

# Introduction: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body

## THE HEAVY BEAR

"the withness of the body"

*Whitehead*

The heavy bear who goes with me,  
A manifold honey to smear his face,  
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,  
The central ton of every place,  
The hungry beating brutish one  
In love with candy, anger, and sleep,  
Crazy factotum, disheveling all,  
Climbs the building, kicks the football,  
Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city.

Breathing at my side, that heavy animal,  
That heavy bear who sleeps with me,  
Howls in his sleep for a world of sugar,  
A sweetness intimate as the water's clasp,  
Howls in his sleep because the tight-rope  
Trembles and shows the darkness beneath.  
—The strutting show-off is terrified,  
Dressed in his dress-suit, bulging his pants,  
Trembles to think that his quivering meat  
Must finally wince to nothing at all.

That inescapable animal walks with me,  
He's followed me since the black womb held,  
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,  
A caricature, a swollen shadow,  
A stupid clown of the spirit's motive,  
Perplexes and affronts with his own darkness,  
The secret life of belly and bone,  
Opaque, too near, my private, yet unknown,  
Stretches to embrace the very dear  
With whom I would walk without him near,

Touches her grossly, although a word  
 Would bare my heart and make me clear,  
 Stumbles, flounders, and strives to be fed  
 Dragging me with him in his mouthing care,  
 Amid the hundred million of his kind,  
 The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.

*Delmore Schwartz*

#### CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF MIND-BODY DUALISM

Through his metaphor of the body as “heavy bear,” Delmore Schwartz vividly captures both the dualism that has been characteristic of Western philosophy and theology and its agonistic, unstable nature. Whitehead’s epigraph sets out the dominating, double-edged construction, the one that contains and regulates all the others—that of disjunction and connection, separateness and intimacy. “The withness of the body”: the body as not “me” but “with” me is at the same time the body that is *inescapably* “with me.” Like a Siamese twin, neither one with me nor separable from me, my body has “followed me since the black womb held,” moving where I move, accompanying my every act. Even in sleep, “he” is “breathing at my side.” Yet, while I cannot rid myself of this creature, while I am forced to lived with “him” in intimacy, he remains a strange, foreign presence to me: “private,” “near,” yet “opaque.”

The body is a *bear*—a brute, capable of random, chaotic violence and aggression (“disheveling all . . . kicks the football / Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city”), but not of calculated evil. For that would require intelligence and forethought, and the bear is above all else a creature of instinct, of primitive need. Ruled by orality, by hunger, blindly “mouthing” experience, seeking honey and sugar, he is “in love”—delicate, romantic sentiment—but with the most basic, infantile desires: to be soothed by sweet things, to discharge his anger, to fall exhausted into stupor. Even in that stupor he hungers, he craves, he howls for a repletion dimly remembered from life in the womb, when need and fulfillment occupied the same moment, when frustration (and desire) was unknown.

The bear who is the body is clumsy, gross, disgusting, a lumbering fool who trips me up in all my efforts to express myself

clearly, to communicate love. Stupidly, unconsciously, dominated by appetite, he continually misrepresents my "spirit's motive," my finer, clearer self; like an image-maker from the darkness of Plato's cave, he casts a false image of me before the world, a swollen, stupid caricature of my "inner" being. I would be a sensitive, caring lover, I would tell my love my innermost feelings, but *he* only "touches her grossly," he only desires crude, physical release. I would face death bravely, but *he* is terrified, and in his terror, seeking comfort, petting, food to numb him to that knowledge, he is ridiculous, a silly clown performing tricks on a tightrope from which he must inevitably fall.

The bear who is my body is *heavy*, "dragging me with him." "The central ton of every place," he exerts a downward pull—toward the earth, and toward death. "Beneath" the tightrope on which he performs his stunts is the awful truth that one day the bear will become mere, lifeless *matter*, "meat" for worms. And he, "that inescapable animal," will drag *me* to that destiny; for it is he, not I, who is in control, pulling me with him into the "scrimmage of appetite," the Hobbesian scramble of instinct and aggression that is, in Schwartz's vision, the human condition.

The body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects: these are common images within Western philosophy. This is not to say that a negative construction of the body has ruled without historical challenge, or that it has taken only one form, for the imaginal shape of the body has been historically variable. For example, although Schwartz employs Platonic imagery in evoking the distortions of the body, his complaint about the body is quite different from Plato's. Plato imagines the body as an *epistemological* deceiver, its unreliable senses and volatile passions continually tricking us into mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and the real. For Schwartz, the body and its passions are obstacles to expression of the "inner" life; his characteristically modern frustration over the isolation of the self and longing for "authenticity" would seem very foreign to Plato.

Plato, arguably (and as another example of the historical range of Western images of the body), had a mixed and complicated attitude toward the sexual aspect of bodily life. In the *Phaedo* passion distracts the philosopher from the pursuit of knowledge, but in the *Symposium* it motivates that pursuit: love of the body is the essential

first step on the spiritual ladder that culminates in recognition of the eternal form of Beauty. For Christian thought, on the other hand, the sexual body becomes much more unequivocally the gross, instinctual “bear” imagined by Schwartz, the animal, appetitive side of our nature. But even within the “same” dominating metaphor of the body as animal, *animality* can mean very different things. For Augustine, the animal side of human nature—symbolized for him by the rebelliously tumescent penis, insisting on its “law of lust” against the attempts of the spiritual will to gain control—inclines us toward sin and needs to be tamed. For the mechanistic science and philosophy of the seventeenth century, on the other hand, the body as animal is still a site of instinct but not primarily a site of *sin*. Rather, the instinctual nature of the body means that it is a purely mechanical, biologically programmed system that can be fully quantified and (in theory) controlled.

At different historical moments, out of the pressure of cultural, social, and material change new images and associations emerge. In the sixteenth century the epistemological body begins to be imagined not only as deceiving the philosopher through the untrustworthy senses (a Platonic theme) but also as the site of our *locatedness* in space and time, and thus as an impediment to objectivity.<sup>1</sup> Because we are embodied, our thought is perspectival; the only way for the mind to comprehend things as “they really are” is by attainment of a dis-embodied view from nowhere. In our own time (as another example of the emergence of new meanings), the “heaviness” of the bear has assumed a concrete meaning which it probably did not have for Schwartz, who uses it as a metaphor for the burdensome drag the body exerts on “the self”; my students, interpreting the poem, understood it as describing the sufferings of an overweight man. For Schwartz, the hunger for food is just one of the body’s appetites; for my female students, it is *the* most insistent craving and the preeminent source of their anger and frustration with the body, indeed, of their *terror* of it.

Not all historical conceptions view the body as equally “inescapable.” The Greeks viewed soul and body as inseparable except through death. Descartes, however, believed that with the right philosophical method we can transcend the epistemological limitations of the body. And contemporary culture, technologically armed, seems bent on defying aging, our various biological

"clocks," and even death itself. But what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom . . .) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization.<sup>2</sup>

#### WOMAN AS BODY

What is the relation of gender to this dualism? As feminists have shown, the scheme is frequently gendered, with woman cast in the role of the body, "weighed down," in Beauvoir's words, "by everything peculiar to it." In contrast, man casts himself as the "inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit."<sup>3</sup> According to Dinnerstein, as a consequence of our infantile experience of woman as caretaker of our bodies, "the mucky, humbling limitations of the flesh" become the province of the female; on the other side stands "an innocent and dignified 'he' . . . to represent the part of the person that wants to stand clear of the flesh, to maintain perspective on it: 'I'ness wholly free of the chaotic, carnal atmosphere of infancy, uncontaminated humanness, is reserved for man."<sup>4</sup> The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death.

Although Schwartz's conception of the body is indeed gendered, it is not guilty of such projections. The "heavy bear" is clearly imaged and coded as male (and, arguably, racially and class-inflected as well). King Kong is evoked ("climbs the building"), as is male gang warfare ("boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city"), and one of the most striking metaphors of the poem is that of state of nature as football game ("the scrimmage of appetite"). It is not a maternal or feminine primitivity that is constructed, but a lumbering, rough, physically aggressive and emotionally helpless male animality. The feminine presence in the poem consists in the nostalgic memory of womb-life (the "water's clasp") and the present

beloved, the “very dear” with whom he yearns for relations unbefouled by the crude instincts of the bear. Woman exists in this poem as a wrenching reminder both of past bliss and of present longing, but a reminder that is experienced without rancor, resentment, or anger at the object of desire. Schwartz, while projecting everything troubling onto the body, does not perform the additional projection of the body’s troubles onto the figure of woman. He owns those troubles, albeit painfully and in estrangement, through the “bear” that is his body.

In his ownership of the instinctual, infantile body, Schwartz distinguishes himself from most of the Christian tradition and the deeply sedimented images and ideology that it has bequeathed to Western culture, from classical images of the woman as temptress (Eve, Salome, Delilah) to contemporary secular versions in such films as *Fatal Attraction* and *Presumed Innocent*. On television soap operas, the sexual temptress is a standard type. No show can earn big ratings without a Lucy Coe or Erica Kane; the Soap Opera Awards Show even has a category for Best Villainess. These depictions of women as continually and actively luring men to arousal (and, often, evil) work to disclaim male ownership of the body and its desires. The arousal of those desires is the result of female manipulation and therefore is the woman’s fault. This construction is so powerful that rapists and child abusers have been believed when they have claimed that five-year-old female children “led them on.”

Conscious intention, however, is not a requisite for females to be seen as responsible for the bodily responses of men, aggressive as well as sexual. One justification given for the exclusion of women from the priesthood is that their mere presence will arouse impure thoughts. Frequently, even when women are silent (or verbalizing exactly the opposite), their bodies are seen as “speaking” a language of provocation (Figure 1). When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, “flaunting”: just two years ago, a man was acquitted of rape in Georgia on the defense that his victim had worn a miniskirt. When these inviting female bodies are inaccessible or unresponsive to male overtures, this may be interpreted as teasing, taunting, mocking. In Timothy Beneke’s *Men on Rape*, several personal accounts demonstrate this interpretation. For example:

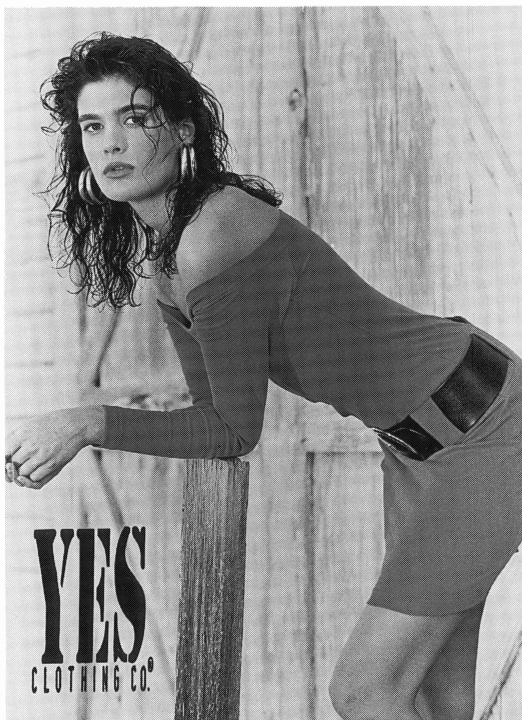


FIGURE 1

Let's say I see a woman and she looks really pretty and really clean and sexy, and she's giving off very feminine, sexy vibes. I think, "Wow, I would love to make love to her," but I know she's not really interested. It's a tease. A lot of times a woman knows that she's looking really good and she'll use that and flaunt it, and it makes me feel like she's laughing at me and I feel *degraded*.<sup>5</sup>

In numerous "slasher" movies, female sexual independence is represented as an enticement to brutal murder, and chronic wife-batterers often claim that their wives "made them" beat them up, by looking at them the wrong way, by projecting too much cheek, or by some other (often very minor) bodily gesture of autonomy.

My point here, if it requires saying, is not to accuse all men of being potential rapists and wife-batterers; this would be to indulge in a cultural mythology about men as pernicious as the sexual-temptress myths about women. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate

the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men but also women (since we live in this culture, too) are vulnerable. Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self-loathing. For example, anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the "femaleness" of the body and a punishment of its desires. Those desires (as I argue in "Hunger as Ideology") have frequently been culturally represented through the metaphor of female appetite. The extremes to which the anorectic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure "male" will, *or* she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground.

Women may be quite ready, too, to believe the cultural mythology about some other woman or women, as responses to the Patricia Bowman/William Kennedy Smith rape trial demonstrated ("Why did she go home with him?" "Why did she let him kiss her?" "Why, if she only wanted to spend the evening with her girlfriends, did they go out to a bar?"). More striking, given the numbers of women who had had similar experiences, was female skepticism about Anita Hill's sexual-harassment charges against then-prospective Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas ("Why did she follow him to the EEOC?" "Why did she call him on the telephone?" "Why did she drive him to the airport?"). Generally, such questions were raised to attack Hill's credibility rather than to suggest that she had initiated a sexual relationship with Thomas. But it seemed clear to me that underlying the specifics of the attack was a generalized condemnation of Hill's behavior as inappropriate, insufficiently cautious, overly ambitious, and "asking for" *whatever* it was that happened. The intensity and even venom with which some women engaged in such attacks is suggestive of powerful projections at work, projections which may serve to protect women against their own self-doubts. "Why did she wait so long to tell? If what she says happened to her had happened to *me*, I'd never let him get away with it!" Thus, at Hill's expense, women



shored up belief in the robustness of their own self-respect, self-confidence, and “purity.”

For African American critics of Anita Hill—male and female—the situation was more complicated than this, of course. In the face of pervasive ideology that stereotypes black males as oversexed animals, many felt that to support Hill was to lend credence to racist mythologies. Some African American women, while believing Hill’s charges, were furious at her for publicly exposing a black man as she did. Leaving aside the question of to what degree these criticisms were just (I discuss the Hill/Thomas hearings in more detail in “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism”), what they seem to overlook (and what was certainly ignored by the white, male senators and in the media coverage of the hearings) is the fact that the racist ideology and imagery that construct non-European “races” as “primitive,” “savage,” sexually animalistic, and indeed more *bodily* than the white “races”<sup>6</sup> extends to black women as well as black men.

Corresponding to notions that all black men are potential rapists by nature are stereotypes of black women as amoral Jezebels who can never truly be raped, because *rape* implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having. Corresponding to the popular sexual myth that black men are genitally over-endowed are notions, harking back to the early nineteenth century, that African women’s sexual organs are more highly developed than (and configured differently from) those of European women, explaining (according to J. J. Virey’s study of race) their greater “voluptuousness” and “lascivity.”<sup>7</sup> “Scientific” representations of the black woman’s body, like evolutionists’ comparisons of the skull shapes of African males and orangutans, exaggerated (and often created) relations of similarity to animals, particularly monkeys. The “Hottentot Venus,” a South African woman who was exhibited in London and Paris at the end of the eighteenth century, was presented as a “living ethnographic specimen” of the animal-like nature of the black woman.<sup>8</sup> Several commissioned portraits depict her with grotesquely disproportionate buttocks, as though she were in a permanent bodily state of “presenting” to the male.

A “breeder” to the slaveowner,<sup>9</sup> often depicted in jungle scenes in contemporary advertisements (Figure 2), the black woman carries