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## From the 'Primitive Droop' to the 'Civilised Thrust' : Towards a Politics of Body Modification

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### Preamble

I want to look at some of the difficulties in trying to develop an ethics or a politics of body modifications at the cusp of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, exploring this within the context of a novel I'm writing, set in 1999, called *A Short (Personal) History of the Bra and its Contents*.

One of the reasons I like to work with fiction is that it allows me to create a discursive field -- an artificial space -- in which a whole range of issues and ideas can co-exist and work off each other. Ideas, for instance, to do with subjectivity, gender, sexuality, and the privatisation of bodies; the implants controversy, the cancer industry, the corporatisation of medicine and various current debates within science; fashion history; and so on.

In this field, ideas and facts and bits can rub shoulders -- and thus cross-fertilise and react -- simply by virtue of an imaginative association, a linguistic chain, an event sequence, or via the relationships that form between a cast of characters.

During the years I've been working on this novel -- which is still very much a work in progress -- quite a large cast has grown up around the narrator, Angela, and a few of these will be making a guest appearance here today.

For instance, apart from **Angela** -- who works at the State library -- there is **Natalie**, her bosom buddy, who, with Angela, is researching and collecting for a **Dr B**, who is creating an underwear museum in a small country town. Then there's her downstairs neighbour **Gail**, mother of three, with a new baby born soon after the novel starts. Her next door neighbour **Bob** (short for Roberta), a tattoo artist. **Maddie**, her favourite aunt, currently using mainly alternative and non-toxic methods to deal with her breast cancer. And **Wanda**, who has various connections to the others and is also the artist in residence at the State Library, working with street people in the basement, helping them workshop their costumes for the party at the end of the millennium.

(Well, I never said it was realism.)

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A few years ago journalist Virginia Postrel, writing in defence of breast implants, declared:

'The Biological Century is upon us...The body, not the Internet, is the next frontier. We are extending control over life itself, over our lives ourselves. That control will, undoubtedly, have some unintended consequences, and bring some tragedies. That is in the nature of things, the nature of life. But so is the attempt to better nature, to bring the born into the realm of the made, to assert human ingenuity against chance. The debate over breast implants is only incidentally about the venality of lawyers or the benefits of a C cup. It is about who we are and who we may become. It is about the future of what it means to be human.'<sup>1</sup>

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When is it *not* ok to modify the body?

With every culture, every individual engaged in body modification as a daily practice, is it possible to draw a line?

And if so, how, and where?

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Natalie says: Well it's like this: having to wear make-up is oppressive; being able to wear make-up is creative and fun.

But are choice and compulsion so clear cut? (I'd imagine that a few of the women on the Silicone Survivors email list, for instance, might be interested in debating this one.)

Or you could evoke the difference -- as Bob has been known to do -- between body modifications that reinforce notions of 'normality' and pathologise difference; compared to ones that aim to 'individualise', encouraging variety and tolerance.<sup>2</sup>

Except that 'individuality' itself is such a loaded term. And a bit like beauty: many beholders.

As a teenager I remember a minister raging against our incredible conformity -- pointing out that all of us in the room were wearing blue jeans. Strutting around, meanwhile, in his two-piece suit and tie.

Indeed, it could be said that what is so effective about the normalising and regulatory practices of post-modern culture is this very ability to produce individuals in such a variety of ways.<sup>3</sup> With Bob's tattooing no more outside of the contemporary power nexus than a thousand dollar suit, or a nose job.

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One morning I'm in the shower and I overhear Bob and Gail out in the courtyard. Dora, the receptionist for the plastic surgeon who owns the building, has just been to collect the rent.

Bob says, 'Look, I'm not saying there aren't some risks with piercing, too. There's the risk of infection if you don't look after it properly. There is the possibility of a mistake and nerve damage. But I've never seen anything serious in that way (not like with implants); and an infection from a piercing is only temporary - if it gets real bad you just remove it.

She says, 'There are a lot of ways you can look at body modifications.'<sup>4</sup> You could divide them into temporary compared to permanent. But it's not really so clear cut. I mean, you can take a

pair of shoes off, but if you're wearing them every day from childhood, your feet are going to be permanently altered.'

Gail says, 'Yeah, but they would be altered if you didn't wear shoes, and walked on rocks and ground for years. I mean, they're going to be altered whatever you do, just by growing older...'

'Ok...' Bob says. I rub shaving foam on my legs while she chews this one over, listening to the the clip of her shears as she moves around the courtyard. 'Ok, yes.' She says finally. 'Life is a body modification process... But if we're talking deliberate modifications, another way it's often talked about is the difference between soft-tissue and deep-tissue modifications, or invasive compared to non-invasive; say ones that involve cutting into the body compared to those that don't. But by that definition, where do you put something like Burmese neck rings? No cutting there, just gradual manipulation... but I think they'd be considered severe modifications by anyone's standards...'

I nick my leg slightly with the razor, and a little trickle of blood runs down in amongst the foam.

'So then, you have the adornment, manipulation, mutilation argument. Adornment,' she says, 'can just be a surface thing; or it can involve manipulation of body tissue; and over time manipulation can involve mutilation... '

Gail says, 'So the litmus test is does it mutilate, and anything that mutilates is bad.'

'Well I don't know if it's always 'bad'', says Bob, 'but it is serious.. the most serious thing you can do, and it needs to have the most careful consideration and a lot of discussion around it. There has to be a good reason for it -- for instance, cancer. Or to prevent conception. Or if you want to change your gender markers because you feel suicidal as you are. Or lip plugs, for instance: some say they began as a protection from evil spirits and then increased in size when it was discovered that slavers couldn't use those with lip plugs. And then it continued because it became such a part of their community identity and history of survival.. That's why you can't say any modification is bad *per se*, it has to be in the context of things.. it has to be constantly questioned and challenged...'

'So: shoes don't mutilate, so they're ok?'

'They can mutilate if you wear high heels a lot and throw out your back. They also deform your ability to walk over rocks, whereas no-shoes only deforms your ability to wear shoes..'

I use a pumice stone on one of my corns.

'Now, I like this argument,' says Bob, 'because by this definition tattoos and most piercings are simply adornment: at the lower end of the scale. Whereas wearing a bra, for instance, is a serious body modification.'

Gail says, 'Oh come on Bob, not this again.'

'It's true,' Bob says, 'Bras can mutilate the functioning of an important body system - the lymphs. And while most parents go ballistic if their kids get a tattoo or a tongue piercing, they happily strap their teenage girls up into a bra the minute they begin to sprout. Barbaric really.'

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Back in 1970, my first day of secondary school, and there was a girl called Christine Hill, who looked a little bit like Christine Keeler (long tawny hair, white fine-featured face). She claimed her school uniform hadn't arrived, so instead of the regulation blue check dress she wore a yellow chiffon blouse with ruffles at the cuffs and throat.

A see-through blouse.

And under the see-through blouse, as clear as day, the white straps and delicate heart-stopping lines of a bra.

The teachers swooped and she was covered up with a borrowed jumper. But it was too late. The serpent had entered the garden. We had glimpsed the perfect apples, and knew ourselves to be naked.

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Down in the basement of the library, Wanda is giving a lecture. She writes a quote from Elizabeth Wilson on the board. 'Clothes,' she says, pointing to it, 'are the poster for one's act.'<sup>5</sup>

The workshopppers huddle over their styrofoam cups of coffee, pulling an assortment of many-layered jumpers and coats and cardigans around them.

'When we wear a bra, for instance,' Wanda says, 'we perform not just gender, but also western post-colonial ideals of progress and control over nature.'

A woman in the front row scratches her breasts and then jiggles them up and down, getting a laugh from the others.

'Every piece of clothing, every act we do with or upon or allow to be done to our bodies is a part of a constant articulation and rearticulation of power relations in all their complexity.'

She switches on the overhead projector. 'Take for instance,' tapping the images on the screen, 'some of the things repeatedly used to designate feminine helplessness and frailty -- high heels, tight-lacing, wigs, false eyelashes, push-up bras. You have to be tough (and determined) to wear them and survive.'

'You become weak, or powerful. Or both.'

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What does the bra enable?  
What does it restrain?

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Natalie says: 'The bra is the ultimate symbol of modernity: progress, comfort and the avoidance of pain, perfection.'

Gail says: 'Classification, competition, assessment.'<sup>6</sup>

Natalie writes a card for Dr B, quoting the words of Anthony Forge, Professor of Anthropology in the 1960s at the London School of Economics, about the bras achievement in 'converting the primitive droop into the civilised thrust.'<sup>7</sup>

Bob says, 'The civilised thrust doesn't eradicate or diminish pain, Natalie.' .She is speaking from experience -- a long history of fibrocystic breasts before she threw away her bra. 'It creates whole new types of pain, and then spreads it around differently. Relocates it somewhere else.'

She says: 'I mean, really, it's insane that so many women these days feel uncomfortable unless they're wearing this thing that leaves red welts and grooves on their bodies, damages delicate tissue, atrophies muscles and ligaments, often causes chronic back ache or debilitating breast pain and lumps, and by cutting off the normal lymphatic flow and allowing toxins to concentrate in breast tissue may well be a key factor in high breast cancer rates...'<sup>8</sup>

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But as Bob herself said, there are no absolutes...

At work I write out a card for Dr B:

*The World's Smallest Waisted Woman* was Ethel Granger: who trained herself gradually over a period of eight years to wear a corset that reduced her waist to a tiny thirteen inches, basically just enough room for her spinal column. By the time she died in 1974 all her internal organs had been displaced, for even without the corset, by then her waist measured only 16-17 inches. Yet she lived a full and healthy life into her eighties, outliving her husband, Will, and for many years riding a small motorbike to her work each day in a London corset shop.<sup>9</sup>

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Actually Bob rather approves of Ethel Granger. Serious modifications, she says, require a serious attitude. Yet is it amazing how even major surgery can be undertaken lightly if it is described as being for 'cosmetic reasons' (advertised alongside lipstick and face creams).

On life and tattoos, Bob says: If you truly want to be altered by it, you have to accept the pain...

She doesn't approve of body modifications that require anaesthetic -- not because of the cutting thing, but because, she says, your conscious and unconscious fears and feelings, especially any feelings of shame, are simply drugged.. and will surface and affect your experience of the modification, and your healing...

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Tony, the video-shop guy, slaps a copy of *The Graduate* on the counter for us and says: 'I'll give you a one word piece of advice about the future: *plastics*.'

Gail says, 'What?'

Tony says: '*The Graduate*... One of the men at his father's cocktail party says it to Dustin Hoffman...Well, actually, he does, but I read it on a Pamela Anderson website.'

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In pure technological terms, with the combinations and permutations of surgery techniques, mass media effects, globalisation, and genetic engineering, for instance, the ability to alter our bodies has increased exponentially.

Fuelled by capitalism and the corporatisation of medicine, an array of possibilities are offered alongside an intensely modern, privatised notion of the body.

Western bodies -- no longer owned as slaves or serfs -- are sold as a kind of personal capital, to be invested in, maintained, worked and improved. With the success of equality feminism, even women's bodies have nominally been extended the masculine unequivocal and exclusive owner-occupier rights: rights to derive pleasure and value from one's body, rights to change it - with only the lingering abortion debates and the occasional storm over breast-feeding left to challenge this.<sup>10</sup>

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As Cher told *People* magazine in 1992: 'You know if I want to put tits on my back, they're mine.'

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The risk, of course, as many critics of genetic engineering have pointed out, is a kind of consumer eugenics.

Even apart from this, it is ironic how all our manipulation and modification and adornment of bodies in the name of individualism, greater pleasure, aesthetic delight, choice, personal freedom and power has led to such an epidemic of body-loathing and despair.<sup>11</sup>

With the body seen as an ongoing project and investment, the sense of incompleteness is often overwhelming.

So we keep adding to the body - clothing, hair dye, accessories, shoes, jewellery, hairspray, push up bras, implants, tattoos, piercings, more clothes, newer clothes, less clothes, muscle building.. And we keep taking away: dieting, liposuction, depilation...

(Peering into the fridge late at night: if only I can find the right thing to put into my body... I just need..? Maybe *this* chocolate ice-cream, with some of *these biscuits*... ?)

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Not one of the choices we make about our bodies, not one of the judgements we make on our bodies, or the pleasures we derive from them occur in a vacuum. They all occur in specific, complex and changing social contexts. Every act we do contributes to changing these contexts. That's why every act we do is important, and every act is social.

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At a dinner party a couple complain about the way they now(days) 'have to' fork out to have their children's teeth fixed by an orthodontist. I remember the husband's astonished reaction when I described it as a body modification, and compared it to breast implants and nose jobs (all aiming at uniformity, all correcting perceived deformities that are culturally determined<sup>12</sup>...).

I mean they only 'have to' because 'everyone else is'... That is, everyone else in the class they want their children to be at home in and to succeed within. Without their teeth 'done', their children might stand out as working class, or odd. Marked for life. (The sins of the parents...)

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Nose jobs in Colombia, eye surgery in Japan, footbinding in traditional China, the war of the bustlines on the Bold and the Beautiful... A constant shifting of the goal posts.

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Gail says, ' It's - I don't know - a spiritual ecology thing, or about cultural ecology: about the diversity of our bodies as a resource.

'When people say, well if I can make myself feel better by having implants or a tummy tuck, then why shouldn't I? This to me is the same as saying well if I feel more powerful having a big car rather than a small car, why shouldn't I have it? Or, if I can afford a boat that uses a year's worth of petrol for a half hour pleasure ride - hell, why shouldn't I just go ahead and get that boat?

'Every person on television who has a face lift to keep their job makes it harder for those who don't. We are all so inter-connected... together we make up an aesthetic environment....And we either value difference and variation, or we don't.. And I'm not saying no one should make changes, but that it's complicated... And that when we make changes, just like when we decide which car to buy, or which soap powder to use, we should at least be thoughtful about it. As individuals, *and* as a community.'

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'Well I always like to keep a few spots of virgin forest on my body,' Natalie says, 'like my pubes.' She glares at her boyfriend: 'Even if this is a bit too wild for some people's tastes.'

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At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still operating from Newtonian physics and the mind-body split<sup>13</sup>, medical science keeps offering us the promise of control over our bodies, just as biological science kept offering for so much of last century its fantasy of control over nature. As if we were somehow above it, or outside of it, independent of it. As if we (or our minds) are the knowing and intelligent ones, and nature (or our bodies) merely a passive surface or material.

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My aunt Maddie says: your body is so much more than just a machine to get your mind where it wants to go, it is an integral part of an immensely complex mind-body-spirit system. A precious object of great power, an extraordinary piece of technology on loan to you for both pleasure and learning.

She says, The body works in partnership with your spirit, and its intelligence and ways of knowing are as intricate and vital as those of the mind. It is your responsibility to look after it, your privilege to learn from it.

She says the limits of your body, it's illnesses and moods, are like white rocks defining your path, so that you can see it even in the dark.

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Of course Maddie only says this on her good days, when she's feeling calm and balanced. On the bad days -- the turbulent ones -- she too rails against her body, just wants the cancer to be *gone*, to disappear, *just wants* to be "normal.'

And then she rides it out, and the calm returns, and she knows there is no normal.

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Bob says she can no longer imagine her body -- can't even mentally visualise it -- without the tattoos and piercings.

She says the original Christian objection to tattooing, apart from it being a symbol of base sexuality, was that it disfigured that which was fashioned in God's image.<sup>14</sup>

Which means that by tattooing your body, you are seeing yourself not as something formed in God's image, or by a God, but as a part of God. You are not just inhabiting your body, but continually co-creating it.

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'Yes,' says Maddie. 'A co-creator; not a dictator.'

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I should have titled this paper 'towards an ethics or politics of body modifications', because I have no answers. Just some more questions I think it is worthwhile we continue to ask.

Like: what functions within a cultural system do particular body modification practices serve at any particular time? What are their long term and social consequences? And what kind of power relations do they reinforce, reproduce, foster or create?

The technological imperative is often conflated with a vague notion of an unstoppable (and therefore natural and right) 'progress'. But progress is always a relative term, meaningless and unmeasurable without some specific defined goals.

In other words: just what kind of a society is it that we're trying to create with our bodies?

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**Bio notes:** Beth Spencer's first book of fiction, *How to Conceive of a Girl*, was published in 1996 by Vintage (Random House Australia). Her essays and criticism on a wide range of topics have been published in Australia and overseas and broadcast on ABC Radio National, and she has been the recipient of several awards. She is currently writing a novel as part of a Phd at the University of Ballarat. She has a webpage at [bethspencer.com](http://bethspencer.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia I. Postrel, 'Abreast of History: Believe it or not, breast implants are more important than the New Hampshire primary.' *Reason* magazine, January 1996. Archived at <http://reason.com/9601/VPedit.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Cf the comment from 'The Doctor' in *Different Loving*: 'With plastic surgery you conform; with tattooing your individualise.' Gloria G Brame, William D Brame and Jon Jacobs. *Different Loving: an exploration of the world of sexual dominance and submission*. (Villard Books, NY, 1993) p 301.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*. (NY Routledge, 1993.)

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to the language of body modifications I am indebted to the collection *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: the Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, edited by Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1992.)

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*. London: Virago, 1985. p 242.

<sup>6</sup> Such as Berlei's famous anthropometric sizing project, conducted in tandem with a scientist and a doctor from Sydney University and published in *The Berlei Review* in 1927. See Sue Best, 'Foundations of femininity: Berlei corsets and the (un)making of the modern body.' In Alec McHoul, ed. *Media/Discourse. Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*. Vol. 5 No. 1 (1991).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Wallace Reyburn. *Bust Up: The Uplifting Tale of Otto Titzling and the Development of the Bra*. NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971. p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding bras and backache, see for instance letter from Dr Edward Ryan to the *Medical Journal of Australia* in Nov 1992, cited by Kaz Cooke in *Real Gorgeous*. (Melbourne: Penguin, 1995, p 97.) For the possible link with breast cancer, see Sydney Ross Singer and



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Soma Grismaijer, *Dressed to Kill: The Link Between Breast Cancer and Bras*. (USA: Avery Books, 1995.) On the importance of lymphatic flow: see for instance (Dr) Michael Schachter <http://healthy.net/library/articles/schachter/breast.d.htm>.

For a summary and review of *Dressed to Kill*, a range of links and scientific references of related interest, and a number of testimonials by women who have experienced dramatic relief from fibrocystic breasts and breast pain by not wearing a bra, see Ralph Reed's webpage at <http://www.all-natural.com/>. See also Doris Lane, 'Lumpy Breasts? Burn Your Bra!' August 10, 2000. [http://www.themestream.com/gspd\\_browse/browse/view\\_article.gsp?c\\_id=45211&id\\_list=&cookie=T](http://www.themestream.com/gspd_browse/browse/view_article.gsp?c_id=45211&id_list=&cookie=T) (link from *The Ultimate Bra Page* - 30 Jan. 2001); and 'Bras -- the Bare Facts', documentary produced by *Dispatches*, Channel 4. Broadcast in the UK, November 2, 2000.

For official response to *Dressed to Kill* - see 'Critics are cool to theory linking bras, breast cancer' <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/07-95/07-10-95/0710ONScancerside.HTML> [11/12/02], and 'American Cancer Society response to bras and breast cancer study' cited on <http://www.breakthechain.org/exclusives/bracancer.html>. These are typical of the many dismissals of Singer and Grismaijer's book, however I am yet to see a refutation, and apart from the BBC documentary, there have to date been no attempts to conduct any follow-up studies that might test their extraordinary findings.

<sup>9</sup> See interview with Fakir Musafar (one of Bob's hero's), in *REsearch: Modern Primitives -- An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment & Ritual*. Edited by V. Vale and Andrea Juno. San Fransisco: REsearch publications, 1989. p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> And punk: which seemed to be implying that in reality it was society that owned your body; but by doing various things to it, you could appropriate it back, in a way, by making it harder for society (ie capitalism) to make use of it.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase 'an epidemic of body loathing' is Susie Orbach's, from an interview on *Life Matters*, ABC Radio National, August 1999.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Sander L. Gilman. *Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul : Race and Psychology in the Shaping of Aesthetic Surgery*. USA: Duke Univeristy Press, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent outline of Newtonian physics compared to Quantum physics, see Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: science, society, and the rising culture*. London : Fontana, 1983. chapters 2 and 3. pp 37-89.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Robinson. *A Guide to Human Sexual Display: Body Packaging*. Sydney: Waterman Press/Macmillan, nd (c. late 1980s). p. 101.

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