

Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body¹

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A PERSONAL PROLOGUE

Sitting down to consider the unusually strong attraction that Foucauldian thought has held for contemporary feminism, it occurred to me that I might learn something from consulting personal history. What did *I* think when I first encountered the work of Michel Foucault? I can remember, when I was a graduate student in the late seventies, rebelling against the infatuation with poststructuralist thought which was then beginning to simmer in the ‘continental wing’ of my department. I had not the slightest knowledge of the *substance* of Derrida’s or Foucault’s ideas. My aversion was based solely on what I felt to be the aestheticised and elitist accoutrements of poststructuralism. I had tried one of the most popular of the early courses and found the conversations pretentious and the atmosphere cultish. The language was too self-conscious, too eroticised for my tastes; I felt instinctively that I could never wear such *haute couture* with comfort and conviction. My prejudice (against poststructuralist ideas; I never did learn to wear the clothes) was challenged in 1980 when I finally read Foucault, on assignment for a book review of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* which had just been published, I had been asked to do the review by my dissertation adviser, who was the book review editor of the journal, and who apparently (and correctly) had recognised a deep intellectual affinity that I had yet to discover.

That affinity was based on Foucault’s historicism—the intellectual orientation which insists that ideas neither descend from a timeless heaven nor are grounded in the necessities of ‘nature’, but develop out of the imaginations and intellects of

historical human beings. As a philosopher and a feminist, historicism was for me the great liberator of thought, challenging both the most stubborn pretensions of my discipline (to the possession of eternal truths, atemporal foundations, universal reason) and enduring social myths about human nature and gender by showing them to be, in Nietzsche's words, 'human, all too human'. Like works of art and literature, like styles of architecture and forms of governance, such notions are products of a temporal imagination negotiating its embodied experience; the point, therefore, is not to refute such notions, but to demystify them, to excavate their concrete human (psychological, social, political) origins. 'Because they are made they can be unmade', as Foucault said in an interview late in his life, 'assuming we know how they were made' (Foucault 1989:252).

As an undergraduate, all my male heroes had been philosophers of historical consciousness: Nietzsche, Marx, Marcuse; in graduate school, I added John Dewey and later Richard Rorty (for *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*); after graduate school, Foucault. But with the possible exception of Marx, whose influence on my thought goes back very far, none of these thinkers opened my eyes or converted me to historicism or the social construction of reality. Rather, they inspired, instructed and delighted me with the intelligence, knowledge and insight which they brought to bear on the objects of their exploration, with the elegance and persuasiveness of their arguments, and with the legitimacy they conferred on what was already the way I looked at the world. How affirming and exciting it was for me to have that way of looking at things confirmed, to put all those enthusiastic 'yes!' marks in the margins! (This was before 'the new historical consciousness' hit philosophy and literary studies.) Where my historicism 'came from' in my life is, of course, a complex mix of personality, gender, culture and the times within which I developed the rudiments of my intellectual and social world view. But certainly, feminism had a great deal to do with it. I do not mean the academic feminism of the 1980s (within which I place my own work), which has produced an enormous feminist/historicist scholarly literature. I mean the more general challenge to cultural consciousness which began in the late 1960s—the demonstrations, the manifestos, the consciousness-raising sessions, the early writings—which first raised for so many of us the startling and potentially life-altering idea that 'man' (and 'Man') and

'woman' (and 'Woman') and all that we had been taught to believe about them were human inventions.

The feminist demystification of the naturalness and political innocence of gender was not 'owned' or articulated by any one person. It was more like a collective 'click', to invoke the metaphor of one early piece, which many different people spoke and wrote about in different ways, most of them 'popular' rather than scholarly. Here is Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*:

It is impossible to argue a case for female liberation if there is no certainty about the degree of inferiority or natural dependence which is unalterably female.... We know what we are, but know not what we may be, or what we might have been. ... [W]omen must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development which have been successively locked off by conditioning.... [F]rom the outset our observation of the female is consciously and unconsciously biased by assumptions that we cannot help making and cannot always identify when they have been made. The new assumption behind the discussion of the body is that everything that we may observe *could be otherwise*.

(Greer 1970:4; Greer's emphasis)

As feminists explored and elaborated such ideas, they put intellectual suspicion of the 'natural' and a radical social constructionism in the cultural air. (Greer's conclusion about the body now seems to me quite extreme.) They did not make much ado about the meta-implications of their work or spend much time elaborating the theoretical presuppositions or consequences involved. We did not see ourselves as developing a new intellectual paradigm; nor, indeed, did we primarily locate ourselves in *intellectual* history. Rather, we saw ourselves first and foremost as participating in a political movement, and as such went straight for the concrete social and political analysis and critique. For these, and for other less benign reasons, feminism's contribution to the major theoretical shifts of the last twenty years is rarely credited.

A striking example of this is the paradigm which re-conceptualised the body from a purely biological form to an historical construction and medium of social control: the 'politics of the body'. Such a view of the body was central to the 'personal

politics' articulated by Anglo-American feminists in the late sixties and seventies. Yet almost everyone today claims Foucault (perhaps with a backward nod to Marx) as its founding father and guiding light:

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

(Johnson 1989:6)

Not a few feminists, too, appear to accept this view of things. While honouring French feminists Irigaray, Wittig, Cixous and Kristeva for their work on the body, 'as the site of the production of new modes of subjectivity', and Beauvoir for the 'understanding of the body as a situation', Linda Zerilli (1991:2–3) credits Foucault with having 'showed us how the body has been historically disciplined'; to Anglo-American feminism she simply attributes the 'essentialist' view of the body as an 'archaic natural'.

One of my goals in this chapter is to help restore feminism's rightful parentage of the 'politics of the body'. My point here is not only 'to set the record straight' out of some feminist chauvinism (although I admit frustration at the continual misunderstandings and caricatures of Anglo-American feminism, both from within and outside feminist scholarly circles). Rather, I think that we can learn something here from history and from the ways that we have re-membered and re-presented that history to ourselves; reflecting on my own participation in such representations, I certainly learned a great deal. In the next section I discuss the original feminist construction of the politics of the body. I then go on to describe what I view as the two key Foucauldian contributions to the further development of that construction, contributions which

have significantly deepened, and (rightly) complicated, our understandings of both social 'normalisation' and social resistance.² But despite the fact that I view both these contributions as valuable, I am concerned about the recent theoretical *over*-appropriation (as it seems to me) of some of Foucault's more 'postmodern' ideas about resistance.³ These ideas have been argued to represent more adequately the fragmented and unstable nature of contemporary power relations; my argument in the final section of this chapter is that 'normalisation' is still the *dominant* order of the day, even in a postmodern context, and especially with regard to the politics of *women's* bodies. Looking at contemporary commercials and advertisements, I will also show how the rhetoric of resistance has itself been pressed into the service of such normalisation.⁴

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

In my review of *The History of Sexuality* (Bordo 1980), I acknowledged what I felt to be truly innovative about Foucault's critique of the scientisation of sexuality. But I also pointed out that his notion of a power that works not through negative prohibition and restraint of impulse but proliferatively, at the level of the *production* of 'bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures' was not itself new. I had in mind here Marcuse's notion, in *One-Dimensional Man* of the 'mobilisation and administration of libido', whose similarities and differences from Foucault's notion of the 'deployment of sexuality' I discussed in some detail in the review. Not for a moment did I consider the relevance of the extensive feminist literature (from the 1960s and 1970s) on the social construction and 'deployment' of female sexuality, beauty and 'femininity'. I was thoroughly familiar with that literature; I simply did not credit it with a *theoretical* perspective on power and the body. How could this have been? How could I have read Andrea Dworkin, for example, and failed to recognise the 'theory' in the following passage?

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* And of course, the relationship between physical freedom and

psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one.

In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement.... From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting and deodorising herself. It is commonly and wrongly said that male transvestites through the use of makeup and costuming caricature the women they would become, but any real knowledge of the romantic ethos makes clear that these men have penetrated to the core experience of being a woman, a romanticised construct.

(Dworkin 1974:113–14; emphasis Dworkin's)

The answer to my question is complex. My failure to recognise the theoretical insight and authority of such work, as I suggested earlier, is in part attributable to the paucity of philosophical scaffolding and scholarly discussion in the works themselves. For the most part, these were not politically motivated academics (at least, not at that point in their lives), but writer/activists; their driving concern was *exposing* oppression, not elaborating the *ideas* most adequate to exposing that oppression (as was the case with Marcuse and Foucault and is arguably the case with much academic feminism today). Moreover, the way 'political writing' was conceived by feminists in those days was aimed at actually effecting *change* in readers' lives. This put a priority on clarity and immediacy, on startling and convincing argument and example, a shunning of obscurity and jargon. And yet: I cannot let myself entirely off the hook here (and of course I am hardly alone on that hook). In 1980, despite the fact that I was writing a dissertation historically critiquing the duality of male mind/female body, I still expected 'theory' only from men. Moreover—and here my inability to 'transcend' these dualisms reveals itself more subtly—I was unable to recognise *embodied* theory when it was staring me in the face. For it is hardly the case that these early feminist works were not theoretical, but rather that their

theory never drew attention to *itself*, never made an appearance except as it shaped the ‘matter’ of their argument. That is, theory was rarely abstracted, objectified and elaborated as of interest in itself. Works that perform such abstraction and elaboration get taken much more seriously than works which do not. This is as true or truer in 1992 as it was in 1980.

Let me clarify here that I am *not* denying the value of such abstraction, or claiming that Foucault’s complex theoretical contribution to the ‘politics of the body’ is contained or even anticipated in the work of Andrea Dworkin or any other feminist writer. Indeed, the next generation of feminist writers on the body often were drawn to Foucault precisely because his theoretical apparatus highlighted the inadequacies of the prevailing feminist discourse and was useful in reconstructing it. I will discuss these issues in more detail in the next section of this chapter. For now I only wish to point out, contrary to current narratives, that neither Foucault nor any other poststructuralist thinker discovered or invented the ‘seminal’ idea (to refer back to Johnson’s account) that the ‘definition and shaping’ of the body is ‘the focal point for struggles over the shape of power’. *That* was discovered by feminism, and long before it entered into its recent marriage with poststructuralist thought—as far back, indeed, as Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 description of the production of the ‘docile body’ of the domesticated woman of privilege:

To preserve personal beauty, woman’s glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves. As for Rousseau’s remarks, which have since been echoed by several writers, that they have naturally, that is since birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking—they are so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation. That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend to her mother’s toilet, will endeavour to join the conversation, is, indeed, very natural; and that she will imitate her mother and aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! is undoubtedly a most natural consequence...genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection.... Women are everywhere in this deplorable state....

Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.

(Wollstonecraft 1988:55–7)

A more activist generation urged escape from the guilt prison, arguing that the most mundane, 'trivial' aspects of women's bodily existence were in fact significant elements in the social construction of an oppressive feminine norm. In 1914, the first Feminist Mass Meeting in America—whose subject was 'Breaking into the Human Race'—poignantly listed, among the various social and political rights demanded, 'the right to ignore fashion' (Cott 1987:12). Here already, the material 'micro-practices' of everyday life—which would be extended by later feminists to include not only what one wears, but who cooks and cleans and, more recently, what one eats or does not eat—have been taken out of the realm of the purely personal and brought into the domain of the political. Here, for example, is a trenchant 1971 analysis, presented by way of a set of 'consciousness-raising' exercises for men, of how female subjectivity is normalised and subordinated by the everyday bodily requirements and vulnerabilities of 'femininity':

Sit down in a straight chair. Cross your legs at the ankles and keep your knees pressed together. Try to do this while you're having a conversation with someone, but pay attention at all times to keeping your knees pressed tightly together.

Run a short distance, keeping your knees together. You'll find you have to take short, high steps if you run this way. Women have been taught it is unfeminine to run like a man with long, free strides. See how far you get running this way for 30 seconds.

Walk down a city street. Pay a lot of attention to your clothing: make sure your pants are zipped, shirt tucked in, buttons done. Look straight ahead. Every time a man walks past you, avert your eyes and make your face expressionless. Most women learn to go through this act each time we leave our houses. It's a way to avoid at least some of the encounters we've all had with strange men who decided we looked available.

(Willamette Bridge Liberation News Service 1971)

Until I taught a course in the history of feminism several years ago, I had forgotten that the very first public act of second-wave feminist protest in the United States was the 'No More Miss America' demonstration in August 1968. The critique presented at that demonstration was far from the theoretically crude, essentialising programme that recent caricatures of that era's feminism would suggest. Rather, the position paper handed out at the demonstration outlined a complex, non-reductionist analysis of the intersection of sexism, conformism, competition, ageism, racism, militarism and consumer culture as they are constellated and crystallised in the pageant.⁵ The 'No More Miss America' demonstration was the event which earned 'Women's Libbers' the reputation for being 'bra-burners', an epithet many feminists have been trying to shed ever since. In fact, no bras *were* burned at the demonstration, although there was a huge 'Freedom Trash Can' into which were thrown bras, as well as girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, copies of *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle*, and so on. The media, sensationalising the event, and also no doubt influenced by the paradigm of draft-card burning as the act of political resistance *par excellence*, misreported or invented the burning of the bras. It stuck like crazy glue to the popular imagination; indeed, many of my students today still refer to feminists as 'bra-burners'. But whether or not bras were actually burned, the uneasy public with whom the image stuck surely had it right in recognising the deep political meaning of women's refusal to 'discipline' our breasts—culturally required to be so completely 'for' the other—whether as symbol of maternal love, wet-nurse for the children of the master's house, or erotic fetish.

'Whither the bra in the '90s?' asks Amy Collins, writing for *Lear's* magazine. She answers:

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

(Collins 1991:80)

Indeed, In 1992, with the dangers of silicone implants on public trial, the media emphasis was on the irresponsibility of Dow, and the personal sufferings of women who became ill from their implants. To my mind, however, the most depressing aspect of the disclosures was the *cultural* spectacle: the large numbers of women who are having implants purely to enlarge or re-shape their breasts, and who consider any health risk worth the resulting boon to their 'self-esteem' and market value. These women are not 'cultural dopes'; usually, they are all too conscious of the system of values and rewards that they are responding to and perpetuating. They know that Bally Matrix Fitness is telling the *truth* about our culture when it tells them that 'You don't just shape your body. You shape your life'. They may even recognise that Bally Matrix is also *creating* that culture. But they insist on their right to be happy on its terms. In the dominant ethos, that right is the bottom line; proposals to ban or even regulate silicone breast implants are thus often viewed as totalitarian interference with self-determination and choice. Many who argue in this way consider themselves feminists, and many feminist scholars today theorise explicitly *as* feminists on their 'behalf. A recent article in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* for example, defends cosmetic surgery as '*first and foremost...about taking one's life into one's own hands*' (Davis 1991:23).

I will return to this contemporary construction later. For now, I would only highlight how very different it is from the dominant feminist discourse on the body in the late sixties and seventies. *That* imagination of the female body was of a *socially* shaped and historically 'colonised' territory, not a site of individual self-determination. Here, feminism inverted and converted the old metaphor of the 'body politic', found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Macchiavelli, Hobbes and many others, to a new metaphor: 'the politics of the body'. In the old metaphor of the body politic, the state or society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts symbolising different functions, needs, social constituents, forces and so forth—the head or soul for the sovereign, the blood for the will of the people, the nerves for the system of reward and punishments, and so forth. Now, feminism imagined the human *body* as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped and marked by histories and practices of containment and control—from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering, to compulsory

heterosexuality, forced sterilisation, unwanted pregnancy and (in the case of the African-American slave woman) explicit commodification:⁶

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

(Omolade 1983:354)

One might rightly object that the body's actual bondage in slavery is not to be compared to the metaphorical bondage of privileged nineteenth-century women to the corset, much less to twentieth-century women's 'bondage' to the obsession with slenderness and youth. I think it is crucial, however, to recognise that a staple of the prevailing sexist ideology against which the new feminist model protested was the notion that, in matters of beauty and femininity, it is *women* who are responsible for whatever 'enslavement' they suffer from the whims and bodily tyrannies of 'fashion'. According to that ideology, men's desires have no responsibility to bear, nor does the culture which subordinates women's desires to those of men, sexualises and commodifies women's bodies, and offers them little other opportunity for social or personal power. Rather, it is in our essential feminine nature to be (delightfully if incomprehensibly) drawn to such trivialities, and to be willing to endure whatever physical inconvenience is required. In such matters, whether having our feet broken and shaped into 4-inch 'lotuses', or our waists strait-laced to 14 inches, or our breasts surgically stuffed with plastic, we 'do it to ourselves', are our 'own worst enemies'. Set in cultural relief against this 'thesis', the feminist 'anti-thesis' was the insistence that women are the *done* to not the *doers* here, that *men* and *their* desires (not ours) are the 'enemy', and that our obedience to the dictates of 'fashion' is better conceptualised as bondage than choice. This was a crucial historical moment in the developing articulation of a new

understanding of the sexual politics of the body. The limitations of that understanding at this early stage are undeniable. But a new and generative paradigm had been put in place, for later feminist thinkers to develop and critique. It is to this criticism that I now turn in the next section of this chapter.

FOUCAULT'S RE-CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE POLITICS OF THE BODY: NORMALISATION AND RESISTANCE

The initial feminist model of body politics presented various problems for later feminist thought. The 'old' feminist model, for one thing, had tended (although not invariably) to subsume all patriarchal institutions and practices under an oppressor/oppressed model which theorised men as 'possessing' and wielding power over women, who are viewed correspondingly as being utterly power-*less*. Given this model, the woman who has a breast enlargement operation 'to please her man' is as much the victim of his 'power' over her as the slave woman who submits to her owner's desires. Moreover, the oppressor/oppressed model provides no way in which to theorise adequately the complexities of the situations of men, who frequently find themselves implicated in practices and institutions which they (as individuals) did not create, do not control and may feel tyrannised by. Nor does this model acknowledge the degree to which women may 'collude' in sustaining sexism—for example, in our willing (and often eager) participation in cultural practices which objectify and sexualise us.

When I first read Foucault, I remember thinking: 'finally, a male theorist who understands western culture as neither a conversation among talking heads nor a series of military adventures, but as a history of the body!' What fascinated me most about Foucault's work were the historical genealogies themselves. But what I ultimately found most useful to my own work was Foucault's re-conceptualisation of modern 'power'. For Foucault, modern power (as opposed to sovereign power) is non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated; yet it none the less produces and normalises bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. The key 'moments' of this conception (as Foucault initially theorised it and which I will now attempt to characterise) are found in 'The eye of power' (1977), *Discipline and Punish* (1979), and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I

(1980); later revisions concerning resistance are discussed in 'The subject and power' (1983). Understanding how modern power operates requires, according to Foucault: first, that we cease to imagine 'power' as the *possession* of individuals or groups—as something people 'have'—and instead as a dynamic or network of non-centralised forces. Secondly, we recognise that these forces are *not* random or haphazard, but configure to assume particular historical forms (for example, the mechanisation and later scientisation of 'man'). The dominance of those forms is achieved, however, not from magisterial decree or design 'from above' but through multiple 'processes, of different origin and scattered location', regulating the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment (Foucault 1979:138). Thirdly, (and this element became central to later feminist appropriations of Foucault) prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity are maintained not through physical restraint and coercion, but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms. Thus, as Foucault writes,

there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself.

(Foucault 1977:155)

I would also argue (not all feminists would agree⁷) that this 'impersonal' conception of power does *not* entail that there are no dominant positions, social structures or ideologies emerging from the play of forces; the fact that power is not held by anyone does not entail that it is equally held by *all*. It is 'held' by no one; but people and groups *are* positioned differently within it. No one may control the rules of the game. But not all players on the field are equal. (I base my interpretation here less on Foucault's explicitly theoretical statements than on his historical genealogies themselves.)

Such a model seemed to many of us particularly useful to the analysis of male dominance and female subordination, so much of which, in a modern western context, is reproduced 'voluntarily', through self-normalisation to everyday habits of masculinity and femininity.⁸ In my own work, Foucault's ideas

were extremely helpful both to my analysis of the contemporary disciplines of diet and exercise (1990a) and to my understanding of eating disorders as arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture. These are practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of 'power' and 'control' (Bordo 1985, 1990a).

Within a Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus, the heady experience of feeling powerful, or 'in control', far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of one's actual social position, is always suspect as itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different. Within such a framework, too, one can acknowledge that women are not always passive 'victims' of sexism, but that we may contribute to the perpetuation of female subordination, for example, by participating in industries and cultural practices which represent women as sexual enticements and rewards for men—without this entailing that we have 'power' (or are equally positioned with men) in sexist culture. While men cease to be constructed as 'the enemy' and their often helpless enmeshment in patriarchal culture can be acknowledged by a Foucauldian model, this does not mitigate the fact that they often may have a higher stake in maintaining institutions within which they have historically occupied dominant positions *vis-à-vis* women. That is why they have often *felt* (and behaved) like 'the enemy' to women struggling to change those institutions. (Such a dual recognition seems essential, in particular, to theorising the situation of men who have been historically subordinated *vis-à-vis* their 'race', class and sexuality.)

Foucault also emphasised, later in his life, that power relations are never seamless, but always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new openings for potential resistance to emerge. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance (1983). I would add to this that prevailing norms themselves have transformative potential. While it is true that we may experience the illusion of 'power' while actually performing as 'docile bodies' (for example, my analysis of the situation of the anorectic), it is also true that our very 'docility' can have consequences that are personally liberating and/or culturally transforming. So, for example, (to construct some illustrations not found in Foucault), the woman who goes on a rigorous weight-training programme in order to achieve a currently stylish look may discover that her new

muscles also enable her to assert herself more forcefully at work. Or—a different sort of example—‘feminine’ decorativeness may function ‘subversively’ in professional contexts which are dominated by highly masculinist norms (such as academia). Modern power relations are thus unstable; resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious.

The ‘old’ feminist discourse, whose cultural work was to expose the oppressiveness of femininity, could not be expected to give much due to the *pleasures* of shaping and decorating the body or their subversive potential. That was left to a later generation of feminist theorists, who have found both Foucault and deconstructionism to be useful in elaborating such ideas. Deconstructionism has been helpful in pointing to the many-sided nature of meaning; for every interpretation, there is always a reading ‘against the grain’. Foucault has been attractive to feminists for his later insistence that cultural resistance is ubiquitous and perpetual. While an initial wave of Foucauldian-influenced feminism had seized on concepts such as ‘discipline’, ‘docility’, ‘normalisation’ and ‘bio-power’, a second, more ‘postmodern’⁹ wave has emphasised ‘intervention’, ‘contestation’, ‘subversion’. The first wave, while retaining the ‘old’ feminist conception of the ‘colonised’ female body, sought to complicate that discourse’s insufficiently textured, good guys/bad guys conception of social control. Postmodern feminism, on the other hand, criticises *both* the ‘old’ discourse *and* its reconstruction for over-emphasising such control, for failing to acknowledge adequately the creative and resistant responses that continually challenge and disrupt it.

From this postmodern perspective, both the earlier emphasis on women’s bodies as subject to ‘social conditioning’, and the later move to ‘normalisation’, under-estimate the unstable nature of subjectivity and the creative agency of individuals—‘the cultural work’ (as one theorist puts it) ‘by which nomadic, fragmented, active subjects confound dominant discourse.’¹⁰ In this view the dominant discourses which define femininity are continually allowing for the eruption of ‘difference’, and even the most subordinated subjects are therefore continually confronted with opportunities for resistance, for making meanings that ‘oppose or evade the dominant ideology’. There is power and pleasure in this culture, television critic John Fiske insists, ‘in being different’. (He then goes on to produce examples of how *Dallas*, *Hart to Hart* and other shows have been read by various sub-cultures to make their

own empowering meanings out of the ‘semiotic resources’ provided by television (Fiske 1987:11).) In a similar vein, Judith Butler (1990:137–8) suggests that by presenting a mocking enactment of how gender is artificially constructed and ‘performed’, drag and other ‘parodic practices’ (such as cross-dressing and lesbian ‘butch/femme’ identities) that are proliferated *from within* gender-essentialist culture effectively expose and subvert that culture and its belief in ‘the notion of a true gender identity’.

In terms of the very general overview presented in this section, there are thus ‘two’ Foucaults for feminism, and in some ways they are the mirror-image of one another. The ‘first’ Foucault, less a product of postmodern culture than a direct descendant of Marx, and sibling to 1960s and 1970s feminism, has attracted feminists with his deep and complex understanding of the ‘grip’ of systemic power on the body. The appeal of the ‘second’ Foucault, in contrast, has been his later, postmodern appreciation, for the creative ‘powers’ of bodies to *resist* that grip. Both perspectives, I would argue, are essential to a fully adequate *theoretical* understanding of power and the body. Yet the question remains as to which emphasis (for we are always and of necessity selective in our attention and emphases) provides the greater insight into the specific historical situations of women today. In the next section of this chapter, focusing on the politics of appearance, I will consider this question.

WHICH FOUCAULT FOR FEMINISM TODAY? NORMALISATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE ERA OF THE IMAGE¹¹

In general, I find the ‘postmodern’ inclination to emphasise and celebrate ‘resistance’—the creative agency of individuals, and the instabilities of systems rather than their recuperative tendencies—to be highly problematic. In other pieces, I discuss Fiske’s and Butler’s proposals in some detail (Bordo 1990b, 1991); here, I will critique the resistance-orientation as a more general intellectual tendency. I acknowledge that power relations are neither static nor seamless, and that resistance and transformation are indeed continual. These elements deserve their recognition in cultural analysis. The degree to which they deserve emphasis, however, must vary according to the

historical realities being explored. Just how helpful, for example, is an emphasis on creative agency in describing the relation of women and their bodies to the image industry of post-industrial capitalism, a context in which eating disorders and exercise compulsions are flourishing? Does the USA have a multi-million-dollar business in corrective, cosmetic surgery because women are asserting their racial and ethnic identities in resistance to prevailing norms, or because they are so vulnerable to the normalising power of those norms? Does an intellectual emphasis on 'resistance' really help us to describe and diagnose the politics of the body within the culture in which we live? Or, rather, does it participate in key mystifications of that culture? I will close this chapter by briefly addressing these questions.

Jean Baudrillard (1983) has suggested that a key characteristic of incessantly self-recreating, postmodern culture is the disappearance of the distinction between reality and appearance. Today, all that is meaningful to us are our simulations. I think that Baudrillard is exactly right here. We all 'know' that Cher and virtually every other female star over the age of 25 is the plastic product of numerous cosmetic surgeries on face and body. Some of us can even remember what Cher *used* to look like. But in the era of the 'hyperreal' (as Baudrillard calls simulations) such historical 'knowledge' becomes faded and indistinct, unable to cast the merest shadow of doubt over the dazzling, compelling, utterly authoritative new images of Cher. Like the 'knowledge' of our own mortality when we are young and healthy, the knowledge that Cher as we see her today is a fabricated product is an empty abstraction; it simply does not compute. It is the present image that has the hold on our most vibrant sense of what is, what matters. In so far as the history of Cher's body has meaning at all, it has meaning not as the 'original' over which a false copy has been laid, but as a *defect* which has been corrected. It becomes constructed as 'defect' precisely because the new image is the dominant reality, the normalising standard against which all else is judged. This has tremendous implications for our relationship to physical appearance, which more and more has come to be understood not as a biological 'given' which we have to learn to accept, but as a plastic potentiality to be pressed into the service of image—to be arranged, re-arranged, constructed and deconstructed as

we choose (Bordo 1990b). Cosmetic surgery is now a \$1.75 billion-a-year industry in the United States, with almost 1.5 million people a year undergoing surgery of some kind, from face-lifts to calf implants. These operations have become more and more affordable to the middle class (the average cost of a nose job is \$2,500), and almost all can be done on an outpatient basis—some during the lunch hour. Lest it be imagined that most of these surgeries are to correct disfiguring accidents or birth defects, it should be noted that liposuction (vacuum extraction of ‘surplus’ fat) is the most frequently requested operation (average cost \$1,500), with breast enlargement (average cost \$2,000) a close second. More than two million women have received breast implants since they have been on the market.

Advocates of cosmetic surgery, as I noted earlier, argue that it is ‘about’ self-determination and choice, about ‘taking one’s life into one’s hands’. But do we really choose the appearances that we reconstruct for ourselves? The images of beauty, power and success which dominate in US culture are generated out of Anglo-Saxon identifications and preferences and are images which, with some variations, are globally influential through the mass media. These images are still strongly racially, ethnically and heterosexually inflected—a reality that is continually effaced by the postmodern emphasis on resistant elements rather than dominant cultural forms. Products still promote ‘hair that moves’ and ‘faded beauty’ for black women; the slender-hipped, long-legged bodies of fashion models are infrequently produced by the Eastern European gene pool. Certainly, high-fashion images may contain touches of exotica: collagen-plumped lips or corn rows on white models, Barbra Streisand noses, ‘butch’ styles of dress. Consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire, and it frequently drops into marginalised neighbourhoods in order to find them. But such elements will be either explicitly *framed* as exotica, or, within the overall system of meaning, they will not be permitted to overwhelm the representation to establish a truly alternative or ‘subversive’ model of beauty or success. White models may collagen their lips, but black models are usually light-skinned and anglo-featured (unless, of course, their ‘blackness’ is being ideologically exploited, as in the many advertisements which code dark-skinned women with lust and animal desire). A definite (albeit not always fixed or

determinate) system of normalising boundaries sets limits on the validation of cultural 'difference'. This system is reflected in the sorts of surgery people request; does anyone in this culture have her nose re-shaped to look more 'African' or 'Jewish'?

Popular culture offers few models of resistance to all this. Cher's public-relations image emphasises her individuality, honesty and defiance against norms. In the minds of many people, she (like Madonna) stands for female power, for rebellion against convention. Yet if we look past the 'discursive' hype to the message conveyed by her *body* we see that Cher's operations have gradually replaced a strong, decidedly 'ethnic' look with a more symmetrical, delicate, 'conventional' (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) and ever-youthful version of female beauty. Cher admits to having had her breasts 'done', her nose bobbed and her teeth straightened; reportedly she has also had a rib removed, her buttocks re-shaped, and cheek implants. But whatever she has or has not done, the transformation from 1965 to 1992 is striking: in Foucauldian terminology, Cher has gradually 'normalised' herself. Her normalised image (the only 'reality' which counts) now acts as a standard against which other women will measure, judge, discipline and 'correct' themselves.

Such normalisation, to be sure, is continually mystified and effaced in our culture by the rhetoric of 'choice' and 'self-determination' which plays such a key role in commercial representations of diet, exercise, hair and eye-colouring and so forth. 'You get better or worse every day,' cautions Glen Frye on behalf of Bally Matrix Fitness, *The choice is yours.* (Yes, you are free to choose to be a lazy, self-indulgent slob?) 'The body you have is the body you inherited, but you must decide what to do with it,' instructs Nike, offering glamorous shots of lean, muscled athletes to help us 'decide'. 'Now, choosing your very own eye colour is the most natural thing in the world,' claims Durosoft (who does not market dark brown lenses). A recent television advertisement (featuring the 'new' Cher) even yokes the discourse on agency and self-determination to the selection of *Equal* over *Sweet 'N Low*; 'When I sit down to make a choice', explains Cher, 'I choose *Equal*.'

Rendered utterly invisible in the spa and exercise equipment advertisements, of course, is the coerciveness of the slenderness and fitness aesthetic (and ethic) itself. Rather, a nearly total inversion is effected, and the normalised body becomes *the* body

of creative self-fashioning, even the body of cultural resistance. 'I believe' is the theme of a recent series of Reebok commercials, each of which features muscled, energetic women declaring their feminist rebellion as they exercise: 'I believe that babe is a four letter word', 'I believe in baying at the moon', 'I believe that sweat is sexy'. The last declaration—which 'answers' the man in a Secret deodorant advertisement who claims that, 'a woman just isn't sexy when she sweats'—not only rebels against gender ideology, but suggests resistance to the world of commercials itself (nice trick for a commercial!). Perhaps the most insidious of the series is a magazine advertisement which pictures a lean, highly toned, extremely attractive young woman, leaning against a wall, post-workout; 'I believe', the copy reads, 'that if you look at yourself and see what is right instead of what is wrong, that is the true mark of a healthy individual'. Now, those convinced that 'resistance is everywhere' might see this advertisement as offering a transgressive, subversive model of femininity: a woman who is strong, fit and (unlike most women) *not* insecure about her body. What this reading neglects is that we have a visual message here as well: her body *itself*—probably the most potent 'representation' in the advertisement—is precisely the sort of perfected icon which women compare themselves to and of course see 'what is wrong'. The advertisement thus puts 'real' women in a painful double-bind. On the one hand, it encourages them to view themselves as defective; on the other hand, it chastises them for their insecurities. The offered resolution to this bind, of course, is to buy Reebok and become like the woman in the advertisement.

One might argue that an adequate analysis of advertisements such as those I have been discussing would take into account both their resistant elements and their normalising messages. (Weight-training and exercise, after all, often do have socially empowering results for women.) I have no problem granting this, so long as the normalising thrust of these advertisements *vis-à-vis* the politics of appearance is not obscured. In connection with this, we need to recognise that the symbols of resistance in these advertisements are included by advertisers in the profoundest of cynical bad faith; they pretend to reject the objectification of women and value female assertiveness, while attempting to convince women who *fail* to embody dominant ideas of (slender, youthful) beauty that they need to bring themselves into line. To resist *this* normalising directive is *truly* to 'go against the grain' of

our culture, not merely in textual 'play', but at great personal risk—as the many women who have been sexually rejected for being 'too fat' and fired from their jobs for looking 'too old' know all too well. Subversion of dominant cultural forms, as bell hooks has said (1990:22), 'happens much more easily in the realm of "texts" than in the world of human interaction...in which such moves challenge, disrupt, threaten, where repression is real'. The pleasure and power of 'difference' is hard-won; it does not freely bloom, insistently nudging its way through the cracks of dominant forms. Sexism, racism and 'ageism', while they do not determine human value and choices, while they do not deprive us of 'agency', remain strongly normalising within our culture.

The commercial texts that I have been examining, in contrast, participate in the illusion (which they share with other postmodern texts) that our 'differences' are already flourishing in the culture *as it is*, without need for personal struggle and social change—that we are already self-determining, already empowered to look in the mirror and see what is right, instead of what is wrong. The exposure of such mystifications, which should not be impeded by too facile a celebration of resistance, must remain central to a feminist politics of the body.

NOTES

- 1 Portions of this chapter are based on material from the introduction and conclusion to my book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Bordo 1993). Other portions were taken from talks that I delivered at the University of Rochester and Hobart and William Smith Colleges. I offer my thanks to all those who participated in discussions at those presentations.
- 2 By social 'normalisation' I refer to all those modes of acculturation which work by setting up standards or 'norms' against which individuals continually measure, judge, 'discipline' and 'correct' their behaviour and presentation of self. By social 'resistance' I refer to all behaviours, events and social formations that challenge or disrupt prevailing power relations and the norms that sustain and reproduce them.
- 3 The postmodern has been described and re-described with many different emphases and points of departure, some critical and some celebratory of the 'postmodern condition' (see Bordo 1991). Without entering into a lengthy and diverting discussion, for my purposes here I employ the term 'postmodern' in the most general cultural sense, as referring to the contemporary inclination towards the unstable, fluid, fragmented, indeterminate, ironic and heterogeneous, for that which resists definition, closure and fixity. Within this general categorisation,

ideas that have developed out of poststructuralist thought—the emphasis on semiotic indeterminacy, the critique of unified conceptions of subjectivity, fascination with the instabilities of systems, and the ability to focus on cultural resistance rather than dominant forms—are decidedly ‘postmodern’ intellectual developments. But not all poststructuralist thought is ‘postmodern’. Foucault, as I read him, has both ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ moments. In his discussions of the discipline, normalisation and creation of ‘docile bodies’ he is very much the descendant of Marx; later revisions to his conception of power emphasise the ubiquity of resistance—a characteristic ‘postmodern’ theme.

- 4 A final introductory note: The ‘stream’ of feminist body-politics which is my chief focus in this chapter is the politics of appearance. Even though Foucault himself had little to say about this—or about women—I construct most of my examples and illustrations of Foucault’s ideas from this domain, to which I view his ideas as particularly applicable. (For the same reason, I use Foucauldian terminology in describing early feminist perspectives of the body, even though that terminology was unknown to the writers themselves.) This choice of focus should not be taken as implying that I view issues concerning work, sexuality, sexual violence, parenting and reproductive rights as less illustrative of, or important to, a feminist politics of the body. It also explains my omission of any discussion of French feminism, whose contribution to feminist perspectives on the body has been significant, but which has not theorised the politics of beauty and appearance as central to the construction of femininity.
- 5 The Ten Points of protest listed were: ‘The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol’; ‘Racism with Roses’; ‘Miss America as Military Death Mascot’; ‘The Consumer Con-Game’; ‘Competition Rigged and Unrigged’; ‘The Woman as Pop Culture Obsolescent Theme’; ‘The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination’; ‘The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity’; ‘Miss America as Dream Equivalent to—’; and ‘Miss America as Big Sister Watching You’ (in Morgan 1970:522–4).
- 6 Among the ‘classics’: Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will* (1975); Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (1978); Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (1983); Andrea Dworkin, *Woman-Hating* (1974); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970); Susan Griffin, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (1979) and *Woman and Nature* (1978); Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence’ (1980). See also the anthologies *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Robin Morgan, ed., 1970) and *Woman in Sexist Society* (Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran, eds, 1971).
- 7 See Nancy Fraser (1989) and Nancy Hartsock (1990) for a very different view, which criticises Foucault’s conception of power for failing to allow for the sorts of differentiations I describe here.
- 8 See the section on ‘Discipline and the female subject’ in Diamond and Quinby (1988), especially Sandra Bartky’s piece ‘Foucault, femininity, and the modernisation of patriarchal power’. See also Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1991).

- 9 For my use of 'postmodernism', see note 3.
 10 This was said by Janice Radway in an informal presentation of her work, Duke University, spring 1989.
 11 For my use of 'normalisation' and 'resistance', see note 2.

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