conception and experience of our bodies, a discourse that encourages us to "imagine the possibilities" and close our eyes to limits and consequences. A postmodern intoxication with possibilities is expressed in some of

the methodological and epistemological ideals of postmodern thought as well, as I argue in "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism." Earlier in this introduction I spoke of the Cartesian fantasy of the philosopher's transcendence of the concrete locatedness of the body (and so of its perspectival limitations) in order to achieve the God's-eye view, the "view from nowhere." Today, I argue, a no less disembodied ideal is imagined by those who advocate "heterogeneity" and "indeterminacy" as principles for interpreting culture, history, and texts. This is not to deny that history and culture are indeed heterogeneous. Rather, I take issue with the fantasy of *capturing* that heterogeneity in our "readings" by continually seeking difference for its own sake, by being guided by the pure *possibilities* of interpretation rather than an embodied point of view. I call this the "view from everywhere" fantasy.

Thus, although I am strongly skeptical of certain tendencies in postmodern culture and poststructuralist thought, my perspective is by no means thoroughly negative. For one thing, as will be obvious to the reader, my own work makes liberal use of the insights of poststructuralist thought, particularly those of Foucault. More deeply, my approach to understanding cultural phenomena has been shaped by the experience of living in "postmodern times," and the unavoidable encounter with complexity, multiplicity, ambiguity that this has meant for me. In sorting out my own ambivalent relationship to postmodernity I have been greatly aided by bell hooks's *Yearning* and Jane Flax's *Thinking Fragments*, which I discuss in "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies, Postmodern Resistance" and which model what I think of as an embodied postmodernism, incorporating the best of postmodern multiplicity with a constant acknowledgment of both the limitations of the self and the weight of collective history.

For neither Flax nor hooks does the fragmented nature of postmodern subjects and postmodern knowledge mean that we cannot or should not talk about "black identity" or "women's experiences" as historically constituted. In this, their approach is to be contrasted sharply to that of Jean Grimshaw and other writers for whom generalizations about gender, race, and class have become taboo, not only "politically" but *methodologically*. Although I recognize the validity of aspects of Grimshaw's critique, I have many concerns about the taboo on generalization, which I explore in connection with the Thomas/Hill hearings in "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism." In that essay I also consider the related contemporary panic over "essentialism," suggesting, among other criticisms, that we look at that panic with a more psycho-cultural eye, as a possible expression of feminist anxiety over being identified with marginalized and devalued aspects of female identity. Such anxiety, however, cannot be adequately theorized only in terms of psychological ambivalence or inner conflict about our femaleness, our mothers, our bodies. Rather, it is also thoroughly continuous with the insistence on creative self-fashioning that is manifest throughout postmodern culture. And it must be located in the context of the *institutions* we practice in-institutions still dominated by masculinist, Eurocentric norms of "professional" behavior and accomplishment.

It is in this institutional context, I would argue, that we most need to "bloom" rather than "transcend." This does not mean alliance with determinist, essentializing ontologies. The most powerful revaluations of the female body have looked, not to nature or biology, but to the culturally inscribed and historically located body (or to historically developed *practices*) for imaginations of *alterity* rather than "the truth" about the female

body. This is one of the elements that I read in the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Adrienne Rich, Sarah Ruddick, ecofeminist Ynestra King, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and a good deal of lesbian-feminist and "cultural feminist" art and literature.

Without imaginations (or embodiments) of alterity, from what vantage point can we seek transformation of culture? And how will we construct these imaginations and embodiments, if not through alliance with that which has been silenced, repressed, disdained? So, for example, feminist philosophers have frequently challenged dominant conceptions of rationality, morality, and politics through revaluations of those "female" qualities spontaneity, practical knowledge, empathy forbidden (or deemed irrelevant) to the "man of reason."

There are those who would claim that revaluing "female" resources only *inverts* the classic dualisms rather than challenging dualistic thinking itself. This position, which sounds incisive and which frequently has been pronounced authoritatively and received as gospel in contemporary poststructuralist feminist writing, in fact depends upon so abstract, disembodied, and a historical a conception of how cultural change occurs as to be worthy of inclusion in the most sterile philosophy text. The ongoing production, reproduction, and transformation of culture is not a conversation between talking heads, in which metaphysical positions are accepted or rejected wholesale. Rather, the metaphysics of a culture shifts piecemeal and through real, historical changes in relations of power, modes of subjectivity, the organization of life.

Dualism thus cannot be deconstructed in culture the way it can be on paper. To be concretely that is, culturally accomplished requires that we bring the "margins" to the "center," that we legitimate and nurture, in those institutions from which they have been excluded, marginalized ways of knowing, speaking, being. Because relocations of this sort are always concrete, historical events, enacted by real, historical people, they *cannot* challenge every insidious duality in one fell swoop, but neither can they reproduce exactly the same conditions as before, "in reverse." Rather, when we bring marginalized aspects of our identities (racial, gendered, ethnic, sexual) into the central arenas of culture they are themselves transformed, and *transforming*. Bell Hooks (see "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies, Postmodern Resistance" in this volume) provides the example of the African American philosopher Cornel West, who by presenting a theoretical, academic talk in a passionate, dramatic sermon mode popular in black communities concretely deconstructed, on that occasion and for that audience, the oppositions between intellect and passion, substance and style. Did he also deconstruct the gendered duality which has dominantly reserved the sermon mode for men? No. *That* challenge requires other occasions, other players.

If we do not struggle to force our work and workplaces to be informed by our histories of embodied experience, we participate in the cultural reproduction of dualism, both practically and representationally. The continuing masculinism of our public institutions (manifest not only in the styles of professionalism that they require but in their continued failure to accommodate and integrate the private for instance, parenting into the public sphere) has been exploited, clearly, in what Susan Faludi describes as the media concocted fiction of a massive "flight" of unhappy women *from* those institutions and back to the home, the only place we can truly realize our feminine nature and completely fulfill our maternal responsibilities. Most women, of course, could not afford

to leave their job even if they wanted to. And whatever actual flight there has been, Faludi argues, is largely the result of panic caused by the media campaign rather than the other way around. But whatever the causality, the old dualities are clearly being culturally reinscribed. Glossy magazines and commercials are currently filled with images of domestic, reproductive bliss, of home as a cozy, plant filled haven of babies, warmth, and light, skillfully managed and lovingly tended by women. The realm of the material, the care and reproduction of the body, we are reminded, is appropriately woman's. Only men, as Hegel said, are designed for the "stress" and "technical exertions" of the public domain.