

# The Self, the Body and Identity

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## This Abstract Body

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The avant-garde tend to read about it rather than do it. Nevertheless, techno-sexuality — technologically mediated sexual relations, sex without the embodied presence of another person, or technological enhancement of the sexual body — is a burgeoning phenomenon. As one facet of a broader phenomenon of techno-disembodiment, that range of practices from telephone sex to cosmetic surgery, it illustrates an emergent but already pervasive development in these postmodern times. The culture of late capitalism is overcome by an extraordinary fascination with the body. Concomitantly, our relationship to our bodies is becoming increasingly mediated by a myriad of technological incursions, and our relationship to others dominated by disembodied modes of engagement. Truth may be stranger than fiction, but in this case fiction provides a good way into describing some contemporary developments in the abstraction of the body.

Whether you read the *London Review of Books*, listen to 3RRR, or collect your cultural cues wandering down Brunswick Street gazing through the half-reflective windows of its *mise en scene* bookshops, you will soon come across a new genre of writing such as that found in Nicholson Baker's latest novel, *Vox*.

\*With thanks to John Hinkson, Alison Ravenscroft, Nonie Sharp and Geoff Sharp for their critical comments.

The novel is written as one long telephone conversation between two strangers, Abbey and Jim (why are we bothering to tell you their names?). They have never met and probably never will, and they use their own names to tell stories in the third person more often than they do to address each other. Abbey and Jim happen to 'cross wires' on a phone-sex party line. The novel renders into fictional dialogue a phenomenon which has burgeoned in the United States since the late 1980s and is beginning to take off in Australia as well. Along with introduction agencies, computer-to-computer introduction networks, video-dating libraries, AIDS-screening agencies, lifestyle clubs and other services for the love-lorn, lonely or 'simply too busy', phone sex marks a new stage in the mediation (and simulation) of intimacy.<sup>1</sup> *Vox* is such an uncritical reflection upon this kind of transaction that we might say that it too finds part of its reason for being in the engendering of disembodied eroticism for sale in a literary marketplace. *Vox* is part of a genre of social practices and image productions which as Julian Loose<sup>2</sup> notes are sufficiently prevalent to engender American academic papers on 'Sex and Death among the Disembodied'.<sup>3</sup>

We join Abbey and Jim as they transfer to a fibre-optical, ninety-five-cents-per-half-minute 'back room' in order to find one-on-one disembodied intimacy. As the cover blurb says (drawing us the readers into a further layer of the disembodied circuit of meaning): 'we eavesdrop on them as, little by little, they talk themselves into increasing levels of self-disclosure'.

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1. Australia's best known introduction agency Yvonne Allen began in 1976. By the late 1980s articles began appearing in the press on how to choose not only the right person but the 'right' agency (*Age*, 5 July 1989). The debut of the first widely marketed computer-to-computer 'inter-facing' agency was in the United States in 1988 (*Age*, 18 February 1989). It was billed as a 'safe [that is AIDS-free] way to meet people'. (See also *Bulletin*, 26 June 1988). The first AIDS-free agency in Victoria, Personal Humanities Service, came to public attention in mid-1987 (*Age*, 18 July 1987). It was in this same period that the press were announcing that the instinct for self-preservation means that 'Warmth and Fidelity are Back' (*Good Weekend*, 27 September 1985).
  2. Julian Loose, 'Keep Talking', *London Review of Books*, 26 March 1992, pp. 18-19.
  3. See Howard Rheingold's citation of this paper in his *Virtual Reality*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1991, pp. 351-352. Rheingold's own book has received extensive popular attention. See for example Robyn Williams's review in the complimentary airway's magazine, *The Australian Way*, January 1992, pp. 22-24.

I called tonight [intimates Abbey] I think out of the same impulse, the idea that five or six men would hear me come, as if my voice was this *thing*, this disembodied body, out there ... but then, when I actually made the call, the reality of it was that the men were so irritating, either passive, wanting me to entertain them, or full of what-are-your-measurements questions, and so I was silent for a while, and then I heard your voice and liked it.<sup>4</sup>

The ambivalence of Abbey's response, wanting to be desired as an abstract *thing* but not objectified in the old-fashioned way, hints at abiding contradictions in our relationship to our bodies; to ourselves that is, and to others. There is a dense condensation of meaning at the heart of the sexual body which at one level assumes and reinforces our sense that our bodies are integrated and coherent entities. However, it is this very condensation which, *in the context of contemporary social relations*, allows one of the body's senses to be separated out as a one-dimensional extension of the whole. It allows interaction to be reduced, for example, to a telephone conversation of hearing-voicing without immediately provoking an identity crisis.<sup>5</sup> It allows the voice to be abstracted over space — via satellite, 'out here under the stars', as Abbey says with self-consciously unromantic irony — to be abstracted without necessarily reducing the erotic effect of 'this disembodied body'. Indeed, pushing at the cultural-technical limits of the integrity-fragmentation contradiction can, in the short term, supercharge the disembodied body with 'sensual', transgressive ambiguity. For example, 'teledildonics', computer-simulated sexual arousal by wearing plugged-in bodysuits, may never become widely practised, but it certainly provokes interest as a *risqué* possibility.

At this point, however, the contradiction folds back upon itself. Without continuing to draw off our historically ambivalent faith in embodied relations, techno-sex quickly becomes hollow, unsatisfying, no more erotic than collecting answers to what-are-your-measurements questions. And herein lies the rub, or so we will argue. By continuing to draw off that ambivalent faith, techno-sex and the many other practices of disembodied interaction contribute to a changing and increasingly abstracted dominant ontology of embodiment. It is not a question of declining intensity.

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4. Nicholson Baker, *Vox*, New York, Random House, 1992, pp. 146-147 (Baker's emphasis). We must thank Kathryn Bird for drawing our attention to the book.

5. This possibility qualifies but does not indefinitely hold off the slow crisis of meaning and identity formation brought on with the dominance of relations of disembodied extension.

Techno-sex can be both intense and apparently liberating. After all, it does vitiate complications of the flesh. As Abbey implies, embodied sex is distracting, too many things happen, and it is feculent: 'I like to *think* about cocks in me, though. Also, yeah, I do unfortunately tend to get yeast complications from real sex ...'<sup>6</sup> Neither is it a question of criticizing techno-sex in itself (though you are right to think that we have already allowed undercurrents of sardonic depreciation to affect the tone of our description of it). Rather, we will argue that critically understanding techno-sex and other forms of 'relations with strangers' entails looking at the much broader context of forms of embodiment within contemporary social relations. It is in the context of the increasing privatization, rationalization and commodification of the life-world that techno-sex contributes to hollowing out the corporeal taken-for-grantedness on which, paradoxically, it depends. Our argument in short is that such processes — objectification, privatization, rationalization, commodification and technological extension<sup>7</sup> — are part of an increasing abstraction of the frame of social integration, and that this development, as uneven and contradictory as it is, is making our relationship to our bodies increasingly vexed. Understanding this broader context will in turn take this article into the realm of comparing different social relations across history and place. Techno-sex is merely an example, some would say even a trivial one, intended to carry us into a broader comparative realm.

In focusing on the body, this article seeks to consider two related themes. Firstly, it examines how bodily symbolism is part of a process of connecting and defining the self and the community. The easiest way to do this is comparatively, contrasting forms of embodiment in different contexts from tribalism to postmodern capitalism. This then allows us to broach a second theme: is the reconstitution of our lived senses of our bodies in contemporary western society stripping the body of its capacity to enrich the social connectedness of people? The current sense of an image-dictated, 'shapable' body; the current debates over whether or not advances in medical technology are an unproblematic liberation

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6. Baker, p. 122 (Baker's emphasis). Keep in mind that the writer is a university-trained American male who once worked as a technical specialist in writing computer software manuals. Howard Rheingold also emphasizes the safety of the disembodied.

7. Unfortunately there is not the space here to explain and elaborate on these processes. They are listed to give a sense of the complexity of abstraction of social relations and deter any possible interpretation of a reductive technological determinism.

from the constraints of our mortal bodies; and recent developments in feminist attitudes to embodiment will be considered to reveal the tensions and contradictions in the textured modern/postmodern constitution of the body. Our overriding concern is to argue through the need for alternative practices of human interrelation which attempt to bind considerations about the value or otherwise of the various modes of disembodied extension within a framework which instantiates in practice the condensed and complex *limitations* on embodiment entailed in face-to-face relations. This is not an argument for a return to kinship-based or close-knit parochial communities. Nevertheless, it asserts the ontological importance of relations of continuity, reciprocity and co-operation in which the constraints of embodiment are not simply impediments to be left behind as soon as is technologically possible.

Before proceeding, we need to define some terms and very briefly summarize our method. The article draws on a position developed over many years in the pages of *Arena*.<sup>8</sup> For present purposes we propose only to introduce the notions of 'levels of social integration', understood as intersecting *forms* of structured practices of association between people. These are analytically distinguishable levels; they obviously do not exist as pure forms. However, it is easiest to begin by describing them that way rather than in the complex intersections of lived practices where different levels of integration may contradict, qualify, dominate or be 'thinned out' by other levels of integration. For present purposes we can distinguish three levels. 'Face-to-face *integration*' is defined as that level where the modalities of being in the 'presence' of others constitute the ontological meaning of interrelations, communications and exchanges, even where the self and the other are not always engaged in face-to-face *interaction*. 'Agency-extended integration' involves the extension of possibilities of interrelation through persons acting in the capacity of representatives, intermediaries or agents.<sup>9</sup> 'Disembodied-extended integration' is that level at which the constraints of embodiment, for example being in one place at one time, can be overcome by means of technological

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8. In using terms such as 'abstraction', 'levels', 'extension' and 'reconstitution' we are drawing very heavily on the work of Geoff Sharp, particularly from his 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', *Arena*, no. 70, 1985, pp. 48-82.

9. While this is not a term we will be elaborating upon later in the article it is necessary to a fuller examination of the body question. For example, any discussion of the long history of the body trade or marriage brokerage would need to cover the processes of the institutionalization of intermediating agents.

extension — broadcasting, networking or telephoning to name only a few. As described, each of these levels is more abstract than the level 'prior' to it, and each is implicated quite differently in the ways in which we live the relationship between nature and culture, and the ways we live our bodies and the 'presence' of others.

Ontological contradictions inevitably arise in the intersection of these levels, and in the intersection of the cultural practices conducted at those different levels with the world-as-given, the natural. It will be our argument that such contradictions, including the culture-nature contradiction, are enriching in so far as any one level does not come to constitute the dominating mode of living-in-the-world, thereby thinning out prior levels of human inter-relation.

### *1. 'Natural Symbols' and the Lived Images of Social Relations*

The most basic question to which the body-as-a-natural-symbol contributes is how social groupings bind their members and create boundaries which reinforce the sense of communality. In contemporary western societies, even the most gregarious individual could not be said to have meaningful and complexly textured relationships with more than a few dozen others, yet as Benedict Anderson describes in writing about the nation-state, there is a 'remarkable confidence of community in anonymity'.<sup>10</sup> Our interest here is in the role played by the body as a universally shared experience and as a symbolic form in creating bonds both in the more abstract settings of 'anonymity' and in the more concrete settings of reciprocal tribalism. Bodily symbols, images and signifiers — from the metaphors of blood, bile, semen and milk to representations of Unknown Soldiers, national heroes and religious figures — draw on the power of symbolism to make sense through linkage and 'remembrance'. Symbolism 'explains' by drawing on the creative human ability to interpret the unfamiliar through imaginative connection with the known. In one case the intimate familiarity of the body relates citizens to the Body Politic. In another, the transubstantiation of bread and wine relates some Christians to the Corpus of the Church community. Order, continuity, integration and depth of meaning are gained through symbolism's bridging of this distance.<sup>11</sup> While the linkage made by a symbol is in one

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10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 40.

11. Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology*

sense 'arbitrary' (a sense emphasized by post-structuralists), it gathers meaning (and thus becomes non-arbitrary) when it is interpreted by an agent who lives its 'message'. A rich interweaving of practices, mores, values and sense messages forms the background against which symbols can yield meaning. Hence, bodily symbols reveal as much about their cultural setting and the practices and perceptions which constitute attitudes to the body as they do about that which is being signified.

The 'social need' to develop and define relationships with others does not diminish as the means of societal integration become increasingly 'distanziating',<sup>12</sup> however the form in which it is expressed grows increasingly abstract as it is reconstituted. This abstraction is paradoxical for, while it continues to reproduce the desire for group identification, drawing together the faces of the nation or the world in written, pictorial and, most recently, electronic images, it also seems to weaken the depth of the connection, revealing an amorphous mass of strangers. By necessity of being diffuse, both national and global community 'stretch' the sense of integration found in the reciprocal, kinship network of non-modern societies. This stretching, this abstracting of the social horizon, has virtues in that historically it has formed part of the basis for the enriching possibilities of a universalizing ethic highlighting the 'needs of strangers'. However, it is this same stretching which thins out the connection which is so crucial for maintaining a depth of ontological security. The fragility of social identity in western late capitalism already suggests a possible answer to the issue of how the constitution of persons differs across historical and social settings. But this will be considered in more detail later in relation to the image of the body in contemporary culture. We still need to say more about symbols in general, natural symbols, and more particularly about the culture of the body as a 'natural symbol' (Mary Douglas's term).

Symbols work to integrate societies and express the meaning of social relations. A society's sense of 'community', modern/post-modern or tribal, becomes personal and knowable in part through

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*of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. xi.

12. The term is Anthony Giddens's in his *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, London, Macmillan Press, 1981, and refers to the extension, through technological development, of ideas and interactions across time and space such that societal integration remains strong while 'presence availability', social integration through face-to-face encounter, is minimal.

the representations made by symbols. Social integration is inevitably multi-layered, requiring associations to appreciate the interweaving of interests involved.<sup>13</sup> As carriers of richly condensed networks of meaning, symbols are part of this multi-layered complexity. Symbolism is capable of secreting history in its layers of possible interpretations and referents, yet can be recouped, or even culturally managed, to represent new images and relationships. Symbolic forms are powerful, energetic tools in cohering and ordering social relations, for they are expressed in richly dramatic sequences of imagery. The imagery is palpable and intense despite its inevitable representational abstraction or distance from what it portrays. All meaningful symbols are thus always caught in a meshing of cultural contradictions between (what we have analytically distinguished as) more concrete and more abstract levels of social integration.

The body can be used in integrating a community and defining its social relations as both a universalizing experience — the human body as common to all of us — and as a particularizing experience — the body as a marker of difference: gendered difference; ethnic difference; differences of age, family and so on. Paradoxically, both these relations of embodiment, we would argue, find their richest and most stable expression in contradictory intersection with each other. In other words, embodiment is most pregnant with meaning where, firstly, the universalizing (more abstract) modalities qualify without annulling the differentiating, exclusionary, inward-turned and more concrete modalities of symbolically likening the community to a body. It is richest where, secondly, the cultural infuses without technocratically rationalizing the body as biologically given. It is richest where the culture-nature contradiction is not so stretched by the possibilities of techno-science that we (our bodies) become reduced to the symbolic 'soft infrastructure' of our dreams for liberation from our mortal, 'defective', differentiated and socially demanding flesh and blood.

Valorizing either the 'abstract' universalizing or the 'concrete' differentiating has worrying consequences. At its politically most disturbing, the heightening of a sense of external boundaries as given can be lived in terms of 'orifices' to be carefully guarded against the poisoning of foreign intrusion. Internal cohesion, allegiance and familiarity can be reduced to the harmony of the essentially bounded, fully closed, interconnected human body. The human body provides a readily available image for societies which treat their interconnectedness as if it were organic, a 'body' which

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13. Cohen, p. 53.

functions in complex and mysterious ways relying on the cohesion of its disparate elements. The fact that treating the body as a natural symbol *can* be part of generating a culture of narrowly bounded exclusion should not, however, lead us to conclude that it is 'boundaries' and 'modes of exclusion' *per se* from which we need to be liberated. Moreover, we should not be deluded by the deconstructionist creed that 'seeing through' processes of meaning formation makes one the master of it. Symbols express socially 'constructed' practices but, in their framing of meaning, they also gain the power to structure and overdetermine processes of social formation. In Mary Douglas's words, they sometimes 'lash back at the people' who create them.<sup>14</sup> It is a dual and reflexive process of structuring — people create the symbols which in turn define their society, social behaviour and relationships, and even their sense of body, from which the symbols derived. Bodily symbols can form an elaborate code which regulates dress, posture, etiquette, social contact, expressions of respect, and an innumerable list of other social behaviours each in themselves of limited consequence but which, as a generalized code, define and affirm the social order. These proscriptions are particularly applicable to face-to-face relations and so are most easily identifiable in communities in which, historically, such relations have formed the dominant level of integration — tribal, kinship or close-knit parochial communities.

It is at the face-to-face level that the humanly created need for the ontological security of group association is revealed most starkly. The study of tribal societies is revealing here because even in these apparently most 'concrete' of settings a primary level of abstraction occurs.<sup>15</sup> In tribal communities, the 'natural entity' of the body is already abstracted beyond its condition of being biologically extant through complex lines of kinship and ritual association, lines through which affines imagine and live modalities of co-presence despite their extension across temporary absence and even across the parting of death. Pierre Bourdieu's comparison of two forms of tribal kinship, official and practical, offers an example of an aspect of this move beyond the literalness of blood ties. He argues that while actual genealogical kinship organizes and legitimizes on official occasions, more often 'kin' relationships are cultivated, existing only through and for the practical interests they serve. Leaving aside the way in which Bourdieu reduces the distinction to the constitutive primacy of self-interest, it draws our

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14. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols, Explorations in Cosmology*, London, The Cresset Press, 1970, p. xiv.

15. Sharp, 'Constitutive Abstraction'.

attention to the way in which even such primordial relations as blood ties are lived-imagined abstract relationships.<sup>16</sup> That is, even something as 'thick' as blood is part of a cultural, rather than simply a natural, relation. Bourdieu's distinction can be paralleled with Douglas's comparison between tribal rituals which are just commemorative and those in which the symbolic action is considered to be efficacious.<sup>17</sup> Efficacious rites rely on the participants' receptivity to extension of 'logical' principles beyond their concrete settings so that they might be imagined to effect change on a person, occasion or environment. Tribal sorcerers rely on this abstraction of direct agency in their performance of magic.

At a very basic level the human body is always treated as an image of society — interest in its apertures reflect the social pre-occupation with entrances, exits, escape and invasion, so it is impossible to consider the body as natural with no sense of its social-cultural dimension. The emergence of what we have been referring to as the culture-nature contradiction was integral to the process of hominoids becoming human. This is part of the basis on which it is possible to say that even in a tribal setting there is a form of abstraction of the body. Victor Turner's study of the Ndembu in Zambia reveals how that people experience society as an intricate arrangement of descent groups, structured by the bodily inscriptions of age, gender and genealogical hierarchy. The colours of the human body — black bile, red blood, white milk — form a vivid symbolic centre for the patterning of complex representations of male and female spheres, of nourishing and destructive powers, and of purity and pollution.<sup>18</sup> The interpretation of this symbolic organization grows increasingly abstract as it is more inclusively extended.

The body is used in many tribal societies as the basis for a symbolic scheme which orients people in relation to each other, setting the limits of remoteness and nearness. This has both positive and negative implications. With the abstraction of public versus private spaces and with the development of a gendered distinction around the contradiction between nature and culture, the positive virtues of a partial separation between men's and women's cultures has in

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16. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 34-38. While we find this distinction useful, using it here does not imply any sympathy for Bourdieu's over-emphasis, in our view, upon self-interest or group-interest as the motivating *basis* of action.

17. Douglas, p. 8.

18. Douglas, pp. 10 and 11.

many cases hardened into public patriarchy. Women of the Baruya, a New Guinean mountain tribe, stop, turn their heads and draw a flap of their bark cloak across their faces when passed by a man journeying on the roads between villages.<sup>19</sup> The women's subordinate public placement in relation to men in the tribe is both abstracted in this bodily gesture and made more concrete by the frequent acting out of this ritual respect.

The internal/external dichotomy is highly visible in tribal settings where there are explicit, often sacred values placed on inner and outer parts of the body. The segregation metaphor orders social arrangements abstractly into a meticulous separation of pure from polluted, sacred from profane, male from female, or initiated from child or stranger. An example of how the body is basic to the physical structuring of place is given in a description of the Baruya family house.<sup>20</sup> It is completely segregated by gender, as though an imaginary line ran through the hearth at the centre of the house. The wife and children sleep and eat on the side closest to the door, while the husband, and any other men entering, take up their place on the other side, beyond the hearth. No woman may enter the male part of the house and must avoid stepping over the central hearth lest she pollute the place where the husband's food is prepared. The hearth itself, built by men from the husband's family, is symbolic of kinship and lineage. Here our argument for a renewed politics of embodiment obviously does not entail a return to the *content or modes* of gendered relations found within tribal reciprocity, the kinds of enactments that we have just been describing. Rather, it is an argument for a politics of embodiment which reasserts the *form* expressed by those modalities: the relevance of bodily-gendered difference; the importance of recognizing that our bodies are not just our individualistic self-creations; the value of retaining a respect for cultural (embodied) boundaries insofar as they enhance the dialectic of difference *and* connection.

We will go on to suggest that the capacity for the body to be the figure of an integrating, organizing symbolic form is greatly diminished in modern/postmodern societies. This should not be taken as implying an argument that embodiment becomes irrelevant to post-tribal processes of structuration, continuity or ontological security. In the private sphere, in a post World War II, English,

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19. Maurice Godelier, *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power Among the New Guinea Baruya*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 9 and 10.

20. Godelier, pp. 10 and 11.

working-class home for example, the body defines an outlay of space, and it structures 'appropriate' behaviour within specifically bounded places. The back of the house contains the kitchen, bathroom and toilet — providing privacy for body functions — while the front of the house, containing the parlour, is given over to public, social relationships where the body is required to present itself with formal decorum.<sup>21</sup> However, the contrast with tribal forms of embodiment cannot be understated. Modernity has involved an increasingly self-conscious acculturation of the 'excesses' of the body as a natural symbol.

In the broader sphere of the contemporary nation-state, changing one's national identity still involves one's own body. It requires a ceremony of symbolic boundary-crossing. Ironically, however, it is a ceremony of 'naturalization' which self-consciously subordinates the significance of birth-place to transform an alien into a citizen. The ceremony treats the nationally 'naturalized' body in a more abstracted way than the rituals of tribal boundary-crossing or identity transformation which call for the bodies of the initiates to be physically changed. National naturalization assumes, almost perfunctorily, an abstract overlay which has reconstituted the cultural meaning of birth. By contrast, for example, Aboriginal initiation ceremonies entail a bloody renaissance, a *rebirth* of the initiate's actual body.<sup>22</sup> The body metaphor is not irrelevant to 'naturalization' in the modern context. Any would-be citizen must attend the ceremony *in person*, swear an oath, and receive a document confirming his or her transition out of the old cultural inscription of what birth means to identity. In the contemporary period, the symbolic shallowness of the transition can be seen in deliberately ambiguous advertisements which appeared in Australia during our bicentenary year with the Australian Government 'inviting more people to swear'; 'To be a good Australian all you have to do is swear'.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, expatriates like Peter Allen (proud recipient of the Order of Australia) and Rupert

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21. Douglas, p. 158. For a discussion of the way in which in France this separation of private spaces, first limited to the bourgeoisie, spread after World War II to the working-class household, see Antoine Prost 'Public and Private Spaces in France', in Antoine Prost and Gerard Vincent (eds), *A History of Private Life, Vol. V*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991.

22. Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 228-233; and Chris Knight, *Blood Relations*, pp. 40 ff.

23. *Herald*, 23 January 1988.

Murdoch (a little sheepish at becoming an American citizen) were confidently voicing that sentiment of postmodern nationalism, 'I still call Australia home'.

## 2. *To the Body as an Individualized Project*

We have seen how the body is already abstracted, even in the most bounded of face-to-face settings. However, the abstraction which occurs in tribal settings has a condensed depth which is rarely found in modern/postmodern society. Our bodily symbols and images are constituted in a very different way. More abstract modes of social interrelation have come to overlay and, very often, to change the nature of our embodied interactions. The electronic image brings impassioned faces of Chinese students pleading with each of us to support their struggle, yet most of us have never stood where they stand in Tiananmen Square or spoken to them in person. For a time we may respond with public outrage to the inhumane way they were treated, but we cannot know these people as more than encapsulated, time-frozen images. The unnamed young man who stood in front of an oncoming tank becomes an abstracted symbol. We cannot obtain a sense of him as a complex, fully dimensioned person. The image has consumed the subject. While we can celebrate the expansive sense of humanity this creates, we should not forget that the processes of abstraction through which this is possible place our relationship with the abstracted Other under shearing strain. Unlike the tribal form, this abstraction has stretched so far beyond the more concrete face-to-face experience that it has lost the layers which texture and amplify it. As quickly as we were first drawn to empathize (although maybe the more abstract concept 'sympathize' is a more accurate term here), we become inured, bored, hardened or even resentful. The abstraction is no longer just an extension of a relation previously or potentially experienced as embodied presence. It has created a completely new form of interaction which can draw only on our sense of what a fuller relationship might be.

Similarly, our own bodies have become increasingly problematic to ourselves. The modern/postmodern body has pushed the 'I am a body, yet I have a body' paradox<sup>24</sup> to its limits. The body has been abstracted as a malleable form. It remains important to the constitution of identity but more as the constructed image through which the self is presented to others than as a locus of

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24. Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 7.

the simultaneous connection and separation from others. The experience is one of an individualized tension — the 'disembodied embodiment' in which the body is part of the 'creative project', an objectified container for effecting appropriate style. As Maryanne Lynch suggests, the body has become the ultimate commodity, a packaged entity which joins the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of selfhood, in a belief that the body can and should be 'worked on'.<sup>25</sup> The body no longer is a natural, reassuring condition from which stable metaphors can grow. Caught in the expectation that it should be constantly modified and reformed through diets, aerobics, plastic surgery and clothes fashion, the body becomes an immediate but abstracted 'experience'. The fetishism of breast enlargement is only the most controversial and latest example of those listed in books such as *Cosmetic Surgery: A Consumer Guide*. The symbolic significance of the body has thus been changed by capitalist developments grounded in personalized consumption. The body becomes an industry, with mass consumerism ascribing the signs of appropriate identity.<sup>26</sup> It also becomes a science with medicine ascribing the frame for viewing our corporeal defects: baboon organs have been transplanted into people in over thirty operations since 1905; by 1988, two million people in the United States, 87 per cent of them female, had undergone cosmetic surgery.

Just as George Bernard Shaw's heroine in *Pygmalion* had her identity synthetically built by mastering the appropriate insignia of the upper class, so in George Mead's terms, the contemporary body 'internalizes the external'.<sup>27</sup> And we become an object not just of the gaze of another but also of ourselves. Rosalind Coward identifies the sense of fragmentation which develops when different parts of the body are referred to in the third person as 'problem areas':

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25. Maryanne Lynch, 'The Body: Thin is Beautiful', *Arena*, no. 79, 1987, pp. 128, 136 and 138.

26. Kathryn Pauly Morgan, 'Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies', *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1991, pp. 25-53; and Turner, pp. 30 and 109. For an interesting confirmation of this development by one of its defenders see Bob Mullan, *The Mating Trade*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 2. He says: 'Finally, the critics seem to forget that the introduction industry is an industry; the primary terms are supply and demand, and profit . . . it is not a social service, except indirectly, but not by intention. The introduction industry is no more inherently wicked than, say, . . . the car trade . . .'

27. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, New York, Vintage Books, 1957, pp. 96 and 97.

If the ideal shape has been pared down to a lean outline, bits are bound to stick out or hang down and these become problem areas. The result is that it becomes possible, indeed likely for [people] to think about their bodies in terms of parts, separate areas, as if these parts had some separate life of their own.<sup>28</sup>

The contemporary image of the body would seem to have lost its ability to offer a deep ontological grounding. Along the way modern body metaphors such as the body politic, body corporate or a body of people have become shallow or procedural senses of group or association. The complex analogue the body once provided for an intricately structured social system has been depleted as it has been segmented and commodified. The bodily symbolism which in tribal settings provided a knowledge of structure and consonance inscribed in the body's natural patterning is being increasingly lost to modern/postmodern society.

The status of the body in late capitalism reflects a paradox characteristic of the disembodied-extended level of integration. While there has been the growth of an expansive perspective witnessed in the extension into globalism, there is also a heightening of the sense of the particular and local. A parallel tension constitutes the body as an abstract homogenized form, the standard to be gained, yet also as a physical space into which one can retreat to experience the inner self. New Age mediation, yoga and similar mind/body communion experiences use the body as a capsule into which the weary postmodern self can crawl to be rejuvenated. Yet even this intimate retreat into the body has become thoroughly commodified, individualized and privatized. The example of Tokyo's night-life district offering Brain Mind Gymnasiums full of machines which, according to their promoters, 'help you find yourself' may seem bizarre, but it is only a step beyond the now naturalized walkman radio. The Japanese manufacturer's strategy behind the design of the walkman was to create a private inner space for people by providing a way to listen to music privately while in public, a public privacy located literally within the confines of one's own body-space. The popularity of walkmans among the world's enormous commuting populations confirms the 'need' which this product met. A benign example, maybe, but once again one in which the body is presented ambiguously, accentuating embodiment but interceding in what it means to walk around together or share a public space.

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28. Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, London, Paladin Books, 1984, pp. 43 and 44.

### 3. *Feminism and the Body*

Feminist theory has made the constitution of the body a key focus of its analysis, and so we will turn now to consider how its insights further explain, but in certain ways contribute to, the abstraction of the body in the modern/postmodern world. Excluded from this criticism are some important new feminist writings which offer the beginning of a reformulation which can both retain the advantages of abstraction of the body and recoup the rich depth of prior forms of embodiment. We have already considered the way the emphasis on dieting and honed image, particularly insidious in its targeting of women, separates out the body into fragmented pieces. One emerging strand of feminist theorists, including writers such as Jean Bethke Elshtain,<sup>29</sup> has begun to emphasize the detrimental way in which technologies intercede in even the most basic of social interactions, intervening in some cases as if to make the embodied constraints on the experience of relationships unnecessary and archaic. They have begun to criticize the individualist valorization of 'free choice', the 'right to choose' and 'owning one's own body' as thoroughly unsatisfactory bases for a politics of embodiment.<sup>30</sup>

Some developments in feminism, most notably the ideal of androgyny, have been criticized for actually contributing to the disembodiment process of which they accuse 'patriarchal' technological rationality. Despite an intention to offer women an 'authentic experience' of their bodies, the ideal of androgyny suggests a desire for an identity which transcends the structure inscribed in the physicality of the body.<sup>31</sup> Androgyny seeks to surpass the contradictions implicit in the nature/culture dichotomy, allowing chosen culture to triumph. Far from knowing the body as a delimiting experience, women are encouraged to use their minds to disassociate self from the limitation of physical form. This trend is a revealing example of how the socio-material constituents of a dominant integrative level succeed in reconstituting other levels in the terms of that dominant level. Feminism began in an assertion of intimate, 'authentic and concrete' womanhood, yet some tradi-

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29. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Power Trips and Other Journeys*, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991. See also Germaine Greer, *Sex and Destiny*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1984; and Elizabeth Porter, *Women and Moral Identity*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1991.

30. For a sophisticated and partly convincing counter-argument against our position see Rosalind Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice*, London, Verso, 1986.

31. Alison Caddick, 'Feminism and the Body', *Arena*, no. 74, 1986, p. 62.

tions of feminism have been deflected by their lodgement in the dominant ideologies. The way some feminists have sought to reconstitute gender identity has been moulded by the sense of abstraction which establishes a mind/body dichotomy and privileges rational choice over the dictates of bodily inscription. By allowing bodily difference to have little theoretical importance, these feminists have been obliged to frame their critique in the very terms they sought to dismantle.<sup>32</sup>

Feminist difference theorists are strongly critical of the androgyny ideal, arguing instead for an embodied subjectivity which avoids what they see as the pitfall of androgyny — a conformity with the implicit assumption that the subject is male 'transcendent in his possession of an ultimate rationality, disembodied in this transcendence'.<sup>33</sup> Difference theorists emphasize the differential influence of the female bodily form. They argue the innate structure of the body distinguishes a grammatical form for the creation of personal and sexual identity. Yet even this perspective which seeks to centre the body in its theory is tinged by the reconstituting abstraction of the dominant level. The body on which it is based shows little of the tangibility which characterizes embodied experience. Closeness with the body is to be rediscovered through a deliberate cultural association in order to revolutionize the actual constitution of the self.<sup>34</sup> This is distinctly reminiscent of the postmodern sense of an abstracted body which is to be made instrumental in the discovery and presentation of the self.

These feminist perspectives on gender and the body are radically different yet they share the impact that an abstracted sense of body has made in constituting their approaches. We have suggested so far that abstraction of the body, through its reconstitution by the disembodied-extended level, has led to a depleted, shallow sense of embodiment. Fragmenting, dichotomizing and partitioning has made it difficult for the body to be experienced as a condensed and consequently reassuring analogue through which to view society. The body, when accepted, as it is by tribal societies, as a rich and authentic condition of social interrelation, has been seen to provide the basis of symbols which offer security and coherence to communities, yet it has also proscribed the behaviour of people, particularly women, who do not wish to act as

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32. Caddick, p. 64; and Porter, chapters 2-3. She posits, to the contrary, an ethic of 'concrete universality' and assertion of difference.

33. Caddick.

34. Caddick, pp. 63 and 64.

their 'bodies' cultural morphology would determine. Abstraction of the body in modern society has offered, through technologies which transcend embodied form, the opportunity to be liberated from such dictates, yet its image of the body as a package to be manipulated by the 'looking glass self'<sup>35</sup> of modern consumerism and techno-science has proved to be a hollowed-out reconstitution. Brian Turner aptly characterizes the contradictions in his description of the body as 'at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever-present and ever-distant thing — a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity'.<sup>36</sup> But as Lynch warns, the 'renaissance' of the body in the West may indicate the possibility of its 'loss', as embodiment is reified out of its centrality in the collective, personally interactive character of human life.<sup>37</sup>

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We have already considered how the attempt to recoup prior levels of integration falls victim to the power of the dominant level to reconstitute those levels in terms of itself. This is the recurring problem of how prior constitutive levels can maintain their depth and texture after they have been 'seen through' from the vantage point of a more abstract constitutive practice.<sup>38</sup> In the flux of new levels of communion and integration rising to dominance, there is often a desire to repossess past forms. But in this disconnected, de-linked borrowing from the past, there seems inevitably to be a 'loss of articulation in the depth of past time'.<sup>39</sup> Recouped forms become thinned out as they lose their sense of historical continuity. The constitution of body in our modern/postmodern society is no longer fulfilling. The paucity of the ontological depth it offers is disturbing. The goal then must be to find a new grounding in the body which is able to sift out the benefits of the more concrete, embodied experiences of past ways of life, and present them as forms ideal for present lifestyle, not as nostalgic slices of the past. The new constitution of body must be able to retain the advantages of certain aspects of abstraction, such as the sense of universalizing disembodiment which connects us to the generalized Other, which allows us to reflect back upon the nature of embodiment, and which maintains the dimension of intellect created by

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35. Turner, p. 110.

36. Turner, p. 8.

37. Lynch, pp. 144 and 145.

38. Sharp, 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', p. 78.

39. Douglas, p. 19.

the mind/body distinction. However, thinking about it is obviously not sufficient.

In true contemporary style we begin by offering two possible conclusions. The first comes from the final paragraphs of Nicholson Baker's *Vox*; the second comes from the closing remarks of the English marxist Chris Knight in his book *Blood Relations*.

## I

'Do you think our wires . . . will cross again?'

'I don't know. I don't know. What do you think?'

'I could give you my number', he said. 'I mean if you still want it. I'll avoid a possibly awkward moment by not asking for yours . . .'

'All right', she said. 'Let me think about things. Let me absorb the strangeness.'

'What's strange?'

'Nothing', she said. 'I guess nothing. I think I should probably sign off now, though. I have to put a load of towels in the laundry.'

'Certainly. Okay. Thank you for calling this number.'

'Thank you. Bye Jim.'<sup>40</sup>

## II

The revolution's outcome is not simply in 'the future', conceived as something abstracted from the past. As we fight to become free, it is as if we were becoming *human* for the first time in our lives. But in this sense, because it concerns *becoming human*, the birth process we have got to win — our survival as a species depends upon it — has in the deepest sense been won already. None of us would be here had it not been.<sup>41</sup>

The first scenario perhaps is sustainable for an evening or two; the second proposition points up the complex and contradictory nature of our struggle for a long-term future. Such a struggle, we suggest, will involve an ongoing choice to reflexively monitor and sometimes to substantially qualify the 'bounteous' possibilities that the processes of disembodied extension and the techniques of techno-science will throw up in pursuit of extending the nature of what it has meant to be human. It will involve living with others in relations of continuity, mutuality and co-operation. It will involve new forms of community.

Spelling out an 'ethics for living' will be the task of people fighting it out together across overlapping levels of association,

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40. Baker, pp. 164-165.

41. Knight, *Blood Ties*, p. 533.

near and far, finding ways of qualifying the ontological dominance of any one level by a contradictory intersection-in-practice of more concrete and more abstract levels of integration. So long as it is not confined to debates conducted through the disembodied realms such as writing, or to discussions lifted out of the context of rounds of everyday life (from academic conferences to know-your-own-body encounter groups), then the very process of negotiating a politics of embodiment with others will be already a small step towards recouping the sociality of our bodies. These are cradle-to-grave and cross-generational issues. What is my relationship to somebody else's child? What makes that child 'somebody else's'? What does it mean to emigrate and permanently leave behind long-term associations? When does the 'private' sexual relationship become relevant to community relations? Will my ageing body be indefinitely sustained by the 'wonders of science'? Where will I be buried?