excised girls I had seen aroused my fears. Were not these older women simply trying to put my mind at rest and allay my anxieties?

Once I was inside the hut, the women began to sing my praises, to which I turned a deaf ear, as I was so overcome with terror. My throat was dry and I was perspiring though it was early morning and not yet hot. 'Lie down there', the excisor suddenly said to me, pointing to a mat stretched out on the ground. No sooner had I lain down than I felt my thin frail legs tightly grasped by heavy hands and pulled wide apart. I lifted my head. Two women on each side of me pinned me to the ground. My arms were also immobilised. Suddenly I felt some strange substance being spread over my genital organs. I only learned later that it was sand. It was supposed to facilitate the excision, it seems. The sensation I felt was most unpleasant. A hand had grasped a part of my genital organs. My heart seemed to miss a beat. I would have given anything at that moment to be a thousand miles away; then a shooting pain brought me back to reality from my thoughts of flight. I was already being excised: first of all I underwent the ablation of the labia minora and then of the clitoris. The operation seemed to go on for ever, as it had to be performed 'to perfection'. I was in the throes of endless agony, torn apart both physically and psychologically. It was the rule that girls of my age did not weep in this situation. I broke the rule. I reacted immediately with tears and screams of pain. I felt wet. I was bleeding. The blood flowed in torrents. Then they applied a mixture of butter and medicinal herbs which stopped the bleeding. Never had I felt such excruciating pain!

After this, the women let go their grasp, freeing my mutilated body. In the state I was in I had no inclination to get up. But the voice of the excisor forced me to do so. 'It's all over! You can stand up. You see, it wasn't so painful after all!' Two of the women in the hut helped me to my feet. Then they forced me, not only to walk back to join the other girls who had already been excised, but to dance with them. It was really asking too much of us. Nevertheless, all the girls were doing their best to dance. Encircled by young people and old, who had gathered for the occasion, I began to go through the motion of taking a few dance steps, as I was ordered to by the women in charge. I can't tell you what I felt at that moment. There was a burning sensation between my legs. Bathed in tears, I hopped about, rather than danced. I was what is known as a puny child. I felt exhausted, drained. As the supervising women who surrounded us goaded us on in this interminable, monstrous dance, I suddenly felt everything swarming around me. Then I knew nothing more. I had fainted. When I regained consciousness I was lying in a hut with several people around me.

Afterwards, the most terrible moments were when I had to defecate. It was a month before I was completely healed, as I continually had to scratch where the genital wound itched. When I was better, everyone mocked me as I hadn't been brave, they said.

In this chapter I want to explore the relationship between the notion that physical brutality and force transformed the African body from a liberating body to a captive one, and Elaine Scarry's idea that the infliction of physical pain unmakes and deconstructs the body, while simultaneously making and reconstructing the world of the perpetrator. I wish to link these two ideas by proposing that under the slave economy and colonization two kinds of bodies were produced: the body of knowledge and the body of labour. These two bodies are missing from Scarry's discourse of the body in pain. They are also absent from most contemporary discourses about the body. Paying attention to the body of labour in particular, I wish to show how I find some of Scarry's arguments useful in relation to reading the slave narrative, *Mary Prince*. I am inspired by the connection Scarry makes between the infliction of pain, embodiment, voice and subjectivity and the ruination of the subject — and certainly *Mary Prince* bears this out. However, I suggest that the economy of violence which characterized the middle passage and the epoch of slavery had as its primary motive the extraction of capital and wealth through slave labour. Following Hortense Spillers's idea in her essay 'Mama’s baby, papa's maybe: an American grammar book' that the middle passage and slavery was a brutal disruption of the African kinship system which denied the captive female a gendered position, I suggest that this degendering also entailed a deconstruction and unmaking of the captive's subjectivity. In their different ways both

Scarry and Spillers address the intersection of bodily damage, objectification and assault on the flesh and the difficulty of expressing that assault. Both address the unspeakability of the terror of torture but Spillers actively focuses on the deconstruction of the African captive.

The Body of Theory

The body has become the most celebrated site for addressing a wide range of cultural configurations; for articulating contemporary experiences among feminists with divergent interests as well as social and cultural theorists. The privileging of the body is evident in the spate of books published with the word 'body' in their title. Among these are Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1995), Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Moria Ganets' *Imaginary Bodies* (1996), Brian Turner's *The Body and Society* (1984). Many of these studies address the numerous ways of using the human body and embodiment as a conceptual tool for rethinking an array of issues: the problematic nature of sex, sexuality and gender; of ageing and aesthetics (*Featherstone and Hepworth* 1991); of disease and illness (*Turner* 1984; *Bordo* 1990); pain and self-alienation (*Scarry* 1985); of deconstructing the dualism in Western metaphysics. The body has replaced such categories as subjects, social agents, and individuals. It is, as Grosz points out, the 'very "stuff" of subjectivity' [and] ... all significant facets and complexities of subjects can be adequately explained using the corporeal framework. Like many current theorists of the body, Grosz calls for the need to fuse the historical specificity of bodies with the biological concreteness of the body since 'there is no body as such: there are only bodies – male and female, black, brown, white, large or small and gradations in between' (*Grosz* 1995: 19). Much of this 'corporeal feminism' (*Grosz* 1995) is grounded in linguistics and psychoanalysis where the body is read as discursive or textual (*Butler* 1993), even as it claims to be 'concerned with the lived body, the body in so far as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular culture' (*Grosz* 1995: 18). This attention to the body sometimes seems a mere flirtation with the idea of the lived body where the experience of lived bodies is constituted as a metaphor that is 'good to think with'.

But what of the dying body; the weeping, living, hurting body; the body as flesh that 'does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography' (*Spillers* 1987: 67)? The body that is a site of physical and psychological trauma; enforced sexual practices and that 'Sadian imagination' (*Carter* 1979), with its self-announcing presence on newstands, in popular literature and medicine. The body that has served and continues to serve a heuristic purpose for the European (male) construction of subjectivity on the one hand and on the other the 'source of an irresistible, destructive sexuality' (*Spillers* 1987: 67). The body at whose breasts white males suckle as they spread the expanse of their fluid around the globe. The body that enables certain categories of white women to retain fine, delicate, sickly hands. The body on which black men can at will unleash their rage and frustration. The body whose physical health will determine whether it will become the body of labour or the body of scientific knowledge. The body that nineteenth-century Europeans found so riveting that it became a prized attraction at fashionable Parisian balls and would later be subjected to the surgical instrument of the physician (*Gilman* 1985; *Schiebinger* 1994). What of the body that is always under: the seduction of death, white racist violence, diseases, perverse heterosexism, pervasive addictions and unemployment? I am talking about the body that is marked by racial, sexual and class configurations. It is this body, this fleshy materiality that seems to disappear from much of the current proliferation of discourses on the body.

It is not enough to show the body as a discursive entity without addressing how different material practices are interwoven with the discursive to affect and shape the materiality of the body. The French theorist Michel Foucault understood the interdependency between the fleshy materiality of the body and its functioning, representation and regulation in discursive fields when he inaugurated, along with the effort of second-wave feminism in the seventies, the topic of the body in contemporary theory. In his numerous philosophical studies, Foucault described in great detail the historical specificities which produce the body in discourses and in everyday practices structure the way experiences of the body are organized. Accordingly the body is always in a political field where 'power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, for it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (*Foucault* 1991: 173). These inscriptions and incorporations of power onto the body mark the ending of one type of body and the beginning of a new kind of body: a useful body. But this body comes into being through new modes of subjection. Such a body, Foucault contends, also produces power that facilitates resistance, rebellion, evasions and disruptions. In other words, where there is power, there is resistance; where there is discourse, there is material; and both power and discourse are interconnected. Discourse then becomes just one of the modes in which political power manifests itself.

If current discourse analysis is to be useful for a black feminist project, we need to make connections with matters of the flesh on the lived body. For it is through the corporeal inscription of the black man as uncivilized savage and the black woman as embodying a hyperbolic sexuality which marked her as sexualized animal in the New World (*Gilman* 1985; *Jordan* 1982). As Fanon notes in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*, it is the 'corporeal schema' of the black (man) that structures how black people are perceived and 'the fact of blackness' is established: 'I am over-determined from without. I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance ... I strive for anonymity, for invisibility' (*Fanon* 1952: 224). It is the visible physical difference that marked the African as inherently non-human.

By becoming aware of the slave experience as an embodied phenomenon, we can better understand: (1) the relationship between embodiment and subjec-
tivity; (2) the body as a surface, a surface that can experience and be inflicted with pain, tortured and terrorized, but also a surface that can be pleasured and is pleasuring; and (3) how bodies are linked in distinctive ways through capitalist modes of production. Thus the history of the middle passage and slavery is a history of endless assaults on bodies of bodies forcibly subjugated, in order to be transformed into productive and reproductive bodies.

THE UNSPEAKABLE TERROR

One way to approach the issue of unspeakable terror is to ask: what is the unspeakable? The answer will of course be: the experience of violence against human flesh wherein the body-surface registers and transmits nothing but pain, a pain that produces nothing but horror, a horror which reads, according to Spillers, like a laboratory prose of testing flesh, of limbs torn from sockets, of breasts branded with hot iron, of severed tendons, bruises, exposed nerves, swollen limbs, of missing teeth as the technology of iron, whips, chains, bullets, knives, and canine patrol went to work (Spillers 1987: 67). It is the struggle, the longing to speak these horrors and the inability, the near impossibility of doing so that confers on slave history the experience of horror and what Gilroy has termed the 'slave sublime' (1993).

The conflation of the body and the unspeakable draws us into an awareness of our physical mortality and the erasure of the human voice. In her influential book The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (1983), Scarry argues poignantly that the presence of physical pain is difficult to express, and also has the capacity to destroy the sufferer's language because it has no referential content in the external world. Unlike other states of consciousness such as psychological and somatic states of being which have referentiality to the external world – love of x, fear of y, hatred for, being hungry for, and so on – physical pain has no such referentiality. Its non-referentiality prevents and inhibits the transformation of the felt experience of pain, leaving it to reside in the body, where the sufferer reverts back to a pre-linguistic state of incommunicable wailing, inaudible whisper, inarticulate screeching, primal whispering which destroys language and all that is associated with language: subjectivity, civilization, culture, meaning and understanding (Sa'ez 1992: 137).

While Scarry’s model is plausible it is still based on a conception of what the appropriate function of the body is and the appropriate function of the mind. Thus, for as long as we conceive of pain as an activity of the body, and language as the function of the mind, pain will continue to be resistance to language, and its sedimentation in the body will continue to confirm the notion that the body is always outside of culture and pre-language. I suggest that we view pain as not necessarily resisting language, but rather as resisting everyday speech. Pain has its own morphology and its own logic which governs its expression and representation and which produce its own meaning. The body writhing on the ground in agony communicates to the spectator the presence of pain (even if

unshareable), using the body as a resource to do so. What cannot be spoken in language is evoked through other cultural representation such as dance.

Gilroy has argued that, while the experience of the middle passage and the diasporic plight might be resistant to verbal language, it is not resistant to representation (1993). The cultures of the black diaspora's he notes have been an attempt to bring that scene of 'pure physical experience of negation' (Scarry 1985: 52) into the realms of representation. The most elemental expression of this can be found in the music and dance of the black diaspora which produced new cultural meanings of the African past, present and future. Although pain has no referential content in the external world it is not unrepresentable.

Because physical pain is so nearly inexpressible and 'flatly invisible', its presence is often relegated to the status of non-existence. According to Scarry, which is expressible is often made visible and thus elicits more attention. The mechanisms of torture and war, she argues, establish the presence of intense pain as absence as the regimes translate the infliction of pain into a language of political power. For Scarry torture is language-destroying; therefore, to elicit information from the tortured while fully aware of his/her powerlessness is to deconstruct his/her world:

Intense pain is world-destroying. In compelling confession, the torturer compels the prisoner to record and objectify the fact that intense pain is world-destroying. It is for this reason that while the content of the prisoner’s answer is only sometimes important to the regime, the form of the answer, the fact of his answering, is always crucial. (1985: 29)

Of course not all forms of torture fall under the interrogational mode in the way Scarry describes. During slavery the use of torture was not to elicit information, but was used instead to inspire terror and confirm to the enslaved the incontestable power of their masters and mistresses (Patterson 1982). It also facilitated the extraction of subsistence labour for the development of the mercantile and industrial economy. Scarry’s claims for an internal structure of torture, however, have implications for these arguments.

As theorized by Lacan, we become social subjects through our subjection to the laws of language and our capacity to understand and articulate language. But, as Scarry suggests, the body in pain is not able to participate fully in civic life, because pain destroys the capacity of language; the body is denied the facilities that make subjectivity possible. It should, however, be noted that the formative role of language in subject formation is not the only means of constituting subjectivity. However, the ability to verbally express the presence of pain is unavailable to the person in pain. The (near) impossibility of constituting pain in language initiates a splitting, a splitting between the speaking subject (voice) and corporeal subject (body). This separation between the tortured (powerless) and torturer (powerful) means that the torturers are able to circumvent material representation, and are represented and describable through the making present of their voice while corporeality is displaced
onto the person in pain. Thus, the person in pain becomes mere flesh and can only experience her own body as the agent of her own agony (Scarry 1985: 47). This way of perceiving the body permits the one who is being inflicted with pain to shift from the position of sufferer to being the agent of his/her own annihilation; the cause of the pain is represented as outside those inflicting that pain. The possession of voice becomes significant for both torturer and tortured. For the torturer, the awareness of voice confirms his power, his existence, the presence of a world; for the sufferer, the absence of a world, the awareness of his/her corporeality, the limit of his/her extension in the world. ‘Consequently, to be intensely embodied is the equivalent of being represented … is almost always the condition of those without power’ (Scarry 1985: 207). This has been precisely the claim of feminists and black theorists, who have pointed out that the association of blacks and females with corporeality excludes and debar them from the public sphere that makes subjectivity possible (Gatens 1996; Spelman 1990; Fanon 1992).

THE ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE; THE VIOLENCE OF ECONOMY

In the narrative of The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself (1987) we have a rare example of writing from the perspective of a black female in British anti-slavery discourse. Mary Prince’s account provides insight into the atrocities and barbarity of the slave system, its absurdity and unrelenting commitment to brutalization and mutilation of the flesh. It shows the cool, calculated contempt for the flesh and the capacity of this barbaric system to rip apart and expose hidden tissues to the taenaz gape of the violator, violating human decency. As in most abolitionist material, while concern was to show the atrocities and catastrophic terror of the slave system, piety was far more important to the abolitionist than the desire to retell events as they really were. The detailing of atrocities in Mary Prince is somewhat circumscribed, especially as it relates to sexual violence. Nevertheless, Mary Prince’s account succeeded in providing details of the atrocities, and the near triumph of the violator/enslaver over the flesh.

A persistent and poignant theme throughout the narrative is the grotesque and harrowing detailing of physical brutality, the physical torment which resulted in Mary’s near blindness, and rheumatism, her mistress’s noxious brutality, and the sadistic treatment of other slaves:

Sarah, who was nearly past work … was subject to several bodily infirmities, and was not quite right in her head, did not wheel the barrow fast enough to please him [the master]. He threw her down on the ground, and after beating her severely, he took her up in his arms and flung her among the prickly-pear bushes, which are all covered over with sharp venomous prickles. By this her naked flesh was so grievously wounded, that her body swelled and festered all over and she died in a few days after. (Prince 1987: 65)

It is this flesh, this live tissue that registers ‘these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, rupitures, lesious, rendings, punctures of the flesh’ (Spillers 1987: 67), that feels the hurt, the intense pain, that is continuously attacked, mutilated, that experiences the flesh as a burden – a venomous prickly pear. It is this flesh, so horribly lacerated, that is marked for enslavement, for raw violence and objectification, that serves others’ will-to-power and their becoming beings. It is these ineffaceable markings that conveniently invalidate all claim of ownership to her flesh, because it is reserved for her master. Her flesh is the signification of her worth within a system whose organizing principle is premised on a proprietary conception of bodies; a system which deemed it its birthright to legislate on her very humanity, control her movements, her body. As Spillers notes, within this legal system, ‘every feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding the African-American person’ (Spillers 1987: 78).

As a slave, she is perceived as having no soul, no human speech, no gendered subjectivity, no culture or language to speak of. Therefore, to devise and enact such elaborate mechanisms of torture, to send waves of terror down the spine of the tortured was the protocol of those who regarded themselves as having those attributes. As Taussig remarked of the colonial conquest of Latin America, it is ‘terror as usual'. The use of terror was a national sport during the period of slavery and colonialism; it was the logic underpinning the creation of colonial reality and identity: ‘it serves as the mediator par excellence of colonial hegemony’ (Taussig 1987: 5).

If, as Scarry points out, the infliction of violence on the body is also an assault on language, similarly, the insatiable and perpetual infliction of raw violence on the slaves is consolidated by the erasure of the human voice. All verbal forms of communication were severed. The only form of communication was to literately work upon/put to work the body of the enslaved. For Mary Prince, when her body was put to work in harsh conditions, her flesh began to give way to tears and to seizure, rheumatism, excruciating backaches and to a near-blindness. Her body became the site of ejaculatory orgasms that disfigured her ‘while the powers that don’t join for a loving circle jerk’ (Sapphire 1994: 14). She is unable to speak these ejaculatory horrors even when she is permitted to do so because of Christian piety and the enormity of her pain. Unable to express the presence of her pain, Mary’s masters and mistresses communicated their presence, confirmed the absence of pain.

The point of this grotesque torment was to inspire terror in the minds of the enslaved and ensure the absence of their world. It confirmed the presence of the violator, and, therefore, that the body of the enslaved will always be the property of her master and mistress. The enslaved could never claim ownership of her body. As a slave, her subjection is an act of de-subjectification. As Scarry describes, in the structure of torture, the infliction of bodily pain, the rupturing of tissues, the exposure of interior skin results for the sufferer in the dissolution of a world akin to the process of dying. This damage, so unalterable, leaves its
mark – for example, her persistent lower back ache and rheumatism – long after the infliction ceased: ‘what is remembered in the body is well remembered’ (Scarry 1985: 113). All trace of humanity, civilization is deconstructed in the infliction of bodily pain:

The horror of slavery was that it was an act of active and systematic deconstruction. To be sure, many bodies were destroyed in the process. However, unlike the Nazi atrocities where the aim was the total extermination of a so-called inferior race, the slave system needed the slaves to work. Although a labour system characterized the Jewish Holocaust, destruction was the ultimate aim. Slavery, on the other hand, was first and foremost a system of labour. The slaves did not intend the slaves to die; they were concerned, to ensure the survival of the black body – albeit in a deformed form. The black female body is a useful body because it is both a labouring, sexual and reproducing body and therefore it was necessary to preserve the health of the enslaved woman. The use of violence was therefore necessary to break them in, to fragment them, to destabilize them and to make them cease to be subjects, to transform them into ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault 1977) that became bodies that labour. Clearly, the purpose of torture during slavery was not to destroy, but to deconstruct the world of the body in pain. Torture is an invitation of death ‘a sensory equivalent, substituting prolonged mock execution for execution’ (Scarry 1985: 27), an externalized violation of the body and psyche. To destroy the body in pain would have been tantamount to economic and ideological suicide. For how could the slave system perpetuate itself if the enslaved population was destroyed? The violent subjection of the slaves was a way of transforming their bodies into an entity that could produce and reproduce the property necessary for accumulating wealth. Thus, the enslaver/victimizer ‘needs the victim to create truth, objectifying fantasy in the discourse of the other’ (Tausig 1987: 8). Destruction would have hampered a European expansionist programme. Therefore, to have deconstructed all traces of civilization, humanity and freedom encapsulated within the bodies of the enslaved assured both their subjection and the enslaver’s subjectivity. Thus, Mary Prince was forced to bear witness to her worldlessness – the disintegration of her world, language, nation, voice, body – while being relegated to corporeality.

Imprisoned thus, Prince is able only to experience herself in the extremities of her body; the body literally and metaphorically caved-in, turned-back-onto-itself. There is no liberation from the body. In one episode she described the enormity of her pain as overwhelming her until she wished for death. This desire becomes pronounced during an event when her mistress noticed that she had broken an already cracked jar, and ordered her to strip naked. She whipped Mary’s bare flesh with the cow-skin until her flesh gaped with blood: ‘I lay there till morning, careless of what might happen, for life was very weak in me, and I wished more than ever to die’ (1987: 59). The presence of such prolonged suffering according to Scarry, is what causes the person in pain to experience her world as no world and her body as the source of pain, deconstructing her world and notions of selfhood in the process:

It is intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. (Scarry 1985: 35)

For Scarry then, the infliction of extreme physical violence is an attack, a destruction of subjectivity. This of course implies that the outcome of physical torment is the destruction of a pre-existing subject (Sa‘ez 1992). This is clearly not the case for the slaves. Their enslavement meant that all right to humanity and subjectivity was stripped from the moment of capture. According to Patterson, a slave had no claim to her person, no right to citizenship; she is the property of her master or mistress. Patterson quotes Henri Wallon:

The slave was a dominated thing, an animated instrument, a body with natural movements, but without its own reason, an existence entirely absorbed in another. The proprietor of this thing, the mover of this instrument, the soul and the reason of this body, the source of this life was the master. The master was everything for him: his father and his god, which is to say, his authority and his duty. (Quoted in Patterson 1982: 4)

The slave then ceases to be subject, all claims to personhood having been stripped at the time of capture, and she had no social existence: ‘The slave was the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished’ (Patterson 1982: 7). Thus the use of torture on the body of the enslaved suggests not a deconstruction of a pre-existing subject, but a radical desubjectification of a desubjectified subject. And in so far as the individual derives its subjectivity from the collective body, the absence of the apparatus that makes subjectivity possible means that the collective body also had to undergo a process of desubjectification.

DECONSTRUCTING GENDER, PRODUCING PROPERTY

If Scarry’s thesis suggests that the infliction of extreme physical violence deconstructs and unmakes the world of the person in pain, Hortense Spillers’s
transformation of the African captive into a commodified property deconstructed the African kinship structure, flesh and gendered subjectivity. As she sees it, in severing the captive body from its motive will, its active desire...we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific (1987: 67). Spillers notes that although the spatial organization of the slave’s hull revealed ‘the application of the gender rule’ (1987: 67), this was based on the logic of commodity, rather than on a conception of subjectivity constituted via gender difference. Using a Lacanian model, she argues that insofar as the captives were ‘literally suspended in the “oceanic”’ they cannot assume a gendered position because ‘gendering’ ‘takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes’ (1987: 72). Spillers’s account of ‘ungendering’ is grounded within a legal discourse that marked the enslaved as non-human and consequently denied the rights accruing to the body that is considered to be human. Therefore, contrary to the arguments often mounted in second-wave feminism, which thought that gender deconstruction would lead to an androgynous utopia, Spillers’s account suggests this is clearly not the case. In fact gender deconstruction results in a stripping away of any claims to personhood.

According to Spillers, in the slavers’ hull enslaved women are prohibited from participating in the reproduction of mothering, which within ‘this historical instance carries few of the benefits of a patriarchalized female gender, which, from one point of view, is the only female gender there is’ (1987: 73). Therefore, the reproduction of mothering has radically different meanings for free white women and enslaved black women. For white women reproduction enables them to define themselves as human subjects since they are able to birth the next generation of the human subject even though they are excluded from full participation in the public realm of citizenship. For the enslaved woman, constituted as property, her reproductive capacity did not free her, in fact it reinstated her role as property. In this instance reproduction is not a reproduction of mothering but of property, because she transmits her unfreedom to her offspring. Spillers points to the way in which the white enslavers descent is passed through the father’s lineage, who then has ownership and control over his children and wife. But they were not regarded as nonhuman. For the enslaved descent was recognized through the mother and her children inherited their status from their mother. This means, according to Spillers, that the African male captive cannot participate in the social realm of the Law of the Father. Thus, gendered identity for the enslaved carries a double patriarchy. As Spillers writes, ‘under the conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not “belong” to the Mother, nor is she “related” to the...}

“owner”, [but] “possesses” it, ... often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony’ (1987: 74).

The destruction of kinship structure Spillers sees as a destruction of maternal rights and consequently a deconstruction of gendered subjectivity. The ‘ungendering’ process reduced the enslaved subject into a productive capital which denies the right to the claims subjectivity and humanity entails: citizenship, gender, name, language, family, marriage and rights to property: ‘In this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”’ (1987: 67).

**RECONSTRUCTING THE FLESH**

The fact that my focus on the body so far has fixed the experience of the body as a site of extreme physical violence for the purpose of utility is not to suggest that the body was always experienced in that manner, or that the captive body always relates to him/herself and the captive community solely as property. Rather, I am simply trying to capture the experience of the body from a single perspective in a given moment in its history. The body, as it were, is not what it is and it is not yet what it will become. Even though history has been terribly unkind to the African body, the body was and still is capable of being something quite beautiful, quite sensuous, quite joyful. There is always a memory of the ‘flesh’, of the flesh that was once liberated. So, by way of summary, I want to return to the distinction Spillers makes between the flesh and the body to suggest an emancipatory reading of the body.

For Spillers the ‘flesh’ that is transformed to body as property is never totally wiped out in this transformation. Rather, it is hidden from the violation of the body. The flesh makes itself known to the body and in this visibility the captive male and female are carried to the frontiers of survival (Spillers 1987: 67). This transformative return reunites the African captives to their ancestral body; it retrieves, recovers the memory of the body’s capacity for resistance, for transformation, for healing. It is this somatic retrieval and recollection that facilitates the creation of what George Lipsitz calls ‘counter-memory’ (1991). Counter-memory enabled the slaves and their descendants to construct a different kind of history, a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of body that is outside the control of the dominant history and knowledge production. The body’s return to the flesh is a central site for the production of that counter-memory. We see this in the expressive cultures of the people of the African diaspora. In her essay ‘The Site of Memory’, Toni Morrison expresses the way memories for diasporic Africans are stored in artifacts, stories and bodies:

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect
memory and is forever trying to get back where it was. Writers are like that; remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory - where the nerves and the skin remember how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'. (Morrison 1990)

The terrorized body remembers the stories of the flesh and makes every effort to trace its step back to the feel of the flesh, the secundity, the freedom and the dance of the flesh.

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5.6

FEMINISM, DISABILITY,
AND THE TRANSCENDENCE
OF THE BODY

Susan Wendell

Western feminist attention to women's bodily differences from men began with arguments that, contrary to long scientific and popular traditions, these differences do not by themselves determine women's social and psychological gender (or the more limited 'sex roles' we used to talk about). These arguments still go on, especially among biologists, anthropologists, and psychologists; understandably, they have little or nothing to say about bodily suffering. But the view that gender is not biologically determined has taken a much more radical turn in feminist poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism, where the social and cultural significance of women's bodily differences from men are examined closely. Here 'the body' is often discussed as a cultural construction, and the body or body parts are taken to be symbolic forms in a culture. In this latter development, experience of the body is at best left out of the discussion, and at worst precluded by the theory; here feminist theory itself is alienated from the body. As Carol Bigwood says, 'A body and nature formed solely by social and political significations, discourses, and inscriptions are cultural products, disemboweled of their full existential content. The poststructuralist body ... is so fluid it can take on almost limitless embodiments. It has no real terrestrial weight' (Bigwood 1991: 59). A body experienced has both limitations and weight.

I was particularly struck by the alienation from bodily experience of some recent forms of feminist theorizing about the body when I read Donna Haraway's exciting and witty essay, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' (Haraway 1985). The view she presents there, of the body as cultural and technological construct, seems to preclude the sort of experience I have had. When I became ill, I felt taken over and betrayed by a profound bodily vulnerability. I was forced by my body to reconceptualize my relationship to it. This experience was not the result of any culture of reading of the body or of technological incursions into the body. I was infected by a virus, with debilitating physical and psychological consequences. Of course, my illness occurred in a social and cultural context, which profoundly affected my experience of it, but a major aspect of my experience was precisely that of being forced to acknowledge and learn to live with bodily, not cultural, limitation. In its radical movement away from the view that every facet of women's lives is determined by biology, feminist theory is in danger of idealizing 'the body' and erasing much of the reality of lived bodies. As Susan Bordo says: 'The deconstructionist erasure of the body is not effected, as in the Cartesian version, by a trip to "nowhere", but in a resistance to the recognition that one is always somewhere, and limited' (Bordo 1990: 145).

Feminism's continuing efforts on behalf of increasing women's control of our bodies and preventing unnecessary suffering tend to make us think of bodily suffering as a socially curable phenomenon. Moreover, its focus on alienation from the body and women's bodily differences from men has created in feminist theory an unrealistic picture of our relationship to our bodies. On the one hand, there is the implicit belief that, if we can only create social justice and overcome our cultural alienation from the body, our experience of it will be mostly pleasant and rewarding. On the other hand, there is a concept of the body which is limited only by the imagination and ignores bodily experience altogether. In neither case does feminist thought confront the experience of bodily suffering. One important consequence is that feminist theory has not taken account of a very strong reason for wanting to transcend the body. Unless we do take account of it, I suspect that we may not only underestimate the subjective appeal of mind-body dualism but also fail to offer an adequate alternative conception of the relationship of consciousness to the body.

THE SUFFERING AND LIMITED BODY

In The Absent Body, philosophical phenomenologist Drew Leder argues that the Western tradition of mind–body dualism and devaluation of the body is encouraged and supported by the phenomenology of bodily experience. He describes how the body tends to be absent to consciousness except in times of suffering, disruption, rapid change (as in puberty or pregnancy), or the acquisition of new skills (Leder 1990: 92). Our experiences of bodily absence, he says, 'seem to support the doctrine of an immaterial mind trapped inside an alien body' (1990: 3). Leder does not like or subscribe to Cartesian dualism and claims that it contributes to the oppression of women, animals, nature, and other 'Others'. However, he argues that we must reclaim the experiential truths that have lent it support even as we 'break its conceptual hegemony' (1990: 3).


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describe this as making friends with their pain; I suspect they have achieved a
degree of acceptance that still eludes me, and I think I know what they mean.
(See, for example, Albert Kreinheder’s description of his relationship to the
severe pain of rheumatoid arthritis in Kreinheder 1991, chapter 6.)

I want to make it clear before I continue that my descriptions of living with
chronic pain do not apply to everyone and are certainly not prescriptions for
anyone else. Living with pain is a very complex and individual negotiation;
successful strategies depend on such factors as how intense the pain is, where it
is in the body (for instance, I find pain in my head or my abdomen much more
demanding than pain in my back, arms, or legs), how much energy a person
has, whether the energy and attention are drained into worries about
money, family, medical treatment, or other things, what kind of work s/he
does, whether the person’s friends encourage and help him/her, how
much pleasure s/he has, what s/he feels passionate about, and many other
factors. (For a sample of strategies, see Register 1987.) In other words, it is
important to remember that pain occurs in a complex physical, psychological,
and social context that forms and transforms our experience of it.

For me, pain is no longer the phenomenon described by Leder. I have found
that when focused upon and accepted without resistance, it is often transformed
into something I would not describe as pain or even discomfort. For example,
my disease causes virtually constant aching in the muscles of my arms, upper
chest, and upper back. I know this, because any time I turn my attention to those
parts of my body, I experience pain; I think of this pain as similar to a radio that
is always playing, but whose volume varies a great deal. When the volume is
low, or when I am doing something that absorbs my attention very fully, I can
ignore it; but when the volume is turned up high, it demands my attention, and I
cannot ignore it for long. If I focus my attention fully on the pain, in which case I
must stop doing everything else, I am usually able to relax ‘into’ it, which is a
state of mind difficult to describe except by saying that I concentrate on
remaining aware of the pain and not resisting it. Then the experience of being
in pain is transformed into something else – sometimes a mental image, some-
times a train of thought, sometimes an emotion, sometimes a desire to do
something, such as lying down or getting warmer, sometimes sleep. Perhaps if I
remained focused upon it in this way, I would rarely suffer from pain, but I do
not want to devote much conscious attention to this process. Other things
interest me more, and this, for me, is the problem of pain.

I must balance the frequency of attention to how my body feels that is
required by the constant presence of pain with whatever attention is required by
something else I am doing. It surprised me to find that I could learn to do
this, and that I got better at it with practice. (Of course, it requires structuring
my life so that I can rest and withdraw my attention into my body much more
than healthy people my age normally do.) But the most surprising thing about
it is that my ability to think, my attitudes, and feelings seem to me less, not
more, dependent on the state of my body than they were before I became ill.
Thus, before I had ME, I would never have considered setting to work at a difficult piece of writing if I woke up feeling quite sick, not only because I knew that I should rest in order to recover, but because I thought I could not possibly write well, or even think well, unless my body felt fairly good. Now I do it often, not because I 'have to', but because I know how to do it and I want to. This outcome is the opposite of my expectation that paying more attention to my bodily experience would make every aspect of myself more dependent on its fluctuating states. In a sense I discovered that experiences of the body can teach consciousness a certain freedom from the sufferings and limitations of the body. I shall return to this subject later, after discussing some strategies of disengagement from the body.

**SOME STRATEGIES OF DISENGAGEMENT**

Attempting to transcend or disengage oneself from the body by ignoring or discounting its needs and sensations is generally a luxury of the healthy and able-bodied. For people who are ill or disabled, a fairly high degree of attention to the body is necessary for survival, or at least for preventing significant (and sometimes irreversible) deterioration of their physical conditions. Yet illness and disability often render bodily experiences whose meanings we once took for granted difficult to interpret, and even deceptive. Barbara Rosenblum described how a 'crisis of meaning' was created by the radical unpredictability of her body with cancer:

> In our culture it is very common to rely on the body as the ultimate arbiter of truth... By noticing the body's responses to situations, we have an idea of how we 'really feel about things'. For example, if you get knots in your stomach every time a certain person walks into the room, you have an important body clue to investigate... Interpretations of bodily signals are premised on the uninterrupted stability and continuity of the body... When the body, like my body, is no longer consistent over time... when something that meant one thing in April may have an entirely different meaning in May, then it is hard to rely on the stability -- and therefore the truth -- of the body. (Butler and Rosenblum 1991: 136-7)

Chronic pain creates a similar (but more limited) crisis of meaning, since, to a healthy person, pain means that something is wrong that should be acted upon. With chronic pain, I must remind myself over and over again that the pain is meaningless, that there is nothing to fear or resist, that resistance only creates tension, which makes it worse. When I simply notice and accept the pain, my mind is often freed to pay attention to something else. This is not the same as ignoring my body, which would be dangerous, since not resting when I need to rest can cause extreme symptoms or a relapse into illness that would require several days' rest. I think of it as a reinterpretation of bodily sensations so as not to be overwhelmed or victimized by them. This process has affected profoundly my whole relationship to my body, since fatigue, nausea, dizziness,
In addition, people with disabilities often express a strong desire not to be identified with their bodily weaknesses, inabilities, or illnesses. This is why the phrase ‘people with disabilities’ has come to be preferred over ‘disabled people’. When the world sees a whole person as disabled, the person’s abilities are overlooked or discounted. It is easy to slip into believing other people’s perceptions of oneself, and this can take a great toll on the self-esteem of a person with a disability. Those people with disabilities who still have impressive and reliable physical abilities can counteract people’s misperceptions by asserting those abilities. For those of us whose remaining physical abilities are unimpressive or unreliable, not to identify ourselves with our bodies may be the best defense. It is good psychological strategy to base our sense of ourselves, and therefore our self-esteem, on our intellectual and/or emotional experiences, activities, and connections to others.

[...] I do not want to give an exaggerated impression of the degree to which people with disabilities rely upon strategies of disembodiment. For all the advantages that some degree of disembodiment the self may have in coping with illness or disability, the process of coming to identify with a sick or disabled body can play an important part in adjusting to it. For many of us who became ill or disabled as adults, reconstructing our lives depended upon forging a new identity. An important aspect of this process is what Register calls ‘acceptance: ability to regard the illness [or, I would add, disability] as your normal state of being’ (Register 1987: 31). This could also be described as learning to identify with a new body, as well as, for most of us, a new social role. For me, this had many advantages: I stopped expecting to recover and postponing my life until I was well, I sought help and invented strategies for living with my sick body, I changed my projects and my working life to accommodate my physical limitations, and, perhaps most important, I began to identify with other people with disabilities and to learn from them. Thus, I do identify with my sick body to a significant degree, but I also believe that my thoughts and feelings are more independent from my experiences of it than they ever were from my experiences of my well body.

TRANSCENDENCE

What has all this to do with transcendence of the body? That, of course, depends on what we have in mind when we speak of transcendence. The form of independence from the body’s sufferings that I have described is partial and mundane. They are strategies of daily living, not grand spiritual victories. Some people might even regard them as forms of alienation from physical experience. I think that would be a mistake. Alienation, as we usually understand it, reduces freedom, because it constricts the possibilities of experience. If we spoke of being alienated from suffering, I think we would mean being unable to face up to and undergo some necessary, perhaps purposeful, pain. To choose to...
exercise some habits of mind that distance oneself from chronic, often meaningless physical suffering increases freedom, because it expands the possibilities of experience beyond the miseries and limitations of the body.

It is because they increase the freedom of consciousness that I am drawn to calling these strategies forms of transcendence. It is because we are led to adopt them by the body’s pain, discomfort, or difficulty, and because they are ways of interpreting and dealing with bodily experience that I call them transcendence of the body. I do not think that we need to subscribe to some kind of mind-body dualism to recognize that there are degrees to which consciousness and the sense of self may be tied to bodily sensations and limitations, or to see the value of practices, available to some people in some circumstances, that loosen the connection. Nor do I think we need to devalue the body or bodily experience to value the ability to gain some emotional and cognitive distance from them. On the contrary, to devalue the body for this reason would be foolish, since it is bodily changes and conditions that lead us to discover these strategies. The onset of illness, disability, or pain destroys the ‘absence’ of the body to consciousness, described by Leder and others, and forces us to find conscious responses to new, often acute, awareness of our bodies. Thus, the body itself takes us into and then beyond its sufferings and limitations.

As an alternative to the traditional theological concept of transcendence, Naomi Goldenberg calls for a new concept of transcendence ‘with body’, which would involve feeling and knowing our connection to other lives, human history, and society (Goldenberg 1990: 211–12). Drew Leder offers an understanding of transcendence that rejects Cartesian dualism and distrust of the body in favour of the realization that the lived body is transpersonal, that we form one body with the world, and that we can experience this one-body relation in compassion, aesthetic absorption, and spiritual communion (Leder 1990, chapter 6). I like both of their conceptions, but I also think they are both talking about transcendence of the ego, which they see as an ideal to replace transcendence of the body. The ability at least sometimes to transcend the demands of the ego seems to me central to spiritual life and probably to human happiness. So perhaps it is a more important form of transcendence than transcendence of the body. Nevertheless, I suspect that the idea of transcendence of the body may be too easily rejected in an attempt to throw out mind-body dualism, derogation of the body, and all the sins that have been committed in their names.

By defending some notion of transcendence of the body I do not mean to suggest that strategies of disembodiment should be adopted by people without disabilities. Instead, I want to demonstrate how important it is to consider the experiences of people with disabilities when theorizing about the relationship of consciousness to the body. One thing is clear: We cannot speak only of reducing our alienation from our bodies, becoming more aware of them, and celebrating their strengths and pleasures; we must also talk about how to live with the suffering body, with that which cannot be noticed without pain, and that which cannot be celebrated without ambivalence. We may find then that there is a place in our discussion of the body for some concept of transcendence.

NOTES
1. In 1984, Adrienne Rich wrote: ‘Perhaps we need a moratorium on saying “the body”. For it’s also possible to abstract “the” body. When I write “the body”, I see nothing in particular. To write “my body” plunges me into lived experience, particularity … ’ (Rich 1986: 215). Clearly, Rich saw the problems coming, and I like her suggestion, but so much has been written about ‘the body’ both before and since 1984 that I find I must use the term to discuss this work and to locate my own position in relation to it. I try to use more specific references to bodies when speaking outside the context of the literature on ‘the body’.

REFERENCES

Bigwood, Carol (1991) ‘Rena...