

**School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts**

**Of Memory & Furniture: Poems in Four Parts**

**and**

**The Flesh and the Word: The Modified Female Body**

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of  
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## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Bronwyn Jane Bateman

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## **Abstract**

The poems in this collection are about the relationship between the female body and its experiences of being culturally silenced by childhood sexual abuse, mental illness and institutionalised maternity. They also articulate ways of writing resistance to that silencing through representing in poetry lesbian embodiment, volitional markings such as tattooing, cutting and piercing, and temporary marking and constraint of the body through consensual D/s [Dominance and submission]. This project of writing the embodied subject into poetry has drawn upon contemporary theorisations of the body, upon readings of the cultural work of the mode of the postmodern Gothic and upon interpretations of poems which work in relation to these understandings to speak resistance. The poems in this collection articulate resistance, volition and rage experienced through a range of strategies and practices; and the costs of compliance or non-volition, with rage that is turned in on itself. Body-centred poetry can work to counter the erasure of women's bodies with its articulation of female experiences of birth, sexuality and pleasure.

Chapter One draws on relevant contemporary work to establish that the body as a discursive construct and thus available for transformation or resistance. Chapter Two explores the resonances for the female body of the Gothic mode in its postmodern form. Chapter Three argues that abuse and medicalised maternity have certain silencing effects on women. Chapter Four discusses the consensual body and the articulation of the relationship between Dominance and submission, exploring how poetry can articulate the fluidity of power relations implicit in the embodiment of D/s sexuality. Chapter Four also explores purposeful body modification, the double 'writing' both of marking the body and expressing this inscription in poetry. It then investigates the writing of the lesbian body. Chapter Five offers readings of resistant work of three other poets and deconstructs them in relation to Michel Foucault's notions of heterotopia, Luce Irigaray's theories of maternal relationships and Elizabeth Grosz's notions of being the woman reader and writer.

## Table of Contents

### **Of Memory & Furniture: Poems in Four Parts**

Part One.....	3
Part Two.....	24
Part Three .....	44
Part Four .....	64

### **The Flesh and the Word: The Modified Female Body**

Introduction: Writing the Heterotopic Body/Subject.....	86
Chapter One: The Body in Contemporary Theory .....	93
Chapter Two: Representing Female Embodiment: The Gothic Mode.....	102
Chapter Three: The Silenced Body as Abject/Object.....	112
Chapter Four: Reclaiming Volition by Writing the Consensual Body .....	119
Chapter Five: Reading Resistant Writing.....	134
Conclusion .....	146
Bibliography .....	151

**Of Memory & Furniture:**

**Poems in Four Parts**

*What did you think, that joy was some slight thing?*

Mark Doty

# Part One



# Prologue

## Coffee With Doty

---

I will not have it gone,  
this moment,  
will not wish it back to the past, so I can have it again,  
will not wish it forward to the time when  
I am telling people when & where & why  
I had coffee with Doty;  
will not focus on setting the scene:  
his borrowed, apricot kitchen,  
the red poppies in the upstairs bedroom window,  
*Ivy Cottage*, with its low ceilings, and  
Ledbury-black wooden beams  
on which, I am told, he has banged his head  
more than once  
—I see a graze on his scalp—

Will not describe how he is handsome,  
lithe, with a boy's blue eyes, but tired.  
How his game smile, its insistence,  
in the face of all the poets  
he has seen before me,  
disarms, then charms me,  
as he leads, with his hand extended,  
to shake mine.  
Like the cliché, he is taller than I expected,  
more tanned, with a moustache  
I've not seen in photographs.

I want to stop time right here  
in this moment,  
with his back turned to me,  
plunging coffee on the kitchen bench,  
pouring milk into a cut-glass jug,

—Doty is pouring milk for me—  
while I sit, waiting, at his kitchen table.

Or stop it here,  
with my hand, curled, as it so often is,  
around a warm, white, ceramic mug;

I will stay in *this* moment, sitting  
on a high-backed wooden chair,  
talking across the table.

This moment.

My half hour with Doty.

**thesis/poem**

---

I cup her breast

Latex gloves.

Mark 2 equidistant dots  
with a black marker.

Open a clamp  
twist a thin band  
over&over&over. Rubbers squeak.

Betadine.

Ready?

Take a deep breath:

One-two-thr—

It's through.

Breathe. Go on! Out.

One more moment for  
the jewellery—

He cups my breast.

Warm hands.

Nipple puckers.

Close my eyes.

Hum of music.

Skin.

Prickles. Cold.

I

Christ.

I

Sharp. Hot.

Stop.

I

just need time

to—

Keep

Still.

## Portrait of the Artist

---

*For Allen*

I cannot contain my longing  
for everyone else to be gone,

to stand, alone,

a pulse-beat distance from its surface,  
skin upon skin.

As if I were blind,  
I close my eyes  
to better learn its composition.

My fingertips

hum

with the white noise of texture.

Streams of enamel flow downward,  
to form round, velveteen blisters  
that bulge beneath my thumb.

I want to be like Thomas,  
to work my fingers,  
knuckle-deep,  
into the wounds of your canvas,  
to slide my palms  
down its shiny, red arteries of colour,

to rest,

to breathe,

in this new,

now-familiar landscape.

## Insomnia

---

Sleep is not my mother tongue.

I grapple with its language  
a perpetual toddler, labouring  
with three-word sentences

*—Sleep is good—*

*—I like sleep—*

while all around me  
the savants of slumber  
effortlessly converse.



## **red and black**

---

**I**

red and black are the  
colours i see with my eyes  
shut against the light.

**II**

my favourite words  
written with you in mind:  
please. again. harder.

## My Tattoo: I

---

A stranger has a tiger inked  
onto his shoulder. I hear him yelp  
as it's wiped clean with metho.

The flesh beneath his design  
flushes with blood.

This ugly, red-faced biker  
makes me itchy.

I want to close my eyes  
scratch my nails across  
his brand-new skin.

On the walls, Flash,  
drenched with colour, hangs in  
smoke-stained plastic sleeves.  
Row upon row of gendered certainty.  
These are the tattoos for  
virgins and teenagers, for bad boys  
and bitches from the suburbs.

The girl who replies with *Cool Bananas*  
to everything I say, who makes a face  
when I say I'm a poet  
—the girl I am trusting with my skin—  
mixes inks on the back of her gloved hand:  
teal, aquamarine, a drop of navy.  
She sticks out her tongue,  
silent for the first time  
as the tattoo gun's sullen hum  
slowly stipples the letters of a poem  
in a semi-circle on my bicep.

The heat of permanency burns.

## **My Tattoo: II**

---

Beneath my clothes,  
glimpses of colour

through the holes  
of my brown shirt,  
washed by water.

*What noun...*

With you.

*What noun...*

I sweat beads of ink.

*What noun...*

Bite me and taste  
the Green  
of aloe vera and seawater,  
grass and moss.

*What noun did I want  
spoken on my skin  
my whole life through?*

## Language

---

At twenty, I have: my first child,  
bruising, soft and black as summer plums,  
from the base of my belly to the middle of my thighs,  
and a second-degree burn inside my vagina.  
The metal speculum sits too long in hot water.  
*Oops, the doctor says. Sorry.*

*The person who Tops me is also my friend.  
We talk for hours before  
he touches me for the first time.  
Negotiate.  
Tell him what I like;  
where I learnt about silence  
the inadequacy of words; and  
about what it is my body can do.*

At twenty-two, my second episiotomy  
—a lateral cut—  
—is stitched too tight.  
I will tear, a little, and bleed  
every time I have sex  
for the next 5 years  
even after cortisone injections into the wall of my vagina, and an offer  
—from the same doctor who got it wrong in the first place  
—to recut and restitch me.  
I will learn to forgo the pleasures of spontaneous sex and of being on top.

*What I feel with him, often, isn't pain. It's intense sensation.*

At twenty-three, the family doctor will press too hard

on my cramping belly,  
while his other arm is deep inside my cunt.  
He'll chat about his adult son, as he pulls out his forearm,  
wrist, hand, red and shiny as plastic.  
Either my blood, or my baby's.  
*Never mind*, he'll say, his back to me, *they're a dime a dozen*.  
Meaning miscarriages.  
This is my first.

I am twenty-four. My son is 3 months old, and dead.  
Twenty-five.  
Twenty-seven.  
Twenty-eight.

Three more babies, blood transfusions antepartum  
and postpartum haemorrhages a second-degree tear twins  
lost at three months of pregnancy secondary infections  
waking up after corrective surgery with a torn perineum  
from being fucked too hard with a speculum, by an obstetrician.  
Not to labour the point. But while I was unconscious.

At thirty-one, miscarriage.  
Thirty-two.  
Baby.  
Thirty-three. Another miscarriage.  
A final fling at thirty-five. A break from study.  
My last child.

*I cede so he can take. He cedes. I choose to yield.*

You're all fine with this, right?  
Pain, blood, needles, cutting, anaesthetic, being held in place, held still  
with velcro and metal, with drugs, by nurses and doctors;  
once, by an anaesthetist, because the epidural didn't take

and being confined to a bed  
by drips and IV lines, by DVTs and temporary paralysis.

*I tell him: tie me up all you like. I'm still a feminist.*

## **motherwarm**

---

*For Kelly*

I expected neither mess, nor pain.  
Just blood, neatly contained.  
But I have been opened,  
I should have known:  
We bring forth, in noise and fluid,  
creatures both alive and dead.  
The twelve-week foetus  
I birthed into my hand.  
This plastic disc.  
A similar silence.  
A gaping maw.

## Beautiful Girl

---

They're taking photos of their baby.

They have, I think, no idea of the Code Blue,  
the plunging of the heartbeat to 65, the room suddenly  
filling with doctors and nurses, with noise,  
four of us holding her stirruped legs  
urging her to *push push push*.

Then safety. A baby girl.

But blood, everywhere blood.

I watch as a midwife crawls on her hands and knees,  
collecting bloodclots,  
slushing them into a metal bowl. *700mls* she says.  
I walk down to the end of the table, to watch the Doctor  
stitching up Sophie, stitching up a huge  
L-shaped episiotomy.  
Blood drizzles down her buttocks,  
onto the knees and plastic coat of the Doctor,  
who packs her with cotton and a riverbed of stitches, one at a time.

*That's a lot of blood, I say.*

He ignores me.

*A lot of blood...*

*That's what girls do, he says, in this situation.*

*They bleed.*



## **I like the way**

---

There are places where stories  
are reduced to vowel sounds fragments  
small mouths frozen in their moment of  
pain & surprise. Choose one instance  
pare back its skin try to capture the eloquence  
of those silver-stoppered mouths.

Emerge from the clutches of sleep with  
one perfect line that  
will not wait 'til morning.

I am learning to measure  
happiness.

## bars

---

you could hang chandeliers from  
these he says eyes half-closed  
taking my right nipple between  
his thumb and forefinger stretching  
it as far as he can it burns  
that moment before pain I watch him  
redesign my body in his head  
we could pierce you here  
his pen marks two black dots horizontally  
then again  
here  
two further dots  
ninety-degree angles explaining  
the process his hands slice the air  
neatly form small crucifixes both  
breasts held in place from the inside out  
radial fingers metal contained by flesh

## **A Freely Chosen Scar**

---

Take two of your fingers  
and press them, petal soft,  
against my mouth.

Then  
close your eyes  
and listen.

## **Intimacy**

---

I write a poem about fisting  
and there is silence.  
Yet how many people  
I wonder,  
in the tenderless intimacy of medicine,  
have had their arms inside my cunt?

## Part Two

## Accoutrements

---

From Bunnings you buy:

25 metres of white cotton rope.

I'm not allowed to come with you,  
in case someone asks  
what we want it for.

I sit cross-legged on your couch,  
watch the orange-handled scissors  
shake in your hand.

Cutting rope into different lengths  
is all it takes for your pupils  
to swallow the colour in your eyes;  
to make you hard.

At Coles, while I get:

bananas and bottled water,  
you buy: wooden pegs  
a six-pack of white, paraffin wax candles  
(for a cooler burn) jute string  
and Chux cloths (blue).

At the checkout I pick up the cloths,  
turn the packet,  
searching in vain for: instructions For Use

My heart, instantly panicked,  
my bottom lip, dry, between my teeth.

I imagine you  
peeling one cloth free from the rest,  
balling it up, egg-sized,  
feeding it into my reluctant mouth.

Me: breathing too fast,

fingertips numb,  
a prickle of sweat on my skin  
trying to listen to your voice

slow, baby;

breathe;

I'm still here

while you layer  
strips of duct tape (black)  
against my mouth.

Don't worry, you say,  
holding out one hand for the Chux,  
reaching for your wallet with the other.  
They're not for you.  
They're to wash my car.

## shape of a girl

---

*I'm a fountain of blood,  
in the shape of a girl.*

Björk

He understands what need is

it chatters against your teeth

tastes like metal

its texture—

all edges sharp ridges hollows

pressed tin—

or luscious as stone-fruit velvet

the imperative of gravity

prickles

heavy on your skin

thickens your blood

his fingers white-tipped on your shoulders

around your throat

in your hair

positioning your hips head hands

anchored to the moment

held in silence

the sound of need

a single indrawn breath

held

held

held

pulsing like the gills of fish

silence

held in silence

he never asks you questions



understands  
anger and punishment  
are not the same thing  
that when you fuck or  
he punishes  
and you say  
that hurts  
you don't mean stop

never used your safeword

he understands  
the wound the longing  
to open your lips  
feel the shape and weight  
of that word  
in your mouth

you

want  
want  
want

to fall to your knees

to say please.

## Needle Play

---

This is just a story.

Flesh and feeling.

Don't waste my time by asking if it hurts.

What do you want me to say?

The practicalities:

30 gauge, 1-inch needles, with brown, plastic hubs. Fine as hair.

25 gauge, 1½ inches. Orange hubs.

22 gauge, 2 inches. Thick as darning needles. Grey hubs.

Each one wrapped separately.

Five or six dollars a box.

We have a moment. Imagine.

You're standing at the top of the 10-metre tower,  
toes curled over the end of the diving-board.

Lift your arms in a smooth arc above your head.

Lock your fingers together.

Breathe.

Trust.

Fall.

The tips of the needles are bevelled so  
they slide, without thinking into flesh.

Avoid the lungs, other organs face, eyes and bone.

But arms, breasts, thighs, the torso and genitals are safe.

Slice into a blood vessel and the plastic hubs  
fill and spill onto your skin.

A woman on a bed.

A plastic-backed, sterile cloth, laid flat on a table.

Surgical swabs and a yellow Sharps container.

Hands folded on her bare stomach.

Slow breathing.

A pulse in her neck.

Fast. Then

faster still.

Breathe.

One needle.

Nothing.

A small flare of heat,

a tiny tug deep inside her flesh,

but

nothing,

except the knowledge that it's in.

Two, Three, Four, Five...

No more counting.

Trust.

A rhythm of sound and sensation.

The tear of plastic and paper.

A pattern of warmth, moments of pain.

Dimension.

The world reduced to

a cradle in which to be held.

Fall.

He decides when it's finished.  
Her hands flutter  
wanting to trace, with her fingers  
the patterns he has made.  
He brushes them away.

*No,*  
He says.  
*Not yet.*  
Then

Sshh  
when she shakes.

Good girl.  
*Good girl.*

Breathe.  
Trust.  
Fall.

Funny term needle play  
he says stroking the damp hair on her forehead.  
*I tell my girls it's needle work.*

## **Bathroom sub**

---

My face against  
the wet white tiles,  
my neck obedient  
to your hand  
an obscene slide  
of skin  
along the wall;  
my breath's  
moist constellations  
in its wake.  
You unwind your hand,  
gentle fingers  
card my hair through water.

I know better than to move.

Your dick in one  
soap-slick hand,  
the other, bruisehard hot  
upon my hip,  
hoisting me onto my toes,  
palms splayed, fingertips curled  
over the top row of tiles,  
nails chalked with grout,  
a counterpoint of stillness  
to the beating of the water,  
as you scribble broad strokes  
in the dip of my back,

feeling, I know,  
on and under your skin,

the prickle, the want;  
your mouth clumsy  
on my throat, cheek;  
searching.

I open wide,  
you bite hot ribbons  
from my lips,  
copper water  
copper blood.

My calves shake themselves  
tight and still.

*Not yet not yet not yet*

you warn

-I'm not sure whom-

Your voice is air & water.

## **Good with Words**

---

When I become the story  
he will not even tell himself,  
I know he will still remember the afternoon  
I fell to my knees,  
suddenly graceful,  
and undid, with my teeth, his black leather belt  
and the button of his oldest, softest jeans.

## Love Song

---

Hands and fingers tentative as teenagers,  
your knuckled fist, soft in his palm, a skim of fingertips  
soothing the skitter of tendons in his forearm;  
his thumb and finger, a fleshy cuff around your wrist.

*It's enough.*

The first kiss, always, chaste as friendship,  
a careful press of lips, followed by a flutter of tongues,  
his bottom lip between your teeth,  
the answering sting of yours.

*It's enough.*

Lock your hands behind his head. Exposed: the raspy column  
of his throat, tense and wanting, your heart  
echoing through your chest as you lean against his shoulder,  
the growing salt of his skin fills your mouth with water.

Count the times he calls you *babe*; kisses  
your mouth, face, neck; the way, when your shoulder locks,  
he massages smooth the clump of muscle in your neck;  
how many times you say *thank you*.

*It's enough.*

Listen, hungry, for the morsels of his unravelling:  
the way pleasure nestles in his throat.  
His mouth, lax and warm against your ear,  
you wait to hear, want to hear



*love; pretty; beautiful—*

his mouth, lax and warm against your ear,

his concession: *stunning; clever; deeply care—*

The paradox of greed and hunger:

*—his asking permission,*

*quietly, gravely,*

*or your saying please.*

*It doesn't seem to matter—*

The grace with which you feed it.

## **Eye of the Beholder**

---

On the stairs,  
two steps ahead of you,  
my back ramrod straight,  
shoulders square,  
head poised and still,  
my hands clasped behind me,  
wrists fastened  
with intricate knots of rope.

And it's true, isn't it?

I've never looked better.

## **I Want You to Know**

---

I want you to know  
that when I touched myself last night  
it had nothing to do with you  
not the rasp of your beard chafing my lips  
not your body beneath my fingertips

not the taste of your skin  
your cock wrapped in my fist  
not you pinching my nipples  
cupping my breasts  
not your hands chest face

not the straining muscle of your thigh  
I straddled and rode  
not your pulse tripping hard

not your belt-leather bruises  
on my skin  
your rope-burns on my wrists  
your clever knots  
your dangerous mouth  
not your wax pegs tape  
not your couch spare room  
your once-a-week appointment

and when I came  
rest assured  
it wasn't with  
your name  
in my mouth.

## **Burn, Baby**

---

Thighs astride my chest, she threads my hands through the slats  
of the headboard; cuffs my wrists, rocks back  
on her heels, tugs the chain between my breasts. The clamps' bite  
limns my vision red and black. She trails hot fingers,  
makes my flesh jump, burn; then bites my neck, tells  
me—her mouth against my skin—about today's brief,  
her hilarity in forgetting how to spell  
the word *submission*.

## Bound

---

You loom behind & over me like  
an Angel, your guardian hand  
pressed hard against my mouth. No sound.

The fierceness of that silence.

-I am frightened-

And finally, the gag: heavy,  
smooth as a stone behind my teeth,  
anchoring me to the moment:  
calling me back from silence to the certainty  
of your voice; to your eyes,  
darker, more compelling than bruises.

My face cupped like a chalice  
in your hands as you kiss  
my silk-bound mouth, pull my breasts free  
and tease them with hot hard fingers.

After we finish, you'll rearrange me  
tenderly, inside my bra, soothe  
blood & feeling back into my hands  
moisten my dry mouth with water.

This kind of trust is hard-won.

## Held

---

Your thumb in my arse,  
two fingers in my cunt, I  
am centred: held in  
place. A fierce joy: my  
pulse thuds against your thumb, you  
say *I have your heart  
in my hand*. I breathe,  
count, bear down, gladly open.

## Held 2

---

You want-don't-want, clench  
so tight, your knuckled hand  
fists a ball of sheet, white  
as the teeth that shred  
your lip. You shatter, hot, wet.

**Because:**

---

I like the smell of leather;  
I'm pretty when I cry;  
I'm so good at saying please.

Because: nothing else.  
Nothing feels.  
Nothing else. Like this.



## Part Three

## **These Things Are True**

---

### **1. Thursday morning**

Music and sex: our bodies

a selfless/selfish concert of intent.

Through the triangle of your one raised leg  
light, hot and yellow, floods my eyes;

turning the hairs on your thigh  
to gold, tipped with red. I dip and taste,  
stroke your perineum with a firm finger,  
you clench and moan, want/don't want.

For a dazzling pause I hover  
just above the surface of your skin,  
then trace soft swoops of restless movement  
over your arse, flanks, the backs of your legs.

### **2. Things I know**

we fuck to music  
and when we don't, you cry;  
you can't swallow tablets.

### **3. Journeys in time**

I bump & prickle as your old fear seeps into my pores  
like stagnant water. I see the stillness of an afternoon your grandmother gone  
shopping your grandfather's hand heavy on your shoulder  
his room your eyes the creak as he sits the frantic heart  
in your neck's hollow your clumsy kneel the zip's loud tear  
his hands cupped the filled and silent circle of your mouth  
his loud excitement and this will be our secret, boy.

#### **4. Music**

As Janet Jackson finishes singing twenty-foreplay  
I press my chin into your shoulder,  
and, skin-to-skin, feel you leave your bounded body.  
You roam your way, unguarded,  
to the silence of water,  
softened, dappled, with reeds and light.  
When you come, it's with the slightest exhalation,  
as if pleasure needs permission  
to unfurl itself from your throat.

#### **5. Affections**

You like boys too:  
the long-haired one in the café,  
the blonde on the train, just out of prison,  
with a tattoo on the back of his neck,  
another with a black t-shirt and a silver ring,  
your sister's friend.

#### **6. A meeting**

I meet a friend for coffee  
and smell you, still on my hands.  
I smile & he says what?  
How do I explain the different blues of your skin?  
The way you push into me with a sigh, every first time  
as if it's the first time;  
our concertinaed limbs, as first you straddle, then I;  
the mushroom softness of your foreskin against my tongue;  
your hip-bones, which deserve their own poem—  
elongated Cs covered by the merest wafer of skin.  
I want to wave my fingers under his nostrils, tell him  
how this morning I felt the small flare the moment

before you poured into me, how I said now  
and you laughed and called me psychic;  
that I held your head in my hands, wrapped my fingers  
in the darkness of your hair as you bloomed  
and blossomed and fell.

## Spring

---

Mid-afternoon. Stillness, but for the small stones of my fingernails, pink and white, as I tear sugar packets into careful pieces.

I watch you stretch your arms above your head, watch as your T-shirt tightens, and your nipples press the cloth like faces against a curtained window.

I purse my lips, blow coffee foam, imagining my palms, spilling like water, over your shoulders, the warm taste of sunlight on your skin.

## Catching up

---

New trousers shirt jacket.

Brush your teeth

rinse

your

mouth.

Meet for coffee tea wine beer.

Silence.

Rinse

your

mouth

with

silence.

Talk about your new job your day week the month

since you saw her last new friends old friends

a song you like that awful play the spending spree

her favourite book movie colour meal drink

her birthday dog's name thesis title best friend.

What you get used to, becomes,

in the end, all that matters:

The fine tremble of your skin too tight

the highlight and shadow of her face

the pulse in her neck

her bottom lip between your teeth

her nipple insistent against your palm

the sounds that nestle in her throat  
the dip beneath her hipbone that holds your thumb  
the loll and sway of her thighs  
as she rocks herself to pleasure.  
Holding her hand.  
Holding her hand while she sleeps.

In  
the  
comfort  
of  
silence.

## Singularity

---

*for James*

They will never make love,  
but here, on the dance floor,  
they laugh, hearts thudding with exertion.  
Her hand, possessive on his back,  
his shoulder bearing the press of her chin,  
then the blur of movement  
as she spins out, attached only to his fingers  
like a looped spool of fishing line cast onto water  
reeled in back in by him,  
to rest, for a moment, against his chest,  
moving too fast to be clumsy or tired, or  
to sink too deeply into bodies  
made light by joy.

There are moments when her veins tremble  
as though they are being plucked  
like a three-stringed instrument:  
an inseparable tremolo  
of love, loss and desire.  
At the station she will kiss his neck, once,  
fold herself into his arms for as long as she is able,  
then bear, for hours afterwards,  
the soft, quick imprint of his mouth on hers.



## **Tongue-tied**

---

with your hand  
deep inside me

the world  
sometimes  
is  
this  
small

## sugar

---

have you ever had a girl  
late at night  
on cold concrete stairs?  
your fingers beneath black lace  
slick and busy  
so wet and lush  
you cannot help but dip your head  
and taste

sharp as lemons  
her vodka mouth  
gusts hot in the crook of your arm  
her cigarette forgotten ash  
between the fingertips of one hand  
the other flexes and splays  
like a starfish  
on the red-bricked wall

nina simone is singing  
*I want a little sugar in my bowl*  
singing to the cold night air  
*baby baby*  
her words ascend  
you think of steam and water  
*I need some sugar*  
steam and water  
and an echo of piano notes

while your girl  
blood and heat and water  
bares her throat

to the moonlight  
and turns to sugar taffy  
in your arms

## God in the Detail

---

Your chin's upon my shoulder,  
your clever, poet's mouth  
against my ear  
-and I say this without conceit-  
reduced to simplicity.

*ah* you say.

and then,

*that's good, baby,*

*don't stop.*

I know this day will eventually  
become a poem,  
but, frankly,  
when I have your breasts overflowing in my hands,  
your mouth nibbling at mine, or  
my fingers tracing the stocking seam between your thighs, or  
peeling back the lace of your underwear, or  
the catch in your throat as I work my thumb  
in tight spirals against you, or  
my fist curled carefully inside you,  
while you rock against me,

I have no need of poems.

## PDA's

---

There will be no public displays of affection between us.  
Your friends will stop wanting to ask you questions,  
will no longer consider your soft, secret smile  
when you talk about me,  
with your head down,  
and your new habit of tucking your hair behind your ears.

I hope they'll politely ignore  
the marks I leave on your neck  
and my hand, moving in gentle circles  
beneath your skirt  
while we eat dinner, or listen to the band.

I advise you to avoid all mention of your breasts  
spilling from beautiful lingerie  
into my hands, restless and greedy;  
your copper nipples, tightening  
to the size of berries in my mouth;  
and what you do with my nipple rings.

It would also be inappropriate  
to tell them that when we do tequila shots  
you press me against the wall, hold both my wrists  
above my head, lick salt from my breast  
and suck lemon, from the wedge held in my teeth.  
Or that I've searched  
and failed to find a word that adequately  
describes the texture of your thighs  
or that I ate a peach yesterday, and  
its tender fuzz against my lips, and  
juice running down my chin  
reminded me of my mouth against you,

your fingers laced in my hair,  
and your hips, rocking.

## **Blue**

---

A blue circle

is tattooed

on your wrist.

We met.

I saw it

and knew

it would soon

hold the press

of my thumb.

## **Some Slight Thing**

---

On your hands and knees,  
with my fist inside you  
I rise up like something growing,

then press the salt slick flesh  
of my belly against your back  
deeper and deeper

to the pulsing core  
of you against my hand,  
as if it were your heart in my keeping.



## **The Jeweller**

---

I want the collar she will make me,  
black leather, silver buckles, restricting my tight  
hot breath, the back of my head  
pliant, in the warm vice of her hands.

## **Bavarois**

---

Your eyes darken  
as you pull your breast free from  
your white cotton shirt,  
and rub a thumb across your plum-coloured nipple.  
We are more still than the faint tremor  
of blood beneath the skin of your breast.  
You dip like a child finger painting,  
into the purple berry juice,  
then coat your nipple with it,  
as slowly, slowly, one droplet  
lands on the tip of my tongue.  
I suckle a line of berry bruises  
in the shadow of your collarbone.  
As your legs curl around me,  
my hand's between your thighs,  
drawing, from inside you, berry juice.

## Girls Like That

---

She knows exactly what I like,

I like

girls with short hair girls with striped shirts  
and cuffs unbuttoned that hang below their wrists

girls with small

breasts and pierced nipples

girls with grey jackets

and purple Docs

steady eyes and leather collars

girls

with boots clever girls with smooth hands

girls who can write

girls who kiss the back of my neck

who kiss

while everybody watches

girls who bite girls who are good

with words

girls who make my mouth go dry

What do you like? She asks, again,  
her voice as shadowed as the room.

I push back, as she laughs,  
and fucks me. I open  
and breathe.

Tell me, she says,  
no longer amused,  
close, now, so close,

I can feel it building in her body.

What do you like?

Her breasts heavy against mine,  
and her dick still deep inside me.

.

## Part Four

## Operation Barbarossa

---

On the day I left:

I choked on the air: grey

Walked upon the earth: salted and barren

The bridges: rubble

The roads: rubble

The books: embers:

On the day I left:

whentheresnothinglefttoburnyouhavetosetyourselfonfire  
whentheresnothinglefttoburnyouhavetosetyourselfonfire  
whentheresnothinglefttoburnyouhavetoset

yourself

on

fire.

## Alex

---

I have a panic attack in group  
Alex takes my blood pressure,  
listens to my heart  
then carefully folds the cloth of my shirt  
from my wrist, to my elbow,  
exposing 57 neat cuts, arranged in groups of three,  
and in the early stages of healing.  
She looks at them, briefly, and then into my eyes,  
with something close to compassion, and says:  
*Looks like somebody had a busy weekend.*

## **The Courage to Know**

---

My psychiatrist says:

I'm sick of your stories.

I don't want to be compelled.

You're in here because they don't work anymore.



## **four am**

---

It's 4am

the tiles are white

cold & white.

Twist the lock,

press my back

to the door.

Cold & white,

red & wet & lonely,

missing jo; so lonely

& horny

& so fucking tired.

Red on white.

Cold & wet & tired.

Close my eyes.

Nothing else.

Clean it up,

Silence.

Clean it up.

Peace. Clean it up.

...sleep.

## Harbour Town

---

*For Ann*

She says: Remind me, one day,  
to tell you about life.

She rinses her coffee cup,  
her eyes are turned from mine.

I laugh and say: life...  
And there's a moment,

where everything, but the unheeded water  
is still, and her face settles into itself.

I say: I'm looking for a harbour.  
Honey, she says, we're all looking for a harbour...

And I want to ask if we can shore them up,  
these harbours, until we need safe passage.

And I remember a table, covered in a blanket,  
an eight-year-old girl, with a torch,

and a packet of granita biscuits,  
counting the space between breaths.

## Chesty Blond

---

*For Noah*

She takes clippers to shave the back of his neck.  
His skin, untouched by sun,  
Is white, fine and soft.  
Tender. Defenceless.

She bends down, brushes her lips  
against his nape.  
Goosebumps.  
He wriggles and laughs.

He has discovered singlets.  
While the fire in the lounge-room blazes,  
he runs around in fleecy pyjama bottoms,  
slippers—and a new white singlet.

They went to K-Mart. He chose,  
from seemingly identical rows  
of boys' underwear,  
the only brand he wanted:

a broad-chested caricature  
of Australian masculinity.  
Could he please  
have a blue one as well?

He is full of instructions,  
demanding she use the  
#2 comb at the bottom of his hair,  
a #3 for the rest, but it has to be

long enough for shaping wax and spikes.  
Does it look exactly like last time?  
Will it look tidy under his cap?  
Can she still see his earring?

Millimetres above his skin,  
the clippers hum in her hand. She  
presses as gently as she can.  
Yet his skin blossoms, red,

a line of a scratch emerges,  
its edges beaded with blood.  
She blows. Blond fuzz floats away  
like dandelion seeds.

Later, watching her knit herself a scarf,  
he winds wool, the colour of sunsets,  
around and around his fingers.  
He wants one the same colour.

Where do you want to wear it? She asks,  
as he talks about his friend, Danielle,  
who has a purple scarf  
that she wears every day in Winter.

He snuggles into her shoulder,  
she wants to be the kind of mother  
who knits for her son  
-defenceless, utterly tender-

says that he doesn't mind if  
she makes him a pink scarf for home,  
a pink scarf with tassels.  
And a blue and red one for school.

## **For Just Three Minutes**

---

I will slip beneath the water  
while my brother draws pictures with his fingers  
on the bathroom wall,  
while the mirror mists with fog,  
while my sister reads in a nearby room,  
while my father sleeps, sick with flu,  
while my mother works on the computer.

I know you wonder what it feels like  
to be three years old,  
to slip beneath the water,  
to close your lungs to air.

It feels like falling.

Not darkness, exactly,  
but an absence of light,  
as if shadow had bound itself to light  
and in doing so, revealed its truest contours.

I fall

deep beneath the skin of me,  
to the silent core,  
to swim with creatures, who,  
without form or substance,  
have no need of names,  
content to be dreamt into existence.

I can see my sister  
pulling me from the water,

laying me, curled in on myself,  
like a tender question mark  
on the cold tiled floor.  
My brother calls to my mother  
who comes running  
down the endless passageway,  
gathers me up  
heavywet, still warm, into her arms,  
a burden she can hardly bear to carry,  
now running with me,  
grey  
unbreathing  
silent.

She will reach, finally  
her bedroom,  
to hand over the burden of my body  
to my father,  
groggy, roused from sleep.

I know that for ever after  
they will all feel the darkening pull,  
the blind malice of water.

And I will be forced  
to close my lungs and ears  
to the luminous music of this water,  
to lament its passing,  
and return to them all,

for this time, at least.

## **in the cut**

---

sleepy nipple

eyes closed

gentle against

the light

left hand middle finger

smooth lazy circles

thumb & forefinger

sliding the metal

back & forth

back&forth

adagio

right hand

fingers

two

three

curve

dip

press

wet

soft hitch

<ah>

nestling in the throat

eddies of breath

hot cheeks

eyes blind-open

flooded

with old pictures...

dangerous consonants

<D>



<D>

hard

against the palate

trapped behind teeth

<D>

a swallowed <oh>

incessant

word

neck head

arched

soft pillow

rock rock

nails pinch

skin livid

rock

dry lips

bitten

<hum>

licked

knees calves

tight listing

certainty

<ah>

destination

falling

does

this

feel

like

intimacy?

## **Aphorism**

---

He would  
often  
tell her:  
Don't do what I do;  
do what I say.

Look at her there,

on her knees.

Ears cupped firm.

Doing.

## **Lexicon**

---

Her father says: watch  
me touch myself; get on your  
knees. He calls this love.

## Talisman

---

If I were a princess not so clever bossy opinionated if I had long hair plaits magic if I was Anne of Green Gables if I would do as I was told when I was told if I was the youngest adopted the middle child if I was planned if granny wasn't crazy if I didn't go to church write poems stories keep a diary read through the night if I could sing dance play cricket climb ladders if I was a boy if my teeth were straight nose not so eyes less face more if I could breathe with my mouth shut if I didn't always get sick fall over if I was blonde pretty small could tell jokes wasn't scared of heights the dark deep water could do maths collect snails and bugs if I could run fast play the piano smile for the guests be less serious not think I was a cut above use big words be so sensitive if I were special he would not have dared.

## Erasure

---

There are no flaming wrecks,  
no screaming sirens,  
no slew of lights,  
twisted metal, twisted bodies.  
No jaws of life.

No nation's outrage,  
no death of innocence,  
no blue-eyed child  
with tear-stained cheeks.  
Every mother's dream.  
Every father's princess.

No locked in a cupboard,  
no cigarette burns or  
shackles, no piss-stained mattress.  
No citizen's arrest.  
No Megan's Law.

Just a girl  
in the dark, white fists,  
nail moons in her palms,  
heart & eyes  
squeezed drum tight.

Waiting.

Megan's Law is an informal name for laws in the US requiring law enforcement authorities to make information available to the public regarding registered sex offenders.

## **Promises**

---

Sometimes he calls me  
his little girl.

Sometimes I want to call him  
Daddy.

## Of Memory and Furniture

---

I.

The certainty of objects:

The linoleum's grey/blue smudge,  
the precise number of flowers on the wallpaper  
curtains in the bedroom window,  
a teak-stained headboard,  
fawn shorts and a bare chest,  
a door-knob out of reach.

II.

Wrapped carefully in cotton sheets,  
Mummy-still and quiet,  
arms wrapped around my belly,  
puffs of breath, round lips  
like blowing out candles,  
chest rattling like the window,  
the alphabet, backwards,  
singing tie me kangaroo down sport.

III.

Hungry dogs prowl beneath my bed.

IV.

Go and get: the hairbrush,  
the wooden spoon,  
your father's belt.

The back of his hand.

The front of hers.

Fists

&

Rings.

V.

Eyes closed in front of the bathroom mirror.

16 tiles across

9 tiles down.

Hold on

fingertip-white tight

to the curved lip of the basin.

144 tiles.

Wrapped in steam and water.

An unlockable door.

Yet: never interrupted.



## The Lemon Picker

---

He is on his knees, surrounded all by yellow  
as he gathers, into a plastic bucket  
a few from the dozens and dozens of lemons  
that have fallen from the tree.

There is a moment when I stand there,  
quietly watching him.

I know he hasn't seen me,  
with light pouring onto his head and his

strong-veined hands, constantly moving.

I can almost enjoy this:

I am the calmness of my breath,  
before he sees me; before my heart, frantic,

before the grief, for which I have no language.

He turns his head and stares at me,  
without recognition, and from this distance,  
he is an old man and I am not afraid.

**The Flesh and the Word:  
The Modified Female Body**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **WRITING THE HETEROTOPIC BODY/SUBJECT**

---

*Poets search for words from anywhere we can. In short, we are avid. And in this avidity our bodies and words are imbricated. When you “dive into the wreck,” in Adrienne Rich’s words, you may come up with treasure, but you may also be disorientated and disassembled. I imagine the fizzy nitrogenised blood of decompression sickness, a woman having to go into a hyperbaric chamber, to slowly dissolve the gas from her blood, and to regain the certainty of her body.*

*“Every text is implicitly a monstrous, female double self.” Jane Gallop (qtd. in Curti 108)*

The poems in this collection, written over a period of years, explore and represent embodied female subjectivity as constrained by the abuse and medicalised maternity which make the body an object to be acted upon, or as an agential subject in its lesbianism and volitional marking. The poems are about the relationship between a particular female body and its experiences of being silenced by childhood sexual abuse, mental illness and institutionalised maternity, then speaking a new way of being marked, through lesbian subjectivity and consensual submission. The writing into poetry of these new ways of speaking as an embodied subject has been undertaken in the context of research into theorisations of the body, the mode of the postmodern Gothic, and close readings of texts informed by these.

The erotic, body-centred poems in this collection attempt to transform sensation and experience into language. The act of transforming perceptions and problems and the actions of living into language makes possible reflection on the nature of sexuality and embodiment. The poems explore the cultural constraints of silence that women experience, and the ‘dance of rage’ that women are compelled to perform to break out of that silence. The ‘monstrous’ female body is the Othered body that is not simply a “living being of negative value” (Canguilhem 188). It is the body that rejects the negation of its sexuality, all-the-while threatening the masculine and its security and privilege. The ‘monstrous’ feminine is also the Mother with the competing and contradictory relationship she has with her children—the relationship that can be both murderous and tender.

How can this be articulated? Terry Eagleton’s discussion of the ambiguity of poetry suggests that the “distinction between the empirical and the moral is not the same as

the difference between fact and fiction” (*How to Read a Poem* 31). It is possible, he says, to write about a partner one does not have. This ambiguity of a poem is produced, in part, by breaking sentences into lines on a page and applying specific rhythm or rhyme schemes (32). Readers respond to these generic cues by reading the poem very differently from prose. “To call something a poem is to detach it from its immediate, empirical context and put it to wider uses” and to “put it into general circulation, as one wouldn’t with one’s laundry list” (Eagleton 31). A poem does not come complete with a ready-made context for making sense of its words. “Instead,” contends Eagleton, “we have to bring a context to it, and there is always a repertoire of different possibilities here” (32). “Simply by being arranged on the page as it is, [poetry] offers a meaning which is potentially sharable” (32).

The poems in this collection articulate both resistance and volition, experienced through a range of strategies and practices, and the costs of compliance, with rage that is turned in on itself. In her poem “The Phenomenology of Anger,” Adrienne Rich writes from the position of the furious woman, who uses madness and silence with which to tell her stories: “The freedom of the wholly mad / to smear and play with her madness / write with her fingers dipped in it / the length of the room” (*The Wreck* 27). This kind of assertion articulates the reality of birth and being a woman. But is that all there is for us, as women who write—silence and madness, silence and madness, dirt and disgust, grounded inside a body that opens and bleeds and betrays us, time after time? To the contrary, here Rich is talking about the way madness makes a space/permission to articulate something that is silenced by the culture. I would suggest that this is how poetry can work. The word ‘monster’ means, literally, to show forth. And ‘monstrous’ female embodiment is culturally silenced unless there can be a way to give it a voice. In his description of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* Kevin Brophy, like Adrienne Rich, talks of entering writing as if entering a room. Of walking inside it and touching the objects within it. This suggests to me not the smearing madness of Adrienne Rich’s writing woman, but a more conscious, theorised process with the acknowledgement of reading/writing a body of work as and about the implications of female embodiment. As Kafka wrote: “What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we loved ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the

axe for the frozen sea inside us” (Kafka, Franz. Letter to Oskar Pollak. 27 January 1904). The “frozen sea” might be a metaphor for the danger of becoming engulfed and immobilised [frozen] in/by culturally imposed experiences of female embodiment, while the axe is metaphorically the writing process that breaks up, separates, and objectifies those bodily experiences from the writing self, speaks them, and comes to see them as shared and cultural.

Feminist writers and theorists have used their work in an attempt to release women from distancing, patriarchal metaphors, a language that constructs their bodies as both “territory [and] machine” (Rich, *Of Women* 285) and yet somehow erases their bodily experience. Body-centred poetry can work to counter the erasure of women’s bodies with its articulation of female experiences of birth, sexuality and pleasure. Adrienne Rich insists that the female body cannot be represented by patriarchal metaphors, arguing that women think through their bodies, and identifying her own impulse for politics and protest as a kind of body “knowledge” (Rich, *Of Woman* 284). Rosi Braidotti argues that such an argument is a product of an historical moment in which,

[I]n a range of discourses from North-American radical feminism, to French feminist psychoanalytic theory, the feminine is ascribed a new and politically creative role: the symbolic absence of the feminine is the source of its strength as a counter-strategy by which to destabilise the symbolic. (qtd. in Eagleton *Patterns of Dissonance* 113)

Similarly, Luce Irigaray argues for a symbolic shift in which men might accept the part of themselves that is ‘nature’ without needing to attribute it to women and through which women can “accede to the transcendental functions allotted to men” (Whitford 93). The pre-eminent concern of my writing is to explore the multiplicity of female subjectivity and embodiment (Smith and Watson, *Women* 25). My poems offer themselves as a counter to the silencing and invisibility of these female subjectivities and embodiments in dominant culture. These poems represent the body as discursively constructed and as able to be spoken: “One of the main issues for women in contemporary philosophy is the need to think about the bodily roots of

the thinking process, of all human intellect, and to reconnect theoretical discourse to its libidinal and consequently unconscious foundations” (Braidotti qtd. in Weedon 8).

Recent theoretical work on the body suggests that because the body is not only socially controlled, but also constituted by practices, it is open to the possibility of deconstruction and reinscription (Pitts, *Queer* n. pag.). Bodies are thus neither “naturally” pristine, nor blank canvases. They are, rather, “enculturated” as Michel Foucault has suggested (qtd. in Sullivan 2). The body is contextualised as a material and metaphoric entity which is both historically and discursively constructed and subjected to the influence of what Foucault terms “power” (Foucault *Power* 40-4). “For Foucault, power is not something that is “acquired, seized or shared” (Weedon 119). It is, rather, a relationship. Relations of power “inhere” in all other relationships—economic, sexual and those of knowledge. Power is not only restrictive and repressive, it is also productive. “Power comes from below . . . and it is not uniform in the forms it takes” (Weedon 119). “And wherever there is power there is resistance and yet, . . . this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Weedon 119).

From a feminist perspective such as Elizabeth Grosz’s, Foucault’s analysis of power has both strengths and limitations. In spite of the limitation that it denies feminists the security and guarantees of centred models of power which see it as something that can be escaped (Weedon 119), it also offers feminists the opportunity to theorise both the “repressive and productive dimensions of power relations.” In the chapters that follow, this exegesis will explore ways in which both patriarchal power and its effects and new resistant forms of “subjectivity and pleasure” can be written into poetic language.

Chapter One draws on relevant contemporary work to establish that the body is a discursive construct and thus available for transformation or resistance. According to Elizabeth Grosz “the body” is a literal, material entity, comprised of flesh, skin, organs, nerves and a skeletal structure which is given cohesiveness, meaning and form through the “social inscription of [its] surface” (*Space* 104). Thus she suggests that the relations between corporeality and “transcendence” (Grosz, *Volatile* 108), between being and owning a body, and between subjectivity and objectification, are

experienced very differently by women and men. Grosz argues that as bodies are “traversed and infiltrated” (35) by knowledges, meanings and power they also become potential sites of struggle and resistance. Such an understanding has informed the production of the poems in the collection.

Chapter Two explores the resonances of the Gothic mode in its postmodern form in relation to the female body. Women have been seen, according to Fred Botting in his book *Making Monstrous*, as two distinct entities: As objects of adoration, angelic mothers, divine daughters/sisters, presented as ‘gifts’ for their men. “[Hence] women are destroyed by their own obedience to their own prescribed roles . . . [and there] is precious little felicity for women who remain true and diligent in the pursuance of their allotted duties” (Botting 101). Or they are regarded as having “a dangerous significance: they are marked with the capacity to resist and signify a monstrous Otherness” (102), threatening the security and privilege accorded to “Man” [sic] (102). The Gothic mode with its fascination with the taboo, the unrepresentable, is often the site where such anxieties are played out. Body-centred poetry can thus draw powerfully on this mode.

Chapter Three, “The Silenced Body,” argues that abuse and medicalised maternity have certain silencing effects on women and that women experiencing these do not speak, because they are so often spoken *for*. And in our silence, a unique dialogue emerges. Our bodies are spoken for by men, by culture, by power relations, and by institutions. Women writers, however, have the power to rewrite their own life/embodied stories.

Chapter Four discusses the consensual body and the articulation of the relationship between Dominance and submission, exploring how poetry can articulate the fluidity of power relations implicit in the embodiment of D/s sexuality, and the empowering capacity of consensual and negotiated D/s sexuality.<sup>1</sup> It also explores purposeful body modification, the double ‘writing’ both of marking the body and expressing this inscription in poetry. By body modification I mean tattooing and skin etching, temporary or permanent piercing, cutting and branding—any practices which open

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<sup>1</sup> I use a capital D for Dominant/Dominance as a mark of respect to the Dominant partner in the D/s relationship.

and permanently change the surface of the skin. I emphasise the use of the word “purposeful” because it is an indicator of intent: it is the difference between meaningful inscriptions of the flesh—which signify dimension—as opposed to superficial adornment of the skin. This opacity of meaning occurs because inscription is both a figurative and literal process: literal in that a material body is the vehicle for the inscriptive process, and figurative in that what is inscribed retains a radical, essential ambiguity. Body modification and writing create spaces that are literally additional to the bounded ‘reality’ of flesh and paper, offering, as a consequence, a rendering of that which exists beneath and beyond the world of skin and ‘surface.’ The implication here, particularly for the female, erotic, body, is that if it is containable, it is conquerable. Chapter Four also explores writing the lesbian body. In my poem “Girls Like That” (62) I write about what it is to be attracted to women. People, I know, often wonder about what it is that women ‘do’ in bed. In this chapter I analyse the powerful nature of the sexuality that exists between women and demonstrate how poetry might articulate the fact that a seemingly-heteronormative penetrative/phallic narrative does not just occur between men and women, celebrating lesbian bodies which are too often written as passive and non-sexual.

Chapter Five offers readings of the work of three other poets and deconstructs them in relation to Michel Foucault’s notions of heterotopia, Luce Irigaray’s theories of maternal relationships and Elizabeth Grosz’s notions of the woman reader and writer. Foucault’s concept of heterotopic space is outlined in his article “Of Other Spaces,” when certain acts and events can occur—secluded from the ‘normal,’ the public and the acceptable (“Spaces” 22-28).

The exegesis is a discussion of the reading that accompanied, inspired, and often underpinned, the production of the poems. While poetry is in some ways always “about” human experience, it is never merely a record of that experience:

Every achieved poem inscribes a perceptual signature in the world. You don’t need to know a thing about the poet’s life, or circumstances. We can only guess why she might be concerned with defeat and victory, or survival. It isn’t for us to know whatever hooks she herself may bear. Instead, we’re brought



into intimate proximity to the slipstream of her sensations. Subjectivity is made of such detail, of all the ways in which the world impresses itself upon us, known through our associations and histories, our scaffoldings of concerns and interests, the tones and shading of our moods. We're invited to form a . . . readerly alliance with [the poet] . . . . Poetry concretises the singular, unrepeatable moment; it hammers out of speech a form for how it feels to be oneself. (Doty 21 *World*)

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY THEORY

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“Symbolically public” and yet “literally private” (Pitts, *Flesh* 79), the female body’s physical components—flesh, skin, blood, sweat, tears and menstrual flow—are knowable, material, prosaic, and yet also mysterious and portentous. As Thomas Laqueur observes, within the discourses of science and medicine, Othered or subordinate status was legitimated and institutionalised for those bodies whose class, race, gender and sexuality differed from the dominant, middle-class, Anglo, masculine, heterosexual body (vii). “Bodies speak because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativised; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms and ideals become incarnated” (Grosz *Space* 35).

This understanding of “the body” as discursively constructed and culturally inscribed makes possible an exploration of the metaphoric body, or rather, the way that metaphor can be used to expose (the body’s) liminal spaces, where discourse is constructed, deconstructed and experienced. In short, to suggest that metaphor functions as a link between the inescapable materiality of the experiential body and the more abstract concept of imagined or theoretical embodiment grounded in possibility to make such a relationship believable for the sake of beauty, necessity and emphasis.

In *Space, Time and Perversion*, Elizabeth Grosz discusses what she sees as two broad kinds of bodily theory. One is derived from Nietzsche, Kafka, Foucault and Deleuze, [which she calls] ‘inscriptive.’ The other is more prevalent in the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. She refers to this approach as “the lived body.” (*Space* 33). The first “conceives of the body as a surface upon which social law, morality and values are inscribed” (33). Therefore, any reference to the metaphoric body concedes and pre-supposes the co-existence of a literal body that is also inscribed by culture. In other words, skin itself becomes a metaphor for embodiment, occasionally spilling open to reveal the secrets within, or managing the minute distance between the hidden, and the observed. Skin is also a

way of defining that space in between the wound and the body it opens—that liminal area where meaning and intention, reading and writing, signifier and signified collide. Skin is also considered to be a site of “self-harming, ‘mutilative’ and self-objectifying” practices (Pitts, *Flesh* 49). “Where the first body analyses a social, public body, the second takes the body-schema or imaginary anatomy as its object[s]. Each provides some of the theoretical terms necessary to problematise the major binaries categories defining the body—inside/outside, subject/object, active/passive, fantasy/reality, and surface/depth” (Grosz *Space* 33).

Grosz argues that there are three strands of investigation of the body in contemporary thought that may be considered as “heirs of Cartesianism” (Grosz 8). Firstly, “the body is primarily regarded as an object of natural sciences” (8), particularly biology and medicine. Thomas Laqueur writes about this type of the body, throughout the centuries. He tells the story of sex in the West from the ancients to the moderns. We cannot fail to recognise the key embodied players in Laqueur’s story, the human sexual organs and the pleasures of food, blood, semen, egg and sperm, but what is interesting is the stories woven around these entities by scientists, political activists, literary figures and every kind of theorist.

Secondly, Grosz contends, the body is seen in terms of metaphors that construe it as an instrument, a tool or a machine at the disposal of consciousness” (8). In many feminist political struggles (those who articulate the old slogan “‘get your laws off my body’”) which are openly about women’s bodies and their control by men, for example, campaigns around issues such as sexual harassment, abuse, rape and the control of female fertility, “the body is regarded as passive and reproductive but largely unproductive,” an object over which struggles between its “inhabitant and others may be possible” (9).

Thirdly, she suggests, the body is commonly considered a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public that which is essentially private. “It is through the body that the subject can express her interiority and through this body that she can “receive, code and translate the inputs of the ‘external’ world” (9). Cartesianism makes it impossible to acknowledge corporeal agency. Reality can be attained by the subject only indirectly, by inference, deduction or projection.

“Descartes, in short, succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundation of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body” (9). From that time until the present, subjective consciousness is separated from and can reflect on the world of the body, objects, and qualities.

The male body, biologically, is regarded as closed, strong and inviolate. Compare this to Western culture’s conception of the female body as open, fluid and weak. Even the male mind is regarded as mathematical, logical and compartmentalised, while the female mind is seen as haphazard, illogical and disorganised. It is important to recognise that the distinction between women and men is not just a straightforward division between two separate-but-equal categories, or natural ‘kinds.’ Implicit in the distinction between women and men is an understanding of man as the ideal. In fact, the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect copy is replicated in the distinction between woman and man, female and male and feminine and masculine (Marinucci 77). In *Feminine is Queer: The Intimate Connection Between Queer and Feminist Theory*, Mimi Marinucci argues that the characteristically female or feminine is thought of as inferior to that which is male or masculine (78).

The masculine body is a body seemingly controlled by the mind, a voluntary body, constructed as ‘normal’ and heard as speaking from a privileged, transcendental, seemingly objective position, outside the corporeal specificity in which female subjectivity is grounded. Therefore, the male body, according to Rich, is supposed to tell truths about facts, rather than feelings (*Arts* 31). Foucault argues that the body—regimented and disciplined—is constructed as functioning, yet subordinated, or docile (Foucault, *Discipline*). The maternal or constrained female body are examples of this kind of body. This understanding of ‘the body’ modulates into an exploration of the metaphoric body, or rather, the way that metaphor can be used to expose the body’s liminal spaces, where discourse is constructed, deconstructed, and experienced. In short, to suggest that metaphor functions as a link between the inescapable materiality of the experiential body and the more abstract concept of imagined or theoretical embodiment.

The historical changes in the representation and understanding of the material body demonstrate the relatively short time that 'the body' has been understood to be a discursive construction. This necessarily challenges its traditional representation as a purely material and 'natural' entity, that exists independently of cultural (and literal) inscription. For the body is produced by and through discourses of power and knowledge (Foucault *Sexuality*; Foucault *Knowledge*; Grosz *Volatile*; Grosz *Space*). The body is also sexualised and gendered in specific normative, performative ways (Butler; Grosz *Volatile*). Grosz argues that the body is constrained by its biological limits (*Volatile*187). For example, it cannot fly, breathe under water, or survive without oxygen (187-8). She suggests that the 'ideal' body, the "unquestioned norm" (188), has no idea of the violence that such a representation does to women, to the handicapped, to lesbians, gays and any who choose for themselves different sexualities. In other words: "those who are reduced to [modifications] of the [implicitly white, male, youthful, heterosexual, middle-class] body" (*Volatile* 188).

Michel Foucault argues that it was in the classical age that the body was discovered as an object and target of power (*Discipline* 136). He describes

the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces. . . . A whole set of regulations, and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital [become used] for controlling or correcting the operations of the body. . . . A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. (136)

Foucault also argues that it is possible to inscribe it with agency and volition. He suggests that discursively bodies are the "agents of knowledge" (Grosz *Volatile* 146). For Foucault, the body is the "field on which the play of powers, knowledges and resistances is worked out" (qtd. in Grosz *Volatile* 146). "It is acted upon, inscribed, peered into; information is extracted from it and disciplinary actions are imposed upon it; yet its materiality also entails a resilience and thus also (potential) modes of resistance to [power]" (qtd. in Grosz *Volatile* 146).

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler argues that “the subject may appear to have ‘an identity,’ an identity which is resolutely written on the body, but this is only because reiteration “conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (12). The pun in *Bodies That Matter* is that ‘matter’ refers to both the significance and materiality of the body. The category of sex is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a ‘regulatory ideal.’ In this sense, then, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus ‘sex’ is a regulatory ideal whose materialisation is compelled, and this materialisation takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialised through time. It is not a simple fact or status condition of the body process whereby regulatory norms materialise ‘sex’ and achieve this materialisation through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That the reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialisation is never complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialisation is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for materialisation, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.

Elizabeth Grosz in her books *Volatile Bodies* and *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* and Michel Foucault in the *History of Sexuality Volume I* write about the body in terms of the linking of perverse sexuality and the Other that occurred with the medicalisation of sexuality in the Nineteenth Century. Grosz explains that this position is documented by Foucault in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* in which he suggests that this construction of sexuality privileged the heterosexual, monogamous couple and identified any sexual ‘types’ who deviated from the heterosexual norm (Grosz *Volatile* 153). The emphasis shifted from what one *did*, sexually to what one *was*. According to Foucault, power, in the form of categorisation and surveillance, “created the necessary conditions” for sexuality to be seen as the monstrous “secret” (Grosz *Volatile* 153) at the heart of each individual. The emphasis on perverse sexuality subsumes and is also a result of

nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural anxieties of ethnic and class-based Otherness centred within a specifically sexualised material body.

This same discourse transformed a “sexual practice into a sexual pathology” (Buchbinder *Masculinities* 57) with the invention in 1869 of the term “homosexuality” to signify “abnormal” sexual practices and inclinations (Buchbinder *Masculinities* 57). Such discursive constructions also pathologise any practices, such as body modification, not deemed normative within the dominant medical discourse. And while the masculine, heterosexual body is the very “*stuff of subjectivity*” (Grosz *Volatile* ix; original emphasis), the sexualities of Othered bodies, particularly Othered female-gendered bodies, are absent from explorations of identity, power and pleasure.

Body modifications are women’s reclaiming projects as interrogations of the individual body’s ownership and governance” (Pitts *Flesh* 193). They are also ritualised practices that both gather women together and mark their position in gendered positions of dominance and violation. Thus these projects make visible what might have been solely private practices and “sufferings” (193). They might also be recuperations of the practices of the Dominant, by a kind of usurpation. This ambiguous positioning of the maternal body that is modified, sees it, on the one hand, as a site of “self-harming, ‘mutilative’ and self-objectifying” practices (Pitts, *Flesh* 49), and on the other as an indicator of maternal agency, a reappropriation of a body seized by patriarchal medicalised discourse and a site for potential rebellion—whether metaphoric or literal. The possibility for ambiguous positioning exists even when we acknowledge that a woman is never the sole author of the meanings of her modifications. Any reclamation narrative, however liberatory, presupposes a complex relationship between “readers” and “writers” of the body, demonstrating the conflicted positioning of the modified, maternal body, with all its discursive “constrictions” (Smith 94).

Readers and writers of the body insist upon a “visible” reading of “bodily and sexual victimisation” (Pitts *Flesh* 193). Agency in these instances is the practice of commanding the social gaze, including the maternal clinical gaze (193). Women

insert their own meanings of “surviving victimisation” (193) which “usurps” other people’s ability to ‘name’ them and their bodily activities.

In the parallel processes of women inhabiting and controlling their bodies—somewhere between the acts and their interpretation—there exists what can be described as the Gothic body space, where there is a blurring, not only of Self and Other, but of meaning itself. Meaning, however, becomes clear for the readers as they process the liminal/the blurred and see how the poems work through the Gothic, or work to objectify it. There is great potency in representing the liminal or blurred subject through the Gothic mode. Furthermore, Judith Halberstam argues that in the Gothic world of embodiment, what can never be sanctioned in terms of normative discourse is the exceptional or monstrous body. Halberstam argues that the postmodern Gothic monster is represented as a remarkably mobile, permeable and interpretable body. This Gothic body will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER TWO

### REPRESENTING FEMALE EMBODIMENT: THE GOTHIC MODE

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Eighteenth-century *fin-de-siècle* or 'terror fiction,' written by (among others) Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis, began appearing in England during the time of the French Revolution (Edmundson 4). Terror Gothic can, according to Edmundson, "look like a bunch of conventions" (8). He draws on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick when he states that

no modern literary form as influential as terror Gothic is so pervasively conventional. But what looks like convention . . . can be, for the intense reader and . . . writer, a means of insight. The best terror Gothic woke its eighteenth-century readers up. . . rous[ing] them from the smug self-assurance often induced by enlightenment rationalism. (8)

Gothic was the adversary of Enlightenment rationalism, offering a critique and counter-discourse to the principles of rationalist thought that enabled revolution to occur. The Gothic mode exemplified the most pressing fears and desires of its readers and the cultural concerns engendered by revolution: chaos, uncertainty, death, destruction and the blurring of boundaries and loyalties are reflected in Gothic's tales of monstrous haunting, bodily suffering, excesses of blood and violent death. The hero-villain represents, with his mix of base and noble qualities, the simmering lust, cruelty and permeability (of body and morality) that lie just beneath the surface of a conventional 'civilised' culture. One of the primary obsessions of the Gothic is that civilisation "sits lightly on even the best bred" (Clover 132). Fred Botting notes that while the original Gothic became available for parody by the early nineteenth century, its tropes have persisted and have become, in the contemporary context, available for new, alternative, resistant uses.

Often, in Europe, Gothic was "anti-domestic" (Davenport-Hines 267). It rejected safety and security and substituted them for the loss of the family (267). American Gothic had an "antithetical development": it became family centred (267). American Gothic writers adapted Gothic imagery to demonstrate the destructive powers of the

family (267). There has also been a shift in emphasis where the inner sanctum of the home, the family, and particularly the all-seeing eye of the monstrous Father and Mother [perhaps metonymic of the super-ego] have replaced the prison/panopticon or dungeon as the place of deadly “midnight intrigue” (Punter 30) and secrecy; with non-normative sexuality located within a body that absorbs then reflects all the cultural and discursive “fragments of otherness” (Halberstam 95). This body, or rather its Othered status, depends upon its being recognised by heteronormative culture. It then gains or loses its secrecy. This keeping of secrets is imperative in the Gothic.

Writing the silenced body and the resistant/volitional body requires non-realist strategies that “use estrangement and engagement to explore and challenge cultural, social, psychological and personal issues” (Wisker 168). This chapter establishes the connection between the Gothic mode and the hidden or secret truths that are written on the body. “A Gothicised body is one which disrupts not only the surface-depth relationship between the body and the mind, but also the surface-depth relationship of a body with itself” (Halberstam 19). In the Gothic, bodies move from the unthinkable/unrepresentable, into language. The Gothic mode has, from its beginnings, been interested in representing that which the culture has deemed unrepresentable, unspeakable or filled with trauma.

According to Steven Bruhm, the contemporary Gothic “registers a crisis in personal history” (268). He argues that it is repetition that “constitutes” a narrative of trauma that contemporary Gothic craves. For Bruhm, Gothic itself is “trauma bound.” Its protagonists are living or reliving some form of disturbance that strongly affects them (268). The trauma does not have to be physical or spiritual. It can occur psychologically and be as a lingering result of exploitation or abuse. “Images of haunting, destruction, and death, obsessive return to the shattering moment”—the recall of child abuse for example—lead to someone being prepared to bleed, even if psychically rather than literally (Bruhm 268). My poems refer directly to the Gothic mode and its traumatic narrative. The maternal, medicalised body bears the traumas of loss and embodied damage. Even the poems about D/s deal with the excesses of sexuality and monstrosity, so-called abuse and physical performance.

## ***The Abused/Monstrous Gothic Body***

An exploration of the abused/monstrous body is perfectly suited to the Gothic theory of the body because the Gothic also celebrates excesses of corporeal performance and taboos of the “violent, the self-promoting and those who indulge their cravings” (Helyer 744). It is powerfully at work in postmodern culture, specifically in the way it attempts to articulate the growing paranoia and sense of powerlessness and isolation that individuals feel in relation to the dominant.

I am not writing traditional ‘feminine Gothic’ which ‘Others’ the ‘monstrous’ feminine. A typical traditional Gothic image of the sexual woman reads like this:

In the deep shade at the end of the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards: what it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours: it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (Charlotte Brontë, (qtd. in Becker 71)

Such is the appearance of Bertha Mason-Rochester in the feminine Gothic classic, *Jane Eyre*. The “madwoman in the attic is seen as clothed hyena, crazy, imprisoned and *voiceless*” (emphasis in the original Becker 71). Her “presentation in *Jane Eyre*’s attic scene as . . . Other to the ‘proper’ Jane betrays a remarkable—and as it turns out, typically feminine Gothic—narrative construction” (72) as it occurs within the gaze of the male hero. Rochester’s “view” of his wife casts Bertha as a monster. “As various critics have shown, this view—and the resulting imprisonment—” (72) is as a result of depictions of uncontrollable, adult, female sexuality and “affirmations of physical pleasure and physical desire” (72). The scopophilic male gaze—always punitive, always judgemental—is the antithesis of my poetry, which in its positive trajectory, confers upon the female subject autonomy and agency. My poetry is a counter to this objectifying of the madwoman. It deals with sexuality as subjectivity for the ‘monstrous feminine’ rather than objectification.

Becker describes the figure of Bertha Rochester as “a prototype of the sexual woman in the feminine Gothic: affirmative femininity turned into the monstrous, or in narratological terms, into a voiceless textual *object*,” (72), controlled by the male gaze. This imprisoned sexual woman has become, in Gothic texts, one of its most powerful horrors (72). The madwoman in the attic that Adrienne Rich writes about is replicated by Brontë’s Bertha Rochester. She is not given a coherent voice until Jean Rhys’s *Wild Sargasso Sea*. In my poems, however, the ‘monstrous’ feminine is Self, not Other.

Lydia Curti suggests that the link between female writing and the female monstrous identity has changed over the years. The contemporary ‘perverse’ woman is one who is seen as sexually aberrant or mentally ill. To this list I add one who indulges in practices such as D/s, one who modifies her body—volitionally—whether through piercing, tattooing and scarification. I also consider the conventional representations of the female body in art—smooth unflawed, integral—in this connection. Body modification deliberately ruptures not only the female body but its traditional representation as perfect, unlike the male body which can be represented as wounded, yet heroic (for example, the sculpture *The Dying Gaul*), or as scarred and thus both heroic or courageous, and as ‘experience.’ The female body in conventional representations appears to be untouched by the vicissitudes of life and experience. This body is also Othered as the perverse female body. For example, Curti explains, “strange unfamiliar shapes, freakish bodies and hybrid, [grotesque] creatures” (107) are found in many contemporary Gothic novels. In her chapter “...and Monstrous Bodies in Contemporary Women’s Writing” Curti describes how Mary Russo explains that ‘grotesque’ comes from the word ‘grotto,’ meaning cave. Caves are regarded as “low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral” (qtd. in Curti 107). This is obviously a reference to the womb as the hidden place from whence we all come.

The word ‘monstrous’ refers to a ‘continuous multiple being’ . . . a being whose multiple parts are neither totally merged nor totally separate . . . whose boundaries are inadequately differentiated, thus calling into question the fundamental opposition of self and other. Such a being is terrifying because

of the stake that any self as self has in its own autonomy . . . individuation . . .  
[and] integrity.(Gallop qtd. in Curti 110)

The sexualised body itself becomes a monstrous creation, according to Judith Halberstam in *Skin Shows*. In this context, the purposeful inscription of the female body enables a destabilising of corporeal boundaries, with the confusion of outside becoming inside, and vice versa. And skin, which figures in this Gothic mode as the ultimate boundary, is presented as a fabricated, monstrous text (Halberstam 7).

Another example of Gothic monstrosity is Buffalo Bill, the serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs* who flays the skin from the women he 'collects' to make for himself a "woman suit" (Halberstam 1). This grotesque dressmaking exercise, executed because Bill wants to refashion himself as a girl, is a graphic example of the way that postmodern Gothic is concerned with bodily surface-depth (Halberstam 1); as Buffalo Bill "prances in front of the mirror, he becomes a layered body, a body of many surfaces laid one upon the other" (Halberstam 1). Sexuality and gender identity are cobbled together as an outfit, to be put on and off at will. This outfit is both vulnerable and tactile. In the back story of *The Silence of the Lambs* we learn that Bill has been assaulted by his mother and he therefore has continued this pattern of abuse as a psychotic killer.

Obviously not all those who are abused as children go onto replicate the abuse, but in the Gothic trope of doubling Bill is abused and abuser, man and woman (suit) and queer in his sexuality—the way he dances is a performance of monstrous queer sexuality—neither straight or gay but a cobbled-together version of the two. Importantly, he carries out his actions in the secrecy of his own home—where much of postmodern Gothic carries out its abusive behaviour. Postmodern or contemporary Gothic represents the "monstrous" [sic] body as a "remarkable mobile, permeable and infinitely interpretable body" (Sullivan 21). This body exemplifies many of the tropes found in traditional Gothic: fluidity, notions of the sacrificial, of family connection, the tension between feminine or (haptic) experience—the act of being watched as a female object--and masculine (scopophilic) distance—the power that derives from the male watching the subject. Halberstam's response to the notion of the gendered gaze is to suggest that "spectatorship" (166) is a less neat

concept than Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" would suggest. It is rather, she argues, historically specific, capable of multiple gendered positions and depends, at least partly, on the viewer's identification with the subject. Moreover, she contends that, if the gaze is not queer, it is at the very least "multidimensional" (166). This "multidimensional gaze is problematic to the dominant because it does not follow a sexual/gendered binary. It is a terrifying experience.

The power of horror lies in the fact that female bodies experience this multidimensionality at the precise moment of change from one state to another. It is not an ongoing condition. In terms of purposeful and non-purposeful body experience (sexual abuse and childbirth) and the Gothic trope of doubling, the moment of terror occurs with misrecognition of Self and Self-as-Other. This can be explained as the intertextual association between the pristine and the marked body. Both bodies—before and after marking—are Self. Both are Other.

Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, discusses the writings of the Judaeo-Christian Bible with her analysis of the Old Testament's *Ecclesiastes* and the sinning of Eve: "Sin originated with Eve and because of her we all perish" (126). This damning message is presaged by Genesis 3:16. God says to Eve: "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" (NIV 11). The Gothic can claim the volitional body (of Eve who picks the fruit) and replace her picking of the fruit as the inhering of sin and the now-constrained maternal-woman. The implications of Eve's enticement of Adam are clear, particularly as St. Paul, later on in the New Testament also implants the power of sin within the female body (Kristeva 126). Eve is a Gothic figure because all the pain and monstrosity of the female body starts with her. The punishment of Eve is effected upon all women, according to Judaeo-Christian belief.

This punishment and the chastisement of the body is seen as a form of corporeal reformation according to Foucault. He also reveals that the comparisons between prisons, schools, barracks and hospitals all share common organisation, in which it is possible to control the use of an individual's time and space by the hour. But in the period of postmodern Gothic, and for too many children and women and families:

“Daddy’s home; “Mummy’s home;” *even the very presence* of Father and Mother, can be an assault on innocence. This is even when the woman’s body is already regarded as transgressive and abject. Patriarchy, according to Rich, forces itself sexually literally and figuratively upon women by “institutions, literature and psychoanalysis, through such practices as rape [including marital rape], wife beating, father/daughter and brother/sister incest” (qtd. in Weedon 20).

This uncontrollable situation occurs to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick when she discusses the differences between a psychological and a spatial model of Gothic conventions. The psychological model is one that is concerned with depth, while in the spatial model its “strongest energies inhere in the surface” (12). When an individual fictional Self is the subject of one of these conventions, that self is spatialised in a specific way. “It is the position of the self to be . . . blocked off from something to which it normally should have access” (12). She lists a range of things that the Self can be removed from: its own past, details of its family history, a lover, and so forth. She continues:

While the three main elements—what’s inside, what’s outside and what separates them take on the most varied guises, the Self and whatever it is that is outside have a proper, natural, necessary connection to one another, but one that the Self is incapable of making. (13)

Historically, Gothic has been obsessed with the law and its “operations, justifications and limits” (Punter 19). From the earliest Gothic, in which the (literal) prison building was used as an inverted image of the outside world (30), law functioned as a “guardian against the encroachment of the night” (44). A gradual shift in emphasis saw the inner sanctum of the home and family replace the prison or dungeon as the place of deadly “midnight intrigue” (30) and secrecy. David Punter argues that Gothic poetry and fiction has the capacity to represent a multitude of viewpoints and social structures, while the law, standing for cohesiveness and unity, acts as a physical and discursive barrier to the advancement of disorder and chaos (44). In the law, corporeal experience is standardised and any deviation from the norm has immediate physical ramifications—imprisonment, pain and death. However, this certainty of the law depends upon a knowable, ordered, ‘normal’ set of bodies.

These bodies are categorised as either male, or the obedient, non-volitional female body. Monstrous bodies in the postmodern Gothic can offer a counter-discourse in the possibility of inversion or carnival. Postmodern Gothic can also enact the “contorted” (Punter 45) relationship between monster and victim, making manifest the idea that sometimes the “monster” is the victim and vice versa. It acknowledges that the body is both a fragile casing capable of being destroyed, while at the same time—even when it suffers most—it is ultimately beyond the reach of the law (46).

From the earliest Gothic, in which the (literal) prison building was used as a panopticon—in which everyone and everything was able to be seen at the same time—as an inverted image of the outside world (30), law functioned as a “guardian against the encroachment of the night” (44). This idea can be developed further in relation to the body modification of the female body, which seeks to open up the otherwise sequestered female body to the gaze. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Michel Foucault describes the arrangement of the prisoner’s room as an implied “lateral invisibility” (200).

To achieve this, it is at least too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes. . . the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at, at any one time; but he must be sure that he may always be so. . . The Panopticon is a “marvellous machine” which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, “produces homogeneous effects of power” (Foucault 200-2.)

The body can be witnessed as a form of panopticon, with its “marvellous machine” being opened to the perpetual gaze of the [outside] Other. Gothic is not interested in minimum, but rather excessive experiences (Punter 9). These excesses include elements such as “incest, unnatural echoes or silences and unintelligible writings and . . . unspeakable [matters] (Kosofsky Sedgwick qtd. in Punter 9). It acknowledges that the body is both wafer-thin and capable of being destroyed and a



strong boundary to keep the inside in, and the outside, out. This is exemplified in Gothic texts by the threshold moment, when the protagonist can refuse to go any further into chaos. Yet if she does, there will be no certainty of returning. A space is entered where the rules are henceforth different, where the “practice of power. . . shimmer[s] . . . ,the uncanny [or the return of the repressed, according to Freud] seeps in and [previously stable] boundaries appear permeable” (Punter 45). In postmodern, Western culture, the current mode of the Gothic continues to articulate so compellingly the concerns and darkneses at work, “gathering up” free-floating anxiety and binding it to a coherent narrative (12). As Botting argues, the tropes of the Gothic can still be made to do the work of articulating the unrepresentable from the point-of-view of the supposedly ‘monstrous’ feminine.

The language of the monstrous feminine and of its inscription is one of excess. Inscription is silenced or monstrous—or both. The postmodern Gothic body is the wounded body, or more specifically, the body of wounds. It is also the tattooed, stippled or modified body. There is an overloading of sensation and an amplification of meaning. The inscribed or scarified, scarred, pierced, tattooed body is one that literally cannot contain itself. Its borders are breached, boundaries of inside and outside are ruptured. This Gothic sensibility deploys the language of rupture and loss and relates it thematically to the disruption of individuals, families and postmodern culture. The fabricated body covered with scars and wounds—both volitionally inscribed or done *to* the body by others—can be seen as an “erotic feast as well as a terror of the flesh” (Potter n.pag.). However, the inscribed or tattooed body captures memory for its lifetime. Each scar or tattoo becomes an exposition of an “inscribed history of events” (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 148). Inscription literalises and critiques the postmodern aesthetic of surface and depthlessness.

This Gothic celebrates excesses of corporeal performance and taboos of “the violent, the self-promoting and those who indulge their cravings” (Helyer 744). Heteronormativity implies that things are supposed to come together at certain social and familial sites, specifically between adults within the domestic and private sphere of a suburban house. Such a construction of sexual expression is predicated on the reproductive and consumerist capacities of heterosexual families and depends on balancing a number of shifting tensions. These include pleasure—which is

discursively constructed as hedonistic, childish and selfish, yet so utterly compelling and desirable that it must be either repressed—counter-balanced with the imprimatur of responsibility, or experienced in a sanctioned way—separated from daily routine and familiar locations. One must also consider the response of the Gothic in relation to these matters. The Gothic takes the normative to the edge of the non-normative abyss—lesbians and gay men are seen as non-compliant, able, in other words, to make their own journey and entirely volitional in terms of their families, their childbearing practices and their sexuality. The reality of this is less than likely to be correct, but it is the heteronormative construction of homosexuality nonetheless. This is why the Gothic is the mode informing my poems. Gothic, or rather postmodern Gothic is, as Mark Doty explains of daily life, “full of small moments of rupture, disappearance and interiority” (*World Into Word* 29).

While Gothic is also cultural in its silencing of the female body—the medicalisation of maternity and mental illness are two examples of this—it also speaks the unspeakable, represents the unrepresentable. “Moreover, it is the story of the contemporary sexualised woman (Becker 72). The female body in pain, which is coerced through abuse and childbirth, is a contained body whose emphasis is on an absence of language. It is spoken *for*. In contrast, the non-compliant or resistant body—one that is marked, sexual, and homo/sexual finds its way to articulation through language—both written and spoken. The body itself is made to speak resistance—which makes it non-compliant. Tattoos, piercings, and short-term markings through ropes, gags and cuffs also can add to the evidence of non-compliance. This can be a symbol of dual and contradictory signification: on the one hand, these devices may well be evidence of non-compliance: on the other, they may signal an enforced compliance. And it can also be seen on the erotic, lesbian-embodied, body-centred female.

Fred Botting, Mark Edmundson and Clive Bloom contextualise the historical emergence of the Gothic genre and demonstrate how Gothic texts are able to articulate the anxieties, silences and fearful fascination with non-normative practices. There is room in these non-normative narrative practices for resistant poetry. Writers of current postmodern Gothic, such as Stephanie Meyer (*Twilight* series), JG Ballard and Jeff Lindsay’s *Dexter* series, are narrating stories that enunciate the

concerns of postmodernity in a framework that utilises and self-consciously replicates the historical tropes and props of earliest Gothic literature. In a commodity-fetishised society that denies corporeal experience, Gothic body theory can locate the female body as a primary site of subjectivity and sensation. An example of this denial of corporeal experience is in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, where young men with banalised, yet good, white-collar jobs, and absent fathers, take off their shoes and shirts and fight each other barehanded for as long as they have to. The implication of this is that the continued denial of corporeal experience ultimately leads ultimately to uncontrolled and bloody violence.

Rationalising the Gothic in terms of women's body theory can be articulated by contrasting female 'monstrosity' with such examples such as D/s, and the non-compliant woman. To be aware of the performances women enact, and of the contradictions opening up in these, horror is the ideal mode, according to Bloom's and Edmundson's arguments about the emergence of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the horrific mother. A monster has been created and although the creator was Victor Frankenstein, the fact of bringing forth a monstrous being can be seen as the actions of a deformed mirrored-maternal being 'birthing' something that is horrific. Wisker argues that a perfect fantasy space exists for our needs for exploration of such contradictions, and, particularly in contemporary feminist horror, for projection of new possibilities. Furthermore she suggests that horror, which most theorists define as a sub-genre of the Gothic, is the ultimate creative, imaginative, and subversive mode.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also employs a Foucauldian reading of the Gothic, with heterotopic space and place (even of the body) the pre-eminent focus. Gothic—especially postmodern Gothic—makes that heterotopic space visible and palpable. This is different from the traditional 'feminine Gothic' that Others the 'monstrous' feminine. James Smethurst argues that the Gothic also offers a counter-discourse to realism, which, while not actively subversive, functions as a critique of the tyranny of patriarchy, relations of power, and the "instability of markers of social identity," such as family, class, gender and sexuality (n. pag.). Kosofsky Sedgwick contends that the thematics or codes of the Gothic convention require both hysteria and paranoia—hysteria on behalf of the female, with the male as the classic paranoid.

They are, she says, gestures which “can be appreciated on [their] own terms” but whose historical and gender specificity” can now seem to be legible (vi).

It is as versions of the heroics of embodiment, too, that hysteria and paranoia can appear most similar to one another . . . The . . . costly struggle in the hysteric to express graphically through her bodily hieroglyphic what cannot come into existence as narrative. (vi)

In female-centred readings of the Gothic, there has emerged a “question of maternity” (vii). The Gothic is not only concerned with daughters’ relationships with their mothers, but rather is connected to childbirth itself (vii). This, however, is not all. Barbara Johnson’s essay on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is entitled “My Monster, Myself,” because she identifies in the novel a “thematics of mirrored monstrosity” which may represent a distinctly female embodiment, (vii-viii). Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that if “My Monster Myself” is the slogan of the feminocentric or hysterically-oriented reading of the Gothic, that of the masculocentric or paranoiacally-oriented would have to be “It takes one to know one.”

It is this potential for subversion, irony and imaginative space, which enables horror to appeal to postmodern Western culture. But at the same time people can critique what is comfortably taken for granted. My poems are not meant to be comfortable, even when the subjects are at the most consensual or volitional. And especially when the protagonists are at the mercy of silence and compliance. Horror's potential for both enjoyment and critique resides in its subversion and its ironising tendencies, “its exposure of alternatives, its destabilising of the stable and defamiliarisation of the completely familiar” (Wisker n.pag.). Our enjoyment of horror takes those two linked responses,” pleasure and subversion, and pleasure at subversion,” an enjoyment of what frightens and destabilises us and what can enable us to see things as other than they appear to be, to “spot the social fissures and so choose to live our lives in certain ways rather than be forced to be easily thrown by the slightest crack in the seeming coherence of our society” (Wisker n. pag.).

“The Yellow Wallpaper,” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman deals with this perverse, ‘monstrous’ subject. The madwoman at the top of the stairs/in the attic is a recurring

persona in Gothic literature. She is overtly sexualised or animalised (Bertha Mason-Rochester) or in need of a 'rest cure' (Charlottes One and Two in *The Yellow Wallpaper*). Rest cures were common for women in the nineteenth century. They were for any woman who displayed a "nervous condition or hysteria" (Lehmann and Izzard 17). As a counter to this is the husband of Charlotte, a doctor called John, the very essence of scientific reason and order. He controls her behaviour and habitation, forbidding her from seeing her baby, or from writing, which is her greatest pleasure. Hélène Cixous writes of the crimes of art and writing that women must commit to take over the "discourse of man." In her discussion, she also asks, "who hasn't accused herself of being a monster?" suggesting a bodily transformation at the heart of these expressive crimes (qtd. in Braunberger 3).

And in horror we face up to this, and either explain it and close it down, return to order or, in more radical contemporary feminist horror, recognise it as a projection of, a part of ourselves, not Other to us. Then closing it down would be absurd, and futile. And while Edmundson is correct to identify this confessional Gothic; the tropes can be easily put to different work. This is what keeps the poems from being what Edmundson refers to as "facile transcendence" (82). Edmundson argues that "facile transcendence" (82) is an Oprah Winfrey-style compulsion to confess the worst that has happened to us (83). It has victims and perpetrators alike, under the gaze of the television camera, confessing what has happened to them, and who has done the deed.

### ***Gothic and the Abused Body***

This discussion of the Gothic—both postmodern and traditional—aids in the understanding of how the Gothic mode underpins the representation of the constrained or the agential/volitional body in poetry. This is because body poetry in the Gothic mode lets one write about the most unrepresentable or unspeakable even when it has been silenced or because it has been deemed monstrous. It also allows for a movement to a volitional, consensual body writing. Why does postmodern Gothic simultaneously celebrate and mourn the "losses" of the body buffeted by excesses? In dealing with what happens in the shadows of society—such as sexual assault, child abuse, domestic violence and its emphasis on the twin "narrative[s] of

abuse” (Punter 15) and therapeutic recovery—postmodern or citational Gothic is forever in the process of re-creating the stories and obsessions of previous generations of Gothic writers. It can be argued that the domestic abode has also become a Gothic space: a space where abuses and Foucault’s madnesses and medicines lurk. There is a tension between the normal and the perverse and sexual abuse hovers in the interstices of these. Such ‘eroticism’ is both feared and celebrated in the Gothic, with a balance having to be struck between “desire, and the desire to hide desire” (Hawthorne n. pag.). The instigator of the abuse feels this desire and wants it to continue, despite the potential consequences.

Edmundson talks about contemporary Gothic in relation to sado-masochism and its function in articulating relations of power in the culture. In the Gothic family structure the helpless child is gendered feminine and the autonomous adult, masculine. Children who are abused remain stuck in a limbo of their own innocence, abject masochists whose performance of gender is ambivalent at best. They are haunted simultaneously by being the sacrificial innocent and the fatally flawed instrument of their own suffering. Some of my poems can then be summed up—if somewhat flippantly—as tales of “sex and Parents” [sic] (Clover 49).

Gothic has been telling the stories of child abuse and masochism from the very beginning. These stories are an explication of dissolution and estrangement, a ‘Snow White syndrome’ where wicked maternal and paternal figures flourish and commit atrocities on innocent children, while their good counterparts die young. Richard Davenport-Hynes, in *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*, argues that the manifestation of power abuses and cruelty dealt with in all forms of Gothic texts came to be reflected in American rather than European Gothic as the “destructive power of families” (267). He suggests that Gothic excess is a useful trope to represent the vindictive horrors capable of being inflicted on children by a family structure steeped in introspection, religiosity and recrimination (267-71). In this context, acts of brutality, including incestuous activity, become discursively allied with the guilt of the victim, rather than the culpability of the perpetrator. And the ensuing keeping of secrets, which leads to silences and ‘gaps’ of connection between the knower and the known, is justified by the assumption that children are “sinful failures” (273), deserving of whatever ‘correction’ is deemed necessary. The

very people who should know and protect—fathers, mothers, other family members—are either perpetrators, absent, ignorant of what is happening, or in active collusion with the abuser.

These excesses in postmodern Gothic include elements such as “incest, unnatural echoes or silences and unintelligible writings and [. . .] unspeakable [matters]” (Kosofsky Sedgwick qtd. in Punter 9). Postmodern Gothic, according to Ellis Hanson, represents Western culture’s paranoia and obsession with child sexual abuse. He suggests that since the 1970s it has become “arguably the definitive sexual panic of our time. Children are queer,” [he argues], “their sexual activities, real or imagined, are deemed an occasion for the utmost surveillance and anxiety, and no punishment is considered too severe for any parent or adult who transgresses the matter” (179). Postmodern Gothic also simultaneously celebrates and mourns the ‘losses’ of the body buffeted by the excesses of experience. Furthermore, in dealing with what happens in the shadows of society—such as sexual assault, child sexual abuse, domestic violence and its emphasis on the “twin narratives of abuse and therapeutic recovery”—postmodern or citational Gothic is forever in the process of re-creating the stories and obsessions of previous generations of Gothic writers (Punter 15).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE SILENCED BODY AS ABJECT/OBJECT**

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The silenced body is, in this exegesis, considered within the context of the historical and cultural “possibilities” available to normatively gendered bodies (Butler 404). Judith Butler asserts that this experience of gender identity is neither determined by “nature, language or the symbolic” (415), nor passively inscribed on the body. She suggests that gender is tenuous, “constituted in time,” and becomes an identity that is “performed” or “acted,” though not in a theatrical sense (415). While the physical functions of the body—menstruation, ovulation, pregnancy and giving birth—are not strictly performative in the Butlerian sense, they are in some sense performed identities. They require different performances of Self-including clothing, the medicalisation of childbirth and ovulation and the accoutrements of menstruation.

Women are, and have been seen, as transgressive and abject bodies, open, leaking and sinful. Their birthing and menstruating are regarded, historically and culturally, as monstrous, and sinfully so. This has led to them being controlled, medically, spiritually, and physically. If the female body wants to choose its own path—via D/s for example, or tattooing and piercing—it does so volitionally, and with the possibility of non-normativity. The same argument could be made for the female poet. A purposefully modified female body is formed with an aesthetic of creativity, adornment, and augmentation that transforms it from a generic “piece” of flesh into an original piece of art (Myers n. pag.). The female skin’s velvet becomes a performance of identity, an object of beauty, a way for the body unable to “contain its longing to augment itself in the world” to re-enact and control a formerly uncontrollable situation (Smethurst n.pag.).

Gender, Butler argues, cannot be put on and taken off like clothing, nor is its ‘performance’ a result of free play or self-presentation. Instead, it becomes constructed and instituted through a “stylised repetition of [specific] acts” (405). This repetition, performed by the body, and enacted convincingly over a period of time, acquires an authoritative illusion of fixedness—an illusion required in



heteronormative, patriarchal society. This fixedness is required because the female body is considered fluid and uncertain in its embodiment.

The menstruating body is surrounded by anxiety even while, or perhaps because, advertisements for tampons and pads abound. The reality of blood is somehow silenced by the commodification of its management. The degree to which these products are advertised is in direct relation to the 'messiness' of such processes. The body that spills and leaks is a taboo, an excessive body that must be silenced.

The pregnant body too, is constructed and disciplined as an object within medicalised discourse. It undergoes tests and is pictured—from the inside out. It must confine itself to certain dates if it is to be induced, or to have a caesarean, and then is constrained by machines, drugs and medical practitioners when the birthing time is due. This body must be rendered docile by these practices. Thus, women's bodies are marked, surveilled and measured. How many weeks pregnant are we? How many centimetres dilated? This medicalised surveillance is postmodern Gothic's embodiment of Bentham's panopticon: it is not necessary that it be examined all the time, it is enough to feel as if it might be at any time. Elizabeth Grosz in *Space, Time and Perversion* argues that the increasing medicalisation of the body, based on processes of removal (incision, cutting, removal and reduction) or addition (inlaying, stitching and injection), demonstrates a body "pliable to power. . . in which components can be altered, adjusted and removed" (*Space* 35). Adrienne Rich asks (in *Of Woman Born*), in her chapter "Hands of Flesh, Hands of Iron," "[how] have women given birth? Who has helped them? And how and why?" (128). These are not simply questions of the history of midwifery and obstetrics, [but rather] political questions. The woman at the onset of labour, or in stirrups delivering her baby is doing these things under the influence of centuries of imprinting (128). If she has any choices, they are made within the context of laws, codes, religious sanctions and ethnic traditions. According to Rich, women-who-are-mothers seemingly only have two options—to be natural or to play the part—an impossible contradiction in her opinion (*Of Woman Born* 41).

In her chapter "The Sacred Calling" Rich describes the "dim, simmering voice of self" (41) in relation to a mother who wrote, in the 1920s, to contraceptive pioneer,

Margaret Sanger. In a time when sex was a fearful duty, with the ever-present possibility of pregnancy, the ability to plan the number of children one had was seen as a blessing. This woman wanted a safe way to enjoy her 'wifely responsibilities,' without having to endure endless childbearing. Rich argues that the institution of motherhood is no more identical with the "bearing and caring" for children (43), than the "institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love" (43). They are both, rather, discursive constructions that have shaped and regulated the reality of our lives.

While the discursive construction of childbirth desexualises it, childbirth educator Sheila Kitzinger describes pregnancy and childbirth as "psychosexual" experiences, making explicit an alliance of maternity and sexuality. Kitzinger believes that if women are allowed to respond to their labours as a continuing sexual experience, their breathing during contractions will correspond to those of sexual excitement and orgasm. She suggests that it is the suppression of sexualised responses to childbirth that inhibits women, which means that they feel more pain during labour, and may require further medical intervention. This suppression casts them in the role of passive bodies, waiting to be 'delivered.' Such a subordinated position, she asserts, embedded in patriarchal constructions of maternal subjectivity, denudes the maternal body of its passion and autonomy, and violates the integrity and meaning of those who would speak through and for it.

Thomas Laqueur argues this position from an historical perspective, with his research into the female body in *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*. He describes seventeenth-century midwifery manuals which advise women how to get pregnant. The manuals called for the need for women to achieve orgasm in order to conceive. "Orgasm," he states, "was assumed to be a routine, more-or-less indispensable part of conception" (vii).

It is assumed that the sexualised experience of childbirth does not happen for many women. Too often they are sedated, have epidurals, or caesareans, which interferes with any positive experience they expect to have. This can lead to frustration and anger. The emergence of women's anger is as a result of a lack of autonomy and volition; acting out that is not permitted. This anger at lack of autonomy can become

full-blown rage. Rich writes about a woman in her thirties, a mother of eight, who decapitated and cut up the bodies of her two youngest children, on her “neatly kept lawn” (*Of Woman Born* 257). She had suffered for many years from depression and postpartum depression. The woman had not wanted any more than three children and found herself, due to her religious faith, in the position of giving birth to child after child.

These depressions in dominant Western culture are not supposed to be enacted. Like Eve, women are supposed to give birth without complaint, however painfully and inconvenient. Religiosity, even within a so-called secular society, enforces these cultural ‘truths.’ Rage, in a woman is an unacceptable emotion or behaviour, according to Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* and psychologist and psychotherapist, Harriet Lerner, in *The Dance of Anger*. When a woman shows her anger she is likely to be dismissed as irrational, or worse (Lerner 2-3). Lerner asks why angry women are so threatening to others. If we are guilty, depressed, or self-doubting, we stay in place. Furthermore, she suggests, we do not take actions except against our own selves and we are unlikely to be agents of personal or cultural change. In contrast, angry women may change and challenge the lives of those around us, and effect change in our own lives. And while change is—or can be—an anxiety-provoking action, it is necessary nevertheless (Lerner 4). The outrage that Western culture feels when mothers kill their children is, in part, due to the explicit anger, or rather, rage, that is being exhibited by these mothers. This psychoanalytic rage, the rage that women demonstrate, is the rage of the Self—sexual or otherwise—who is not being recognised.

There is a positive, consensual constrained body and it is the one that experiences the pleasure and pain of D/s. This body exhibits how the sub’s body is altered and restrained by the Dom, with just a few implements, such as rope, scarf gag and belt. It is obviously a negotiation between the two protagonists as to what will happen, as they are also in synchronicity with one another. There is a difference from where the volition is substantively taken away from the female protagonist, to one where the female protagonist cedes her control as part of a pleasurable experience. So, therefore, however troubling the intersections of love, or violence, but not abuse, may appear from the outside, and how ‘abuse’ and sex can appear to outsiders, it is

possible to work them into an idiosyncratic framework that alone does not make the acts themselves pathological.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **RECLAIMING VOLITION BY WRITING THE CONSENSUAL BODY: D/s, BODY MODIFICATION AND LESBIAN SUBJECTIVITY**

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“At twenty, I have my first child,” says the poem “Language” (15). It then offers a litany of experiences of pregnancy loss and childbirth and all that goes with it. These are intersected with verses describing a D/s relationship and the autonomy and volition it offers, although this is not the usual reading of its dynamic. I wanted first to explain a pregnancy and birth history, and second to explain why I saw a connection between what was done to the protagonist as a mother, without any choice, as female and compliant at least some of the time, and the choices made to have a relationship with a Dominant partner. This marked body was one that was surprising to some people, because it seemed to them that the actions done to a sub took away autonomy. I felt this to be the opposite case. This was a body that had been, both literally and in a medicalised discourse, constrained, pierced, cut, contained, bruised, and silenced. I hardly need to point out the similarities between one body and the other. The proper relationship between a Dom and a sub is one of complicity and trust. Actions are, before being carried out, discussed in detail and permission has to be given *by the sub*. In short, D/s makes submission consensual, and thus, volitional.

What is Dominance and submission? In 1886 Sigmund Freud refers to sadism and masochism as “sexual aberrations” (Sullivan 151). S/M is Freud’s preferred term, not mine. I use the terms D/s or Dominance and submission. Sadism and masochism, Freud claims, are deviations from the “normal sexual aim of heterosexual [intercourse] or reproduction” (151). “For theorists such as Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and Freud, sadism and masochism are more properly forms of psychopathology” for which it may be necessary to develop ‘cures’ (151).

What is meant, precisely, by the terms D/s or S/M? These terms have been used to cover a range of practices some of which are not explicitly sexual—“although in the psychoanalytic imaginary all pleasure is considered sexual pleasure” argues Nikki Sullivan in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (152). D/s can include spanking,

being tied up, bruising, cutting, being gagged, needle play, biting, slapping, bondage, dominance and submission, the use of sex toys and so forth (Sullivan 152-3).

For many commentators, however, while D/s may be connected practices this does not mean that they are conflatable. Ted Polhemus claims that sadomasochism (or D/s) is more accurately represented by the term S/M, rather than S&M since the “latter implies the existence of two separate types or practices, whereas the former indicates reciprocity and ‘symbiotic interdependency’” (152). It can be seen that [D/s] is often funny, creative, spiritual, integrating, a power of inner power as strength (Bersani qtd. in Sullivan 153). D/s does not involve, at least to most practitioners, rape, violence, coercion, beatings, cruelty—despite the claims of Sheila Jeffreys and some other feminists to the contrary. Jeffreys argues that any women who claim to be feminists and are also practitioners of D/s are in fact fascists, allying them with the genocide of the Jews, if they take part in [D/s] or S/M (qtd. in Sullivan 164). She (Jeffreys) made this claim for the first time in an article entitled “Sado-Masochism: The Erotic Cult of Fascism.” (qtd. in Sullivan 164). Sullivan argues, though, that the contradictory arguments about [D/s] and S/M require each group to set the other up as its own opposite. So, “for example, if the anti-S/M writer is feminist, then she constructs [the practitioners of S/M] as non-feminists, and vice-versa (Sullivan 165).

The “pleasure and pain” of D/s exhibits how the sub’s body is altered and restrained by the Dom. It is essentially a negotiation between the two protagonists as to what will happen and this is not a situation where the volition is substantively taken away from the female protagonist, and in which the female protagonist cedes her control as part of a pleasurable experience. The marks that remain on the skin from these practices are a form of corporeal ‘writing’ that can then in time be represented in poetry. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that it is evident that “though language [is] a sort of safety valve between the inside and the outside, or the experiential and the fictive [when it is] closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive and explosive” (17).

Michel Foucault describes D/s as a way of “degenitalising” corporeal pleasure. Furthermore, he argues that D/s is not about reproducing hierarchies of social power, with the Dom unproblematically dominant over the submissive. Rather, he

suggests, Doms and subs enter into a complex negotiation of possibilities that may or may not be sexual. He emphasises the fluidity of D/s and its “game” or performance attributes, which broaden the understanding and experience sexual and/or bodily pleasure, through the enacting of power structures to achieve an eroticisation of the entire body (Foucault, “Sex” 157-62). These game or performance attributes of D/s are perhaps analogous in some sense with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, where the body becomes a site of playing at ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ the body. An example of this, in the carrying out of D/s is ‘my body hurts (doing this), rather than, ‘my body hurts *me*.’

D/s practices take place between people of all ages, ethnicities, classes, occupations, body types and sexes/genders. D/s is not a specifically lesbian or gay practice, although many contemporary theorists claim for various reasons that it is queer (Sullivan 153). D/s is most often described by its protagonists as an assignment of roles or game-play. For example, a Top, or Dominant is the person who controls the action. The submissive or bottom “follows the Top’s lead” (153). This structure is loose because the power over what happens and when it stops, rests with the sub, rather than the Dom. The sub has a ‘safe word’ or action which, when given, means that the activities immediately cease. Sometimes these positions are reversible, with the Dom subbing, or the reverse, depending on circumstances and the people involved.

Polhemus stresses that:

Not everyone in the [D/s] scene fall easily or permanently into a submissive or Dominant classification. Certainly there are those whose identity is fully linked with either the Mistress/Master or Slave prefix but there are also those who happily switch from [Dom to sub] and back again, depending upon mood or situation. (qtd. in Sullivan 155)

From Polhemus’s statement we can conclude that some people treat [D/s] as an innate identity, whereas for others it is a game of roles to be played whenever one chooses (155). “The latter approach presupposes a level of flexibility, experimentation, malleability and *agency* [my emphasis] that is nothing like as

apparent as the former” (Sullivan 155). Foucault claims that [D/s] could be understood as a subversive form of self-fashioning, or self-(trans)formation. In an interview in a 1981 edition of *Mec* magazine Foucault makes an important distinction between desire and pleasure, which informs . . . his work on [D/s] as a strategic form of self-trans(form)ation through the use of pleasure.

I [Foucault] am advancing this term [pleasure] because it seems to me that it escapes the medical and naturalistic connotations inherent in the notion of desire. The term [desire] has been used as a tool . . . a calibration in terms of normality. Tell me what your desire is and I will tell you who you are, whether you are normal or not, and then I can qualify or disqualify your desire. The term pleasure on the other hand is virgin territory, almost devoid of meaning. There is no pathology of pleasure, no ‘abnormal’ pleasure. It is an event ‘outside of the subject’ or on the edge of the subject, within something that is neither body nor soul, which is neither inside nor outside, in short a notion which is neither ascribed nor ascribable. (Foucault qtd. in Sullivan 155)

In an interview published under the title “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity” Foucault states that [T]he S/M game is very interesting because . . . it is always fluid. Of course there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed” (qtd. in Sullivan 153-4). For Foucault then, “the roles are simply roles, that is ways of being that are intentionally donned for particular purposes and at specific times. Therefore S/M practices should not . . . be conceived of as an essential identity” (154). The power issues at work in Foucault’s theories of S/M are that he believes that power is productive, rather than simply oppressive. It (power) should be understood as a fluid “network of relations” (Sullivan 42). David Halperin agrees with Foucault, suggesting that the pleasure produced by practices such as fisting . . . and bondage, for example, function to “shatter identity, and dissolve the subject” (qtd. in Sullivan 156). For example, as David Halperin sees it, “neither fisting nor bondage are a means to an end, that is to orgasm, heteronormative sex, or reproduction” (156). Moreover, such practices are not fixated on the genitals. In short, according to Halperin, as such practices are non-reproductive, they open up a “polymorphous perversity and they enable us to rethink pleasure and/or sexuality in terms of one’s certain acts, certain zones . . . certain relations of age or power . . . a



certain number of participants and so on, rather than simply in terms of the gender of one's sexual object choice" (qtd. in Sullivan 156). For Foucault and Halperin, then, D/s is a strategic game, a political practice of queer pleasure that functions to denaturalise sexuality; it is not the expression of an innate identity (Sullivan 156). For the female subject whose sexuality has been objectified by sexual abuse or medicalised maternity, such 'denaturalised' subjective possibilities can produce new, agential embodiments. These are articulated in my poems.

The volitional, agential subject can experience through D/s, according to "Juicy Lucy," herself a practitioner of D/s, "passionate, erotic, . . . consensual, boundary-breaking, trust building, loving activities or great sex" [though sex does not necessarily have to be a part of a D/s relationship] (qtd. in Sullivan 153). Through these practices the female body can be experienced as subject *not object* and as agential/ volitional subject, rather than a non-volitional object. It may be read as 'monstrosity' but is not, because it is possible to recuperate a female body through sexuality and individuation and to explore its preoccupation with what Judith Halberstam and Nikki Sullivan argue is costume and disguise and its connection to the appropriation and casting off of identity (Halberstam; Sullivan).

An example of this volition is Linda Kauffman's discussion of (now deceased) Bob Flanagan, self-titled "super-masochist" and performance artist—best known for nailing his penis to wooden boards and hanging from hooks. Kauffman explains that masochism locates sensations of pain or pleasure "*within* a corporeal body," which emphasises its "tactility, materiality and immediacy" (12). This was the case for Flanagan who stated that masochism became a way for him to reclaim a body pathologised because of chronic illness. He went as far as to juxtapose the "pathology of cystic fibrosis with the pathology of masochism" (qtd. in Kauffman 21). A body such as his, constantly surveilled, measured, examined, and tested, was able to regain some autonomy from the invasiveness and pain of medical procedures by redefining pleasure and sexuality in such a way that "pain and sex [we]re the same thing" (qtd. in Kauffman 24).

Lidia Curti in *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative Identity and Representation* quotes Hélène Cixous on the process of a woman coming into writing.

Who

Invisible, foreign, secret, hidden, mysterious, black, forbidden

Am I...

Is this me, this nobody that is dressed up, wrapped in veils,  
carefully kept distant, pushed to the side of History and change  
nullified, kept out of the way, on the edge of the stage on the  
kitchen side, on the bed side?

For you? (qtd. In Curti 109.)

And Adrienne Rich writes about that which is not supposed to be spoken, the ambivalence of motherhood and the painful experience of love and hatred:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings towards these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. (*Of Woman Born* 21)

Further, even the most 'normal' of mothers has this feeling of being monstrous at times.

The following section offers the perspective that a purposefully modified female body is one that can be a site of resistance. This is not to deny the more pessimistic view of the body as a controller and disciplined site of knowledge and sexuality; rather it suggests that binaries of deviance and normativity operate within parameters that make written resistance both possible and necessary

Yet, certain feminist writers see writing as a patriarchal "dressing," or covering of the body (Michie, *Flesh* 146), a way of diffusing meaning. Margaret Atwood reviews

Rich's seventh book of poetry, *Diving Into the Wreck* and quotes her poem "The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One." This is a poem in which she makes herself reborn from her dead mother:

your mother dead and you unborn  
your two hands grasping your head  
drawing it down against the blade of life  
your nerves the nerves of a midwife  
learning her craft. (Atwood qtd. in *Reading Adrienne Rich* 240)

Julia Kristeva says that she discovered that when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the self-narrative is what is challenged first (Kristeva 141). The status of merely being a woman's body is reductionist and parlays into the diminishment of writing by women as being merely 'women's writing.' Even those writers as powerful as Kristeva or Cixous.

### ***Writing the Modified Body***

How do body modification—piercing, tattooing, scarification—act upon the world and upon the chosen subject? Practitioners of body modification perceive and present it as a 'performance' of embodiment. This performance explores issues of transgression and abjection. The female body, with its scars from childbirth, IV drip scars, caesareans and episiotomies is the body that both propels a narrative, and is the embodied canvas upon which the narrative is drawn. Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* with the 'punishments' passed on the prisoners has a machine with a bed and a harrow on it. The machine writes, similarly to the tattoo gun's stipple, its message of punishment upon the prisoner's skin (Kafka 210).

"Does he know his sentence?" [Asked the explorer]. "No," said the officer . . .

"There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body" (212).

This learning process exemplifies how the marked body is understood by the people who mark it, or have it marked for them.

Scars from childhood abuse or self-inflicted wounds, which Halberstam calls totemic marks of “past violation” (155), become sensual sites, and the visibility of the scarified body has an added Butlerian-performative quality with its “marks of disclosure” (155). The maternal body too, (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 90) is subjugated, manipulated and marked through such processes as medicalised interventions in pregnancy and childbirth. Such “oppression” can, however, be recuperated, “resisted and protested” (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 6) through purposeful body modification. Markings on the skin as a result of cutting, or beneath the skin via the tattoo needle, serve as an illusion of dimension that is a signifier of “real” dimension. Therefore acts of cutting or tattooing in and of themselves constitute a clear narrative. Women who practice purposeful body modification are able to offer, to a greater or lesser extent, justifications and explanations of what such practices mean. But with the tension between prohibition and invitation—where what is concealed on the body is sometimes as desirable as what is revealed, where there is a contradictory fascination for both pristine and augmented or disfigured flesh, it accordingly becomes “read” by others as a mimetic expression of an individual’s “psychic interior” (Grosz *Space* 35).

Purposeful body modifications act as signifiers of transgression and resistance. Victoria Pitts and Nikki Sullivan observe that the last few decades have seen the emergence and rise in popularity of “new and recirculated body modification technologies” including scarification or purposeful cutting and branding (*Queer* n. pag.). These practices were preceded in Western cultures by a more acceptable and mainstream history of tattooing and piercing (Sullivan *Tattooed* 20). Deployed most particularly by queer and other subcultural communities to create “anomalous” bodies that not only provoke, but also present themselves as sites of resistance that underscore heteronormative, discursive notions of embodiment and sexuality (*Queer* n. pag.), these body modification practices are linked to romanticised concepts of “neo-tribalism” (*Queer* n. pag.) and are loosely modelled after the rites and rituals of some non-Western indigenous groups. Such rituals can then be used to examine, expose and critique the regulatory effects of the discursive constructions of gender and sexuality, health and “perversion,” and issues of normative embodiment and agency on the “material, tangible” body (Bauman 194).

Once the signifier of working-class, masculine criminality (Braunberger 5), purposeful body modification, has become more widely practised by increasing numbers of urban, educated, middle-class women and men. These urban “modern primitivists” (Pitts, *Flesh* 125) self-consciously redeploy rituals of “primitive” cultures—prayer, meditation, dancing, incense, feathers, bones, etcetera. (*Flesh* 126)—to invest their modifications with spirituality and meaning. This urban “elitism” (*Flesh* 127) aims to give tattooing and piercing an elevated aesthetic and significance perceived to be missing from its “working-class, biker and sailor associations” (*Flesh* 127).

Body modification establishes corporeal territory, autonomy and individuation.

From the 1770s on, Christine Braunberger says, since Capt. James Cook re-introduced tattooing to the Western world from the Polynesian Islands, tattooing has primarily been done by men for other men, and has functioned like a “hundred other rituals implicitly designed to keep men together and exclude women” (7). Early efforts to keep women away from tattoo—and then perversely to draw women in—both involved degradation of the female body as a desirable object and desiring subject (Braunberger 7).

Body modifiers also articulate, particularly in queer communities, their sexuality and orientation and their pleasure in the public and private sphere, along with visibility and community (Pitts, *Queer*; Pitts, *Flesh*). Body modifiers experience, construct, and in some sense occupy, the paradoxical intersections of sexuality and gender, pleasure and pain, autonomy and agency. A purposefully modified body is also able to elicit a corresponding visceral response from other transgressive, non-normative bodies. Constant (purposeful) body modification leads to what Michel Foucault describes as the (inscriptive) process of “enculturation” (qtd. in Sullivan 2), where flesh is “morphologically” transformed into a body or text, upon which societal and cultural “truths” can be read (2-3). To undo that work it has to be read in an alternate way. Past sexual abuse or volitional marking can be worked into present sexual pleasure, but it is nearly always embedded within a narrative of anxiety.

Daniel Rosenblatt argues that body modification practices become a way for individuals to “use” their bodies to “comment and act on the world” (300). In using a number of key symbolic domains—such as the body, sexuality, and the Self—body modifiers are able to reveal what the body means in Western culture (Rosenblatt

300). Modification therefore can be seen as a tool for exploring “exotic” (Rosenblatt 311) non-normativity and, like the body itself, has always had a cultural, historical and metaphorical context. Body modification can therefore function as a means to critique dominant, discursive constructions of subjectivity and embodiment. It is as if “living so long in the same unchanging flesh made them [modifiers] restless; [so] they were compelled to change it themselves” (Brite 82). This generic body is in an ongoing process of creation as an historical and discursively constructed entity. And when the body is used as the site where culture’s “truths and anxieties” (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 164) are articulated, it is the male, heterosexual body that is read as generic and normative. The female body is seen as the one that disrupts norms of embodiment, sexuality and gender (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 164).

Jean Baudrillard explains the potential for unanchored subversion as “the trait of reversion” (*Simulacra* 163). Such dominant constructions of subjectivity depend on conflated or totalised representations of this body, a position exacerbated when it is also a surface for purposeful modification. Zygmunt Bauman explains the postmodern notion that body modification is seen as seductive, rather than coercive, because modification is seen as a “manifesto” of agency, rather than an external imposition of control (194). This demonstrates the paradoxical positioning of the modified, maternal body, with all its discursive “constrictions” (Smith 94). It is not enough to view it as an abstract, metaphorical process that is experienced emotionally, spiritually or psychologically. On the contrary, body modification must be understood, first and foremost, as “literal and constitutive” practices that are encoded and inscribed on a material body (Grosz *Volatile* 137). This resistance, though, is reliant on purposeful or desired modification of the body, rather than passive inscription. She demonstrates that purposeful, “ritualistically inscribed” scars, incisions and tattoos also function to create an illusion of fixity that belies the *actual* fluidity and flux of the experiential body (34). It is hardly coincidental that it is the female, rather than the male body that is in a state of openness or fluidity. Foucault’s key argument is that heteronormative performances of sexuality demand the technology of Self he calls Confession, which is meant by him as a performative technique or technology of Self.

Despite the popularity of these practices, much of the research on body modification fails to reflect this broadening of appeal, concentrating instead on two particular narratives. The first is a pathologised or medicalised narrative, that represents body modification as “mutilative” and evidence of an individual’s tendencies to “self-harm” and/or mental illness (e.g., Favazza and Favazza; Myers). The body is a Gothic site upon which terror is experienced as a sublime and momentary brush with the abyss and the dissolution of boundaries and reason. This is most aptly seen in the mentally ill and discussed at length by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation*. Foucault states that moreover, the treatment of the mentally ill [or mad] in hospitals, changed as the “therapeutics of madness did not function . . . [as the hospital’s] chief concern was to correct” (*Madness* 151). Furthermore, “every psychiatrist, every historian yielded” to the treatment of the mad. Every prison in the nineteenth century contained the “raving mad” (210) and these “unfortunates” were chained in dungeons besides criminals (210). The madmen [sic] were treated worse than malefactors” (210). It is no small thing to refer to body modification as mutilative, and to ascribe to it mental illness. The second prevailing narrative of body modification constructs modification practices as performed only by bodies already marginalised from the dominant: “queer bodies,” such as those in the gay, lesbian and transgendered communities (Pitts *Queer* n. pag.); disabled or chronically ill bodies (Kauffman 21) and the bodies of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline/Sado-Masochism) practitioners (see for e.g., Turner; Pitts, *Flesh*; Pitts, *Queer*).

In his short story/memoir piece “Dr Fell,” Michael Bronski writes of his relationships with three men over a six-year period. Part of the ‘sex play’ with two of them, he says in the opening paragraph, was that they cut each other with razors, scalpels and X-acto blades. He establishes the parameters in which he is able to write about the events: “assume an honest tone and simply explain the experiences” (Bronski “Dr Fell” 194). Bronski explains how cutting for him demonstrates “the elliptical spaces [on the body] left unsaid” (194). He clearly and lyrically explains what it was about cutting—specifically the sexual, religious and aesthetic connections that it represented—that made it so compelling and compulsive for him. He acknowledges that there were aspects of it that discomfited him—he talks of the lover who introduced him to cutting as being: “fucked up about sex”. (And that) “acting out doesn’t always bring you through to the other side” (“Dr Fell” 198-9).

And yet to emphasise his compulsion, Bronski demonstrates the inherent tensions, pleasures and contradictions of a performance of transgressive embodiment for himself and for his lover in the private sphere. Bronski, unlike some other homosexuals, is comfortable with 'performing' his sexuality in the public sphere. For him, it is blood and cutting, "so sexy, so *driven*" (195; original emphasis), that are the non-normative aspects of his sexuality: "The actual experiences were sexy [he frets], but how do you convince readers who may well be appalled by the very idea? (195). In turning a 'real-life' situation into narrative, Bronski makes the reader complicit in the act of 'creating' a text. The 'text' of his cut body becomes ordered, coherent and reconfigured, like words on a page. Flesh becomes the embodiment of meaning *and* language.

And more than that: Bronski is lyrical in his explanation of how body modification constitutes, for him, a saturation of meaning—where the actions themselves, while erotic, sexy, satisfying—are superficially prosaic, a mere matter of "cut and bleed." Yet, Bronski describes how he and his lover are "amazed [and] confounded by the "extraordinary grace" [of blood]: "from rose, to vermilion, to crimson . . . tiny amounts of precious, jewel-like fluid, fall and shatter as they hit the floor" (201). Blood in this context is clearly seen as an embodiment of "private desire, or passion, but [it is also] a public, [more] circumspect representation of family and lineage" (Oakleaf 494). For 'monstrous' women whose sexuality can estrange them from their families of birth, blood also functions as a metaphor for estrangement and excision. In terms of Gothic representations of the body and blood exemplifies pain and the difference between self-containment and embodied experience (Oakleaf 494). Moreover, they are also imbued with profundity and significance. Bronski writes: "the problem with writing about cutting and blood is that nothing much happens . . . It is not the stuff of pornography but of dreams and unreason; the fairy-tale, fearful myth; the elliptical spaces left unarticulated" (195). And the Gothic body, perhaps?

### ***Writing the Lesbian Body***

Writing bodily experience into poetry can embed me more firmly in my place, time and skin. In the grip of writing passion, the most trivial details become suffused with



meaning, and bodily sensations and their documentation are a metaphoric substitution for the body. In this way the very nature of poetry heightens the body's memories of sexuality, and eroticism. The poem, "Girls Like That" (62) is an example of this metaphoric substitution. The construction of a sexual, physical identity is, of course, not merely concerned with erotic practices. It is also about the creation of a space of transitivity, of heterotopia, where these practices can be enacted. Foucault's construction of heterotopic space explains that within every space—both physically and theoretically, there are counter-spaces. He identifies spaces of "temporary relaxation" ("Of Other Spaces" 24), as well as closed or semi-closed [places] of rest. The lesbian body is also a place of heterotopia, with its openings and closings, its entrances and exits and its scars and bleeding which make it a "feast" of embodiment (26). Gay activist and academic Michael Bronski argues that clearly delineated periods of release such as "the eagerly awaited holiday, the girl's/boy's night out, the occasional 'tying one on'" "allow" pleasure in "overcontrolled" lives. Furthermore, he contends that homosexuality in Western culture has come to symbolise intense, yet forbidden pleasure (*Pleasure* 26)—made all the more galling to dominant culture because it seems to be pleasure untrammelled by the sobering reality of family and children. This belief belies the fact that lesbians and gay men are active members of families. Like many lesbians and gay men, I came to being a lesbian later in my life, after being in a traditional heterosexual marriage into which children were born. In addition, lesbians and gay men are more and more commonly having children of their own.

But according to Mimi Marinucci in her book *Feminism is Queer*, sex lacks boundaries in that there is a seemingly limitless array of potential sex acts. "For at least some people sex lacks boundaries in other ways as well. While the sexual pleasure of men is characterised in terms of the single moment of ejaculation," (49) for women, sexual pleasure is described as more of a "continuous experience" (49). According to Luce Irigaray, for example, a woman's sexual pleasure is not confined to a single body part, but rather to a broader geography, with more diversified, more complex, more subtle enjoyment than is commonly imagined.

Irigaray explains the impact of this geography on women's pleasure:

Thus what they desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time everything. Always something more and something else besides that one sexual organ that you give them . . . . Their desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole. Whereas it really involves a different economy . . . one that . . . undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarisation towards a single pleasure . . . .(Irigaray qtd. in Marinucci 49)

Marinucci uses as an analogy the changing of hair colour to discuss the changing of sexuality in one's life. She asserts that as hair colour is not necessarily fixed, neither is sexual orientation. The only difference between the two is that people tend not to have such a degree of anxiety about shifts in hair colour—is she a 'natural' blonde? Is she grey for a reason? While there is a variation in hair colours, there is also a variation among sexed bodies and sexual orientations that are not fixed. The mere fact that sex is biological does not establish that it is stable over life. Therefore the sex category and the sex acts that one participates in over one's life are changeable and malleable—not through whimsy, but through fact (50).

Those who do not represent what Judith Butler refers to as 'intelligible' genders are regarded at best, as different and, at worst, as deviant. According to Butler, genders are 'intelligible' to the degree that they in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire" (qtd. in Marinucci 77). In other words, genders are 'intelligible' to the extent that they reflect and reinforce the hegemonic binary.

This is one of the reasons why queer theory is so difficult to define. Unlike heteronormativity, it avoids a social and sexual binary of sexuality between male and female and masculine and feminine. Secondly, it "posits social and sexual opposition between forms of sexual expression that reinforce the allegedly complementary opposition between male and female, masculine and feminine, and forms of sexual expression that disrupt this opposition" (Marinucci 33).

The phrase "Gothic sexualities" is self-evident, even redundant, according to Steven Bruhm (93). He suggests that sexuality, as conceptualised in the theory of Sigmund

Freud, then post-Freudian and queer theory, is nothing short of Gothic in its ability to “rupture, fragment and destroy the coherence of the individual subject and the culture in which that subject appears” (93). Furthermore, he argues that a critic like Michelle Massé sees the Gothic’s “preoccupation with masochism as a schooling of women . . . into submission,” or what he terms an “acceptance into compulsory femininity” (93). Moreover, Bruhm refers to Anne Williams, who locates the Gothic within the fall of the patriarchal family and wonders if women might fashion their own poetics within that fall (93). It could be said, rather, that the submissive female body is one that resists subordinate status in the same way that a lesbian body resists heteronormative patriarchal strictures.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**READING RESISTANT WRITING**

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When I read Mark Doty's D/s poetry (Dominance/submission) in *School of the Arts*, the most important element of them was the acknowledgement of the submissive's role as significant. In "The Acknowledgement" he writes:

My pleasure.  
And the towering man  
bent down and took my face  
in his big hand,  
looked directly into my eyes  
and said 'Thank you'  
as if I had honored him  
in some fashion,  
through my submission" (*School* 60-1).

The complete poem follows:

Waves breaking in darkness  
a crowd of shadows  
severe hand on my back  
  
pushing me down  
that's what you want,  
to be held down, to be forced,  
  
of course it sounds ugly,  
but that's the difference  
between the interior  
  
and the limit of saying;  
the mouth won't make

what the spirit knows

so say it roughly  
or not at all: to be made  
to receive, which I did,

gladly. My pleasure.  
And the towering man  
bent down and took my face

in his big hand,  
looked directly into my eyes  
and said, 'Thank you,'

as if I had honored him,  
in some fashion,  
through my submission.

And in truth that was what  
I liked best, the being acknowledged  
—that was the difficult thing. (*Doty School 60-1*)

In this poem about D/s there is a transition from stanza one, which is in the first person (“severe hand on my back”) to stanza two “pushing me down / that’s what you want,” as if he finds some degree of ambiguity in his pleasure at what is happening to his body and his mind. This is about creating a distance between Self and mind and body through the use of “you.”

between the interior necessary?  
and the limit of saying;  
the mouth won't make  
what the spirit knows  
so say it roughly  
or not at all: to be made

to receive, which I did,  
gladly.

This reckoning of a D/s relationship depends on the volition of the sub and the agreement that has been made between the two of them. It is a poem that articulates the importance of literal and embodied speech—the mouth is sexualised in a new way—not that it is filled, necessarily, but rather that it asks for a “punishment” of choice.

The final stanza is important, in relation to my exegetical work. One thing I have not said overtly, but what becomes apparent to me in this poem, is the seductive, compulsive nature of D/s. To be the complete focus of the Dom’s attention; to have that capacity to compel interest from another is intoxicating. To please someone so much, with one’s actions, and to be pleased in return is to understand the nature of a particular form of generosity. Doty articulates this pleasuring with a tinge of ambivalence—as if it is almost too much to bear. But as the sub in the poem, his protagonist has strength and power he almost does not realise, until the Dom

looked directly into my eyes  
and said, ‘Thank you,’

as if I had honored him,  
in some fashion,  
through my submission.

This is what feminists like Sheila Jeffreys miss in their critique of the Dom/sub relationship. Doty uses an old-fashioned and specific word: “honoring” [sic] and this is what makes the relationship not fascist, but compelling, and as Foucault says neither pathological, nor abnormal. (qtd. in Sullivan 155).

Another of Doty’s D/s poems is less accessible, at least from the perspective of the non-practitioner of D/s. It is called “Hood.”

A master leads his slave

through the bar,

the slighter man bound  
to his lodestar

by a leash hooked  
to his collar,

every surface of him swathed,  
rubber, leather,

hard to tell in this light.  
Slits in the hood,

almost nothing of him  
visible. They look,

I think, ridiculous  
—but something

compelling about it, too:  
only an outside:

absurd, elaborate universe  
of buckles and straps,

every bit of the body  
sealed away,

so nothing of the interior  
can be known.

From a distance sex looks,  
inevitably, awful:

what's less graceful  
than transport?

Face focused  
to a single point,

clenched, contorted, or the mouth  
stretched wide—

Therefore this exterior's sealed,  
Blank so that we might

guess at what lies  
beneath: happy abdication,

the will locked down at last,  
unable to choose

or to act. Who knows?  
Impenetrable,

what's paraded before us. (Doty *School* 58-9)

This poem can be read in relation to Foucault's theory of power and its duo of oppression and resistance. We have the onlookers at what is a gay bar, already a heterotopic space surrounded by heteronormativity. In such places of heterotopia, he explains, what occurs neutralises or inverts the "set of relations . . . [is that] they happen to designate, mirror or reflect" (24). Furthermore, he argues that these spaces, although often concretely located in the environment, exist outside of all other spaces (24). They function as a private place in which transformation or change occurs. Foucault also describes "crisis heterotopias." These are sacred or privileged places reserved for individuals who are in a "state of crisis" (24) in relation with those with whom they live.



According to Foucault each heterotopic space has a “precise and determined function within a society,” (25). An example of this is the gay bar in the poem. This can, according to the demands of each culture in which it occurs, “have one function or another” (25). Foucault discusses how heterotopias “always presume a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (26). In general, he continues, a heterotopic space is not “freely accessible like a public space . . . .To get in one must have a certain permission” (26). The heterotopia of the submissive’s body—all zipped and contained—denies it the scars, openings and closing of the body; the mouth and anus are locked away from the possibility of being used. There are no recognisable scars or cuts and where the possibility here of sexual activity is both “sheltered and absolutely hidden” (27), although for Doty there is a murmur of sex, somewhat disquietingly felt. The sub would seem to be in a subordinate position, and in order for him to recuperate his physical (yet submissive) assertion—however contradictory those terms appear—requires bravery through the stoic acceptance of the physical pain he withstands. The pain he endures serves to make him stronger and this is where the power of D/s lies. Consensual pain or sensation. Permission given to the Dom by the sub. A play of shifting barriers and power exchanges. And a queer exploration of roles of gender, performativity and physical activity.

“Mother and Daughter” is a poem by Anne Sexton written for her daughter, Linda. This is the first stanza:

Linda, you are leaving  
your old body now,  
It lies flat, an old butterfly,  
all arm, all leg, all wing,  
loose as an old dress.  
I reach out toward it but  
my fingers turn to cankers  
and I am motherwarm and used,  
just as your childhood is used  
Question you about this  
and you hold up pearls.

Question you about this  
and you pass by armies.  
Question you about this –  
you with your big clock going  
its hands wider than jackstraws—  
and you'll sew up a continent. (Sexton "Mother and Daughter" 305-6)

Sexton's poem is the narrative of a growing daughter and her mother. The daughter has cast off her childhood apparel and her childhood is dead and over. From the maternal perspective the daughter is now fecund and fertile. Long-legged and lanky. A new creation unfurling from the old. But for Sexton, as the mother and older woman, there is nothing but "cankers" and being "used / just as your childhood is used" (305). And Sexton, through the rest of this poem hears, as she enters her forties, the metaphor of "time's winged chariot" in her ear, and the passing of time.

How, in this poem, are women to overcome the objectified state in which they have been fixed by the male gaze? This objectified status spreads out to the females (and males) around them—their friends, family, children. They are fixed in place by the scopophilic gaze, they age under the unblinking eye of literature and of the media, the men [or women] who no longer find them desirable, and as they age and take notice of their children blossoming and figuratively taking over the world, this poem is notionally about power—the power of the body and the power of youth versus older age. "How are women to elaborate a truth which is not removed from the body, reclaiming the body for themselves. How are women to develop and transmit a critique which respects and bears the trace of the intensive, libidinal force that sustains it?" (Braidotti qtd. in Weedon 8). At issue here is the embodied nature of subjectivity, and knowledge. The mother figure in this poem passes on the mantle of authority to her daughter, while acknowledging that she (the daughter)

will see my death  
drooling at these gray lips  
while you, my burglar, will eat

fruit and pass the time of day. (Sexton *The Collected Poems* 307)

This poem contains metaphors of anger that mothers feel, in relation to the ties they have with their children. This anger has been demonstrated earlier in the thesis by Adrienne Rich's ambivalence towards her young children. But there is ambivalence to older children as well. As women age and their daughters, particularly, come into their own, there is a resentment and anger at this transformation. For example, the daughter in Sexton's poem is a "burglar" who will "eat fruit and pass the time of day" as her mother withers and dies.

Here are some of the problems, according to Luce Irigaray, faced by women-who-are-mothers in "attempting to create a different social and symbolic order" (Whitford 78). She argues, firstly, that there is an "interminable rivalry" between mothers and daughters. This is because there is no room "for more than one at a time in the place of the mother" (78). There is only room for taking a substitution of the mother, which implies hate for the mother figure. Secondly, there is "permanent destruction in the absence of a female symbolic" (Whitford 78). Thirdly, the cruelty that takes place when relations are not mediated by anything, such as rites or exchanges, so women become vehicles of their own "oppression and self-destruction" (Whitford 79). Fourthly, various forms of pathology, and finally, murder, the infanticide to which I referred to earlier with the mother and her two dead babies, and a symbolic murder, of the mind, emotions and intelligence.

Luce Irigaray also states:

In a sense we have to say goodbye to maternal omnipotence [the last refuge] and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. In a word, liberate ourselves along with our mothers. This is an indispensable precondition for our emancipation from our fathers. In our societies, the mother/daughter, daughter/mother relationship constitutes a highly explosive nucleus. Thinking it, and changing it, is equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order. (Irigaray 47-50)

“Meditations For a Savage Child” is a poem written by Adrienne Rich. The prose passages are from J-M Itard’s account of *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*, as translated by G. and M. Humphrey.

II

*When considered from a more general and philosophic point of view, these scars bear witness . . . against the feebleness and insufficiency of man when left entirely to himself, and in favour of the resources of nature which . . . work openly to repair and conserve that which she tends secretly to impair and destroy.*

I keep thinking about the lesson of the human ear  
which stands for music, which stands for balance—  
or the cat’s ear which I can study better  
the whorls and ridges exposed  
It seems a hint dropped about the inside of the skull  
which I cannot see  
lobe, zone, that part of the brain  
which is pure survival

The most primitive part  
I go back into at night  
pushing the leathern curtains  
with naked fingers  
then  
with naked body

There where every wound is registered  
as scar tissue

A cave of scars!  
ancient, archaic wallpaper  
built up, layer on layer  
from the earliest, dream-white

to yesterday's, a red-black scrawl  
to a red mouth slowly closing

Go back so far there is another language  
go back far enough the language  
is no longer personal

these scars bear witness  
but whether to repair  
or to destruction  
I no longer know.

This poem invokes the 'monstrous' female body and the cave of the 'grotesque' vagina, with its episiotomies and tears it is a place of scars, repeated scars. But the scars stand up to repeated births and cuttings, if necessary. As comedienne, Betty White says: "Why do some people say 'Grow some balls?' Balls are weak and sensitive. If you really want to get tough, grow a vagina! Those things take a pounding." This humorous comment demonstrates the strength that women have to endure to do even the most 'natural' of actions.

This poem constructs an ancient world where the marked body is the primary site of sensation and identity. A body that is a feast of scar tissue that is eroticised and feared in equal measure as Alphonzo Lingus suggests. The wolf boy is written as primeval, as the female body is primeval:

Go back so far there is another language  
go back far enough the language  
is no longer personal.

Elizabeth Grosz poses a number of interesting questions about the sex of the writer and what this means if she is female. She states that the assumption is for 'feminist' writers, and I would put Rich in this category, texts are necessarily feminist. Such writers adopt what she calls a "women and... approach" to writing (*Space* 12). There, is an assumption she says, that knowing the sex of the writer . . . enables us

to say that she is a feminist,” A text’s feminine status depends on who writes it, rather than what it is about. I think this is particularly relevant to a reading of this poem, as its subject matter is a ‘monstrous boy’, the so-called wolf boy of Aveyron. But the references are female. For example, there is similarity between the wolf boy and the hyena-animal of Bertha Mason-Rochester. Both are constrained by silence. Both are seen as animalistic: hyena and wolf. And even though, on the one hand, monstrosity can be seen as genderless in this poem, the metaphors Rich uses are feminine—a voiceless creature with a “red mouth slowly closing.” “A cave of scars.” This is an example of *vagina dentata*, the toothed mouth of the female’s reproductive organs. Scars from previous activity, become, perhaps-sensual sites, and the visibility of the marked body has an added Butlerian-performative quality, with its “mark[s] of disclosure” (Halberstam 155).

Terry Eagleton, in his discussion about poetry and morality, suggests that if “poetry is about pleasure; morality would seem to be its opposite” (*How to Write a Poem* 28). On the contrary, “morality in its traditional sense is the study of how to live more enjoyably” (28). The word “moral” “refers to a qualitative or evaluative view of human conduct and experience” (28). The language of morality extends, not from such words as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ Rather, it runs the gamut from such words as ‘rash’ and ‘exquisite’, to ‘placid’ and ‘tender’, and so on. The poems have chosen to critique *are* exquisite and have, at their core, even with their subject matter, a particular kind of tenderness. It is possible to write about the kinds of subjects that these three poets explore, and to “write the book [or poem] like the axe for the frozen sea inside us” (Kafka 27). This metaphor emphasises that poetry is the universal language: the encapsulation of ideas, emotions and theories is contained in each and every one.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In this exegesis I have suggested that the female body, as represented through the mode of the postmodern Gothic, is less about a violence of representation than it is an articulation of transgression's elusive and mysterious connection with normativity (Halberstam 188). Female bodies are both normative and prosaic, in their very existence, but are transgressive in the actions they choose to undertake to remove themselves from a normative existence. Moreover, the fabricated body is a threat to the pristine, zoned, male body because it hints at one that is either zoneless, or differently zoned. This is highlighted by Luce Irigaray and her discussion of the sexed female body and its ability to experience pleasure everywhere. Transgressive embodiment and sexuality in this reading become conflated with normative-eroticism, which is both feared and desired. The ambiguity of response to women is one of patriarchy's deepest weaknesses. Fear and Desire are two sides of the same spinning coin.

In Chapter One I discussed how bodies speak because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativised; and simultaneously, through them, social codes, laws, norms and ideals become incarnated" (Grosz *Space* 35). This understanding of 'the body' as discursively constructed and culturally inscribed makes possible an exploration of the metaphoric body, or rather, the way that metaphor can be used to expose (the body's) liminal spaces, where discourse is constructed, deconstructed and experienced. Skin itself becomes a metaphor for all that cannot be spoken through a literal body.

In Chapter Two I explored the idea that writing the silenced body and the resistant/volitional body required non-realist strategies such as those of the Gothic mode, that use estrangement and engagement to explore and challenge cultural, social, psychological and personal issues (Wisker 168). This chapter established the connection between the Gothic mode and the hidden or secret truths that are written on the female body. Another aspect of Gothic, as Judith Halberstam argues, is that such fabrication is an integral part of the Gothic's preoccupation with costume and disguise and its connection to the appropriation and casting off of identity (61).

Gothic articulates a complex fascination with and horror at, the ways that families can provide—even encourage—the circumstances in which children come to equate pain with love. The Gothic obsession with secrets is powerfully at work in the postmodern family with its ability to pursue “action” away from the public gaze.

The imbrication of sex, abuse, sadomasochism and gender is elucidated by Mark Edmondson, who suggests that the action of the superego has a Gothic dimension. In discussing Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, Edmondson goes so far as to suggest that these are also the essential elements of the sadomasochistic, or D/s dungeon, which he describes as Gothic “uncontested by an effective alternative drive (131). In the economy of sadomasochistic sex, pleasure, guilt, suffering and punishment comprise a mutually beneficial relationship. This beneficial relationship is represented in my poems as the pleasure/autonomy of D/s and corporeal marking.

In Chapter Three, the silenced abject/object body was considered within the context of the historical and cultural “possibilities” available to normatively gendered bodies (Butler 404). Judith Butler asserts that this experience of gender identity is not determined by “nature, language or the symbolic” (415), nor is it passively inscribed on the body. This body is, nevertheless, in the way that it is controlled both medically and psychologically as an abject object—one that is managed by dominant patriarchy as represented by medicalised practices. The emergence of women’s anger is the product of a lack of autonomy and volition. Acting out is not permitted, and this lack of the space for autonomy and anger can give rise to full-blown rage, with catastrophic results.

The ‘pleasure and pain’ of D/s exhibits, in Chapter Four, how the sub’s body is altered and restrained by the Dom, with just a few implements, often just found around the house. This is radically different from heteronormative practice, in which volition is substantively taken away from the female protagonist, and in which the female protagonist cedes her control as part of a pleasurable experience. However troubling the intersections of love, or violence, seeming-abuse [from the outside looking in] and sex can appear in D/s, it can be possible to work them into an original framework that alone does not make the acts themselves pathological. Indeed they can be read as resistant.



Body modification is neither “wholly reactionary nor wholly liberatory” Halberstam 136). And the relationship between meaning and intent or “representation and reality” can be unclear and depend on context (145). The confusion that emerges from the “slippage between representations and their material effects (Halberstam 145) evokes great cultural anxiety. Therefore, in their Gothic sensibility, female practitioners of body modification are, *with their bodies*, able to foreground and accentuate the issues that culture most fears. But in contemporary Gothic, some core of the secret remains hidden—there is a lingering mystery of the unsaid and the unresolved; echoes of sense and resolution, but not actual sense. Body modification practices literalise this position because the surface of the body is inscribed with its “secrets” for all to see, but the meanings/intentions are often undecipherable. And while it would appear that there is a price to be exacted for placing the “whole burden of self-formation” onto the body (Smethurst n. pag.) it is a price these women seem willing to pay. I also wrote about lesbian subjectivity in this chapter and how women can find a new way of being—together.

In Chapter Five I selected a number of resistant poets/poems for close reading. I chose Mark Doty because he wrote a series of D/s poems which gave me inspiration and underpinning for my own poems. His boldness in his own writing encouraged me to be bold. And his D/s poems are different from all his other poems, which are lyrical and deal with love, animals, nature, loss. He searches in his D/s poems for affirmation in the midst of suffering that is somehow not suffering, while at the same time refusing the cheap solace of any affirmation that would make the actions of the Doms and subs seem like “facile transcendence” (Edmundson 82).

I chose Anne Sexton because the anger and pain expressed in her poem is mercilessly, unblinkingly expressed. In her forward to Sexton’s *Complete Poems*, Maxine Kumin explains that women poets, in particular, owe Sexton a debt, because she broke new ground, shattered taboos of embodiment, experience and sexuality, all-the-while enduring a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyant nature of her subject matter: abortion, menstruation, masturbation, aging, incest, adultery—many of my own poetic interests (Kumin xxxiv). The poem I chose to interpret was a mother’s narrative to her daughter and while there is such anger directed at the daughter, there is also a resigned tenderness. It also encapsulates

Luce Irigaray's notions about the ambivalent relationship between mothers and daughters.

Adrienne Rich has informed much of my work, both creative and theoretical. She writes about the subject of womanhood—its difficulties and its painful journeying, as both an embodied subject [malleable and medicalised; opened and scarred] and as a theorised being. My poem "Beautiful Girl" (19) is, in part, inspired by Rich. Also important is her writing as a female writer, of male subjects. Elizabeth Grosz had much to say about the reader/writer position as a feminist woman [owing to the fact that not all women are feminists and that some men are]. In the poem I chose to write about she is writing about a monstrous wolf-boy, and the similarities between him and Bertha Mason-Rochester are unmistakable.

The thematic and metaphoric associations of abused bodies, body modification, maternal bodies, lesbian embodiment and volitional embodiment with Gothic issues of disruption and loss also represent the omnipresent concern of postmodern culture to locate, identify and contain difference. The female body is an embodiment of Otherness and difference and the secrets she bears threaten to expose the frailty of heteronormative constructions of family, identity and gender, as Butler has argued. But the hands that mark her body are not only "hands of fury, but hands of desire" (Potter n. pag.).

So, when I tell you that a tattoo is ink stored in scar tissue, I am not only giving you a literal explanation of the tattooing process. I am also finding a way of defining that space in between the wound and the female body it opens—that liminal area where meaning and intention, reading and writing, signifier and signified collide. This world is inhabited by a body made of senses, a body wrapped in skin that offers a point of meeting—not just a meeting between lovers, but the meeting of skin with skin, and the marks we leave on each other; marks we choose and marks which arrive randomly, marks we don't know we want, but which we long for. However, such a romanticised view is not tenable. It is a lyrical way of writing, but not a sensible one. There is literally a space between the skin's epidermis and dermis. In the tattooing process there are two peelings of the skin. And the final remainder is the deepening of colour underneath the skin and the perfect smoothness of tincture. In the Gothic

trope of boundary blurring and doubling those hands of desire are both hers, and our own. In the elliptical, silent spaces where we are confronted by the absolute corporeality of our bodies and where flesh has to be dealt with, we recognise that the female body is one of postmodernity's most compelling sites.

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