

Feminism and the Body

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Androgyny is an archaic and universal formula for the expression of *wholeness*, the coexistence of the contraries, or *coincidentia oppositorum*. More than a state of sexual completeness and autarchy, androgyny symbolises the perfection of a primordial, non-conditioned state. It is for this reason that androgyny is not attributed to supreme Beings only. Cosmic Giants, or mythical Ancestors of humanity are also androgynous... A mythical Ancestor symbolises the *commencement* of a new mode of existence; and every beginning is made in the wholeness of the being.

Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality* 1

Thus a woman's (re)discovery of herself can only signify the possibility of not sacrificing any of her pleasures to another, of not identifying with anyone in particular, of never being simply one. It is a sort of universe in expansion for which no limits could be fixed and which, for all that, would not be incoherency... Woman would always remain multiple...

Luce Irigaray, 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un'²

The 'nature' of the body seems today to be the central focus of feminist debate; the body now emerges as the locus of a new set of differences which supersede the earlier contestation between radical feminists and marxist or socialist feminists.³ Within this new setting of a fundamental questioning of the body it is my intention to draw out the implications of feminist representations of the body as they pose questions about the nature of the individual and of social life generally, and which arguably give voice to an emergent *general* socio-cultural transformation.⁴ This is by

no means to imply that this voice, or voices, are fully reflexive. Bearing the marks of their emergent condition, they remain half articulate, not necessarily cognizant of the dimensions of that broader socio-cultural context which contributes to shaping and is shaped by feminism. Though the different feminisms do ideological battle amongst themselves it may be of quite central importance — not the least to feminism itself — to argue that a shared cultural frame is constitutive of the very divisions and disputes which might otherwise appear to sunder feminism into a variety of incompatible positions.

In the following article the dispute between feminists who argue for an androgynous future and those looking forward to a pleni-

1. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, UK, Collins, 1972, p. 176.
2. Luce Irigaray, 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron eds, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p. 104.
3. The examples of feminist theory to be used in this article will primarily be those of 'radical feminists'. Radical feminists, in contradistinction to 'socialist' or 'marxist' feminists and 'liberal' feminists, hold that the oppression of women by men is the primary fact of all domination, and thus patriarchy, and the body and sexuality, are their primary considerations. Socialist-feminists generally hold to an historical explanation of women's oppression in terms of the primacy of socio-economic forces, investigating their intersection with patriarchy. However, because of the conceptual lead of radical feminists on questions to do with the body — which must occupy all feminisms if they are to be feminist at all — all feminist theorizing is swayed by the radical feminist analysis. Thus radical feminist gender analysis of the sex-role type has been incorporated into marxist-feminist arguments (e.g. Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, London, Verso Editions and NLB, 1980) and this analysis shares liberal-rationalist underpinning with liberal feminism. Radical feminist difference theory too, informs theorizing growing from other traditions, including marxist-feminism, e.g. the magazine *M/F*. To speak broadly, then, of feminism in this article is to recognize my use of what is usually designated radical feminist work, but to suggest that the analysis applies to all feminisms. For an explanation of the distinctions between radical, socialist and liberal feminisms see Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg Struhl, eds, *Feminist Frameworks*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1978.
4. The underlying and at times explicit framework of this article draws upon the work of Geoff Sharp. I have in mind specific articles in print such as 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', *Arena* 70, but also many long discussions with him. I also acknowledge the work of other writers in *Arena* who have contributed to the development of *Arena* theses on which I have generally drawn. Clearly also, though this article seeks to comment on the feminist project in a general way, it is offered as a contribution to a feminist practice, and obviously draws on that tradition.

tude of difference will be traced in their relation to such a common, implicit cultural commitment. Despite the express intention of all feminists to deliver to women the authentic experience of their bodies, it will be argued that avowedly different feminist representations of the body join in contributing to a *disembodiment* of the person — an accusation which feminism usually levels at 'patriarchal' technological rationality. In this, feminist representations of the body may be said to be commonly underpinned by a commitment to an autonomous individual — an emergent entity taken for granted, rather than reflexively examined.

As the above excerpt from Eliade illustrates, it should not surprise us entirely that contemporary feminism often projects an ideal of androgyny onto the future it seeks to create. Professedly engaged in a revolution of our culture's ways, feminism actively seeks to redefine what it is to be human; it sees itself as, and in ways to be discussed *is*, the commencement of a new mode of existence. In this article the elaboration of the specific 'wholeness of the being' to which feminism aspires will be one object; and as Eliade might suggest, the idea of androgyny found here can be associated with a notion of the transcendence of the nature/culture dichotomy. Of course, for Eliade the androgynous god or mythical being represents a prior state, the time of the beginning from whence the differentiation of the sexes and other related divisions evolved;⁵ androgyny is part of the symbolic explanation of that meeting of the natural with the socio-cultural. Following Lévi-Strauss, it can be said that myths of the beginning make clear to real social actors the irreconcilability of certain features of human life;⁶ the symbol of the androgyne has not usually implied a lived androgyny, bodily or psychologically.⁷ Feminism in this, however, is unique for not only has it projected different forms of androgyny as possible lived futures — psychologically and/or sexually — it remains if nothing more positive, ambiguous in its response to

5. For example, the myths of pre-literate cultures and various versions of the Christian understanding of the Creation. In the latter case both God and the 'original ancestor' — today known as the male, Adam — have been known as androgynes. See Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-7 and Carolyn Merchant on androgyny in the gnostic heresies, *The Death of Nature*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980, pp. 16-17.
6. See Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the myth of Asdiwal in *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. 2, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 146-197.
7. Though some gnostics may have sought to *live* androgyny, feminism remains unique in its programme for an everyday androgyny, as the following discussion will show.

technologies which may now realize bodily the melding of the categories male and female.

For Luce Irigaray however, androgyny is not the only future to which feminism can point. The feminist difference theorists apparently counter the logic of the androgyne, objecting to the constraints of the new wholeness it offers which they see as defined in terms of the 'old' sexual dualism. Difference theorists, then, lay claim to the truly radical feminist project: here is a vision and a projected practice of the person as a multiplicity of identities, sexual and psychological, ever defiant of the rigidifying meaning of 'imposed' frameworks of definition. Indeed, as the excerpt at the head of this article shows, the symbolism of androgyny is wholly alien to this feminist tendency. Here there is no attachment to the so-called static categories of male and female; indeed, woman seems no longer earthbound by body, nor tied to prior forms of earthly sociality: she becomes the focus of a universe of potentialities, self-defining, an unbounded force.

Of course it is the difference theorists rather than those who foster androgyny who place greatest store on the role of the body in the formation of sexual and personal identity — the inescapable and differential influence of different bodily forms and the positive attributes of woman's sexual morphology. But this body, as I shall discuss presently, ultimately exhibits little of the tangibility by which bodies have typically been known — a feature of the work of difference theorists which commits them as, if not more strongly than those proposing androgyny to the conditions of that 'new mode of being'. In view of this we could say that the early second wave feminists drew largely unconsciously upon the meanings of the traditional dualism out of which the androgyne is constructed. The profundity of the rupture contained in this new beginning, however, suggests the likelihood of a hankering after a new theoretical formulation and symbolism to express more authentically what is a radically new socio-cultural form and experienced way of life. It may be, then, that a development in feminist theorizing consistent with the experience of changing aspirations and a new way of life can be identified, and that feminist difference theory, far from constituting a dramatic break with the androgyny position, may be seen to be continuous with it.

Androgyny and the Body

'Androgyny' is here taken to mean a particular conception or group of similar conceptions of the constitution of the subject. It

speaks not just of sexuality but of the relationship of body to psyche and social form, the latter seen here in terms of its integrative mode or primary means of the interpellation of the subject as a specific kind of individual.

In particular, the androgyny tendency in feminism takes as given the rigidly dualistic conception of sexual difference as traditionally understood in the terms of the nature/culture, mind/body dichotomy. That is, the traits and tasks associated with the male — reason, instrumentalism, a transcendence of the natural in culture — are implicitly understood as oppositions to the female's association with nature — her expressivism, her tasks in the private, her 'animality'. But further, as difference theorists and other commentators point out, this self-evident adoption of the nature/culture dualism carries with it the traditional asymmetrical valuations of male and female which all feminisms at least explicitly have sought to dismantle. This contradictory outcome is most clear in those androgyny positions where an instrumentalism is explicitly encouraged — where women are encouraged to 'learn the male role' or to unquestioningly take up technological solutions to the 'problem' of their bodies. At its broadest though, wherever there is a proposal for equality through processes of degendering, this 'male' valuation is in operation. It is also present in explicit calls for an actively synthetic androgyny where male and female traits are apparently equally valued, but where the body is ultimately held to play no significant or necessary role in the attribution of social function or cultural meaning. In the androgyny tendency we see that bodily difference has no theoretical importance. Rather a fundamental similarity across sexes is theorized. But conceiving of persons as androgynous this feminism in fact conforms to the deeply buried assumption that the subject is male, transcendent in his possession of an ultimate rationality, disembodied in this transcendence. Critiques of the androgyny position to the contrary argue for an embodied subjectivity and see the female's closer cultural association with the body as a means to revolutionizing both our conceptions and the actual constitution of the self.

Mainstream sociology, as Bryan Turner points out, has in its historic opposition to biologicistic explanations of society, almost completely failed to confront the issue of people as social beings, 'having and to some degree being bodies'.⁸ Indeed, in holding to the primary assumption of a sociological determinism, the body has largely been excluded from theory, the centrality of the self/

8. Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 30.

society dichotomy occluding any vision of the other possible paradigm for sociological investigation, the nature/society intersection. As he puts it: 'The body as part of the continuity of the self was discarded in favour of the continuity of the self resting on the continuity of others' perceptions of personal continuity.'⁹ The inconsequentiality of the body has, then, been firmly entrenched in sociological theoretical endeavour. Feminist difference theorists see as one of their primary targets this very occlusion in the work of feminist writers on sex roles, sex-role theory being described as an *epistème* now generalized in feminism.¹⁰ Indeed the sex-role conditioning argument, despite its promise to deliver to women the authentic expression of self and body, can be shown to have its roots in the dominant sociological tradition and its denial of woman and body.

Kate Millet, for example, while especially identifying mainstream role theory as one perpetrator of the oppression of women, takes up that general framework of sociological explanation.¹¹ Thus she explains the universality of the patriarchal domination of women in terms of women being conditioned to an acceptance of their own conventional and oppressive sex-role stereotype. In this scheme, men occupy the public world, dominate key social and political institutions and exercise a distinctive instrumentalism; all stereotypically masculine. These tasks and traits are erroneously labelled 'male', understood as naturally given; rather for Millet, it is as constituents of a pervasive *gender* type that they form the basis of men's privileged position. Women, similarly, are commonly described in terms of their 'sex', albeit as the 'second sex'. But it is as their *gender* that they have in fact been known as private, passive and expressive. A knowledge of the construction of gender is, then, the key to an understanding of woman's oppression and to her liberation. In the terms of role theory, gender is the collection of traits learnt as sex role. On the one hand, women acquire the attributes of their sex role as small children; learning them as the 'natural' attributes of females. In their role as primary socialization agent, the mother, they also become complicit in their own oppression, as they conserve distinct gender attributes in the rearing of their own girls and boys. On the other hand, role traits are reinforced and maintained in the settings of adult life in the counter-positioning of role expectations as these enforce prohibi-

9. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

10. Mick Carter, 'S/he, It; From Unisex to Androgyny', *Art Network* 10, Winter 1983, p. 29.

11. Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971.

tions and sanctions, constructing the dominant cultural institutions and power structures.

Millett, then, proposes that the formation of 'sexual' identity is not biologically underpinned as the 'prescriptive', commonsense assumption of mainstream sociology would have it.¹² Rather, we come to know ourselves as man or woman according to a kind of cultural politics, primarily focused through the psycho-social interactions of child-rearing. The sexually differentiated body is only invested with social significance as an unrecognized power play between men and women fills out the content of their dichotomous and unequally valued roles. It is thus that Millett may reason:

Since patriarchy's biological foundations appear so very insecure, one has some cause to admire the strength of a 'socialization' which can continue a universal condition 'on faith alone', as it were, or through an acquired value system exclusively.¹³

Likewise, 'Psychosexually, there is no differentiation between the sexes at birth. Psychosexual personality is therefore postnatal and learned.'¹⁴ Logically, then, Millett may argue that the traditional allocation of roles can readily be reversed, and *Sexual Politics* in fact challenges women to prove their equality with men by adopting the traits once known as male. Ultimately, it seems, what has traditionally been understood as male and female is purely social construction.

However, though Millett raises to consciousness this area of patriarchal assumption and appears to provide a basis for a re-valuation of 'woman', her subscription to the basic tenets of role theory leads her work on to unintended consequences. Indeed, the conception of gender merely as role, as superficial social construction, relegates the body to a complete sociological irrelevance, to the logical view of persons in their social being as disembodied. As Moira Gatens argues, for 'these theorists of gender' there is

the unargued assumption that both the body and the psyche are postnaturally passive 'tabula rasa'. That is, ... the mind, of either sex, is a neutral, passive entity, a blank slate, on which is inscribed various social 'lessons'. The body, on their account, is the passive mediator of these inscriptions.¹⁵

In this view, sexual and personal identity may be divorced from

12. *Ibid.*, see 'The Influence of Functionalism', pp. 220-233.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

15. Moira Gatens, 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction', in Judith Allen and Paul Patton eds, *Beyond Marxism? Interventions After Marx*, Leichardt, NSW, Intervention Publications, 1983, p. 144.

the body, as a radical environmental determinism shapes analysis. The relation of sex to gender is completely arbitrary; bodies do not matter socially.

The logic of women's disembodiment becomes clearer if the philosophical roots of this functionalist sociology are traced. As Bob Connell notes, all role theory, including feminism on sex roles, is ultimately supported by the assumption of the existence of the individual rational will. He puts it in terms of a basically psychological 'solution' to questions of society. The counter-positioning of different role expectations such that sanctions are enacted leads to an infinite regress — unless someone, somewhere, as it has to be assumed, *chooses* to take his/her role or to enforce the expected sanction.¹⁶ How else are we to explain the role-playing patriarch if he is not at some point enacting a conspiracy to protect his own self-interest,¹⁷ how in the context of patriarchy is the feminist to carry out that radical self-transformation if will and self-interest independent of social experience are not assumed. Similarly, how is there to be any sense of oppression in this model unless there is an independently existing subject 'behind' the role which is said to distort one's potential or undermine one's authentic experience of self.¹⁸ As Gatens and others would have it, this feminism's psychologistic bent and its celebration of 'choice' may be understood in terms of the self/society paradigm's typically liberal-rationalist assumptions.¹⁹ Here the self is assumed as an abstract entity living a continuity, with independent force, 'behind' its infinite practical plasticity. The self of the abstract individual exists as Mind conceived of as prior to the social and quite independent of the body. Within the framework of liberalism's 'normative dualism', as the body cannot 'know', the only genuine self is the rational ego,²⁰ the body being ultimately assumed to be a purely biological entity.

In this, as in sociology at large, then, the body as theoretical

16. R. W. Connell, 'The Concept of Role and What to Do With It', *Which Way Is Up?*, Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1983, p. 199.
17. Many of the early feminist writings have been noted for leanings towards simple conspiracy theory.
18. See Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Sussex, Rowman & Allanheld, Harvester Press, 1983, p. 43.
19. Gatens, *op. cit.*; also Carter, *op. cit.*; and Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Against Androgyny', *Telos* 47, Spring 1981; not to mention the 'French feminists' of *New French Feminisms*.
20. See Elshtain, *op. cit.*, p. 12, for a spelling out of the implicit assumptions of androgynists.

object disappears, and the self/society paradigm is embraced. And just as the body exists as a theoretical absence, so it is projected as a vacant space in the actual interactions between persons in society. In feminism's intention to dispel biological explanations of woman's position, women become, like men, disembodied; subjectivity in the androgynous form takes shape in the assumption of the possibility of individual rational choice between different role contents and this irrespective of bodily form. In the sex-role thesis we have a programme for the transcendence of the body: a liberation *from* it, rather than *of* it. As indicated, this transcendence is accomplished by Mind — Millett's revolution of consciousness — and as such the assumptions of the feminist sex-role thesis appear ultimately to be isomorphic with those of the traditional sexual dualism it ostensibly seeks to dismantle.

Now Connell argues that the revival of role theory in the late sixties and seventies illustrates the bourgeois-conservative nature of that thesis. He believes that the legitimation crisis of that time necessitated an active revival of ideological models of the harmonious society, and that even feminism's attempt to 'change the value signs' attached to sex roles may be seen in this light.²¹ But if this meant that we were to see feminism's explicit attempt to subvert 'patriarchal' sociological precepts as merely a variation on an old ideological theme, it would not be entirely satisfactory.²² This is especially applicable to the difference theorists' ready labelling of the sex-role thesis and other versions of androgyny as but expressions of the 'liberal-rationalist mythology'. Of course, such critiques are crucial. As the above analysis indicates, exposing the theoretical roots of feminism as those of conservative sociological theory, shows the complete reversal of feminism's intention. But such analyses do emphasize certain aspects of feminism's early theoretical formulations to the detriment of other vital clues to the nature of the feminist project. If these formulations are taken at the level of their own explicit self-understandings, as beginnings, and if this description is at all justified, then analysis of a different order is necessitated. With this in mind it will be argued that the feminist sex-role thesis in its explicit opposition to 'patriarchal sociology', and in its liberal-rationalist formulations in the service of women, is a kind of straining at the paradigmatic limits of an established ideology's 'usefulness'. This is meant in the sense that, while the implicit assumptions of long-standing theoretical

21. Connell, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

22. Of course Connell, in so analysing feminist sex-role theory, does not generalize such criticism to all feminism.

understandings continue to be fruitful ground for the seeding of ideological constructions, the ideological framework overall begins to lose its grip as implicit commonsense. That is, with role theory, its implicit assumptions allow for the expression of some continuity of concerns in feminism, though these basic assumptions come to no longer entirely mesh with the lived self-evidence of its audience. We might say that the logic of the liberal-rationalist ethos is now set in a new context,²³ and this combination in fact shapes new aspirations, impelling implicitly a new commonsense apprehension of the person, body and society. If role theory has always been disembodied, a new form of disembodiment is anticipated with feminist role theory.

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Some of the early feminist writers, and now many of the histories of the women's movement, recognized, in some sense or other, that developments in the productive sector and particularly the development of certain technologies had shaped women's experience in the fifties and sixties and underpinned *the possibility* of the women's liberation movement.²⁴ The Pill, for example, brought to fruition a realization of the possibility of calling for control of one's body. Equally, the development of technologies which have reduced the need for physical labour dependent on male's bodily strength and the expansion of white collar work since World War II, have underpinned the possibility for calls for a recognition of women's equality in the public realm.²⁵ These shifts which pushed or beckoned women out of the private realm, creating the sense

23. This makes use of work instigated by Sharp into the shift from formulations of liberal individualism as ideological expression of one 'constitutive level' to an 'ideology of autonomy', the expression of another. See Sharp, *op. cit.*
24. For example, Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 28-30 on the post-war education explosion, expanded consumer production and related technological development; Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981 on the Pill; and for a more popular understanding, Kate Ahearne, 'Still a Dash of Cave in Everyman', *Age*, 26 January 1985, Saturday Extra.
25. Of course there have been earlier calls for equality between the sexes — for instance, in first wave feminism. But I assume that different social contexts generate different understandings of equality: the term is to some degree historically specific. Amongst nineteenth century feminists who could have appreciated the radical equality which the Pill now appears to offer?

of marginalization of which Glennon writes,²⁶ provided the underlying conditions in which women were spurred on to make sense of their own experience. But though these developments have been pointed to by feminists, their nature as *degendering in themselves* is not particularly drawn out.²⁷ Indeed, when it comes to making sense of the experience of women before the post-war explosion of technique,²⁸ any sense of real differences between men and women, related to a material difference between male and female bodies, is somehow lost. As noted previously, feminist role theory critiques mainstream sociological theory from the point of view of its having been prescriptive rather than descriptive; but what is important here is that this typification facilitates a view of the earlier sex-role theory as *thoroughly* 'ideological'.²⁹ The result seems to have been that not only was the male/female distinction constructed by mainstream sociology jettisoned (the 'John Wayne - Marilyn Monroe' *distortion*³⁰); the existence of *any* difference was denied. The point is that mainstream sex-role theory in part did describe, or at least elaborate upon, a real and practical difference. Its credibility, the fact that it had some commonsense value, was dependent on a partial 'meeting' of ideology with the lived constraints of the experience of material bodies.³¹

26. Lynda M. Glennon, *Women and Dualism*, New York, Longman, 1979, pp. 16-45, where she identifies women's experience of marginalization as a response to modernity, unusual in feminist self-understanding.
27. Turner recognizes that capitalism does not of necessity demand the traditional male/female dualism. It is the most commonly held feminist view that the male/female division of labour is reproduced in the interests of capital.
28. This is a rough historical 'dividing line' pointed to by Sharp, *op. cit.*, for example p. 65.
29. Ideology appears here in inverted commas to indicate that common conception of ideology as false consciousness used by Millet, for example, but not subscribed to in this article.
30. This is to use a formulation of Mary Daly's unfaithfully. While she sees androgynist feminism to depend upon this kind of stereotypic depiction of male and female characteristics, it seems to fit much better to me with the role theory constructions of the 1950s and 60s, the heydays of the two 'stars', as the ideological distortions of sex-role theory of that era.
31. Of course this is not to deny the important work of feminist historians who, especially in their work on the changes wrought since the industrial revolution, have reclaimed for women areas of employment which they previously held but are today commonly understood as male; for example in Cynthia Cockburn's *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*, London, Pluto Press, 1983. Nor is it to deny that there are areas of work which females and males have both successfully occupied and which when called women's work come to be understood as less demanding physically and mentally.

We might say, then, that though role theory was always underpinned by the idealist framework of liberal-rationalism, though the person (male or female) could be conceived of as the abstract individual, and even though capitalism had practically shaped persons as abstract entities,³² the liberal-rationalist framework could not refer in reality to a completed 'sameness' of the sexes, nor had capitalism achieved the productive-scientific/technological potential for such a lived degendering.³³ Feminist sex-role theory, then, shares the idealist framework of a well-seasoned liberal-rationalism. It clearly calls upon deeply buried assumptions about the powers of mind to construct reality; strongly facilitative of feminist aspirations to ready personal/political change. But only with a socio-economically founded degendering taking place on a broad scale could that idealist framework, in a sense, come to *live out its internal logic*. In its practical implications and its commonsense or implicit recognition of the changed conditions of female/male relations, feminist sex-role theory must be seen as at least a preparation leading to a qualitative leap in cultural perceptions of the nature of the person and the body, reflective of a revolution in the actual constitution of the subject, both male and female.

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With *explicit* calls for androgyny and its explicit construction in feminist theory and fiction as technological intervention in the body, we see only a greater commonsense 'recognition' of the new conditions of existence. In Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* for example, we see an explicit rebuttal of psychologistic explanations of male-female relations; and with her assertion of a materialist account of women's oppression, the strong adoption of technological 'solutions' to the 'problem' of women's bodies.³⁴

Here, logically, there is no fundamental antipathy between the sex-role proposal for degendering and Firestone's explicit call for androgyny via technological means. Where the body is assumed to be, ultimately, merely a biological entity, passive and essentially

32. While liberalism has always conceived the abstract individual in philosophical terms, the constitutive abstraction argument, as discussed by Sharp, *op. cit.*, explains the experience of individual life under capitalism as the *lived* abstraction of the form of social relationship impelled by the commodity, see p. 70.

33. As discussed presently, this 'lived degendering' is achieved in the new reproductive technologies.

34. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, New York, Bantam Books, 1972.

divorced from the individual's psychic life, a technological interventionist notion of control may readily take hold. In the sex-role thesis women were to take control by realizing the transcendent powers of mind through their sexual and personal redefinition understood as psychological change. In Firestone's work the same assumption of a liberal-rationalist normative dualism may be seen to underpin her technological solution to women's oppression; Mind is concretized in test-tube reproduction and the body explicitly rejected.³⁵ It is thus that 'the end of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just to eliminate male *privilege* but the sex *distinction* itself . . .'³⁶ In Firestone's scheme the body in history *has* exerted a direct influence on the sexual division of labour and broader cultural understanding; woman's reproductive functions being the basis of her negative valuation. But the body of the future is essentially passive; with the reproductive function disembodied, genital difference 'would no longer matter culturally'.³⁷ In any case, when Firestone says that the body has perpetrated a 'tyranny' on women she is still in characteristic liberal-rationalist style, divorcing the body from the self as the antagonist of rational mind.

So the identification of Firestone's work as in the liberal-rationalist mould is largely correct. But Firestone's observation that 'Humanity has begun to *outgrow* nature'³⁸ surely says more than can be explained by labelling it 'liberal-rationalist'. With respect to its commonsense setting, it is a willing embrace and *manifest* recognition of the fundamentally changed possibilities for relationships between men and women now able to be *lived* through the new technologies of the body. In this it might be said to raise to the androgynous feminist consciousness the real means of its transcendence of the body. Certainly, feminists often display an ambivalence³⁹ toward Firestone's embrace of the reproductive technologies and commentators often hold that Firestone's influence on the women's liberation movement has been negligible.⁴⁰ But the Firestone vision of androgyny has been everpresent in women's movement discussions and taken up time and again in

35. For example, her description of pregnancy as barbaric, *ibid.*, p. 198.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

39. Thus, of course, the feminist difference theorists whose rejection of 'androgynist feminism' has been foreshadowed; but also a popular, less tangible uneasiness held in a complex and often contradictory commonsense.

40. For example, Jaggar, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

feminist thinking on reproduction and in feminist popular literature, especially in its science fiction utopias.⁴¹

For example, Firestone's call for the 'reintegration of the Male (Technological Mode) with the Female (Aesthetic Mode) to create an androgynous culture surpassing the heights of either cultural stream'⁴² is echoed in Marge Piercy's *Mattapoissett*, one possible future earth,⁴³ and in Mary Staton's *The Legend of Biel*.⁴⁴ The equality and relative harmony of these degendered worlds is dependent on the loss of any functional relation between body, reproduction and its previously related tasks. And this is achieved as reproduction is given over to the gestation tank and test-tube, with experts taking on various aspects of the 'parenting role'. With sex roles rendered obsolete, only a division of labour according to *individual* talents and skills need exist. With the 'natural' reproduction function eliminated and bodies therefore exposed to the same environmental conditions (work, diet, pleasure), male and female bodies grow alike in their strength and other physical potentialities. Consumed by an avid female audience as utopias, these worlds may be taken to indicate something of the commonsense aspirations of contemporary readers. Even where Ursula Le Guin rejects the suggestion that her physiologically androgynous Gethenians⁴⁵ are a utopian vision, the same commonsense assumptions pervade.⁴⁶ Her description of her task as the stripping away of gender in order to find what is essentially human — which is achieved fictionally by hormonal experiment — belies Millett's commonsense behaviourism, but is one which in *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes the leap into the commonsense of Firestone's direct technological intervention in the body.

41. Firestone is always raised as a landmark of feminist theorizing, always at least a reference point in discussion of the technologies, one of the most popularly quoted writers as 'feminist'. Though many feminists now reject her embrace of the technologies (with the rise of difference theory), the apparently straightforward logic of her position — which appeals at a commonsense level — remains to perplex even those whom she makes uneasy.
42. Firestone, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
43. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York, Fawcett Crest, 1976.
44. As discussed in Susan H. Lees, 'Motherhood in Feminist Utopias', in Ruby Röhlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch eds, *Women in Search of Utopias*, New York, Schocken Books, 1984, pp 226-227.
45. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Great Britain, Panther Books, 1979.
46. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*, (ed: Susan Wood), New York, Perigree Books, 1979, p. 163.

Androgyny and Cultural Mediation

Firestone is equally straightforward on the question of culture itself. Androgyny will represent 'an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation — a matter-anti-matter explosion, ending with a poof! culture itself'.⁴⁷ She adds that 'We shall not miss it. We shall no longer need it.' Of course there is the recognition here that the body has in some sense underpinned the traditional institutions (motherhood, the family); but with the 'natural' constraints gone in the new technologies, culture itself is apparently able to be dispensed with. Again this vision of androgyny seems only to give clarity to the aspirations of less explicit positions on androgyny. In all, with the hope for escape from the body, comes the implicit belief in the possibilities of transcending culture itself — for the body indeed is and has been, one of the conditions and relatively secure bases of our *collective* social knowledge.

Indeed, the tangible body has provided all social groups with a basic and necessary analogue for human cultural understanding; the body's natural systemic qualities providing a model of exchange and a key source of signifiatory materials.⁴⁸ In this view, the body is both a model for and its various aspects parts of a complex sign system or 'language'. As 'signifier' it helps to pattern a structure of homologous relationships across areas of meaningful activity, and as 'signified' it carries a heavy condensation of meaning drawn from the totality of the relationships of the system. 'Spoken' by a native, the language of the body has embedded within it the broader systemically organized knowledge of the group, and a cognitive and emotional security is facilitated in the person by this logical patterning and apparent striving after consonance.⁴⁹

In turn it can be said that specific cultural understandings and usages of the body, understood as part of a linguistic system, may be related to particular forms of social exchange and modes of social integration. Indeed, language usage has embedded in it the key codes of any cultural group such that the social structure becomes the implicit substratum of the cultural participant's

47. Firestone, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

48. See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973.

49. See Douglas on the implicit, especially 'Self-Evidence', in *Implicit Meanings, Essays in Anthropology*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

individual experience.⁵⁰ Thus, for example, where categorical boundaries are respected as if 'absolutely given' in utterances to do with the body, we see that individual exercise of meaningful activity is strongly circumscribed by the knowledge and related prohibitions and sanctions of the group. Here the normative boundaries are strongly drawn according, if you like, to a restricted set of perceptual possibilities, the typically face-to-face setting of the relatively closed social system making for a certain immediacy in the confrontation of the individual with group norm, and little 'space' for the individual exploration of meanings, motivations, 'self'. In this setting one is confronted with a picture of the relative rigidity and immediacy of the social structure present in the interactions and understandings of persons, facilitated by the face-to-face setting, or tangibly embodied interactions of community life. Here we see also, however, a rich condensation of meaning in participants' actions and utterances, bonds between persons in the wholeness of their tangible embodiment, and generally a personal cognitive and emotional security which underpins personal formation, providing for the person substantial meaning and the coherence of a largely 'given' identity.⁵¹

Where, on the other hand, in 'utterances' of the body we see the categorical boundaries subjected to forms of individual speculation, we will find quite different modes of social control and forms of social structuring.⁵² Where the body and its functions are questioned, and where it is for example represented as crossing the time-worn categories in an *everyday* androgyny, we can expect to find a radical shift away from the more concrete social ties and controls of the face-to-face setting. Indeed, with an increased realm of the self, the possibility of the elaboration of one's motivations and the (abstract) principles by which one takes action, we find embodied interactions and their attendant immediacy in terms of the control of the group are dropped away. In this relatively open social system, social relationships are extended in time and space, the 'language of the body' dependent on its actual presence having become 'optional'.⁵³ Social integration in this

50. See Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, Great Britain, Paladin, 1971, p. 167.

51. See Douglas on Bernstein's 'restricted code' and her 'group' social relational formation, *Natural Symbols*, *op. cit.*, Chapters 2 and 4.

52. See Douglas on Bernstein's 'elaborated code' and her 'grid' social relational formation, *ibid.*, Chapters 2 and 4.

53. Sharp notes the now expressed need of the contemporary person to reclaim the body in the context of socio-cultural change, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

setting in fact depends upon attenuated processes of control, the mediation of meaning and value through intervening mechanisms which address the person as radically solitary individual.⁵⁴

Our bodies, then, are not related to cultural meaning according to a mechanical notion of a direct relationship between 'social function' and biology (Firestone); nor are they empty vessels containing identities *learnt* through culture conceived only in terms of 'conditioning' (Millett). We are our bodies, and only in and only through them do we know ourselves and our relationships to others. They are both the site and in part the source of active processes of signification which inescapably bind persons into overarching systems of meaning and secure them to particular modes of lived social interchange and their underlying constitutive forms.

It is this very conception of the body that allows for a 'reading' of the feminist body as signifier of feminism's aspirations, culturally encoded, and its relation to that emergent social form. Mary Douglas' work on anomalous beings and Lévi-Strauss' conception of the functions of mythic thought provide insight into feminism's androgynous body.⁵⁵ As noted at the outset, androgyny has not so far in human history implied any lived or practical mode of existence. Quite the contrary: the anomalous being, the anomalous body, straddling opposing categories, has stood in all cultures as sign both of a culture's deepest insecurities — the unsolvable existential mysteries — and its strongest sureties — that belief that the boundaries between man and woman are absolute in everyday life and must be protected. The boundaries may only be overcome in very special personages or at very special times of ritual transcendence. The androgyne has never meant a divestment of culture; in fact culture always has in it a place for its own apparent divestment.⁵⁶ Here are those *extraordinary* points and moments where the constraints of the tangible body, as they have been elaborated in distinctive cultural systems, are temporarily overcome. In other words, the constraints of ordinary day-to-day existence lived 'in' the tangible body have been mediated by the image of the 'other' body reconstructed in the androgynous god or mythical being.

54. For example, the work on advertising and the electronic media by Gerry Gill, 'Cultural Management and Ideology in the Consumer Society', MA Prelim. Thesis, Melbourne University, 1980.

55. See Douglas, 'Self Evidence', *op. cit.*, and Lévi-Strauss, for example, *op. cit.*

56. I mean by this those moments of ritual engagement and religious ecstasy for example, as are observed in non-literate cultural settings.

In feminism's everyday androgyny and its implication of a hope for an end to culture, we do not see an aspiration to a special moment of transcendence but rather the hope for the overcoming of all mediating forms and structures. We are asked to live a social form which elevates the immediacy of experience to knowledge, which dissolves boundary distinctions *per se*, and which constructs that sameness which appears to make possible the subject's immediate grasping of her object. The sex-role thesis promises that the individual is in immediate relation to her object, rational will binding mind to its object of a simple, cognitive choice, outside the mediations of socio-cultural process. The explicit technological interventionist thesis, foreshadowing the real means of choices which override prior categorical and normative boundaries, proposes that the new technologies of the body are themselves beyond the mediation of any more general system of meanings. In this theoretical construction of the person as degendered (s)he is no longer dependent on the collective definition of the significance of her/his sex; rather it seems that the individual (*qua* individual) is understood to be able to negotiate the meaning of her/his body. The ideology of 'choice', the popular expression of the sex-role thesis, has led women to believe that change in personal and sexual identity is change in essentially superficial characteristics, an act of will through which aspects of an essentially external world — including the body — may be pieced together to form an individually chosen coherence.⁵⁷ That of 'control', as in 'control of our bodies, control of our lives' has encouraged a view of control as that of the instrumentally-gearred will in opposition to any sense of the body as 'social fact', emotionally underpinning that belief in the neutrality of technologies of the body, also conceived of as part of that external world and as objects of an unconstrained choice.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of feminist androgyny's hope for an everyday transcendence in autonomous self-definition and its link to a distinctive social relational form is found in this early feminism's oft-used metaphor of flying. A symbolic psychic archetype of sexual transcendence, it is used by both Millett and Jong in *Flying*⁵⁸ and *Fear of Flying*.⁵⁹ In the former case, the

57. A good example of the view of the superficiality of sexual identification was the lesbian feminist slogan, 'Feminism the theory: lesbianism the practice' where women were effectively exhorted to shed their sexual identity as if it were an outer skin. Connell criticizes this aspect of sex-role theory, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

58. Millett, *Flying*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

59. Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*, London Granada, 1973.

tenor of the sexual liberation proffered by the women's liberation movement in general, is paralleled by Millett's own apparent liberation in the transition from the 'instrumentalism' of *Sexual Politics* to the lesbianism of *Sita*.⁶⁰ Written as a stream of consciousness, echoing Millett's flux of love and relationships, a new identity is being formed.⁶¹ The message is also clear that for all mere mortal women, a transcendence achieved by mind — clear in the very stream of consciousness style — is possible; one's choice of sexual object is but a superficial discrimination. In that stream of consciousness, as with the very sense of flying, we may find the hope for the overcoming of all mediating form, that of the orgasmic immediacy of the unity of the subject grasping her object. But it is particularly interesting that this flying is not achieved through any likening of the transcendent act to the flight of a bird, or any other flying creature of the natural or traditionally understood spiritual world; rather it is made to work in relation to Millett's cross-Atlantic jet-setting.

A parallel case is found in June Singer's *Androgyny, A Theory of Sexuality for the New Age*.⁶² Here, where flying is again a favoured metaphor, we could have readily expected reference to the heavens as traditionally conceived in the figures of gods and mystics. Singer is immersed in the myths of antiquity and the mystical traditions of East and West; she searches these for clues to an androgyny appropriate to this the new age. But the following, her opening passage, belies the mundanity of her conception — the mundanity of the androgyny hoped for:

Soaring into space.

Taking off in a jet liner heading for Chicago.

Feeling the exhilaration that comes from doing something totally against human nature. An *opus contra naturam*, as the alchemists called their work. The excitement of flying, something that a human being was not meant to do, allows consciousness to shift to another level. Ascending to thirty-five thousand feet, I find myself willing to think that the apparently impossible may not be impossible after all. I remember Blake's *Proverb*: 'What is now proved was once only imagin'd'.

Human sexuality is natural enough. It begins with the proposition that we are male or we are female, which is surely incontrovertible. *Androgyny* is a work against nature, or seems to be. The sky over mid-America is an appropriate place to begin a consideration of the androgyne.⁶³

60. Millett, *Sita*, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1977.

61. See Millett's rejection of the self of *Sexual Politics* as 'male' and the positive reflection on the self of *Flying* in Glennon, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

62. June Singer, *Androgyny*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Here is a truly twentieth century conception, for it is the icon of late-capitalism's world tourist and its commuter which is carrying the author into a distinctively contemporary Western bliss. The 'jet liner' as metaphor is no mere literary figure. It is a lived metaphor, the contemporary, day-to-day transcendence in social relationships of time and space — the mundane transcendence which Singer's unconscious depiction of middle America's mobility and uprootedness epitomizes.

The aeroplane is an ideal metaphor for androgyny, a liberation from the body, for the actual technological extension of human relationships which the aeroplane achieves signifies that of the extension proffered by promises of androgyny. They go hand in hand in terms of the 'logic' of the increasingly 'open social setting'. The modern person is offered aeroplane travel as a means of transcendence in the same sense that androgyny offers transcendence in the pursuit of new self-definitions: with air travel, the world of other cultural meanings the tourist may absorb beyond those of hearth and home.⁶⁴ But not only is place, as home, and its particular contribution in the formation of identity and a particular form of individuality, transcended. Bodies, in air travel are likewise 'left behind'. The aeroplane makes possible the vast extension of relationships between persons — familial and business — such that the continuity of the presence of bodies for all kinds of interactions is no longer required. For many American families, for example, it is the means for a just sufficient (might we say superficial) maintenance of blood ties — the fundamental and once fairly stable core of the individual's social and moral formation.⁶⁵ The aeroplane is sign, but significantly a lived form of the transcendence of the body, as is androgyny. As with air travel, so with the reproductive technologies: a technological medium intervenes between tangibly embodied persons, making their presence in concrete social relationships unnecessary, and denying the lived constraints of bodies. This underlines the now radically 'open' setting in which the new technologies mediate even the most basic of social interactions, offering new meanings in the area of sexual identity and reproduction — not unlike the alluring commodification of place offered the tourist as construction of meaningful identity.

64. The costs of losing a cultural 'rootedness' in 'place' are pointed to by John Hinkson in a discussion of migration and multiculturalism, 'Assimilation or Multiculturalism: A False Dilemma', *Arena* 67, pp. 8-11.

65. See, for example, Alvin Toffler's data on Americans' high mobility rates, *Future Shock*, London, Pan Books, 1970, p. 78.

Difference and the Body

Adrienne Rich explains the feminist difference thesis: 'It is this culture and politics of abstraction which women are talking of changing, of bringing to accountability in human terms.'⁶⁶ Unlike the previous positions on androgyny, we see here the emphasis on the detrimental, even anti-human rationality of the male, and the hint that again a new definition of humanity is to focus this attack. All versions of difference theory agree that analysis is to be woman-centred, that the female body will be inspiration to the new society, and that as counter to the male — now fully understood as the problem — the previous sexual dualism may be destroyed. In fact the feminist difference theorists mount their critique of male rationality as one of the whole 'logocentric' tradition⁶⁷ which informs Western civilization: from the Greeks to Christianity, to the scientific revolution and modern capitalism, a continuity of male epistemological concern and a related social interest in the instrumental control of nature and of women is posited.⁶⁸ It is this critique of the elevation of that arm of the traditional sexual dualism — 'culture' — which is the basis of difference theorists' perspective on androgynist feminism as implicitly disembodied. Woman, the body, Nature, the other arm of the dualism is now to be elevated as model of a new human nature, but not with the elevation of itself as final aim. If the sexual dualism *per se* is to be rendered obsolete, woman's body must be seen rather to prefigure a new combinatory mode of the *diverse* traits which persons may display.

'Difference', then, has two senses. Unlike the androgyny position's implicit assumption of men and women's essential sameness, for difference theory there are real differences between the sexes, and their actual bodies, in one sense or another, are partially formative of that difference elaborated culturally. But according to difference theory, the assumption of sameness, like the rationality at work in the larger society, not only de-genders, it homogenizes. That rationality, we are told, crushes creative potentiality of a human kind generally. 'Difference', then, must also refer to differences, those which must be actively fostered between *individuals*. The connection between the two senses is that, with a recognition of the first, a general principle of difference may be carried over into the larger society. Differences of all kinds — previously

66. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, London, Virago, 1976, p. 285.

67. For example, Luce Irigaray, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

68. See, for example, Merchant, *op. cit.*

labelled deviant categories, for example — should be allowed to flourish. Exactly how the sexually differentiated body is to relate to differences, however, varies from one theorist to another.

For example, Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich focus on 'the power inherent in female biology'.⁶⁹ A direct relationship is posited between the child-bearing capacity viewed positively with the power of the body to revolutionize experience. But this does not simply imply the positive valuation of nurturance. This female body as a 'complicated, pain-enduring multi-pleasured physicality' is the font of a particular intellectual-somatic mode. The traditional sexual dualism will be overcome when we begin to 'think through the body' — the female body which signifies the possibility of a new fusion of body and intellect. Daly likewise emphasizes woman's 'native talent' and asserts this as 'superiority'. In direct confrontation with the androgynists' implicit assumption of men's biological superiority, Daly identifies the male body as deficient and the male psyche insecure as a result, a position also implied by other difference theorists. Mary O'Brien's men, for example, must assert control of women because of their insecurity with respect to proof of paternity.⁷⁰ Daly's men drain women's energy like the foetus does; men's sense of being 'fetal'⁷¹ is presumably the basis of that misogynist hate for the woman on whom men must depend. Although the *exact* relation of biology to the powers of woman and the converse, the relation of biology to male insufficiency, is unclear, there seems a fairly simple and direct association of the given body to its social performance.

Now in this perspective, though Daly and Rich focus on the history of woman as invisible, we are still confronted with a woman we know. This, it seems, is because woman's body as we know it is portrayed as if it were a given or biological fact. This is not the case in other feminist difference theory, which will be discussed presently. The point here is that, in focusing on woman as a collective category related to an apparently naturally occurring group of bodies, a future of differences tends to be undermined. Daly clearly has a heightened sense of the potential of the radically individual self. Personal individuation, which is essential for true liberation, means a 'paring away, burning away the false selves encasing the Self . . .'⁷² and this definition of the person will be

69. Rich, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

70. O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

71. Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1978, p. 59.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

'of the Self by the Self'.⁷³ But it seems that this mode of individuation is sequestered by women for women, women as a category opposed to men. Both Rich and Daly's differences are arguably those contained in a separatist future. Their dependence on a notion of woman's powers as deriving from the known female body as a natural fact impels separatism as a logical necessity.⁷⁴ Though for both, the traditional sexual dualism is apparently overcome — to 'think with the body' — it seems that the possibility of a non-dualistic mode is to be contained within one arm of the old sexual dualism.

The bevy of names — Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous, Wittig, Duras — is associated with theory which does not, it seems, posit women's body as we know it as a biological fact. The body's depiction rather as an 'artificial social fact', though elaborated differently by the various writers, more clearly shifts feminist discourse towards the possibility of differences. Here a revolution in our common-sense seems necessary. It is no longer gender we are questioning, and not even simply sex in the sense that Daly and Rich counterpose the male and female sexes; rather it is a questioning of the naturalness of the male/female sex distinction itself.

Again, there is an explicit recognition of the language of the female body and the need for its positive valuation as a guide to the future. Duras, for example, holds that:

... the future belongs to women. Men have been completely dethroned. Their rhetoric is stale, used up. We must move to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, the body.⁷⁵

Like Rich's 'multi-pleasured physicality' the female body is a 'sensual universe' characterized by its plurality, incompleteness and non-linear or dialectical sexuality. Women's genitalia itself is indicative of, or rather, provides a metaphoric archetype for this language of the body which must come to inform interactions on a broader scale. Thus Irigaray speaks of the female sex and the distinctive interactional form it might inspire in the terms of the 'two lips':

But a woman touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation, and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible. A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two — but

73. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

74. See Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1984, p. 113.

75. Duras, in Marks and de Courtivron, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

not divisible into ones — who stimulate each other.⁷⁶

This sensibility is pitted against the instrumental and abstract culture of the male which is likewise figured in the genitalia:

... all Western discourse presents a certain isomorphism with the masculine sex: the privilege of unity, form of the self, of the visible, of the specularizable, of the erection (which is the becoming in a form.⁷⁷

Now here, though the symbolism of the two lips is recognizable, unlike the woman of Daly and Rich, the woman of the French feminists is decidedly hard to delineate. Indeed, the idea that woman has always been the invisible, an absence in history, is played upon in Kristeva's 'La femme, ce n'est jamais ça'. For her, 'The belief that "one is a woman" is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that "one is a man"'. She holds that,

A feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it'. In woman I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.⁷⁸

Cixous concurs on the unclassifiability of woman, and this notion is of course the inspiration behind Irigaray's description of woman's rediscovery as 'a sort of universe in expansion for which no limits could be fixed...' Though the 'tangible body' seems here to retain the form of the two lips, its inspiration is to an understanding of woman as without any definable form that might refer us to an essence, or to any 'nature' we might recognize.

As Cixous points out (and as it seems to be a view held by all the French theorists) Freud was wrong in his belief in a natural anatomical determination of sexual difference. The body is rather the 'imaginary body' of Lacanian psychoanalysis: that 'imaginary' anatomy which 'varies with the ideas (clear or confused) about bodily functions which are prevalent in a given culture'.⁷⁹ We live a physical image of the body and this is constructed with reference to the contours of a shared language and a culture's various institutional discourses. Here the anatomical body is only present as a collection of sites — albeit with certain sites privileged⁸⁰ — with respect to which a person engages actively in processes of

76. Irigaray, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

77. Irigaray, as quoted in Ariel Kay Salleh, 'Contribution to the Critique of Political Epistemology', *Thesis 11* 8, 1984, p. 34.

78. Kristeva, 'Woman Can Never Be Defined', in Marks and de Courti-vron, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

79. Jacques Lacan, as quoted by Gatens, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

80. As Gatens puts it, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

signification. The only 'operative' body is that composite unconscious entity in and through which 'identity' is achieved.

It is thus for these writers that the very category of woman may come under question. As Wittig puts it, women do not constitute a 'natural group':

Women appear as though they existed prior to reasoning, belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an 'imaginary formation' which reinterprets physical features through the network of relationships in which they are perceived.⁸¹

Andrea Dworkin, an American difference theorist, argues more crudely that this mythic construction has culturally maintained an actual 'breeding out' of the range of sexual types: and by implication that liberation will be a flowering of the 'cross-sexes' and 'deviant soma-types' once culturally denied. For both these writers what we recognize as biological reality is itself socially constructed. In fact, '*we are, clearly, a multisexed species which has its sexuality spread along a vast fluid continuum where the elements called male and female are not discrete*'.⁸² In similar vein Kay Salleh explains that sexual identity cannot be explained by the 'mono-causal scientific perspective' of the instrumentally rational patriarchy. Rather, it is an

overdetermined process arising from a continuing complementarity, fusion and interchange of at least six classes of 'variable': chromosome type, genital indication, endocrine production, metabolically-based behavioural traits, socialized role and preferred sexual object.⁸³

And these themselves are all 'multi-dimensional potentialities'.

Now clearly, this use of the notion of the imaginary body allows that the categories male and female may drop away if persons incorporate into their daily lives that facility for 'seeing through' 'cultural constructions'. It readily allows a shift of focus away from sex dualistically conceived to a conception of there being 'many sexes': those allowed to blossom according to the individual's achievement of unique intersection(s) of those many 'variables' and possible libidinal attachments. A vivid heterogeneity is conjured up as the person of the new age is likened to the artist or thinker — 'creators of new values' — and named the 'inventing subject'.⁸⁴ This 'subject', as we have seen, is not that of patriarchal history. The radically unique definitions of the individual within

81. Monique Wittig as quoted in Jaggar, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

82. Andrea Dworkin, in Jaggar, *op. cit.*, p. 99 (emphasis in the original text).

83. Salleh, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

84. Hélène Cixous, in Marks and de Courtivron, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

the larger setting of many differences, are dependent upon and figured in the two lips as bodily metaphor for the person, known themselves as indeterminacy and multiplicity. The cultural constructions of male and female as we know them are inseparable from the very form the subject takes in the logocentric and phallogocentric organization of Western society. Thus, in order to achieve difference, 'the subject' cannot merely construct a unity around a new substance — liberated woman, for instance, that 'naive romanticism'. There is no individual essence, no single 'nature' to realize. Rather we see that the person is an ever-expanding potentiality, conceived of as the changing intersections of 'living structures' of meaning, rich in their signifiatory combinations, plural in the directions which the individual might take up.

* * *

Now the problem here is that, though the emphasis on individual difference seems readily enough to have some continuity with the androgynist's perspective on the individual *qua* individual, the body and psyche in the two overarching tendencies of androgyny and difference, *are* conceived of differently. Likewise, the impact of the peculiarly literary/political/philosophical writing of difference theorists is one of profound transcendence of the mundane and bodily, though it is true that the body as in no other feminism is apparently *present*. How then, might difference theory be located in the same trajectory of feminism at large?

As I have already implied, with Daly and Rich a line of continuity is not so difficult to find. Though with these writers woman's body is no longer invisible and its social impact is positively regarded, there seems still to be a dependence on the traditional sexual dualism — with all its implications for a continuing, albeit implicit, dependence on the instrumentalism and abstraction of 'male' culture. If a separatist future does grow from the logic of finding in woman's body an inherent power transferable to the social setting, how is the reproduction of the species to be accomplished? Rich speculates upon the need for women to take up the new reproductive technologies and believes that women may control these technologies in order to offer women more choices.⁸⁵ Here a view, ultimately, of the technologies themselves being neutral (a view Firestone shared) may be seen. There

85. See Eisenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 75 about the ambiguities in Rich's position on the reproductive technologies.

is not the space here to elaborate fully upon this issue; it is enough to simply make the point that the technologies, though associated with the logic of men's control of women, are spoken of ambivalently at best. And this ambivalence is thoroughly to be anticipated because a lingering attachment to the notion of choice — as it is spoken of in Rich's work — remains. And indeed, if women are to inhabit a separatist world, choice of the means of one's technological disembodiment is necessitated.

Daly's exposure of the invisible woman as witch and spinster leads in the same direction. Her mystical elevation of woman in these terms is an attempt to reverse their meanings — to re-empower women with a spirit of a resistance they already intuitively know. But, this new Manichaeism⁸⁶ only reinvents the struggle of a universe divided dualistically: the negativity of those once-defined 'forces of darkness' are conjured up as the now virtuous army in its struggle against Men. In any case, the proposal of a mystical solution as Daly's seems to be, of course represents a hope for a transcendence of the mundane, the flesh: the hope of all mystics — kept alive by the labour of another class of persons which must cater to the mystic's actual bodily needs.

Daly's separatism, her lesbianism, actually draws her back from the break with dualism which, at an explicit level, she seeks. It constrains, in her depiction of woman as witch, what might have been a refusal of the very mode of categorical construction which establishes normative boundaries of the kind 'good-bad', 'light-dark', 'in-out'. In this she offers a form of transcendence of the body not unlike the feminisms previously examined. Like these in their implicit hopes, Daly's call for an end to dualism itself, expresses a desire for the obliteration of the categories themselves. But only the French feminists and American difference theorists like Dworkin appear to achieve this logically. This latter outcome grows from their perspective on differences being embedded in 'the body', and here is the significant rupture in theoretical formulation with other feminisms. With Dworkin there is an appeal back to some primeval nature — the assumed plethora of original bodily types — which is ultimately a kind of naturalistic justification for the obliteration of the categories. But, though naturalistic, it cannot be said merely to hark back to the 'nature' of the traditionally conceived sexual dualism. The two conceptions of bodies, of nature, are fundamentally opposed. With the French feminists on the other hand, 'nature' is of course a disputed term entirely; 'the

86. As noted in Eisenstein, *ibid.*, p. 111.

body', its homologous expression under the old dualism, is divorced from any such 'essentialism'. Thus the French theorists might say that a depiction of their formulation as offering a transcendence of the body is meaningless: the body itself, being no concrete entity, cannot logically be conceived of in such terms.

But a notion of transcendence might be refashioned in the face of difference theory. It may be so that no Mind as liberal-rational entity is implicated here; the rational, instrumental mind of the 'puny' man of the mechanical age is replaced, in the terms of this ideology, by that organic unity of the interpenetration of mind and desire. It is the artist, thinker, *inventing* subject — the super-subject — whose putative powers of cultural insight allow for the deconstruction of the very body as we know it. The new individuality that androgyny foreshadowed as cultural hope, appears to be delivered in this logical construction of the body freed from any 'nature'.

The French feminists do not, it seems, sully their hands with explicit discussion of the new reproductive technologies. But a homologous relationship is readily observed in their deconstructionist hopes and theoretical formulations, and the deconstruction of the body, at an elemental level, in the reproductive and related genetic engineering sciences. Indeed, a common intellectual form may be imputed, related to the social form of the radically 'open society' the conditions of which offer the logic of 'seeing through' both the material body — as science achieves — and all that is deemed cultural construction, as the way of everyday life. Both difference theory and *in vitro* fertilization, for example, offer the body to us as *resource*, the pliable material of the self-defining individual. In an immediate, practical sense too, though, the technologies may be related to deconstructionist difference. For, in its dismantling of any grounds for cultural constraint — the tangible body of course carries no related imperatives — if individuals are really to take up the options of the many possible sexual/personal combinations held out by the idea of difference, technological solutions will be *necessitated* in order to overcome presently existing material, bodily, constraints — and no moral-normative understanding will block their use.

In conclusion, though all feminisms seek to establish for women the authentic experience of their bodies, and though feminism increasingly focuses its attack on 'male' instrumental rationality as the key to women's oppression, significant strands of feminist theory may be seen to share in the further *disembodiment* of

woman, and of the person in general. It remains to work through the details of the relationship between an ideology of autonomy and the actual autonomy currently offered by the new reproductive technologies. But it seems that if feminism is to put forward a truly oppositional practice (one which must salvage the meaning of an 'old' socialism in a new context) our perspective on the body needs to involve a reflexive examination of the common constitutive form of the new self which implicitly shapes our diverse experience.