THE BODY
AND THE REPRODUCTION
OF FEMININITY: A FEMINIST
APPROPRIATION
OF FOUCALUT

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RECONSTRUCTING FEMINIST
DISCOURSE ON THE BODY

The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we
attend to the body—is a medium of culture. The body, as anthropologist
Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which
the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a cul-
ture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the
body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture. From quarters
as diverse as Plato and Hobbes to French feminist Luce Irigaray, an imagina-
tion of body-morphology has provided a blueprint for diagnosis and/or vision
of social and political life.

The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre
Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a
practical, direct locus of social control. Banally, through table manners and
toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practices, culture is
"made body," as Bourdieu puts it—converted into automatic, habitual activ-
ity. As such it is put "beyond the grasp of consciousness...[untouchable] by
voluntary, deliberate transformation" (1977:94). Our conscious politics, so-
cial commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by
the life of our bodies—not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato,
Augustine, and Freud but the docile, regulated body practiced at and habituat-
ted to the rules of cultural life.
Throughout his later “genealogical” works (Discipline and Punish, History of Sexuality), Foucault constantly reminds us of the primacy of practice over belief. Not chiefly through “ideology,” but through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity. Such an emphasis casts a dark and disquieting shadow across the contemporary scene. For women, as study after study shows, are spending more time on the management and discipline of our bodies than we have in a long, long time. In a decade marked by a reopening of the public arena to women, the intensification of such regimens appears diversionary and subverting. Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, a resting point, that requires women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become what Foucault calls “docile bodies,” or bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, “improvement.” Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the days of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification. Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, insufficiency, of never being good enough. At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death.

Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body—perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation—has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control. In our own era, it is difficult to avoid the recognition that the contemporary preoccupation with appearance, which still affects women far more powerfully than men, even in our narcissistic and visually oriented culture, may function as a “backlash” phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations against any attempts to shift or transform power-relations. Surely we are in the throes of this backlash today. In newspapers and magazines daily we encounter stories that promote traditional gender relations and prey on anxieties about change: stories about latch-key children, abuse in day-care centers, the “new woman”’s troubles with men, her lack of marriageability, and so on. A dominant visual theme in teenage magazines involves women hiding in the shadows of men, seeking solace in their arms, willingly contracting the space they occupy. The last, of course, also describes our contemporary aesthetic ideal for women, an ideal whose obsessive pursuit has become the central torment of many women’s lives. In such an era we desperately need an effective political discourse about the female body, a discourse adequate to an analysis of the insidious, and often paradoxical, pathways of modern social control.

Developing such a discourse requires reconstructing the “old” feminist body-discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with its political categories of oppressors and oppressed, villains and victims. Here, I believe that a feminist appropriation of some of Foucault’s later concepts can prove useful. Following Foucault, we must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another, and we must think instead of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a particular domain. Second, we need an analytics adequate to describe a power whose central mechanisms are not repressive, but constitutive: “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (Foucault 1978: 136). Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much depends upon the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices, we need an analysis of power “from below,” as Foucault puts it (1978:94): for example, the mechanisms that shape and proliferate, rather than repress, desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normality and deviance. Third, we need a discourse that will enable us to account for the subversion of potential rebellion, a discourse that, while insisting on the necessity of “objective” analysis of power relations, social hierarchy, political backlash, and so forth, will nonetheless allow us to confront the mechanisms by which the subject becomes ensnared, at times, into collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression.

This essay will not attempt to produce a “theory” along these lines. Rather, my focus will be the analysis of one particular arena where the interplay of these dynamics is striking and perhaps exemplary. It is a limited and unusual arena—a group of gender-related and historically localized disorders: hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa. I recognize, too, that these disorders have been largely class and race specific, occurring overwhelmingly among white middle- and upper middle-class women. Nonetheless, anorexia, hysteria, and agoraphobia may provide a paradigm of one way in which potential resistance is not merely undercut but utilized in the maintenance and reproduction of existing power relations.

The central mechanism I will describe involves a transformation (or, if you wish, duality) of meaning, through which conditions that are “objectively” (and on one level, experientially) constraining, enslaving, and even murderous, come to be experienced as liberating, transforming, and life-giving. I offer this analysis, although limited to a specific domain, as an example of how
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The continuum between female disorder and “normal” feminine practice is sharply revealed through a close reading of those disorders to which women have been particularly vulnerable. These, of course, have varied historically: neurasthenia and hysteria in the second half of the nineteenth century; agoraphobia and, most dramatically, anorexia nervosa and bulimia in the second half of the twentieth century. This is not to say that anorexics did not exist in the nineteenth century—many cases were described, usually within the context of diagnoses of hysteria (Showalter 1985:128–129)—or that women no longer suffer from classical hysterical symptoms in the twentieth century. But the taking up of eating disorders on a mass scale is as unique to the culture of the 1980s as the epidemic of hysteria was to the Victorian era.

The symptomatology of these disorders reveals itself as texuality. Loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving self, taking up space and whirling down the space one’s body takes up—all have symbolic meaning, all have political meaning within the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender. Working within this framework, we see that whether we look at hysteria, agoraphobia, or anorexia, we find the body of the sufferer deeply inscribed with an ideological construction of femininity emblematic of the periods in question. That construction, of course, is always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class, and other differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal. Strikingly, in these disorders the construction of femininity is written in disturbingly concrete, hyperbolic terms: exaggerated, extremely literal, at times virtually caricatured presentations of the ruling feminine mystique. The bodies of disordered women in this way offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter—a text that insists, actually demands, it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender.

Both nineteenth-century male physicians and twentieth-century feminist critics have seen, in the symptoms of neurasthenia and hysteria (syndromes that became increasingly less differentiated as the century wore on), an exaggeration of stereotypically feminine traits. The nineteenth-century “lady” was idealized in terms of delicacy and dreaminess, sexual passivity, and a charmingly labile and capricious emotionality (Vicinus 1972:x–xi). Such notions were formalized and scientized in the work of male theorists from Acton and Kraft-Ebbing to Freud, who described “normal,” mature femininity in such terms. In this context, the dissociations of hysteria, the drifting and fogging of perception, the nervous tremors and faints, the anaesthesias, and the extreme mutability of symptomatology associated with nineteenth-century female disorders can be seen to be concretizations of the feminine mystique of the period, produced according to rules governing the prevailing construction of femininity. Doctors described what came to be known as the “hysterical personality” as “impressionable, suggestible, and narcissistic; highly labile, their moods changing suddenly, dramatically, and for seemingly inconsequential reasons... egocentric in the extreme... essentially asexual and not uncommonly frigid” (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:203)—all characteristics normative of femininity in this era. As Elaine Showalter points out, the term “hysterical” itself became almost interchangeable with the term “feminine” in the literature of the period (1985:129).

The hysteric’s embodiment of the feminine mystique of her era, however, seems subtle and inevitable compared to the ingenious literalism of agoraphobia and anorexia. In the context of our culture this literalism makes sense. With the advent of movies and television, the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through the deployment of standardized visual images. As a result, femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing, in the manner described by Erving Goffman, the appropriate surface presentation of the self. We no longer are told what a “lady” is or of what femininity consists. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images which tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior is required.

In agoraphobia and even more dramatically in anorexia, the disorder presents itself as a virtual, though tragic, parody of twentieth-century constructions of femininity. The 1950s and early 1960s, when agoraphobia first began to escalate among women, represented a reassertion of domesticity and dependency as the feminine ideal. “Career woman” became a dirty word, much more so than it had been during the war, when the survival of the economy depended on women’s willingness to do “men’s work.” The reigning ideology of femininity, so well described by Betty Friedan and perfectly captured in the movies and television shows of the era was chillichke, nonassertive, helpless without a man, “content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home” (1962:36). The house-bound agoraphobic lives this construction of femininity literally, “You want dependency? I’ll give you dependency!” she proclaims with her body, “You want me in the home? You’ll have me in the home—with a vengeance!” The point, which many therapists have commented on, does not need laboring. Agoraphobia, as I. G. Fodor has put it, seems “the logical—albeit extreme—extension of the cultural sex-role stereotype for women” in this era.
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The emaciated body of the anorexic, of course, immediately presents itself as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyperslenderness for women, an ideal that, despite the game resistance of racial and ethnic difference, has become the norm for women today. But slenderness is only the tip of the iceberg, for slenderness itself requires interpretation. “C’est le sens qui fait vendre,” said Barthes, speaking of clothing styles—it’s meaning that makes the sale. So, too, it is meaning that makes the body admirable. To the degree that anorexia may be said to be “about” slenderness it is about slenderness as a citadel of contemporary and historical meaning, not as an empty “fashion” ideal. As such, the interpretation of slenderness yields multiple readings, with some related to gender, some not. For the purposes of this essay I will offer an abbreviated, gender-focused reading. But I must stress that this reading illuminates only partially, and that many other currents not discussed here—economic, psychosocial, and historical, as well as ethnic and class dimensions—figure prominently.10

We begin with the painfully literal inscription, on the anorexic’s body, of the rules governing the construction of contemporary femininity. That construction is a “double-bind” that legislates contradictory ideals and directives. On the one hand, our culture still widely advertises domestic conceptions of femininity, the ideological moorings for a rigorously dualistic sexual division of labor, with woman as chief emotional and physical nurturer. The rules for this construction of femininity (and I speak here in a language both symbolic and literal) require that women learn to feed others, not the self, and to curvate any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeling as greedy and excessive. Thus, women are required to develop a totally other-oriented emotional economy.

“Young women today are still being taught such a construction of the self. On television, the Betty Crocker commercials symbolically speak to men of the legitimacy of their wildest, most abandoned desires: ’I’ve got a passion for you; I’m wild, crazy, out of control’ the” hungering man croons to the sensuously presented chocolate cake, offered lovingly by the (always present) female. Female hunger, on the other hand, is depicted as needful of containment and control, and female eating is seen as a furtive, shameful, illicit act, as in the Andes Candies and “Mon Cheri” commercials, where a “tiny-bite” of chocolate, privately savored, is supposed to be ample reward for a day of serving others (Bordo 1986). Food is not the real issue here, of course; rather, the control of female appetite for food is merely the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity—that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited (Bordo 1989). On the body of the anorexic woman such rules are gruffly and deeply etched.

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At the same time as young, “upwardly mobile” women today continue to be taught traditionally “feminine” virtues, to the degree that the professional arena has opened up to them, they must also learn to embody the “masculine” language and values of that arena—self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on. Female bodies now speak symbolically of this necessity in their slender spare shape and the currently fashionable men’s wear look. Our bodies, as we trudge to the gym every day and fervently resist both our hungers and our desires to soothe and baby ourselves, are also becoming more and more practiced at the “male” virtues of control and self-mastery. The anorexic pursues these virtues with single-minded, unswerving dedication. “Energy, discipline, my own power will keep me going,” says ex-anorexic Aimee Liu, recreating her anorexic days, “psychic fuel. I need nothing and no one else... I will be master of my own body; if nothing else, I vow” (1979: 123).

The ideal of slenderness, then, and the diet and exercise regimens that have become inseparable from it, offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the contradictory demands of the contemporary ideology of femininity. Popular images reflect this dual demand. In a single issue of Complete Woman magazine, two articles appear, one on “Feminine Intuition,” the other asking “Are You the New Macho Woman?” In Vision Quest, the young male hero falls in love with the heroine, as he says, because “she has all the best things I like in girls and all the best things I like in guys,” that is, she’s tough and cool, but warm and alluring. In the enormously popular Aliens, the heroine’s personality has been deliberately constructed, with near comic-book explicitness, to embody traditional nurturant femininity alongside breathtaking macho-prowess and control; Sigourney Weaver, the actress who portrays her, has called the character “Rambolina.”

In the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of appetite the traditional construction of femininity intersects with the new requirement for women to embody the “masculine” values of the public arena. The anorexic, as I have argued, embodies this intersection, this double-bind, in a particularly painful and graphic way.11 I mean double-bind quite literally here. “Masculinity” and “femininity,” at least since the nineteenth century and arguably before, have been constructed through a process of mutual exclusion. One cannot simply add the historically feminine virtues to the historically masculine ones to yield a “New Woman,” a “New Man,” a new ethics, or a new culture. Even on the screen or on television, embodied in created characters like the Aliens heroine, the result is a parody. Unfortunately, in this image-bedazzled culture, we have increasing difficulty discriminating between parodies and possibilities for the self. Explored as a possibility for the self, the “androgynous” ideal ultimately exposes its internal contradiction and becomes a war that tears the subject in two—a war explicitly thematized, by many
anorexics, as a battle between male and female sides of the self (Bordo 1985).

PROTEST AND RETREAT
IN THE SAME GESTURE

In hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, the woman’s body may thus be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form. They are also written, of course, in languages of horrible suffering. It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the edge, waiting at the horizon of “normal” femininity. It is no wonder, then, that a steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied (protest) unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics—but protest nonetheless.

American and French feminists alike have heard the hysterics speaking a language of protest, even or perhaps especially when she was mute. Dianne Hunter interprets Anna O’s aphasia, which manifested itself in an inability to speak her native German, as a rebellion against the linguistic and cultural rules of the father and a return to the “mother-tongue”: the semiotic babble of infancy, the language of the body. For Hunter, and for a number of other feminists working with Lacanian categories, the return to the semiotic level is both regressive and, as Hunter puts it, an “expressive” communication “addressed to patriarchal thought,” “a self-repudiating form of feminine discourse in which the body signifies what social conditions make it impossible to state linguistically” (1983:114). “The hysterics are accusing; they are pointing,” writes Catherine Clément in The Newly Born Woman; they make a “mockery of culture” (1986:42). In the same volume, Hélène Cixous speaks of “those wonderful hysterics, who subjected Freud to so many voluptuous moments too shameful to mention, bombarding his masonic statute/law of Moses with their carnal, passionate body-words, haunting him with their inaudible thundering denunciations” (1986:95). For Cixous, Dora, who so frustrated Freud, is “the core example of the protesting force in women.”

The literature of protest includes functional as well as symbolic approaches. Robert Seidenberg and Karen DeCrow, for example, describe agoraphobia as a “strike” against “the renunciations usually demanded of women” and the expectations of housewife functions such as shopping, driving the children to school, accompanying their husbands to social events, and so on (1983:31). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg presents a similar analysis of

hysteria, arguing that by preventing the woman from functioning in the wifely role of caretaker of others, of “ministering angel” to husband and children, hysteria “became one way in which conventional women could express—in most cases unconsciously—dissatisfaction with one or several aspects of their lives” (1983:208). A number of feminist writers, among whom Susie Orbach is the most articulate and forceful, have interpreted anorexia as a species of unconscious feminist protest. The anorexic is engaged in a “hunger strike,” as Orbach calls it, stressing this as a political discourse in which the action of food refusal and dramatic transformation of body-size expresses with [the] body what [the anorexic] is unable to tell us with words”—her indictment of a culture that disdains and suppresses female hunger, makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs, and demands women’s constant work on the transformation of their bodies (1983:102).

The anorexic, of course, is unaware that she is making a political statement. She may, indeed, be hostile to feminism and any other critical perspectives that she views as disputing her own autonomy and control or questioning the cultural ideals around which her life is organized. Through embodied rather than discursive demonstration she exposes and indicts those ideals, precisely by pursuing them to the point where their destructive potential is revealed for all to see. The very same gesture that expresses protest, moreover, can also signal retreat; this, indeed, may be part of the symptom’s attraction. Kim Chernin argues, for example (1985), that the debilitating anorexic fixation, by halting or mitigating personal development, assuages this generation’s guilt and separation anxiety over the prospect of surpassing our mothers, of living less circumscribed, freer lives. Agoraphobia, too, which often develops shortly after marriage, clearly functions in many cases as a way to cement dependency and attachment in the face of unacceptable stirrings of dissatisfaction and restlessness.

Although we may talk meaningfully of protest, then, I would emphasize the counterproductive, tragically self-defeating (indeed self-deconstructing) nature of that protest. Functionally, the symptoms of these disorders isolate, weaken, and undermine the sufferers; at the same time they turn the life of the body into an all-consuming fetish, beside which all other objects of attention seem pale and unreal. On the symbolic level, too, the protest dimension collapses into its opposite and proclaims the utter defeat and capitulation of the subject to the contracted female world. The muteness of hysterics and their return to the level of pure, primary bodily expressivity have been interpreted, as we have seen, as rejecting the symbolic order of patriarchy and recovering a lost world of semiotic, maternal value. But at the same time, of course, muteness is the condition of the silent, uncomplaining woman—an ideal of patriarchal culture. Protesting the stifling of the female voice through one’s own voicelessness, that is, employing the language of femininity to
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protest the conditions of the female world, will always involve ambiguities of this sort. Perhaps this is why symptoms crystallized from the language of femininity are so perfectly suited to express the dilemmas of women living in periods poised on the edge of gender change: the late nineteenth century, the post-World War II period, and the late twentieth century. In these periods gender has become as issue to be discussed, and discourse proliferates about “The Woman Question,” “The New Woman,” “What Women Want,” “What Femininity Is,” and so on.

Of course, such dilemmas are differently experienced, depending on class, age, and other aspects of women’s situations. Agoraphobia and anorexia are, after all, chiefly disorders of middle- and upper-middle-class women—women for whom the anxieties of possibility have arisen, women who have the social and material resources to carry the language of femininity to symbolic excess. Clearly, we need separate analyses of the effects of homogenizing feminine practice on various class and racial groups and the different modes of protest that may be employed.

COLLUSION, RESISTANCE, AND THE BODY

The pathologies of female protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them, reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested. In this connection, the fact that hysteria and anorexia have peaked during historical periods of cultural backlash against attempts at reorganization and redefinition of male and female roles is significant. Female pathology reveals itself here as an extremely interesting social formation, through which one source of potential for resistance and rebellion is pressed into the service of maintaining the established order.

Is this collusion established? Here, “objective” accounts of power relations fail us. For whatever the objective social conditions are that “produce” a pathology, the symptoms themselves must still be produced (however unconsciously or inadvertently) by the subject. That is, the body must become invested with meanings of various sorts. Only by examining this “productive” process on the part of the subject can we, as Mark Poster has put it, “illuminate the mechanisms of domination in the processes through which meaning is produced in everyday life” (1984:28); that is, only then can we see how the desires and dreams of the subject become implicated in the matrix of power relations.

Here, examining the context in which the anorexia syndrome is produced may be illuminating. Anorexia will erupt, typically, in the course of what begins as a fairly moderate diet regime, undertaken because someone, often the father, has made a casual critical remark. Anorexia begins, emerges out of what is, in our time, conventional feminine practice. In the course of that practice, for any variety of individual reasons that I cannot go into here, the practice is pushed a little farther than the parameters of moderate dieting. The young woman discovers what it feels like to crave and want and need and yet, through the exercise of her own will, to triumph over that need. In the process, a new realm of meanings is discovered, a range of values and possibilities that western culture has traditionally coded as “male” and rarely made available to women: an ethic and aesthetic of self-mastery and self-transcendence, expertise, and power over others through the example of superior will and control. The experience is intoxicating, habit-forming. Aimee Liu writes: "The sense of accomplishment exhilarates me, spurs me to continue on and on... I shall become an expert [at losing weight]. The constant downward trend [of the scale] somehow comforts me, gives me visible proof that I can exert control" (1979:36).

At school, she discovers that her steadily shrinking body is admired, not so much as an aesthetic or sexual object but for the strength of will and self-control it projects. At home, she discovers, in the inevitable battles her parents fight to get her to eat, that her actions have enormous power over the lives of those around her. As her body begins to lose its traditional feminine curves, its breasts and hips and rounded stomach, and begins to feel and look more like a spare, lanky male body, she begins to feel untouchable, out of reach of hurt, "inviolable, clean and hard as the bones etched into my silhouette," as one woman described it. She despises, in particular, all those parts of her body that continue to mark her as female. "If only I could eliminate [my breasts]," says Liu, "cut them off if need be" (1979:99). For her, as for many anorexics, the breasts represent a bovine, unconscious, vulnerable, side of the self (Bordo 1985). Liu’s body symbolism is thoroughly continuous with dominant cultural associations. Brett Silverstein’s studies on the “Possible Causes of the Thin Standard of Bodily Attractiveness for Women,” testify empirically to what is obvious from every comedy routine involving a dramatically shapely woman: namely, our cultural association of curvaceousness and incompetence. The anorexic is also quite aware, of course, of the social and sexual vulnerability involved in having a female body; many, in fact, were sexually abused as children.

Through her anorexia, on the other hand, she has unexpectedly discovered an entry into the privileged male world, a way to become what is valued in our culture, a way to become safe, above it all; for her, they are the same thing. She has discovered this paradoxically, by pursuing conventional feminine behavior—in this case, the discipline of perfecting the body as an object—to excess, to extreme. At this point of excess, the conventionally
feminine "deconstructs," we might say, into its opposite and opens onto these values our culture has coded as male. No wonder the anorexia is experienced as liberating and that she will fight family, friends, and therapists in an effort to hold onto it—fight them to the death, if need be. The anorexic's experience of power is, of course, deeply and dangerously illusory. To re-shape one's body into a male body is not to put on male power and privilege. To feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities. And, of course, for the female to become male is only to locate oneself on a different side of a deforming opposition. The new "power look" in female body-building, which encourages women to develop the same bulk-like, triangular shape that has been the norm for male body-builders, is no less determined by a hierarchical, dualistic construction of gender than was the conventionally "feminine" norm that tyrannized female body-builders such as Bev Francis for years.

Although the specific cultural practices and meanings are different, similar mechanisms, I suspect, are at work in hysteria and agoraphobia. In these cases too, the language of femininity, when pushed to excess—when shouted and asserted, when disruptive and demanding—deconstructs into its opposite and makes available to the woman an illusory experience of power previously forbidden to her by virtue of her gender. In the case of nineteenth-century femininity, the forbidden experience may have been the breaking out of constraint, of bursting fetters—particularly moral and emotional fetters. John Conolly, the asylum reformer, recommended institutionalization for women who "want that restraint over the passions without which the female character is lost" (Showalter 1985:48). Hysterics often infuriated male doctors for lacking just this quality. S. Weir Mitchell described them as "the despair of physicians" whose "despotism selfishness wrecks the constitution of nurses and devoted relatives, and in unconscious or half-conscious self-indulgence destroys the comfort of everyone around them" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:207). It must have given the Victorian patient some illicit pleasure to be viewed as capable of such disruption of the staid nineteenth-century household. A similar form of power, I believe, is part of the experience of agoraphobia.

This does not mean that the primary reality of these disorders is not one of pain and entrapment. In anorexia, too, there is clearly a dimension of physical addiction to the biochemical effects of starvation. But whatever the physiology involved, the ways in which the subject understands and thematizes her experience cannot be reduced to mechanical process. The anorexic's ability to live with minimal food intake allows her to feel powerful and worthy of admiration in a "world," as Susie Orbach describes it, "from which at the most profound level [she] feels excluded" and unvalued (1985:103). The literature on both anorexia and hysteria is strewn with battles of will between the sufferer and those trying to "cure" her; the latter, as Orbach points out, very rarely understand that the psychic values she is fighting for are often more important to the woman than life itself.

**TEXTUALITY, PRAXIS, AND THE BODY**

The "solutions" offered by anorexia, hysteria, and agoraphobia, I have suggested, develop out of the practice of femininity itself, the pursuit of which is still presented as the chief route to acceptance and success for women in our culture. Too aggressively pursued, that practice leads to its own undoing, in one sense. For if femininity, as Susan Brownmiller has said, is at its very core a "tradition of imposed limitations" (1984:14), then an unwillingness to limit oneself, even in the pursuit of femininity, breaks the rules. But, of course, in another sense everything remains fully in place. The sufferer becomes wedded to an obsessive practice, unable to make any effective change in her life. She remains, as Toril Moi has put it, "gagged and chained to the feminine role" (Bernheimer and Kahane 1985:132), a reproducer of the docile body of femininity.

This tension between the psychological meaning of a disorder, which may enact fantasies of rebellion and embody a language of protest, and the practical life of the disordered body, which may utterly defeat rebellion and subvert protest, may be obscured by too exclusive a focus on the symbolic dimension and insufficient attention to praxis. As we have seen in the case of some Lacanian feminist readings of hysteria, the result of this can be a one-sided interpretation, romanticizing the hysterics' symbolic subversion of the phallocentric order while confined to her bed. This is not to say that confinement in bed has a transparent, univocal meaning—in powerlessness, debilitation, dependency, and so forth. The "practical" body is not a brute biological or material entity. It, too, is a culturally mediated form; its activities are subject to interpretation and description. The shift to the practical dimension is not a turn to biology or nature, but to another "register," as Foucault puts it (1979:136) of the cultural body: the register of the "useful body" rather than the "intelligible body." The distinction can prove useful, I believe, to feminist discourse.

The intelligible body includes our scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of the body—our cultural conceptions of the body, norms of beauty, models of health, and so forth. But the same representations may also be seen as forming a set of practical rules and regulations through which the
living body is “trained, shaped, obeys, responds,” becoming, in short, a socially adapted and “useful body” (Foucault 1979:136). Consider this particularly clear and appropriate example: The nineteenth-century “hour-glass” figure, emphasizing breasts and hips against a wasp-waist, was an “intelligible” symbolic form, representing a domestic, sexualized ideal of femininity. The sharp cultural contrast between the female and male form, made possible by the use of corsets, bustles, and so forth, reflected, in symbolic terms, the dualistic division of social and economic life into clearly defined male and female spheres. At the same time, to achieve the specified look, a particular feminine praxis was required—stilettoing, minimal eating, reduced mobility—rendering the female body unfit to perform activities outside of its designated sphere. This, in Foucauldian terms, would be the “useful body” corresponding to the aesthetic norm.

The intelligible body and the useful body are two arenas of the same discourse; they often mirror and support each other, as in the above illustration. Another example can be seen in the seventeenth-century philosophic conception of the body as a machine, mirroring an increasingly more automated productive machinery of labor. But the two bodies may also contradict and mock each other. A range of contemporary representations and images, for example, have coded the transcendence of female appetite and its public display in the slenderness ideal in terms of power, will, mastery, the possibilities of success in the professional arena, and so forth. These associations are carried visually by the slender superwomen of prime-time television and popular movies and promoted explicitly in advertisements and articles appearing routinely in women’s fashion magazines, diet books, and weight-training publications. The equation of slenderness and power emerges most dramatically when contemporary anorexics speak about themselves. “[My disorder] was about power,” says Kim Morgan in an interview for the documentary The Waist Land, “that was the big thing ... something I could throw in people’s faces, and they would look at me and I’d only weigh this much, but I was strong and in control, and hey, you’re sloppy.”

Yet of course the anorexic is anything but “strong” and “in control,” and not only full-blown anorexics live such contradictions. Recent statistics—for example, the widely publicized University of California study of fourth-grade girls in San Francisco—suggest that, at least in some American cultures, more and younger girls (perhaps as many as 80 percent of the nine-year-olds surveyed) are making dedicated dieting the central organizing principle of their lives. These fourth-graders live in constant fear, reinforced by the reactions of the boys in their classes, of gaining a pound and thus ceasing to be “sexy,” “attractive,” or, most tellingly, “regular.” They jog daily, count their calories obsessively, and risk serious vitamin deficiencies (not to mention fully developed eating disorders and delayed sexual and reproductive matura-

We may be producing a generation of young women with severely diminished menstrual, nutritional, and intellectual functioning.

Exposure and cultural analysis of such contradictory—and-mystifying relations between image and practice is only possible if one’s analysis includes attention to and interpretation of the “useful” or, as I prefer to call it, practical body. Such attention, although often inchoate and theoretically unsophisticated form, was central to the beginnings of the contemporary feminist movement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the objectification of the female body was a serious political issue. All the cultural paraphernalia of femininity, learning to please visually and sexually through the practices of the body—media imagery, beauty pageants, high heels, girdles, make-up, simulated orgasms—were seen as crucial in maintaining gender domination.

Disquietingly, for the feminists of the present decade, such focus on the politics of feminine praxis, although still maintained in the work of individual feminists, is no longer a centerpiece of feminist cultural critique. On the popular front, we find Ms. magazine presenting issues on fitness and “style,” the rhetoric reconstructed for the 1980s to pitch “self-expression” and “power.” Although feminist theory surely has the tools, it has not provided a critical discourse to dismantle and demystify this rhetoric. The work of French feminists has provided a powerful framework for understanding the inscription of phallocentric, dualistic culture on gendered bodies. But so far, French feminism has offered very little in the way of concrete, material analyses of the female body as a focus of practical cultural control. Among feminist theorists in this country, the study of cultural “representations” of the female body has flourished, and it has often been brilliantly illuminating and instrumental to a feminist rereading of culture. But the study of cultural representations alone, divorced from consideration of their relation to the practical lives of bodies, can obscure and mislead.

Here, Helena Michie’s significantly titled The Flesh Made Word offers a striking example. Examining nineteenth-century representations of women, appetite, and eating, Michie draws fascinating and astute metaphorical connections between female eating and female sexuality. Female hunger, she argues, and I agree, “figures unspeakable desires for sexuality and power” (1987:13). The Victorian novel’s “representational taboo” against depicting women eating (an activity, apparently, that only “happens offstage,” as Michie puts it) thus functions as a “code” for the suppression of female sexuality, as does the general cultural requirement, exhibited in etiquette and sex manuals of the day, that the well-bred woman eat little and delicately. The same coding is drawn on, Michie argues, in contemporary feminist “inversions” of Victorian values, inversions that celebrate female sexuality and power through images exulting in female eating and female hunger, depicting it explicitly, lushly, and joyfully.
Despite the fact that Michie’s analysis centers on issues concerning women’s hunger, food, and eating practices, she makes no mention of the grave eating disorders that surfaced in the late nineteenth century and that are ravaging the lives of young women today. The “practical” arena of women dieting, fasting, straitlacing, and so forth is, to a certain extent, implicit in her examination of Victorian gender ideology. But when Michie turns, at the end of her study, to consider recent feminist literature celebrating female eating and female hunger, the absence of even a passing glance at how women are actually managing their hunger today casts her analysis adrift from any concrete social moorings.

Michie’s sole focus is on feminist literature’s inevitable failure to escape “phallic representational codes” (1987:149). But the feminist celebration of the female body did not merely “deconstruct” on the written page or canvas. Largely located in the feminist counterculture of the 1970s, it has been culturally displaced by a very different contemporary reality; its celebration of female flesh now presents itself in jarring dissonance with the fact that women, feminists included, are starving themselves to death in our culture.

The rising incidence of eating disorders, increasing dissatisfaction and anxiety among girls and women concerning how they look, and the compulsive regimens of bodily “improvement” in which so many of us engage suggest that a political battle is being waged over the energies and resources of the female body, a battle in which at least some feminist agendas for women’s empowerment are being defeated.

“I do not deny the benefits of diet, exercise, and other forms of body ‘management.’ Rather, I view our bodies as a site of struggle, where we must work to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of ‘docility’ and gender normalization. This requires, I believe, a determinedly skeptical attitude toward the seeming routes of liberation and pleasure offered by our culture. It also demands an awareness of the often contradictory relations between image and practice, between rhetoric and reality. Popular representations, as we have seen, may speak forcefully through the rhetoric and symbolism of empowerment, personal freedom, ‘having it all.’ Yet female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century, pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy. The recognition and analysis of such contradictions, and of all the other collusions, subversions, and enticements through which culture enjoin the aid of our bodies in the reproduction of gender, requires that we restore a focus on female praxis to its formerly central place in feminist politics.

NOTES


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2. Over the last decade, there has been an undeniable increase in male concern over appearance. Study after study confirms, however, that there is still a large “gender gap” in this area. Research conducted at the University of Pennsylvania in 1985 found men to be generally satisfied with their appearance, often, in fact, “distorting their perceptions [of themselves] in a positive, self-aggrandizing way.” See “Dislike of Own Bodies Found Common Among Women,” New York Times, March 19, 1985. Women, however, were found to exhibit extreme negative assessments and distortions of body perception. Other studies have suggested that women are judged more harshly than men when they deviate from dominant social standards of attractiveness. Psychology Today (April 1986) reports that while the situation for men has changed recently, the situation for women has more than proportionately worsened, too. Citing results from 30,000 responses to a 1985 survey of perceptions of body image and comparing similar responses to a 1972 questionnaire, the magazine reports that the 1985 respondents were considerably more dissatisfied with their bodies than the 1972 respondents, and it notes a marked intensification of concern among men. Among the 1985 group, the group most dissatisfied with all their appearance, however, were teen-age women. Women today are by far the largest consumers of diet products, attenders of spas and diet centers, and subjects of intestinal by-pass and other fat reduction operations.

3. On our cultural obsession with slenderness, see Chernin 1981; Ohrbach 1985; Bordo 1985, 1989. For recent research on incidence and increase in anorexia nervosa and bulimia, see Greenfield et al. 1987; Rosenzweig and Spruiil 1987.
4. On the “gendered” and historical nature of these disorders: The number of female to male hystericología has been estimated as anywhere from two to one to four to one, while as many as 80 percent of all agoraphobics are female (Brodsky and Hare-Mustin 1980:116, 122). Although more cases of male eating disorders are being reported recently, it is estimated that close to 90 percent of all anorexics are female (Garfinkel and Garner 1982:112–113). For a sociohistorical account of female psychopathology, with particular attention to nineteenth-century disorders but having, unfortunately, little mention of agoraphobia or eating disorders, see Showalter 1985. For a discussion of social and gender issues in agoraphobia, see Seidenberg and deCrow 1983. On the clinical history of anorexia nervosa, see Garfinkel and Garner; for cultural, historical, and gender perspectives, see Bordo 1985, 1986; Ohrbach 1985, 1989.

5. There is evidence that in the case of eating disorders this is rapidly changing. Anorexia and bulimia, originally almost exclusively limited to upper- and upper-middle-class white families, are now touching ethnic populations (e.g., blacks, East Indians) previously unaffected and all socioeconomic levels (Garfinkel and Garner 1982:102–103). Although there are cultural reasons for such changes, equally interesting and crucial to study are the cultural factors which have “protected” certain ethnic groups from the disorders (see, for example, Hsu’s study of eating disorders among blacks).

6. In constructing such a paradigm, I do not pretend to do justice to any of these disorders in its individual complexity as “pathology” or as cultural formation. My aim is to chart some points of intersection, to describe some similar patterns, as they emerge through a particular reading of the phenomena—a “political” reading, if you will.

7. For studies suggestive of a striking increase in the frequency of eating disorders over the last twenty years, see Garfinkel and Garner 1982:100; Greenfeld et al. 1987; and Rosenzweig and Spruihl 1987. On the “epidemic” of hysteria and neurasthenia, see Showalter 1985; Smith-Rosenberg 1985.

8. See Nadelson and Normen 1982:5; Vicoius 1972:82. For more general discussions, see Gay 1984, Showalter 1985. The delicate lady, an ideal that had very strong class connotations (as does slenderness today), is not the only conception of femininity to be found in Victorian cultures. But it was arguably the single most powerful ideological representation of femininity in that era, affecting women of all classes, including those without the material means to fully realize the ideal. See Michie 1987 for discussions of the control of female appetite and Victorian constructions of femininity.


10. For other interpretive perspectives on the slenderness ideal, see Bordo 1985, 1989; Chernin 1981; Ohrbach 1985.

11. Striking, in connection with this, is Catherine Steiner-Adair’s 1984 study of high-school women, which reveals a dramatic association between problems with food and body-image and emulation of the cool, professionally “together” and gorgeous Superwoman. On the basis of a series of interviews, the high schoolers were classified into two groups—one that expressed scepticism over the Superwoman ideal, the other that thoroughly aspired to it. Later administration of diagnostic tests revealed that 94 percent of the Superwomen group fell into the eating disordered range of the scale. Of the other group, 100 percent fell into the noneating disordered range. Media images notwithstanding, young women today appear to sense, either consciously or through their bodies, the impossibility of simultaneously meeting the demands of two spheres whose values have been historically defined in utter opposition to each other.

12. When one looks into the many autobiographies and case studies of hysterics, anorexics, and agoraphobics, one is struck by the fact that these are, indeed, the sorts of women one might expect to be frustrated by the constraints of a specified female role. Freud and Breuer, in Studies on Hysteria (and Freud, in the later Dora) constantly remark on the ambivalence, independence, intellectual ability, and creative strivings of their patients. We know, moreover, that many women who later became the leading social activists and feminists of the nineteenth century were among those who fell ill with hysteria or neurasthenia. It has become a virtual cliché that the typical anorexic is a perfectionist, driven to excel in all areas of her life. Though less prominently, a similar theme runs throughout the literature on agoraphobia.

One must keep in mind that in drawing on case studies, one is relying on the perceptions of other, acculturated individuals. One suspects, for example, that the popular portrait of the anorexic as a relentless “overachiever” may be colored by the lingering or perhaps resurgent Victorianism of our culture’s attitudes toward ambitious women. One does not escape this hermeneutic problem by turning to autobiography. But in autobiography one is at least dealing with social constructions and attitudes that animate the subject’s own psychic reality. In this regard the autobiographical literature on anorexia in particular is strikingly full of anxiety about the domestic world and other themes which suggest deep rebellion against traditional notions of femininity; see Bordo 1985.


15. A focus on the politics of sexualization and objectification remains central to the antipornography movement (e.g., in the work of Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon). Feminists exploring the politics of appearance include Sandra Barky, Susan Brownmiller, Wendy Chapkis, Kim Chernin, and Susie Ohrbach. Recently, too, a developing feminist interest in the work of Michel Foucault has begun to produce a poststructuralist feminism oriented toward practice; see, for example, Diamond and Quinby 1988.

16. See, for example, Jardine 1985; Suleiman 1986; Michie 1987.
REFERENCES


