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

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# ***INTRODUCTION***

This thesis uses fiction as a research technology for exploring a range of issues to do with difference, identity, knowledge, and beliefs about bodies and nature at the cusp of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It includes sample material – as the experimental outcome of this process – from a novel in progress called *A Short (Personal) History of the Bra and its Contents*.

As a research topic, the ‘bra and its contents’ opens up a network of issues concerning the complex and dynamic relationships between bodies and culture.

The bra is an accoutrement to the body which also (re)creates it in its own image. It is a wonderful example of how the ‘nature’ of the body is constituted by and within discursive practices such as fashion, medicine, the law, science and spirituality.

By defining and accentuating the most visible signifiers of femininity in our culture, the bra (as a topic) also ‘contains’ gender. Furthermore it holds or gestures towards the origins of subjectivity, with ‘the breast’ – by its presence and absence – as the first Other.

Through this, the breast – as the first Other, and as a signifier of gender difference – opens up the subject of the dualities or oppositions which underpin phallocratic discourse; at the same time as it confounds the unitariness of sexual signification by being a doubled image. As the first Other it is ‘the breast’; as a signifier of sexual difference it is the plural, ‘breasts’. Likewise, as the first Other it initiates the process whereby we see our individuality as neatly bounded at the skin. At the same time, in the closely intertwined needs and rights of the mother-child dyad focussed around the milk produced by this relationship, it also messes up that boundary.

In colloquial terms, the ‘breast’ (for both genders) is the seat of feelings, the fleshy door to the heart. In this way, too, it is a deep element or site of our sense of self or identity, for when asked to point to themselves, most people indicate their heart (pointing to their breast) rather than their head.

As such, for this thesis I have taken the contents of the bra as indicating the whole of the body-self and body-culture relationship. Within this there is also a range of more specific but inter-linking issues around subjectivity, gender and gender diversity, the implants controversy and body modifications in general, the cancer industry and the corporatisation of medicine, maternity, nurture and the history of breast and bottle-feeding, and fashion history.

There is no part of this thesis that came ‘first’. The fiction is not an illustration of the theory. The theory or non-fiction is not an exegesis (in the usual sense of interpretation or explication) of the fiction. Both parts were developed and written in a continuous back and forth process – the theory informing and deepening the research and fiction writing, and the research and fiction writing, in turn, informing, grounding and deepening the theoretical insights.

Thus the novel structure was created in response to research and ideas and what developed in the novel was used to target and guide further research and further develop and refine the ideas. Sometimes I used the mechanism and techniques of fiction to explore an issue, other times I used the tools of logic and reasoning and the language of non-fiction to keep working over the plethora of images, concepts, questions and ideas thrown up by my topic. The theory gave me additional tools to interrogate the issues raised by my topic and to constantly analyse my own textual strategies. While the materiality and more concrete circumstances of fiction provides a space for exploring and testing out and expanding on the theories.

My intention is that the two parts should act as companion pieces, complementing and working off each other and expanding the reading possibilities of each. Both are ways of discovering and expressing things that are unlikely to be discovered and are difficult to express with only one process or the other. So the design here is a matrix rather than a linear journey, and all parts of the thesis are in a sense different ways of telling the same overall story. Even the bibliography is a way of telling a story through links – another mapping of the issues; while the longer endnotes at times also function as a hypertext to the main narrative.

Within all of this there is the constant tension between an artistic process and a polemical one – between expanding out and reigning in; between the wide radar that creative thinking both

allows and encourages, compared to the narrowing down process of constructing a single definite thesis.

As well there is the tension between producing an artistic work where you want the influences and theory to be almost invisible, and an academic thesis in which you are required to demonstrate clearly the connections. Indeed, part of what I want to explore and demonstrate in this thesis is the power of juxtaposition and montage. Thus while there are obvious and explicit links between the fiction and non-fiction parts of this thesis, there is also, I hope, power in the juxtaposition of these two very different ways of approaching a similar field of topics about the body-mind and its relationship to and within western culture.

So part one of this thesis is the non-fiction 'exegesis', while part two presents a large amount of sample fiction (as much as space would permit). Some is in the form in which it is likely to appear in the final novel, other parts have been reconfigured specifically for this thesis and to create special themed chapters. Basically, the overall focus of this thesis is to explore the process and outcomes of using fiction as an academic research technology in tandem with non-fiction, rather than to present a completed fiction work ready for mainstream publication.

In these samples I am using fiction as a discursive technology to create a laboratory in which to observe aspects of culture at work: the connections, disconnections, interweavings, the gaps and slippages. (What happens when you put x with y – two things not usually juxtaposed or looked at together?) My aim is to create a discursive space in which to track some of the ways we perform and manage cultural ideas about normativity and bodily difference (ideas around gender, beauty, health and illness, for instance). The novel is, in this sense, a place in which to experiment with the chemistry of different characters and situations.

By injecting meticulous research into the complexity, pleasure, playfulness and fluidity of fiction, this becomes both a process of discovery and a process of creation, often facilitating a more uninhibited cross-pollination of ideas than in more traditionally disciplined writing modes.

My technique is to keep going out from an initial topic (such as body modifications, or breast-feeding, or cancer treatments) drawing in as many unexpected threads, metaphors, images, allegories and stories as I can, often relying initially on an irrational feeling that something is appropriate, a gut sense that a connection will emerge. The long process of collecting, sifting and working over this plethora of data – all the ways in which we decorate, modify, describe, classify, train, enjoy, nourish, abuse, love and hate our bodies, the ways in which we use them

in relationship with others and the world around us, the many ways as a culture we regulate and re-design them – creates, in a sense, a complex system. When the quantity of factors gets to a certain saturation point, meanings, connections and possibilities start to accumulate.

As such fiction is used here not just as a frame or a means for presenting ideas or information arrived at through logical thinking or non-fiction discourse, but as a way of analysing and generating ideas, a way of thinking.

Indeed, this process was so effective that the difficulty was in knowing where to draw the line. Nevertheless, while there are numerous ways in which this topic could have been expanded and explored, I found that what I kept coming up against – whether I was researching gender and gender variations, breast implants and cosmetic surgery, the history of bottle and breastfeeding, or cancer treatments and theories of disease – was a recurring epistemological question of: how do we know what we know? Can anything ever really be proven in a universal and permanent way? If not, then what is involved in something becoming ‘true’?

So the recurring theme in the first (non-fiction) part of this thesis is the question of how we derive knowledge of ourselves, or how we represent ourselves to ourselves – as individual personalities or gendered subjects (the notion of a self), and as a species (how ‘the body’ is conceptualised in discourses such as science, medicine and spirituality). Or, to put it another way, how we negotiate conflicting notions of truth and meaning, and how our bodies might figure in this.

*Chapter one* begins with a review of literature about breasts, from mainstream popular books and ‘owner’s manuals’, to writing by, on and through breasts by feminist writers and thinkers. From these examples it seemed clear to me that in order to write an empowering narrative of the body, or any aspect of it, it was also necessary to constantly interrogate and explore the basic cultural categories out of, through and around which it is constructed.

Therefore *Chapter two* is a brief overview of some of the concerns of post-structuralism, in particular post-structuralist feminism, regarding the relationship between bodies, language, power and knowledge. This chapter looks, for instance, at the pervasiveness of dualistic thinking and the operation of the mind/body, nature/culture split within western philosophy, and the difficulty of rethinking these dichotomies in relation to bodies without simply reversing them.

*Chapter three* takes up this problem by looking at philosophical post-structuralism in the context of the two other great paradigm shifts (or post-structuralisms) of the twentieth century that also form a part of the discourse of bodies: quantum physics (as a shift from the structuralism of Newtonian science) and ecological spirituality (as a shift from monotheism or atheism). In this chapter I trace a history of these movements and explore how they might help reconceptualise the body (and nature) as more than just a passive surface for the activity of culture. As critiques of the possibility of objective or value-free knowledge, these shifts also pose important questions not only for science and philosophy, but about the function of all forms of story-telling and history-making, all forms of ‘knowing’. As such this chapter also raises questions with regard to the form, method and aims – the myriad choices and decisions I had to make – in writing my own history of the bra and its contents.

In *Chapter four*, I take a slightly more meandering or meditative trek through several ways of challenging the mind/body split by conceptualising the body as an open, dynamic and flexible system interdependent with the mind. Drawing on ideas from ecological spiritual traditions (such as Buddhism and Breema), Affect Theory, psychoneuroimmunology, and some recent findings in neurology about the role of emotions in decision making, I explore some of the ways in which the body is an intelligent and essential participant in the formation of our ideas, beliefs and knowledges. By exploring the role of affect and emotional scripting in the continual cultural process of ascribing meaning and value, I look at how fiction, as a psychophysiological practice – a process that affectively engages the body as well as the mind – might be able to play a role in this.

*Chapter five* returns to the question of form and method, and the philosophy of history that underpins my stylistic choices in writing my novel, in particular the use of montage. It also gives a brief overview of the characters, structure and recurring devices used in the novel and how these are managed in order to explore some of the themes. I also look at the issue of accountability, and ways of creating a research context for the novel as ‘a text event’ so that it can provide a focus for a continuing cultural conversation about these issues.

While the *Conclusion* should, by rights, go at the end of the whole thesis (and thus at the end of the fiction samples), in order to fit into the constraints of a linear form and make two comfortably sized packages, the conclusion and bibliography follow Chapter five at the end of the non-fiction section. Placed here, these remarks offer both a commentary on the non-fiction thesis while also acting as a springboard (or invitation) into the fiction.