

# Embodied Practices

Feminist Perspectives on the Body



edited by Kathy Davis

# Embodied Practices

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES  
ON THE BODY

edited by  
KATHY DAVIS



SAGE Publications  
London · Thousand Oaks · New Delhi

© SAGE Publications Ltd 1997

This edition first published 1997

Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 12 were originally published in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 1996, 3(3).

Chapter 3 was originally published in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 1997, 4(2).

Chapter 5 was originally published in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 1996, 3(4).

Chapter 11 was originally published in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 1997, 4(1).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without permission in writing from the Publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd  
6 Bonhill Street  
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
32, M-Block Market  
Greater Kailash – I  
New Delhi 110 048

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-7619-5362-3

ISBN: 978-0-7619-5363-0 (pbk)

**Library of Congress catalog card number 97-067935**

Typeset by Type Study, Scarborough

## Embodied Practices

# Notes on Contributors

ANNA AALTEN teaches feminist anthropology at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam. She has written numerous articles on women's labour, feminist methodology and the development of feminist anthropology. In 1991 she published the book, *Zakenvrouwen. Over de grenzen van vrouwelijkheid in Nederland sinds 1945* ('Businesswomen. Crossing the Boundaries of Femininity in the Netherlands since 1945'). Her current interest is in the relationship between gender, culture and constructions of the body.

RACHEL A. BLOUL lectures in sociology at the Australian National University, Canberra, specializing in gender, ethnicity and social theory. Her PhD analysed the disruptions in gender and power relations brought about by post-colonial immigration among North African migrants in France, with a particular focus on the construction of masculinity. She has published several articles on gender and ethnicity. Her forthcoming publications include papers in B. Metcalf (ed.), *Making Muslim Space in North Africa and Europe* (University of California Press) and in J. Kahn (ed.) *Beyond Nationalism and Ethnicity* (University of Hawaii Press). Her present research looks at the role of gender in the globalization and ethnicization of Muslim discourses. She is also preparing a book on the feminist sociological imagination(s).

GON BUURMAN has been a photographer for over 15 years. She has received many commissions from ministries and foundations for her work. Her first book, *Poseuses* (1987), which contained a series of portraits of women, was highly acclaimed in the Netherlands and abroad. In *About Love* ('Over liefde') (Ploegsma/De Brink, 1995), she focused on the themes of love, desire and loneliness in relationships between people 'of every colour, sex or sexuality'. Her most recent book, *With Desire* ('Uit Verlangen') (Schorer/van Gennep, 1996) was commissioned by the Dutch Gay and Lesbian Movement in honour of their fiftieth anniversary.

KATHY DAVIS was born in the US and has taught (medical) sociology, psychology and women's studies at various European universities. She is currently a senior lecturer in the Women's Studies Department at Utrecht University. She is the author of *Power under the Microscope* (Forum, 1988) and *Reshaping the Female Body* (Routledge, 1995), and co-editor of several books on gender, power and discourse. She is currently working on masculinity, plastic surgery and men's bodies.

JULIA EDWARDS is a lecturer in politics at the University of Glamorgan. She is the author of *Local Government Women's Committees* (Avebury Press, 1995) and a number of publications on equal opportunities and local government. She is currently researching women's participation in local government and access to public services.

JOANNE FINKELSTEIN teaches cultural studies and sociology at Monash University, Australia. She is the author of *Dining Out: A Sociology of Modern Manners* (Polity Press, 1989); *The Fashioned Self* (Polity Press, 1991), *Slaves of Chic: An A-Z of Consumer Pleasures* (Minerva, 1994), and *After a Fashion* (Melbourne University Press, 1996).

INEKE KLINGE was trained as a biologist and specialized in immunology. She has been working as a Research Fellow at the Dutch National Cancer Institute and since the mid-1980s she has developed Women's Studies in Science in Utrecht. Her current research entitled 'Bones and Gender' addresses the representation of the female body in biomedical practices concerning osteoporosis. She has co-ordinated an international EU-funded research project on women's views on the Human Genome Project. She is co-ordinator of the Dutch Research Network of Women's Studies in Science and Medicine and Chair of the WISE division: Women, Science and Technology. She has published on feminist science studies, the position of women in science and technology, medicalization of the female body, and women and gene technologies.

GESA LINDEMANN teaches sociology at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/Main. Her research interests include the body, the sociology of the emotions, gender difference, and the difference between human/non-human as a constituting principle of modern society. As well as many articles on the construction of body and gender, her recent publications include *Das paradoxe Geschlecht. Transsexualität im Spannungsfeld von Körper, Leib und Gefühl* ('The Paradoxical Gender') (1993) and, co-edited with Theresa Wobbe, *Denkachsen. Zur theoretischen und institutionellen Rede vom Geschlecht* (Axes of Thinking) (1994).

LINDA MCKIE is a senior lecturer in health education at the University of Aberdeen. Her research interests include the body in public and health policies and the social construction of the body in health promotion. She is the author of a number of articles on equal opportunities and health promotion. With Sophie Bowlby and Sue Gregory she edited *Concepts of Home*, a special issue of *Women's Studies International Forum* and *Gender, Power and the Household* (forthcoming, MacMillan).

HARRIETTE MARSHALL is a principal lecturer in the Psychology Division at Staffordshire University. She is a member of the editorial group for

the journal *Feminism & Psychology*. Her main research interests include identity, issues around gender, ethnicity and the role of psychology in relation to inequalities.

MONICA RUDBERG is professor at the Institute for Educational Research, University of Oslo. Her main interests are in the intersection between gender studies and youth studies. She is currently involved in a three-generation study of young women and men. Her latest book, in collaboration with Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen, is *Psychological Gender and Modernity* (Scandinavian University Press, 1994).

ANNE WOOLLETT is Reader in Psychology at the University of East London. Her research interests are in the role of families in children's development, and in women's experiences of childbirth, parenting and parenting problems. With Ann Phoenix and Eva Lloyd she edited *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies* (Sage) and with David White she wrote *Families: A Context for Development* (Falmer).

DUBRAVKA ZARKOV studied sociology, anthropology and women's studies in Beograd (Serbia) and the Netherlands. She is currently doing her PhD on the female body and nationalist processes in the former Yugoslavia, at the Centre for Women's Studies, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

# Preface

The photograph on the cover of this book was taken by Gon Buurman. It shows a young woman and an older woman dancing in a garden. They are mother and daughter. The young woman is also a professional dancer. But it is the mother who knows how to do the tango. So, with an expression of concentration and determination (do I still know how to do this?), she begins to instruct her daughter. Together, they engage in some mundane gender-bending in the most traditional and heterosexist of all dances. The image brings together many of the themes of this book: differences between women, cultural discourses about the body, power and domination, subversive body practices and more. It manages to be playful and serious, both at the same time.

The publication of *Embodied Practices* represents the growing interest in the body of contemporary feminist scholarship. The book is aimed at a broad audience of scholars interested in the body and, more generally, in issues concerning femininity and masculinity in various fields, from women's studies, cultural studies, sociology and psychology, to philosophy and the humanities.

Most of the chapters in this book originally appeared in the Special Issue on the Body in *The European Journal of Women's Studies* (Volume 3, Issue 3, August 1996). Three chapters were published in subsequent issues of the journal – those by Gesa Lindemann, 'The Body of Gender Difference' (Volume 3, Issue 4, November 1996), Kathy Davis, 'My Body is My Art: Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?' (Volume 4, Issue 1, February 1997), and Anna Aalten 'Performing the Body, Creating Culture' (Volume 4, Issue 2, May 1997). The introductory chapter 'Embody-ing Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body' and the chapter by Dubravka Zarkov, 'Sex as Usual: Body Politics and the Media War in Serbia' appear for the first time in this book.

I would like to thank the members of the editorial board of *The European Journal of Women's Studies* and Karen Phillips of Sage for supporting this project. A final word of thanks goes to Margit van der Steen who came up with the idea to begin with and has been a constant source of encouragement and practical help.

Kathy Davis



# CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors	vii
Preface	x

1	Embody-ing Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body	
	<i>Kathy Davis</i>	1

## THE FEMALE BODY: DIFFERENCE AND POWER

2	Reading the Body: Young Women's Accounts of their Bodies in Relation to Autonomy and Independence	
	<i>Anne Woollett and Harriette Marshall</i>	27
3	Performing the Body, Creating Culture	
	<i>Anna Aalten</i>	41
4	Female Bodies and Brittle Bones: Medical Interventions in Osteoporosis	
	<i>Ineke Klinke</i>	59
5	The Body of Gender Difference	
	<i>Gesa Lindemann</i>	73
6	Victims or Offenders? 'Other' Women in French Sexual Politics	
	<i>Rachel A. Bloul</i>	93
7	Sex as Usual: Body Politics and the Media War in Serbia	
	<i>Dubravka Zarkov</i>	110

## FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN BODY / POLITICS

8	Erotic Bodies: Images of the Disabled	
	<i>Gon Buurman</i>	131
9	Women's Public Toilets: A Serious Issue for the Body Politic	
	<i>Julia Edwards and Linda McKie</i>	135
10	Chic Outrage and Body Politics	
	<i>Joanne Finkelstein</i>	150

- 11 'My Body is My Art': Cosmetic  
Surgery as Feminist Utopia?  
*Kathy Davis* 168
- 12 The Researching Body:  
The Epistemophilic Project  
*Monica Rudberg* 182
- INDEX 203

# 1 Embodiment Theory

## Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body

Kathy Davis

---

Several years ago a well-known sociologist, Arthur Frank, remarked that bodies were 'in' (1990: 131). The past decade has marked an enormous upsurge of interdisciplinary interest in the body, both in academia and in popular culture. Conferences on the body abound and no annual meeting in the social sciences, cultural studies or humanities would be complete without at least one session devoted to the body. A whole series of 'body' books has emerged with titles like *A Political Anatomy of the Body* (Armstrong, 1983), *Five Bodies* (O'Neill, 1985), *The Body and Social Theory* (Shilling, 1993), *The Body & Society* (Turner, 1984), *Body Matters* (Scott and Morgan, 1993), *The Body Social* (Synnott, 1993), or just *The Body* (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner, 1991). Add to this, three lengthy volumes by Michel Feher et al. (1989) on the history of the body from antiquity to the present and a special interdisciplinary journal, *Body & Society*, and it becomes clear that the body has clearly captured the imagination of contemporary scholars.

Different explanations have been put forth for this recent 'body craze'. For some, the concern is regarded as a reflection of the culture at large. Others view the current interest in the body primarily as a theoretical development. And, for still others, feminism is held responsible for putting the body on the intellectual map.

### BODY CULTURE

Scholars like Bryan Turner, Mike Featherstone and John O'Neill take the line that the current popularity of the body is due to changes in the cultural landscape of late modernity. While the body has always been a matter of social concern (take, for example, nineteenth-century fears in Europe and the US that the societal 'stock' was degenerating through malnutrition and a high birth rate among immigrants and African-Americans), the meanings surrounding the body have changed. With the

demise of industrial capitalism and the rise of consumer culture in the second half of the twentieth century, the Protestant work ethic with its emphasis on hard work, thrift and sobriety gave way to a celebration of leisure, hedonism and unbridled consumption (Turner, 1984; Featherstone, 1983).

The imagery of consumer culture presents a world of ease and comfort, once the privilege of an elite, now apparently within the reach of all. An ideology of personal consumption presents individuals as free to do their own thing, to construct their own little world in the private sphere. (Featherstone, 1983: 21)

The body is the vehicle *par excellence* for the modern individual to achieve a glamorous life-style. Bodies no longer represent how we fit into the social order, but are the means for self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be. In an era where the individual has become responsible for his or her own fate, the body is just one more feature in a person's 'identity project' (Giddens, 1991).

Interest in the body also goes hand in hand with recent medical advances and improved sanitation. Life expectancy is greater than in previous centuries and the result in most Western societies is a rapidly greying population. Health care issues have become increasingly relevant, particularly for the elderly. Paradoxically, as we become more able to turn back the clock, a wide-spread cultural anxiety about bodily decay and death have emerged. Individuals are prepared to go to great lengths to achieve a body which looks young, thin, sexual and successful, while ageing, ill, or disabled bodies are hidden from view (Shilling, 1993). Previously-held notions of the human life course proceeding according to socially constructed stages (childhood, middle age, old age) have been replaced by the notion that age is nothing but a mask concealing the 'real' person underneath (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991).

The denial of mortality is exacerbated by recent developments in technology. Transplant surgery, pacemakers, in vitro fertilization and plastic surgery have joined the more routine techniques of dieting and exercise, offering the individual increasingly dramatic possibilities for taking his or her body in hand. Our bodies have become the ultimate cultural metaphor for controlling what is within our grasp (Crawford, 1984: 80; Bordo, 1993). The notion that the body is a machine – to be repaired, maintained or enhanced (Finkelstein, 1991) – is reflected in computer technologies which blur the boundaries between body and machine, between physical and virtual realities (Shilling, 1993).

## BODY THEORY

While the desire to map cultural trends may account for much of the recent enthusiasm about the body, many scholars regard the interest in the body,

first and foremost, as a *theoretical* intervention. Traditionally, science has been reluctant to deal with the material body, displaying what Scott and Morgan (1993) refer to as an 'anti-body bias'. Philosophers have tended to disparage bodies in favour of the mind, while theologians have decried the body as the enemy of the soul (Synnott, 1993). Social scientists have tended to focus on social structures, institutions and collectivities, relegating the actual body to the domain of biology (Turner, 1984). Human beings are portrayed as disembodied actors rather than living, breathing, flesh-and-blood organisms (Freund, 1988). As O'Neill (1985: 48) puts it, sociologists seem to prefer to imagine that if society rules us, it does so through our minds, while we rule our bodies rather than being ruled by them.

Shilling (1993) suggests that the body has not been entirely absent, but rather an 'absent presence' in the social sciences. For example, psychologists study body images and self concept. Anthropologists deal with cultural meanings which are attributed to the body (Douglas, 1966, 1973). Sociologists have discussed the body as a carrier for the 'self' (Goffman, 1959; Giddens, 1991). The body is treated obliquely, as a symbol for something else: 'nature', desire or biology. In this context, the recent interest in the body can be viewed as a long overdue attempt to redress an imbalance. By 'bringing the body back in', social scientists are retrieving a neglected topic and making it the focus rather than the implicit backdrop of their analyses.

Michel Foucault has probably done more than any other contemporary social theorist to direct attention to the body. In his highly influential attack on humanism, he replaces the notion of the self-conscious subject as a mainstay of history with the concern for how bodies are arbitrarily and often violently constructed in order to legitimate different regimes of domination (1978, 1979, 1980, 1988). The body became the primary site for the operation of modern forms of power – power which was not top-down and repressive, but rather, subtle, elusive and productive. Power, once the province of the state, now came to be regarded as part and parcel of the micro-practices of everyday life. Foucault's studies on the regimes of the prison, the asylum and the clinic, as well as the history of sexuality, were seminal in understanding the body as object of processes of discipline and normalization. Through his work, the body came to be seen more generally as a metaphor for critical discussions which link power to knowledge, sexuality and subjectivity.

Arthur Frank (1990, 1991) has provided the most convincing explanation for the body 'revival' in social theory, however. He attributes interest in the body as theoretical object to contradictions in academic discourse which have emerged in the wake of postmodernity. The contradictory impulses of modernist certainty and postmodernist uncertainty, which are central to contemporary social theory, have been carried out in perspectives on the body as well.

In modernist discourse, the body represents the hard 'facts' of empirical reality, the ultimate justification for positivism and the Enlightenment

quest for transcendental reason. The body is the 'only constant in a rapidly changing world, the source of fundamental truths about who we are and how society is organized, the final arbiter of what is just and unjust, human and inhumane, progressive and retrogressive' (Frank, 1990: 133). However, the enormous diversity in the appearance and comportment of the body in different cultures is also used by social scientists as an argument for social constructionism. Cultural variation in embodiment and bodily practices show just how untenable the notion of a 'natural body' is, making the body an ideal starting point for a critique of universality, objectivity or moral absolutism.

This same contradiction can be found in postmodern discourse on the body. Although the material body is replaced by the body as metaphor, the conflict between the body as bedrock or the body as construct remains. On the one hand, the body is treated as the ideal location from which to criticize Enlightenment philosophy and its tendency to privilege the experience of the disembodied, masculine, Western elite. By 'embody-ing' knowledge, critics deconstruct the faulty universalist pretensions of such 'grand narratives' as merely one version among many. On the other hand, postmodern scholars, inspired by Foucault, take the body as the site *par excellence* for exploring the construction of different subjectivities or the myriad workings of disciplinary power.

Thus, both modernist and postmodernist scholars alternately propose the body as secure ground for claims of morality, knowledge or truth and as undeniable proof for the validity of radical constructionism.

For Frank, it is precisely this use of the body for contradictory theoretical agendas which accounts for its current place of honour in contemporary social theory. In his view, the tension between the body as 'reference point in a world of flux and the epitome of that same flux' (Frank, 1991: 40) is inherent in *any* perspective on the body. As such, it serves to fan the flames of controversy, thereby ensuring that the body remains a subject of ongoing theoretical concern for both modernist and postmodernist scholars alike.

## FEMINISM AND THE BODY

A final explanation for the body revival is *feminism* – a scientific imperative which emerged in the wake of women bringing themselves back in (Frank, 1991: 41). While many of the 'new', male body theorists seem somewhat reluctant to draw upon feminist scholarship on the body, they generally acknowledge the influence of feminism as a political movement on the emergence of the body as a topic. The body became a political issue as feminists struggled to gain control over their fertility and their right to abortion (Gordon, 1976; Dreifus, 1978). Feminists brought the body to the forefront in their analyses of power relations under patriarchy (Firestone, 1970; Mitchell, 1971; MacKinnon, 1982). And, as feminists entered the

academy, they brought their analysis of gender and power to bear on how women's (and men's) bodies were conceptualized in scientific discourse.

For feminist scholars, scientific indifference towards the body was much more than an oversight, bias or 'absent presence', however. Theorists like Susan Bordo (1987), Evelyn Fox Keller (1985), and Moira Gatens (1996) have analysed scientific neglect of the body as a product of the dualisms of Cartesian thought and the centrality of rationality in modernist science. From Plato to Bacon, the mind-body dualism has permeated Western thought, dividing human experience into a bodily and a spiritual realm (Bordo, 1993). The female body becomes a metaphor for the corporeal pole of this dualism, representing nature, emotionality, irrationality and sensuality. Images of the dangerous, appetitive female body, ruled precariously by her emotions, stand in contrast to the masterful, masculine will, the locus of social power, rationality and self-control. The female body is always the 'other': mysterious, unruly, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order through 'distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death' (Bordo, 1993: 5). In short, the female body represented all that needed to be tamed and controlled by the (dis)embodied, objective, male scientist (Keller, 1985).

By exploring the relationship between gender and the mind/body dichotomy in Western science, feminist scholars have shown that the 'anti-body bias' masked a distinctively masculine fear of femininity and a desire to keep the female body and all the unruliness which it represented at bay. Thus, feminist scholarship provided a critique of modernist science with a distinctively political thrust. When feminists called for a social theory of the body, they meant a theory which took gender and power into account. For them, 'bringing the body back in' meant both addressing *and* redressing the 'fear of femininity' which had made science such a disembodied affair in the first place.

In the past three decades an enormous amount of feminist research on the female body has been generated from a diversity of disciplines, theoretical perspectives and methodologies.<sup>1</sup> The female body has been the subject of numerous empirical studies in a wide variety of specific contexts. These studies focus on how women experience their bodies, on how women's bodies are implicated in various social and cultural practices and on symbolic representations of the female body. The history of women's bodies has been mapped in various areas of social life and attention has been devoted to how institutions and cultural discourses shape women's embodied experiences.

The specific character of women's embodied experiences of menstruation, pregnancy and menopause have been explored (O'Brien, 1981; Martin, 1987). Reproductive control has been a favourite topic among feminist scholars – from contraception, abortion and sterilization (Gordon 1976; Petchesky, 1986) to the new reproductive technologies like IVF (Stanworth 1987; McNeil et al., 1990; van Dyck 1995). Beginning with the



ground-breaking *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1971), women's health has occupied a central place on the feminist research agenda (Ehrenreich and English, 1979; Roberts, 1981; Lewin and Olesen, 1985) with attention given to, on the one hand, indifference on the part of the medical profession to women's bodily complaints, and, on the other hand, to the negative consequences of medicalization and the often dangerous medical interventions in women's bodies. Medical discourse has played an important role in constructing the female body as, by nature, unstable, deficient, diseased or unruly (Bleier, 1984; Keller, 1985; Showalter, 1987; Jordanova, 1989; Scheibinger, 1989; Jacobus et al., 1990). From hysteria and nymphomania in the nineteenth century to the twentieth-century variants of postnatal depression, pre-menstrual syndrome, anorexia nervosa and menopause, women's bodies have been regarded as more susceptible to pathologies than their male counterparts. Constructions of the female body as more tied to nature than the male body have been instrumental in justifying women's being barred from higher education (Ehrenreich and English, 1979; Morantz-Sanchez, 1985) to, more recently, being exonerated from murder due to their raging hormones (Bransen, 1986).

Sexuality has been a primary focus of feminist scholarship on the body (Vance 1984; Rich, 1980; Haug, 1987). Feminist scholars have explored women's sexual desire and experiences, paying special attention to the normative constraints of heterosexuality. In the past two decades path-breaking work has been done on sexual violence: from child abuse, rape, wife-battering, or the exploitation of sex workers (Herman, 1981; Stanko, 1985; Mort, 1987; Marcus, 1992; Edwards, 1993) to the mass rape of women during wartime or the international slave trade in women (Brownmiller, 1975; Barry, 1981). State policies and legislation concerning body issues like abortion, pornography, prostitution or social welfare have been critically scrutinized in their capacity to undermine women's right to bodily self-determination (Petchesky, 1986). Legal discourse has drawn upon the female body in ways which curtail women's autonomy or detract from their credibility (Eisenstein, 1988; Smart, 1995).

Women's experiences with the appearance of their bodies have been explored – from the more routine beauty practices (Chapkis, 1986; Bartky, 1990), fitness regimes (Radner, 1995) and fashion (Wilson, 1985) to dieting, the recent epidemic of female eating disorders (Chernin, 1981; Orbach, 1986; Brumberg, 1988; Bordo, 1993) and the cosmetic surgery 'rage' (Wolf, 1991; Davis, 1995). Feminist research in cultural studies has provided a wealth of studies on representations of the female body in film and television, showing how cultural images in the media normalize women by presenting images of the female body as glamorously affluent, impossibly thin and invariably white (Bordo, 1993).

Contemporary feminist theories have historically drawn upon the body in order to understand gender and sexual difference (Nicholson, 1994). Scholars have shown how the female body is implicated in the construction of femininity (Brownmiller, 1985; Smith, 1990; Bartky, 1990) as well as



how differences are constituted along the lines of social class, 'race', ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, able-bodiedness and more (Young, 1990a). The female body is the object of processes of domination and control as well as the site of women's subversive practices and struggles for self-determination and empowerment (Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1995).

Feminist scholarship has begun to trace the interconnection between racism and the body, showing how the body has been central to the construction of 'race' (hooks, 1990, 1994; Collins, 1990; Gilman, 1985). In the early nineteenth century scientists justified colonial expansion with biological arguments about the superiority of European 'racial' types. The bodies of African women played a significant role in the imaginations of male European scientists who represented them as wild and unruly continents to be explored and tamed (Gilman, 1985; Fausto-Sterling, 1995). The non-white woman was thought to be endowed with an uncontrolled, animalistic sexuality – a myth which justified the use of black women for slave breeding and exempted them from the possibility of being raped (Davis, 1981; Carby 1987; Smith, 1990). 'Racial' differences are drawn to produce dichotomies of 'Otherness' and power hierarchies among women. For example, the light-skinned, Western ideal of feminine beauty is predicated on African woman with dark skin, broad noses and kinky hair (Collins, 1990). In order to represent Woman, white Western women require an inferior 'Other' – the woman of colour or women from non-Western countries (Spivak, 1988).

In addition to being used in the construction of 'racial' differences, the female body has always been the target of nationalist discourses of community. Women's bodies have historically been used as a metaphor for nation – as, for example, Delacroix's famous rendition of Marianne as a bare-breasted, flag-bearing heroine, leading the French nation into battle. The female body not only represents freedom and liberty, but is the symbolic marker of the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. It is mobilized to fan the flames of ethnic conflict and militarism (Wobbe, 1995; Cooke and Woollacott, 1993).

Even this cursory look at contemporary feminist research on the body indicates that the body is hardly new, let alone in the process of making a comeback.<sup>2</sup> For feminist scholars, the body has always been – and continues to be – of central importance for understanding women's embodied experiences and practices and cultural and historical constructions of the female body in the various contexts of social life.

In the rest of this chapter, an attempt will be made to set out the distinctive features of a feminist perspective on the body. Despite differences in topic, theoretical orientation and methodological approach, feminist approaches to the body invariably attend to three problematics: *difference*, *domination*, and *subversion*. These themes are implicated in the analysis of women's bodily experiences and embodied practices as well as in studies of how the female body is constructed in different cultures, social contexts and historical epochs. I shall now take a closer look at these issues and, in