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**The Body as Fiction / Fiction as a Way of Thinking**

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***CHAPTER 2 –  
POST-STRUCTURALIST  
FEMINISM AND THE BODY***

### **The system of dualities that underpins phallocratic culture**

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a significant part of the project of post-structuralist feminism, working within the wider field of post-structuralism, concerned elaborating and deconstructing the relationship between language, power and the body.<sup>1</sup>

This work demonstrated that integral to the workings of ‘phallogocentric’ or ‘phallocratic’ culture are a set of dualities that function as binary opposites:

mind/body  
 active/passive  
 rational/irrational  
 culture/nature  
 public/private  
 reason/emotion  
 subject/object  
 self/other.

And underlying these, as the primary metaphor that links these concepts to bodies and inscribes them as more or less powerful:

male/female.

By constructing difference as opposition, privileging one quality or state over the other as the normal, defining, positive term, with the second term thus figured as an absence of this quality – subordinate, lacking, only existing within this relationship and never able to be defined on its own terms – and then linking the dominant terms with one particular sex, phallocratic culture was

constantly reproducing itself with every utterance or act of representation or description or story of itself.

As Helene Cixous wrote in her essay 'Castration or Decapitation':

...the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems – everything, that is, that's spoken, everything that's organised as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us – it is all ordered around the hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition, an opposition that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as 'natural'<sup>2</sup>

For Cixous, this is an opposition founded in '*the couple*. A couple posed in opposition, in tension, in conflict.' To be aware, she continues, that it's the male/female couple that makes it all work 'is also to point to the fact that it's on the couple that we have to work if we are to deconstruct and transform culture.' (44)

The aim of feminist critique became, however, not to reverse these dichotomies, so that the repressed terms became the dominant or positive ones, but to collapse them: to find ways of representing the world that might operate on a different economy, and that can thus imagine a state of difference (sexual, cultural or any kind – different truths, for instance) that doesn't have to be defined within a hierarchical relationship of same/opposite (true/not-true) but can simply co-exist. That is, to find a way of thinking difference so that it doesn't have to be either the One or the Other, but can be represented as simply two, or more; and with each able to be defined on its own terms.

One of the more poetic explorations of the workings of these underlying dichotomies is found in the work of the feminist psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, who in her deeply metaphorical texts uses a strategy of re-reading western philosophy and psychoanalysis, borrowing from and adapting Derrida's deconstructive method.<sup>3</sup>

Irigaray draws a comparison between the way female sexuality is inscribed as an absence or lack within the phallogratic heterosexual economy, which is capable of privileging or valuing only one organ on one kind of body, and the way the values and traits associated with femininity are likewise inscribed within phallogratic discourse as merely an absence of the 'positive' traits. (Thus emotion, for instance, in western philosophy is usually seen as merely a lack of reason, and

always its opposite, and therefore incompatible with any reasonable discursive practice aiming at discovering truth.)

Furthermore, Irigaray argued that it was only by this exclusion or repression of the feminine (that is, values associated with femininity) that western philosophical discourse retained its systematicity, its sense of closure and logic. So that this exclusion is not accidental – or easily patched back in; indeed according to Irigaray the feminine could be regarded as the ‘unconscious’ of western philosophy, integral to its integrity, power and functioning.

It is important to see Irigaray’s work as metaphoric and disruptive or suggestive – a deconstruction of the performance of femininity within phallographic logic, rather than as a description of an essential femininity natural to or exclusive to one particular sex. Indeed, her notion that any systematic and logically coherent representation or theoretical model depends for its coherence on the repression of an Other or other views and perspectives could be used to critique feminism itself in its essentialist form. For it could be argued that feminism only retains its functioning as an ‘identity politics’ by repressing or subordinating other kinds of difference, such as cultural differences and those that don’t fit easily into a two gender framework.

### **Power and the inscription and performance of bodies within culture**

Within post-structuralism, the body is understood as a cultural not (just) a ‘natural’ object; as something socially inscribed and produced ‘within a network of socio-historical relations instead of being tied to a fixed essence’<sup>4</sup>. And it is through this complex process of inscription and performance that the philosophical underpinnings of phallographic culture exist as a *material* power – a physical and productive power – not just an ideological one. Which is to say that we don’t just absorb the ideologies of patriarchy through our minds, but these are inscribed into our very being in the world through our relationships with our bodies.

The body, in this sense, in its ‘openness to cultural completion’<sup>5</sup> is the ‘interface’ or point of contact between the political and the personal,<sup>6</sup> with knowledge / discursive practices (or *thought*) as the dynamic link between power and bodies: that which ‘invests’, ‘contours’ and ‘animates’ them<sup>7</sup>.

If power (or culture) is in Michel Foucault’s terms, a complex strategical situation, a field of force relations, then the body is both an effect of this, and its vehicle.<sup>8</sup> The body is both product *and* agent, with the interactions and relationships between the embodied subject and its culture as the means by which and through which both are produced simultaneously. For power is not simply

enacted upon individual subjects, but is involved in forming or constituting them in the first place; our subjectivity, for instance, formed ‘by virtue of having gone through such a process [as] “assuming” a sex.’<sup>9</sup>

Thus power exists in the things that produce us (and produce things for us), not just in the things which constrain or limit us; with the body not just an object of power, but a powerful object; each of us taking an active role in the inscription of both ourselves and others throughout our lives. For our identity or ‘self’ is not something we are born with, but something born out of a complex of recognitions, comparisons, exclusions, demarcations, divisions, alignments and realignments. We identify ourselves within a shifting field of images defined (made sense of) by language, and imbued with power relations.

Our bodies are also powerful (and objects of power) in the way that knowledge is extracted from them – via science and medicine, for instance, as well as through their centrality to the juridical process. This knowledge then works back onto bodies to invest them in a complex and dynamic process of continual exchange.

In Michel Foucault’s rendering, this power that operates on and through bodies exists as ‘a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity,’<sup>10</sup>. Power is

not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised at innumerable points.

...Relations of Power are not exterior to other types of relationship (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in them...

It is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. This is the omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.<sup>11</sup>

Judith Butler<sup>12</sup> also looks at the body as an historically and culturally specific performance of materiality – as a discursive field in which discourse produces and marks (differentiates) what it names – rather than as a universal ‘natural’ or pre-given entity. In particular she looks at the way gender is regulated and produced through a complex process of reiterative performativity, a process that continually resignifies gendered and ‘heterosexual’ bodies as normative.

In this view, you don't walk like a man because you are a man, but to become one, constantly reinforcing (or reinscribing) your gender to yourself and others. Thus, Butler says, 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (*Gender Trouble*, 25).<sup>13</sup>

The reiterative power of discourse – the relationship between bodies and knowledge – is further explored and played with in the work of Luce Irigaray. If phallogocentric logic 'reconstructs anatomy in its own image'<sup>14</sup>, Irigaray's tactic is to deconstruct this logic by choosing a different organ to represent female sexuality, one that operates quite outside of the phallogocentric sexual economy which offers women the either/or of clitoris or vagina and (thus) the either/or of being represented as the opposite (complement) to the male, or the same (but inferior).<sup>15</sup>

While Iris Marion Young talks about breasts as 'a scandal' for phallic sexuality, being 'a multiple and fluid zone' of erotic pleasure<sup>16</sup>, Irigaray takes not the doubled breasts but another double, the 'two lips' as her focus, developing this into an evocative metaphor of transgressive expressiveness, in both speaking (discourse) and sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

The two vaginal lips (literally) embrace both the vagina *and* the clitoris, as well as each other. Always in touch, as a metaphor they provide a 'tissue of implications'<sup>18</sup> for a new economy of sexuality (or knowledge) based on touch rather than penetration<sup>19</sup>. With touch there is no source or recipient, no one and then the other, no 'master' organ, no master(y) act. The sources of pleasure are diffuse rather than specific; multiple instead of unitary; not the property of one person or another but the shared product of an exchange.

In the words of Irigaray: '*You don't 'give' me anything when you touch yourself, when you touch me: you touch yourself through me.*'<sup>20</sup>

Touch defines an economy of pleasures in which giving and receiving are one.<sup>21</sup> To define sexual intercourse in terms of its tactility – and thus in terms of its carnal rather than its purely genital aspect – it becomes possible to begin to collapse the system of binary oppositions that define the heterosexual couple so that the self-other relationship becomes re-inscribed as one of *contiguity* rather than penetration, *recognition* rather than reconciliation, *adjunction* rather than possession, *difference* instead of opposition.<sup>22</sup>

Irigaray's work is a strategy, rather than a theory of women's 'true' sexuality. It is not a description aimed at supplanting the prevailing view, or supplementing it, but a textual performance concerned to deconstruct it – to question its given-ness or 'naturalness': a glimpse of what might happen if you break open the closure of the representative process, if you can unfix the locks.

As a metaphor, touch takes us towards being able to collapse the dualities that underpin not just sexual expression and bodies, but all forms of relationship and knowledge. The body in touch with itself doesn't require a reflection from another, but is part of an interconnected and interdependent experience. As a metaphor, touch might provide a more productive image, perhaps, with which to approach questions regarding the materiality of the body, and the ways in which matter and consciousness are related.

In her thoughtful and evocative book, *Telling Flesh: the Substance of the Corporeal*, Vicki Kirby notes the tendency of some post-structuralist theorists to read the body as if it were only a surface. This 'somatophobia' or reluctance to go 'inside' the body, to think *through* it, she suggests, would seem to be yet another 'legacy of phallogocentrism's mind/body split'. It is as if:

the body is a dangerous supplement that we possess, or are possessed by. It is as if we are held hostage within the body, embodied, such that the site of self, the stuff of thinking and consciousness, is an isolate made of quite different matter.<sup>23</sup>

Kirby also questions the way that 'human identity underpins what we mean when we say "the subject"' – that is, the assumption that only humans have consciousness, and are unquestionably and in all ways distinct from 'nature' (153 ff).

For many feminists and post-structuralists working in the humanities, science and biology have long been considered 'off limits' as a topic for anything other than cultural critique. There are two main aspects to this argument. On theoretical grounds: the materiality of the body is considered ultimately untheorisable (unknowable), because there is no culturally, geographically or temporally objective position from which to make valid or universal observations. (For instance, it is always gendered subjects studying gendered subjects.) On political grounds: as an historically essentialist activity science has often been used to explain culturally differential traits according to notions of a natural body or natural gender distinction, and thus could in the future be used (as it has been in the past) to justify differential treatments and expectations.

As such it can be a sensitive issue, and Kirby's description of the difficulties she faced when wanting to discuss questions usually associated with an endorsement of the science of bodies with her colleagues, struck a chord with me with regards to my own research for this project (1ff). For instance, I often felt caught between what I was reading in queer theory (and what was considered legitimate to discuss openly in academic circles) and what I was reading in writings by gender activists – who, for instance, often welcomed contemporary scientific explanations, or even spiritual explanations, for their mind-body experiences and felt that these were important.

But as Kirby points out, in a sense the debates about essentialism versus anti-essentialism could be seen as coming from the same 'place'. 'Where,' Kirby asks, 'is the evidence for either essentialism's error or anti-essentialism's truth to be situated, and in what does it consist?' (72) Indeed, she suggests that post-structuralist feminism and queer theory's rejection (and repression) of discussion of biology runs the risk of merely inverting the nature/culture opposition – and thus of playing into and repeating the split – rather than deconstructing it.

Kirby's book – along with the work of a number of other academic theorists in the past decade<sup>24</sup> – suggests that effectively deconstructing the nature/culture and mind/body splits would necessarily involve conceiving of the body as more than just a passive material surface for the inscription of culture, but as having its own cognitive input. That is, to look at 'the whole question of how matter and intelligence is paired'<sup>25</sup> might entail looking at the dynamic *two-way* conversation or relationship between nature and culture, mind and body, humans and the planet.

This rethinking of the notion of the body-mind, or the matter of matter – including the limits and definition of 'mind' or consciousness – is a question and exploration that is increasingly significant within science and especially medicine. As such was deeply relevant to my research on a range of issues raised by my topic such as difference and transgender, cancer therapies, and the implants controversy. It is also a feature of what could be termed the 'new ecological spiritualism' as influenced by a range of indigenous, pre-modern and East Asian spiritual traditions.

In the next chapter I would like to look at the three great paradigm shifts of the twentieth century – quantum physics, ecological spirituality, and post-structuralism – at what they might have in common, and the implications of this shift in thinking for understanding the nature and culture of embodiment.



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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Elizabeth Grosz for her lectures at Sydney University in the early 1980s which provided such a lucid introduction to post-structuralist theory, and a grounding for much of my later research in this area.

<sup>2</sup> Helene Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation' translated by Annette Kuhn, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, 1 (1981) 44.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, 'When Our Lips Speak Together' translated and introduced by Carolyn Burke in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6, 1 (1980) 66-79; 'And One Doesn't Stir Without the Other' translated and introduced by Helene Vivienne Wenzel in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, 1 (1981); 'This Sex Which is Not One' in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Ed.) Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) 99-106; and *Speculum of the Other Woman* translated by Gillian C. Gill (NY: Cornell University Press, French edition 1974, English trans. 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 'Notes Towards a Corporeal Feminism,' *Australian Feminist Studies, Feminism and the Body Issue* 5 (Summer 1987) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994) xi.

<sup>6</sup> Grosz, 'Notes Towards a Corporeal Feminism,' 10.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Judith Butler: 'I wanted to work out how a norm actually materialises a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm.' Interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, originally published in *Radical Philosophy* 67 (Summer 1994) 4 Apr. 2001 <<http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>>.

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Ed) C. Gordon (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980) 98.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (NY: Routledge, 1993) 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (England: Penguin, 1977) 26-7.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, from the chapter on 'Method' in *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (NY: Vintage Books, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> See *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (NY: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies that Matter*, passim. Note, while Butler takes issue with both Foucault and Irigaray, reading their work as depending on a notion of an essential or natural body, I feel this is a misreading of their work, and see more connections than differences between them.

<sup>13</sup> In this sense, insofar as language is a technology, we are already 'natural born cyborgs', to borrow Andy Clarke's phrase. See 'Natural Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence: an Interview with Andy Clark' *All in the Mind*, ABC Radio National, Sunday 18 May 2003, transcripts, 6 Jul. 2003  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/mind/s850880.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> Vicki Kirby, commenting on Jane Gallop's reading of Irigaray, in *Telling Flesh: the Substance of the Corporeal* (NY & London: Routledge, 1997) 74.

<sup>15</sup> Of course the clitoris is certainly not inferior in terms of sensation, or even in terms of size when the interior network of nerves and tissue is taken into account. However, within a specular philosophical structure it is 'inferior' in the sense of being (outwardly) visibly smaller, and less able to penetrate an Other where penetration is considered the master('s) act.

<sup>16</sup> Young, 'Breasted Experience,' 194.

<sup>17</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together' (1980), and 'When One Doesn't Stir Without the Other' (1981).

<sup>18</sup> Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, 75.

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<sup>19</sup> And touch rather than looking, which also has myriad implications for a subjectivity formed around a dichotomous relationship between self and other.

<sup>20</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other'.

<sup>21</sup> When you stroke a cat, for example, you give pleasure to the cat as well as yourself (especially as the cat knows how to receive). When you eat, which is the source of pleasure: the food, or the mouth?

<sup>22</sup> Likewise Irigaray also focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, overlooked in classical Freudian psychoanalysis, as a primary and important self/other relationship that is not based in an opposition.

<sup>23</sup> Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, 73 –76 and passim.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, see Elizabeth Wilson, 'Gut Feminism,' *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15, 3 (2004) 66-94; Anna Gibbs, 'Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect,' *Australian Humanities Review* (December 2001, accessed 3 May 2005) <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-2001>>; and Alison Bartlett's work as discussed in chapter 1. The more recent work of Elizabeth Grosz is also re-examining the links between feminism and science.

<sup>25</sup> This is a phrase that endocrinologist Deepak Chopra uses regarding his work on the notion of 'quantum healing' which features the idea of all matter, including the body as having intelligence. See for instance, *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/Body Medicine* (NY: Bantam, 1989/1990).