The Body Deferred: Reconsidering Feminist Approaches to Embodiment

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> Biology provides a *bedrock* for social inscription but is not a fixed or static substratum: it interacts with and is overlaid by psychic, social and signifying relations.... The body can thus be seen not as a blank, passive page, a neutral ground of meaning, but as an active, productive, 'whiteness' that constitutes the writing surface as resistant to the imposition of any or all patterned arrangements (Grosz, 1990:72).

While earlier feminists have cautiously circumvented any allusion to the body to avoid both the pitfalls of sexual difference and accusations of "biologism" or "essentialism", contemporary Anglo-American feminists are frequent participants in what Terry Eagleton calls academic "body-talk" (1993:7). Reasons for this shift are as varied and complex as the history of Western ambivalence towards the body. But most significant is the advent of post-structuralist critiques of the autonomous, rational, masculine subject, and the concurrent feminist struggle to articulate women as subjects. The voicing of suspicions against these critiques, particularly by women of colour like bell hooks who claims they surface "at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time," (1990:28) has generated a proliferation of ideas concerning embodied subjectivity.

As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, feminists are now eager to "question the terms in which the body has been previously theorized, as well as to question feminist rejections of notions of women's lived bodily specificities" (1991:2) with a view to dismantling the dualisms of mind/body, self/other, and subject/object, that continue to permit relations of domination. In this paper I

problematize the claim Grosz makes that this retheorizing of the body moves it away from an uncritical association with nature and otherness, and an opposition to mind and self (1991:2). I argue that many of these new articulations of an embodied subject continue to bump up against articulations of *the* Body, and by association, the Referent, the Real, the Signified and Nature. This *Body* is always one more layer beneath the culturally-inscribed body, an inaccessible Ground or Beginning on which the spectre of essentialism lingers, rendering our efforts to speak as subjects unattainable. In effect, despite its promise to disassemble binary oppositions, much of the feminist work on the body inadvertently assumes the very categories it wishes to undermine.

Hence, while Grosz is right to enunciate an "active" and "productive" notion of biology that acknowledges the contingencies in which our bodies are embedded, she simultaneously refuses contingency by invoking the "whiteness" of the writing surface that is our flesh. The tension inherent in this stunning blindness to the *effects* of white consciousness, one of which is to *obscure* these effects, is characteristic of the contemporary discussion of embodied subjectivity. I will focus on two responses to the problem of bringing the body back into feminist concerns with identity and subjectivity that I believe clearly highlight the difficulty Grosz displays in conceiving the flesh as contingent rather than fixed and immutable.

Attempts to speak with/in a body that cannot be reduced to "sexual indifference" or to an essentially-defined meaning of woman, are complicated by an uneasy shift between a demand for a theory of the female subject, and an adamant denunciation of such a demand as itself contributing to an essentialist discourse. Those who hope to articulate a female embodied subjectivity no longer exposed to the errors of exclusionary politics, are attempting to revalue former notions of essentialism. Conscious of the criticism by women of colour that white feminists' notions of subjectivity often mirror the traditional masculine model of the self dominating the other, feminists such as Rosi Braidotti attempt to situate subject positions in the contingent spaces of our bodies. To this end she states:

> I believe that the redefinition of the female feminist subject starts with the revaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting the traditional vision of the knowing subject as universal, neutral, and consequently gender-free. This 'positional' or situated way of seeing the subject states that the most important location or

> situation is the rooting of the subject into the spatial frame of the body. (1993:6-7)

Braidotti argues that the feminine needs to be re-connected to the "bodily sexed reality of the female," permitting a revaluation of what remains the condition of possibility for political activism--essentialism (1989:93). It allows for a politics of location that rejects global statements about women and in their place enables us "to be as aware as possible of where one is speaking from" (Braidotti, 1993:8). With this in mind, Braidotti calls for a recognition of "a bond of commonality among women," meaning "a consensus that all women partake of the condition of 'the second sex'" which "seals a pact among women... the foundation stone that allows for the feminist position or standpoint to be articulated" (1993:8). Indeed, she goes so far as to define woman as "an umbrella term" that brings together a variety of different levels of subjectivity and different relationships to and notions of time (1993:7).

It is difficult to see just how a definition of woman as "an umbrella term" leads us to a politics of location, where the particularities of women's lives are not glossed over. It appears that Braidotti's revaluation of essentialism has not overcome the central problematic for feminists concerned with this paradox. To circumvent it, Braidotti advocates "an epistemological and a political distinction between 'woman' and 'feminist'" (1993:8); that is, between real women, speaking from a multitude of different locations, and feminist women, who must unite for political reasons. Yet a third term is introduced, "Woman," the historical representation of the feminine,[1] a "culturally dominant model for female identity" (Braidotti, 1993:8) that must be recognized as distinct from the reality of women's lives in order for feminists to elaborate a political subjectivity. Braidotti concludes that "[t]he myth of Woman is now a vacant lot where different women can play with their subjectivity" (1993:9).

What happens to the body in the kind of separations that allow women to play with what kind of Woman they want to be, and at the same time (or maybe only sometimes) decide to be feminists for political reasons? It turns out that Braidotti's notion of the body is as fraught with distinctions as her elaboration of Woman. When she gets down to the task of describing just what a "bodily sexed reality" is, we read that:

> The 'body' in question is the threshold of subjectivity: as such it is neither the sum of its organs--a fixed biological essence--nor the

> result of social conditioning... The 'body' is rather to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social.... (1989:97)

In other words, this body that Braidotti puts in quotation marks, marking it apart from what we know to be real, is not a collection of organs, tissue, and skin--*that* remains another layer beneath this 'body.' Just what kind of body is this, and how many kinds are there? In arguing that "there is a fundamental qualitative distinction to be made between anatomy and sexuality as such," (1989:97) Braidotti distances herself from the flesh-and-blood body that she argues so eloquently for incorporating into a theory of subjectivity.

Braidotti provides one example among many ever more sophisticated attempts by feminists to separate the flesh from metaphorical, symbolic, discursive, or theoretical bodies, in an attempt to give women a political voice. The body is stuck in the middle of these attempts, either uncritically assumed in its undesirable "natural" state and ignored, or re-dressed and propped up to pose in its new position as the indicator of particularity and locale for the female subject.

A second response to the problematic of essentialist discourses of the body rejects altogether the notion of feminine subjectivity for being in itself an essentialist project. Judith Butler provides an excellent example of one who is critical of the perceived political need to construct a ground for identity, that is, a notion of woman as subject, since it is this ground that invariably excludes other identity positions.

Butler's opponents are those who claim that "politics requires a stable subject" to be effective (Butler, 1993:4). On the contrary, she insists, we need to deconstruct the notion of the subject, not to negate it, but "to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory" (1993:4). To demonstrate such a consequence, Butler asks how she is personally positioned as a theorizing subject: "how is it that a position becomes a position[?]" For is it "one that I devise, publish, and defend, that belongs to me as a kind of academic property? Or is there a grammar of the subject that merely encourages us to position me as the proprietor of those theories?" (1993:9). In other words, while Butler explicitly states that she does not "shirk" from using the pronoun "I," she is adamant that this "I" is not the originator of these positions, but is constituted by them, for "[n]o subject is its own point of departure" (1993:9)

Similarly, Butler states that she does not shirk from using the term women, admitting we have to "speak as and for women" for political reasons. For "[s]urely, that is the way in which representational politics operates, and in this country, [the United States] lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics" (Butler, 1993:15). Rather than shying away from it, Butler argues we can release the term woman "into a future of multiple significations... emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and... give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear" (1993:16).

In order to facilitate this accommodation of both the destabilization of the category and the recognition of its usefulness, Butler espouses a strategy that is critical of the common feminist assumption of a radical distinction between sex and gender. Originally, she asserts, this distinction was stressed in order to free gender from the immutable natural-ness of sex, a pre-discursive and pre-cultural given (1993:6-7). But the problem with this distinction, according to Butler, is the assumption of sex as a natural category.

If such a position is contested, Butler argues, then "perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (1990:7). In Butler's view, sex cannot be the surface on which gender, as a form of cultural inscription, imposes meaning. Rather, sex itself is a gendered category, discursively constructed as a pre-discursive ground: "[t]his production of sex *as* the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*" (Butler, 1990:7).

Butler's denunciation of the subject is clearly caught up in what she sees as a problematic positioning of the body. In her notion of sex--by which I think she means the body--as culturally constructed and therefore the same as gender, Butler effectively collapses sex and gender into one free-floating signifier and removes them both from the body. Where do we find a reconceived notion of the body? Where do we find any body at all?

Once the distinction between the body and gender has been synthesized, Butler outlines a strategy for "denaturalizing" sex. She proposes "a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts" that allow a subversive "resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame" of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality (1990:x). Since parody is understood by Butler to mean an imitation "that mocks the notion of an original" (1990:138)

gender parody reveals only that there is no original gender identity on which gender "fashions" itself. What we think is an original is really a copy, a failed "ideal that no one *can* embody" (Butler, 1990:139). She concludes from this that gender is merely "a stylized repetition of acts," a performance, neither real nor true, played out by cultural and political discursive regimes.[2]

Since she has already collapsed sex and gender into a single performance, we can only presume then that the body is also neither real nor true. Hence Butler has succeeded in removing our flesh from any considerations of identity, subjectivity, and voice. Sex and gender are merely effects of discourse, despite Butler's lip-service to reconceiving the body "no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will" (1990:8).

From these brief examples, and many others,[3] it is clear that feminist discussions of embodiment reveal a relentless rejection of the "literal," "real," "biological," "pre-discursive," or "referent." Indeed, the search for a way to separate the flesh from speech, consciousness, and subjectivity, can be thought of as seeking to position women's bodies *somewhere else*. As Vicki Kirby argues:

> Although rethinking essentialism marks an avowed return to the body, the reunion is always be-ing deferred. It is certainly not an easy homecoming. Perhaps commerce with the body is considered risky business because the border between the mind/body split... just cannot be secured. (1992:6)

The problem facing feminist attempts to envision a re-embodied subject arises out of the assumption of the very terms they are struggling to destabilize: the notion of a fixed universal body that must be rejected as an inaccessible pre-discursive reality. In effect, as Kirby claims, it is assumed that "if the ground isn't solid then it isn't a ground--if it moves and changes, then it must be just the representation of a ground" (1992:14). In other words, the feminist anti-essentialist stance is ironically founded on an essentialist notion of *The Body*, *Nature*, or *Biology*, that is absolute and immutable (Kirby, 1992:14).

We cannot continue to talk about a female embodied subject that is rooted in the traditional notion of the body alienated from consciousness and the world. While there are several feminist intellectuals currently engaged in such a critical project, most notably Grosz and Kirby,[4] what I think is missing in even the most eloquent and persuasive invitations to rethink the body, is a

sustained conceptualization of the body as flesh, as inseparable from consciousness and actively interacting with the surrounding world.[5] Once we accomplish this, it will no longer be necessary to speak of *the* body as though it were some entity isolated from minds, others, and the world we share.

The urgency of such a project is evident in Grosz's assumption of the "*bedrock*" that is the body; that while viewed as interacting with social inscription and thereby accounting for all the contingencies and particularities of life, it is nevertheless conceived of as a "whiteness." Sidonie Smith is right to remark that the discourse of embodied woman is comprised of the subjectivities of those "angels in houses": the bourgeois women. As the universal, male subject is formed through the discourses of identities such as race, class and sexuality, "so those angels take shape through the discourses of various kinds of contaminated women, those even more 'colorful' others who are denied the possibility of escaping the drag of the body" (Smith, 1993:17).

Notes

1. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Sexual Difference: A theory of socio-symbolic practice*, (1990) for a description of her differentiation between "Woman" as cultural imago, and women, as real agents of change.

2. For example, the practice of drag, Butler suggests, "plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed," thereby exposing the imitative and contingent structure of gender itself (1990:137).

3. Elsewhere I have included the work of Elspeth Probyn who makes distinctions between a "natural" body and a "discursive" body (see "This Body Which Is Not One: Speaking an Embodied Self," Hypatia 6:, no. 3, 1991).

See also feminist responses to Irigaray, whose discussions of female embodiment provoke enormous ambivalence and anxiety in Anglo-American feminist writing: Maggie Berg (1988), Diana Fuss (1989), Toril Moi (1985), Margaret Whitford (1989).

4. Tania Modleski and Moira Gatens should also be noted here. Modleski convincingly argues against an "as if" position in her first chapter of *Feminism Without Women* (1991), appropriately entitled "Post-mortem on Post-feminism," where she asks "could we... say of anti-essentialist feminists that only those possessing vastly wider options than the majority of women living in the world today can play at 'being it' while theorizing themselves into the belief that they are not it?" (1991:22).

Gatens points to the split between representation and reality, and the "impotence of our political vocabulary" for articulating bodily difference ("Corporeal representation in/and

the body politic," *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991: 85).

5. I am thinking here of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as the novels of Toni Morrison: two examples of writers who ignore the dualities of flesh and consciousness, flesh and object, and flesh and word, and move on to an understanding of what it means to be sentient beings.

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