

Womæn under Erasure: Anorexic Bodies in Postmodern Context

HELEN MALSON*

Department of Psychology, University of East London, Romford Road, London, E15 4LZ, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how ‘anorexia nervosa’ can be understood not so much as individual psychopathology than as a plural collectivity of embodied subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices, embedded in and constituted by the contemporary discourses and discursive practices of late twentieth-century ‘postmodern’ culture and in the gender power-relations that cut across this socio-historically specific discursive context. Specifically, the paper uses extracts from a series of interviews conducted with 23 women diagnosed and self-diagnosed as ‘anorexic’. It deploys a feminist post-structuralist form of discourse analysis to analyse the interview transcripts so as to elucidate a recurrent discursive construction of women’s ‘anorexic’ bodies as disappearing bodies that signify a (feminine) ‘anorexic’ identity constructed as an identity-put-under-erasure. This construction of ‘anorexic’ embodied subjectivity is located within a gendered ‘postmodern’ cultural context in which, it has been argued, the body *qua* body has been displaced by the body-as-image and in which identity has been deconstructed. The paper thus seeks to move beyond a concept of ‘anorexia nervosa’ as individual pathology, towards a re-conceptualization of ‘anorexia’ as discursively constituted within the complex contexts of late capitalist ‘postmodern’ culture. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: anorexia nervosa; gender; subjectivity; embodiment; feminism, post-structuralism; postmodernism; discourse

INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing the anorexic body

There are undoubtedly a variety of ways in which ‘anorexia nervosa’, as well as other categories of ‘disordered’ eating, can be understood to be promoted by and constituted within the socio-economic, cultural and political context(s) of our contemporary Western Culture. Increasingly, socio-culturally orientated researchers and theorists working within this field have pointed to the potentially damaging effects of our societal idealization of the thin female body as *the* standard of feminine

* Correspondence to: Helen Malson, Department of Psychology, University of East London, Romford Road, London, E15 4LZ, UK.

beauty (e.g. Garner and Garfinkel (1980) and Garner *et al.*, 1980, 1983). They have located 'anorexia' within a cultural context saturated by images of hyper-thin fashion models and by a plethora of (diverse) instructions for achieving such a physique (see e.g. Shaw, 1995; Woolf, 1990; Polivy and Herman, 1985). 'Anorexia' is often seen here, then, as the pathologized extreme of a continuum of food restriction and body-image dissatisfaction found amongst girls and women generally. However, important as these aspects of contemporary Western culture clearly are in understanding 'anorexia nervosa', they are not, on their own, sufficient. Conceptualizing 'anorexia' in terms of an *over*-internalization of cultural prescriptions about female beauty and the 'necessity' of dieting only *begins* to understand how our socio-economic, cultural and political contexts are implicated in the production of 'anorexic' subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices. It does not, in itself, constitute an adequate end-point in understanding 'anorexia nervosa' as a complex and heterogeneous culturally-produced category of distress (see also Malson and Ussher, 1996a; Malson, 1998). This is particularly so when, as Susie Orbach (1993, p. xxiii) has argued, women are so frequently considered to be 'naturally' vain and diet-orientated; a commonplace misogyny which prematurely forecloses further questions about *why* so many girls and women are dissatisfied with their bodies, wish to be smaller and habitually restrict their food intake (Bordo, 1992).

As feminist theorists have argued, any adequate understanding of cultural prescriptions about 'ideal' female bodies must attend to the ways in which such prescriptions function as a patriarchal regulation of women, as an expression of and a 're-production' (see Henriques *et al.*, 1984) of unequal gender power relations (Ferguson, 1983; Ussher, 1991; Woolf, 1990). And, as the various feminist perspectives on eating disorders (e.g. Fallon *et al.*, 1994) have illustrated, there are also many other ways in which patriarchal gender ideologies and gender power relations can be seen to be implicated in women's distressed relationships to their bodies and to food. Women's 'anorexic' (over-)control of their/our bodies has, for example, been interpreted as a response to our lack of control over other aspects of our lives (Lawrence, 1984), whilst the diminutive proportions of the 'anorexic' body have been interpreted as an embodiment of women's subordinated and 'child-like' social status (Chernin, 1983) and as a rejection of or ambivalence towards traditional femininity (Orbach, 1993), as well as an (over-)conformity to contemporary cultural dictates about 'ideal' (heterosexual) femininity (Boskind-Lodahl, 1976).

The various feminist analyses of eating disorders (e.g. Boskind-Lodahl, 1976; Chernin, 1983; Lawrence, 1984; Orbach, 1993; Fallon *et al.*, 1994) have, then, already indicated that an adequate understanding of this category of personal distress must go beyond any overly simplistic conceptualization of 'eating disorders' as *individual* pathology or as simple over-adherence to cultural prescriptions about dieting and ideal body weight and shape. For such traditional individualizing and pathologizing or narrowly-focused approaches fail to engage with the many complex and gender-specific ways in which our contemporary socio-economic, cultural and political contexts are deeply implicated in this field of distress.

A thorough theorization of contemporary constructions and regulations of gender and gender inequalities must then be central to any adequate understanding of 'anorexic' subjectivities, experiences and practices. At the same time, however, it is essential that we also look beyond the usual remit of feminist analyses to explore the multiple and complex ways in which the values and dynamics of contemporary

Western culture are implicated in the distress that increasing numbers of people (girls and women in particular) experience in relation to their bodies and to eating. Thus, in addition to what Bordo (1992) has termed 'the gender-power axis', 'anorexia' can also, for example, be understood to be located within and produced by a discourse of Cartesian dualism that pervades Western culture (see also Malson and Ussher, 1996a); a discourse that in one form or another has long dominated Western 'technologies of the self' (see Martin *et al.*, 1988). It is a discourse in which human subjectivity is divided into mind and body and in which 'self' is equated with mind, will or spirit. Within this long-standing tradition it is the mind that is privileged over the body which, whilst inextricably 'attached' to the mind, is constituted as separate from the mind/self and as confining, distracting and threatening to self-control (e.g. Bordo, 1990, 1992). This particular construction of 'personhood' thus also produces the need to control the body in order to retain the integrity of the mind/self. It is a discourse which clearly forms a part of the West's Christian heritage (see Foucault, 1988), but which also suffuses contemporary secular culture in a variety of socio-historically specific ways (Malson and Ussher, 1996a). It is manifested in, for example, commonplace divisions between mental and physical illness (Turner, 1987); in cultural representations of the dangerous, alien and eruptive bodies that populate the current genre of horror films; in cultural fantasies of achieving personal salvation through absolute control over the body, as expressed in films such as *Rocky*, *Flash-dance* and *Vision Quest* (Bordo, 1990), and in advertisements for such consumer products as anti-ageing creams, body reshaping creams and diet products, and consumer services offered by cosmetic surgeons and 'health clubs' (see Bordo, 1990, 1992). Within this discursive context, 'anorexia nervosa' can be understood not so much as individual pathology than as a collectivity of subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices constituted within a socio-historically specific discursive context within which we are all, to some extent, located.

There are undoubtedly numerous other discursive contexts within which 'anorexia' can also be located. As a complex, heterogeneous and shifting collectivity, 'anorexia' is, as argued elsewhere (Malson and Ussher, 1996a, Malson, 1998), expressive of a *multiplicity* of societal concerns and dilemmas that are particular to the socio-economic, cultural and political dynamics of contemporary Western culture (see also Brumberg, 1988; Turner, 1992; Bordo, 1992). As Appels (1986, p. 481) has argued:

One could say ... that the cultural dynamics of post-industrial society seem to foster many of the conflicts which underlie the genesis of anorexia nervosa ... The new demands that originate in the ethos of this culture pose the most problems for those who are least able to engage in direct, spontaneous and informal relations because of conflicts regarding identity, self-esteem and autonomy. Such a psychological profile characterizes anorexia nervosa ...

'Anorexia' can be seen as a multiply constituted (discursive and simultaneously corporeal) expression of a wide range of socio-cultural values, concerns and dilemmas that are constituted in and by the discourses and discursive practices of late twentieth century post-industrial society. Thus, in addition to those analyses outlined above, 'anorexia' has also been interpreted as expressive of the cultural dilemma created by the requirement that we inhabit the antithetical identities of self-controlled, disciplined worker and of self-indulgent consumer (Bordo, 1990; see also Turner, 1982). Similarly, 'it' can be seen as expressing cultural concerns about the individualistic competitiveness of late capitalism and about the values implicit in our cultural

preoccupations with personal display (Brumberg, 1988). 'Anorexia' seems to express both an anti-consumption ethic, an antipathy towards the late capitalist culture of mass-consumption, whilst at the same time epitomizing a particular experience of subjectivity that is precisely constituted within that very (socio-economic, political and cultural) dynamic; a subjectivity in which embodied experience is constituted in terms of anxieties about body *image*; in which the body (of the consumer subject) is discursively constituted as a 'sign-commodity' which should conform to current 'fashions' and which should express our own individual 'personalities' and lifestyles (see also Featherstone, 1982). That is, 'anorexic' subjectivity can be understood to be constituted within and by the discursive context of consumer culture which, rather than promoting any experience of sensate embodiment, represents our bodies to us as image. Much like cars and other 'status objects', the body-as-sign-commodity functions as surface image that (should) signify our (always fashionable) individuality. The body of the consumer subject becomes an ever-imperfect but always 'perfectible' spectacle, a project that must always be worked upon; that is always in the process of becoming what it 'should' be (see Featherstone, 1982; Hall, 1996a).

Within consumer culture, advertisements, the popular press, television and motion pictures provide a proliferation of stylised images of the body. In addition, the popular media constantly emphasise the cosmetic benefits of body maintenance. The reward for ascetic body work ceases to be spiritual salvation or even improved health, but becomes an enhanced appearance and a more marketable self . . . Within consumer culture, the inner and outer body become conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body (Featherstone, 1982, pp. 170–171).

Within this socio-economic, cultural and political context, 'anorexic' subjectivities, experiences and body management practices appear not so much as individual pathology as aberration(s) from the norm, but as precisely constituted in and by this normative discursive context of late twentieth-century consumer culture; expressing an anti-consumption ethic whilst simultaneously producing (or destroying) a body which in being hyper-thin is also 'hyper-cool' (Turner, 1992, p. 221).

Anorexia nervosa as postmodern condition

'Anorexia nervosa' emerged as a diagnostic category in the late nineteenth century (Gull, 1874) and has become increasingly prevalent since the 1960s. 'It' has undoubtedly been expressive of many of the cultural concerns of modern Western culture, including the complex gender-political issues that have been read onto the then newly fashionable Twiggy-like models and that have informed the 'Second Wave' (modern, liberal) feminist movements which also emerged during that decade. In short, once contextualized, 'anorexia' can be understood not as a trans-historical, quasi-natural clinical entity but as a socio-historically specific category of distress, constituted within and by the multiple discursive contexts of modern Western culture.

In the last decades of the twentieth century,¹ however, modernity, it has been said (e.g. Lyotard, 1992; Jameson, 1991), is being displaced by postmodernity; a term that

¹ See, however, that whilst Lyotard (1984), for example, has talked of a postmodern society and a postmodern age 'premised on the move to a post industrial order', thus suggesting an 'epochal shift' (Featherstone, 1991, pp. 3–4), he and others have also problematized 'historical periodizing' as a modernist appropriation of (progressivist) 'history', heroicizing, as it does, the (man of the) present (Foucault, 1986,

has proved notoriously difficult to define (Rose, 1991) but which might be loosely characterized as a cultural condition in which modernist meta-narratives (of, for example, truth, progress and identity) are deconstructed; in which modernity is not replaced but is nevertheless questioned, problematized and put *under erasure* (see e.g. Featherstone, 1991; Rose, 1991; Sarup, 1993). That is, certain 'key concepts' of modernity, including the concept of 'the self-sustaining subject at the centre of post-Cartesian Western metaphysics' are re-appraised as:

... no longer serviceable—'good to think with'—in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different, concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them—albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated (cf. Hall, 1985). The line which cancels them, paradoxically, permits them to go on being read (Hall 1996b, p. 1).

There is, of course, a wide range of contemporary cultural phenomena, styles, objects, philosophies and experiences, including 'consumerism', that have been described as 'post-modern' (Featherstone, 1991), as 'symptomatic of a major transition in our cultural and political life, as well as in critical theoretical work in recent decades' (Hall, 1996c, p. 293). To discuss this complex, multi-faceted and elusive concept in any thorough manner is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. What I hope to illustrate, however, is that whilst 'anorexic' subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices are undoubtedly constituted by and expressive of many 'modern' cultural values, concerns and dilemmas, 'they' can also be theorized as a peculiarly intense and over-determined 'crystallization'² of what might be termed a postmodern condition or sensibility. 'They' can, for example, as indicated above, be understood as a distinctly conflictual and paradoxical engagement with the dynamics of the consumer culture of the post-industrial order of 'postmodernity' (see Featherstone, 1991). Indeed, as Elspeth Probyn (1987, p. 203) has pointed out, 'Anorexia has recently hit the headlines as the postmodern illness'.

More specifically, I would argue that, as a complex and heterogeneous category of discursively constituted subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices, 'anorexia' can be theorized as, in part, an articulation of the postmodernist concerns with the theme of the body and with 'undermin[ing] or displac[ing] modernist epistemology and the human subject on which it depends' (Jagger, 1996, p. 192); with 'the critical operation of questioning, doubting or deconstructing all truths' (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 48, cited in Jagger, 1992) and thereby deconstructing all identities (Spivak, 1976; see also Hall, 1996a, 1996b), including the identity of 'womæn'³ (Jagger, 1992; Butler, 1993; Riley, 1988; Poovey, 1988). Such concerns are apparent, I would argue, not only in the academic critical theoretical work of such writers as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard and others but also in a diversity of contemporary cultural phenomena; in art, fiction, film and architecture, for example (see Featherstone, 1991). They are apparent, too, in contemporary

cited in Featherstone, 1991). More recently, therefore, Lyotard and others have indicated that the postmodern should be regarded as part of the modern rather than being seen as its sequel (Featherstone, 1991).

² Bordo (1992) describes 'anorexia nervosa' as a 'crystallization of culture'.

³ I have used the term 'womæn' to indicate that, as Riley (1988) has argued, deconstructing the category of 'woman' involves more than pluralizing the term, more than an acknowledgement of the diversity of (actual) women, because the 'female' body can no longer be viewed as guaranteeing a 'feminine' identity.

cultural politics, for example, in the recent shifts in feminisms (e.g. Weedon, 1987; Poovey, 1988; Jardine, 1985; Riley, 1988) and Black cultural politics (Hall, 1996a), marking the end of 'woman' as an essential, quasi-natural, homogeneous identity which could be guaranteed by the body (e.g. Jardine, 1985; Riley, 1988; Marshall and Wetherell, 1989) and 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (Hall, 1996a, p. 443). As Hall (1996a, pp. 443, 444) has argued in relation to the politics of ethnicity:

What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature ... The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appears historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity.

Like the concept of 'the essential black subject', the concept of 'the essential female subject' has similarly been subject to a searching and radical critique such that 'woman' too is put under erasure. 'She' is no longer guaranteed by 'nature', by the (female) body. From a 'postmodern' or critical perspective 'femininity' can no longer be considered to be a consistent or unitary identity, originating from the female body or from the individual woman. Postmodern and post-structuralist feminists (e.g. Weedon, 1987; Poovey, 1988; Jardine, 1985; Riley, 1988; Walkerdine, 1986) and others have argued against the concept of 'woman' as a trans-historical and homogeneous category of identity and experience; arguing that any monolithic concept of woman flattens out the diversity of lived experiences contained within that category (Jones 1985; Sayers, 1986) and thereby also marginalizes those issues and experiences that emerge in the articulation of gender with other (discursively constructed) categories, such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, dis/ability and socio-economic status (see Fine, 1994). What has emerged, in recent feminist debates then, is a re-theorization of 'womæn' as a fragmented, multiple and always socio-historically specific fiction (see Walkerdine, 1986, 1990; Wetherell, 1986). 'Womæn' is re-'written' as an historically contingent and 'volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "woman" is not to be relied on: "woman" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic' (Riley, 1988, pp. 1–2). That is, as an identity 'woman', or even 'women', is put under erasure.

These recent shifts in the cultural politics of gender and ethnicity can then be seen as manifestations of a multifaceted postmodern project which involves an undermining and destabilization of any (modern) notion of a self-contained, unitary identity. They illustrate a cultural shift in which everyday *lived* subjectivities are constituted as decentred, fragmented, multiple fictions which cannot be guaranteed by the body, geographical location or anything else. For, as Foucault (1977a, p. 153) has argued, '[n]othing in man (sic)—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men' because the body, far from being able to guarantee any transcendental identity, is itself always-already discursively constituted and regulated in the specificities of its socio-historically specific discursive contexts.

'Anorexic' subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices can, as discussed above, be understood to be located within and constituted by a variety of contemporary discursive contexts. 'They' are expressive of a multiplicity of socio-historically specific and gender-specific cultural values and dilemmas. In this paper, however, I would like to focus on a particular discursive construction of the 'anorexic' body as a disappearing body or, more precisely, as a body that appears to disappear (see also Malson and Ussher, 1997) and that signifies a (feminine) identity put under erasure. The paper explores, therefore, a construction of 'anorexia' as a discursive and corporeal articulation of a specifically postmodern construction of embodied 'identity' as a precarious and ultimately undecidable fiction; a construction or 'writing' (Derrida, 1979) of 'the body' and 'identity' which is already feminized and which is also manifested in a variety of contemporary cultural experiences, styles and objects. It is, I would argue, a construction of embodied subjectivity which is manifested in more positive form in the recent shifts in the cultural politics of gender and ethnicity outlined above.⁴ Thus, in explicating a particular discursive construction of women's 'anorexic' bodies as disappearing bodies signifying a (feminine) 'anorexic' identity that is under erasure, this paper aims to provide an empirically grounded re-theorization of 'anorexia', not as *individual* pathology but as a collectivity of subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices located in and constituted by a socio-historically specific 'postmodern' cultural context.

METHOD

The paper uses extracts from a series of semi-structured interviews⁵ conducted with 23 women, 21 of whom had been diagnosed as 'anorexic' and two of whom were self-diagnosed. The women were recruited to the study through a variety of sources, through self-help groups, NHS and private health services for 'eating disorder', through advertisements in the local and national press and in the *Open Mind* newsletter, and through posters in eating disorder clinics and university common rooms. The interviews, in which the women were asked to discuss their ideas about and experiences of 'anorexia', gender identity and the body, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim⁶ in their entirety. The resulting transcripts were then analysed using a feminist post-structuralist form of discourse analysis⁷ in order to explicate the discourses and discursive resources deployed in constructions of 'anorexia', 'femininity' and embodied subjectivity.

⁴ Positive forms of engagement with this shift are evidenced in, for example, films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Hall, 1996a), in contestations over what it means to be 'British' (Hall, 1996a), in the celebrations of difference/difference within postmodern feminisms and in transgenderism.

⁵ See Malson (1995) for details of the interview schedule. In the interview extracts that follow, all names and identifying details have been changed.

⁶ The interviews were transcribed using the following convention: *italics* indicates where words have been stressed; = indicates an absence of any discernible gap between two utterances; (.) indicates a pause; ... indicates that part of the transcript has been omitted; and slashes are used to indicate the beginnings and ends of interjections, e.g./HM: right/.

⁷ See Malson (1995, 1998) for a fuller discussion of this methodology. See also Potter and Wetherell (1987), Burman and Parker (1993), Wetherell (1996), Hollway (1989) and Gavey (1989), amongst many others, for further discussion of discourse analysis and feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis.

Like other discourse analytic interview-based studies, this study takes discourse to be the object of analysis because, from a discourse analytic perspective, discourse is viewed as constitutive rather than as reflective of 'reality', of objects, events, subjectivities and experiences (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Burman and Parker, 1993). Thus, rather than viewing the interviews as providing access to some underlying putative 'reality', to 'facts' about 'anorexia nervosa' or about the individual participants, it is the interview transcripts themselves that are the object of analysis. The purpose of the analysis was, then, to explore the various and often contradictory ways in which 'anorexia' and the 'anorexic' body may be discursively constituted and the ways in which these various discursive constructions are articulated in relation to contemporary constructions of gender and embodied subjectivity.

The interviews on which the following analysis is based covered a wide range of issues and evidenced a variety of different discursive constructions of 'anorexic' and 'feminine' subjectivities, experiences and practices (see Malson, 1998). However, this paper focuses on just one aspect of the interviews, that is, on a particular discursive construction of the 'anorexic' body as a body that appears to disappear and which signifies a (feminine) identity that is under erasure. The analysis is not, therefore, presented as offering any complete or final analysis of 'anorexia'. Neither is it presented as the only or 'best' way in which to read the interview extracts that follow. Indeed, many of these extracts have been differently analysed elsewhere in relation to themes of self-destruction, 'feminized' death and the Foucauldian concept of panopticism (Malson and Ussher, 1997) and in relation to constructions of 'anorexia' as simultaneously self-destructive and self-producing (Malson 1998).

ANALYSIS

Anorexic bodies as disappearing bodies

As noted above, the very thin or 'anorexic' body may be discursively constituted in a multiplicity of often contradictory ways. It may, for example, be construed as a hyper-feminine body, signifying a delicate, child-like or petite femininity (Malson, 1998) and, simultaneously it may be construed as a non-feminine subjectivity, a 'boyish' subjectivity (Bordo, 1990) and a resistance to (a particular 'patriarchal' construction of) femininity (Malson and Ussher, 1996b). Additionally, it may be construed as a controlled body, signifying a pure, independent and powerful subjectivity (Malson and Ussher, 1996a), as a transcendence of (feminized) bodily excess and, contrarily, it may signify a loss of control, an excessive and uncontrolled *over*-control of the body and its desires (Malson, 1997). It may be constituted as a body that becomes increasingly visible to, for example, medical scrutiny (Malson and Ussher, 1997). Or, as in the following extracts, the 'anorexic' body may be discursively constituted as a body that appears to disappear.

Mandy: Obviously the thinness does come into it ... And the actual, um, the physical appearance is much more to do with um *not* wanting to be seen in in some ways, um. There's sort of a feeling there of wanting to sort of just fade into the background literally.

- Nicki:* It's just a way of like trying to disappear /HM: mm/ and trying to be in control and feel pure. /HM: right/ It's just the perfection /HM: mm/ thing ... I mean I just wanted to die anyway /HM: mm so not eating, becoming smaller is very relevant to that.
- Penny:* It's kind of (.) /HM: I don't/anger and the fear were kind of just (.) of being Penny I think, of being me ... I think it was a fear of being me /HM: mm/ totally ... I just wanted to fade away (inaud) =
- =*Laura:* I avoided being me. I didn't want to know what me really was so I thought that if I just sort of (.) you know go along like this, just sort of hiding, I think I was just sort of hiding from myself.
- Tricia:* I remember sort of (.) looking in the mirror and actually being surprised that I saw a form in the mirror /HM: right/ and not just a nothingness.

Whilst clearly polysemic, these extracts evidence, I would argue, a particular construction of the 'anorexic' body as a disappearing body, associated too with a construction of a profoundly problematized 'identity'. In these extracts, the 'anorexic' body is constructed as a body that is fading away, disappearing, almost a non-body, 'just a nothingness'.

Clearly, this construction of the body might be read as 'literal' description. Self-starvation results in a very real destruction and de-materialization of the body as it becomes progressively more emaciated. Yet, as Foucault (1977a, p. 148) has illustrated, the body is always-already discursively constructed, 'the inscribed surface of events ... totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body'. Like other bodies, 'anorexic' bodies are always-already inscribed in discourse, constituted and regulated in a multiplicity of socio-historically specific ways. Thus, whilst the discursive construction of the 'anorexic' body as a disappearing body evidences a particularly intense relationship between the discursive and the material (of the body), the emaciated corporeality of the 'anorexic' body does not and cannot guarantee its meaning, precisely because it is always-already discursively constructed. It is always-already inscribed by discourses and by the 'micro-physics of power' that operate in discourse (see Foucault, 1997b). And, as a disappearing body, it is a body that is, I would argue, precisely constituted within the discursive context(s) of 'postmodernity' in which the 'natural' body seems to disappear, to be displaced by the-body-as-image. As Featherstone (1982, p. 175) has argued, the proliferation of images of the body within consumer culture 'create[s] a world in which individuals become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural'. That is, consumer culture constitutes bodies, and female bodies in particular, as images (which advertise consumer goods and which 'advertise' the self) and bodily appearance is no longer constituted as natural or inevitable but as plastic and a matter of individual responsibility, always to be worked upon in order to achieve a certain 'look' (Featherstone, 1982). Consumer culture promotes a construction of embodied subjectivity in which 'a sensuous experience ... is completely submerged amidst the welter of benefits called up by the market and health experts' (Featherstone, 1982, p. 185–186).

Similarly, in their *Thesis on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper-modern Condition* Kroker and Kroker (1987, pp. 21–23) argue:

If, today, there can be such an intense fascination with the fate of the body,⁸ might it not be because the body no longer exists: ... Everywhere today the aestheticization of the body and its dissolution into a semiurgy of floating body parts reveals that we are being processed through a media scene consisting of our own (exteriorized) body organs in the form of second-order simulacra ... never has the body (as a floating sign-system at the intersection of the conflation of power and life) been so necessary of the teleonomic functioning of the system; and yet never has the body ... been so superfluous to the operation of advanced capitalist culture. In technological society, the body has achieved a purely rhetorical existence ... Indeed, why the concern over the body today if not to emphasize the fact that the (natural) body in the postmodern condition has already disappeared, and what we experience as the body is only a fantastic simulacrum of body rhetorics?

Whilst such postmodern analyses of the body are undoubtedly 'difficult' and may seem rather removed from lived experience, they do theorize a particular socio-historically specific construction of the body in which embodied subjectivity becomes profoundly problematic precisely because the body is constituted within 'advanced capitalist culture', not as a 'natural' body but as 'a floating sign-system'. That is, the socio-economic, technological, cultural and political context(s) in which we live, and which might be termed 'postmodern', constitutes the body *as* body *image* or text, as an inscribed surface which must always signify a personality, a lifestyle, a fashion or a desire (for consumer goods for example). The body is thus constituted as a 'background text' for advertising consumer products, 'debased, humiliated and inscribed to excess by all the signs of consumer culture' (Kroker and Kroker, 1987), p.33) or, as outlined above, it is constituted as an ever-imperfect but always perfectible 'image' to be worked upon in order to *make* it signify the (consumer) subject's discursively constituted fantasy of the perfected self. Susan Bordo (1992, pp.96–97) has similarly commented 'on a subjective stance, increasingly more prominent over the last five years, which although preoccupied with the body and deriving narcissistic enjoyment from its *appearance* [my emphasis], takes little pleasure in the *experience* of embodiment'. Thus, within the context of an increasingly technological, mass-media, consumer culture of late capitalism, 'the body *qua* body' can be seen to disappear under a proliferation of increasingly self-referential and inter-textual images of bodies. It is a body that appears to disappear (see also Malson and Ussher, 1997); that is multiply re-constituted as 'a fantastic simulacrum of body rhetorics' (Kroker and Kroker, 1987). Within this socio-economic, cultural and political context, the discursive and corporeal construction of the 'anorexic' body as a disappearing body can therefore be theorized not as individual pathology, as categorically distinct from the norm, but as a dramatic and highly distressing expression of a particular construction of the body that is produced by this 'postmodern condition'.

⁸ In addition to the attention given to the body in recent critical theoretical work (see Turner, 1991 in Featherstone *et al.*, 1991), there are clearly many diverse indications of this cultural fascination; the massive global expansion of the sex industry, the increasing media and government focus on health as an issue of individual responsibility (see, Lupton, 1996; Featherstone, 1982); the place given to 'the body' in contemporary art (see e.g. Boyne, 1988)—the recent *Sensation* exhibit of young British artists from the Satchi Collection and the recent exhibition of Francis Bacon's works on the body, for example—and the media's attention to a wide range of body-related issues: *New Internationalist*, for example, recently devoted an entire issue (No. 300, April, 1998) to the body.

'Anorexia' as (feminine) identity under erasure

As indicated above, this construction of the 'anorexic' body as a disappearing body is also associated with a construction of a profoundly problematised 'identity'. Penny, for example, associates her desire to fade away with a fear of being herself: 'the fear were kind of just(.) of being Penny I think, of being me . . . I think it was a fear of being me /HM: mm/ totally.' Similarly, Laura talks about how she 'didn't want to know what me really was' and constructs 'anorexia' as a way of 'avoid[ing] being me . . . just sort of hiding from myself'. 'Identity' is problematized not only because the self is so frequently construed as deeply flawed but also because it is somehow absent for the speaking subject. In Penny's and Laura's extracts, 'identity' is avoided (through being 'anorexic'). In many other extracts, however, whilst participants talked about themselves as lacking identity, 'anorexia' and the 'anorexic' body were discursively constructed as providing an otherwise absent identity (see also Malson, 1998).

- HM:* What is it that you feel you're achieving?
Jackie: Well in some ways it's being different from other people. (.) /HM: right mm/ It's you know it's something that was my, this is what I find quite difficult now. It's something that's my own.
- Lynn:* In the end I did like the label [anorexia]. I thought that's something that's me, that's mine.
- Nicki:* It's a way of life. /HM: right/ And it was like, well it was like me. It's like a way to have an identity. . . . And if I didn't have it, if I wasn't thin /HM: mm/ then I wouldn't have an identity. I'd just be this big bad blob . . . Before I'd just felt like nothing. /HM: mm/ Now I had something to focus on and something to be.
- Tricia:* I started thinking: but I am the the anorexia. /HM: mm/ This is my identity . . . it had become my identity /HM: mm (.) yeah/ and I think that's that's a problem with it. /HM: mm/ I think it can become an all-consuming identity.
- HM:* Right (.) that that you feel you're you're nothing else outside of it?
Tricia: Nothing else but anorexia. That's /HM: yeah/ that's my name . . . it's like if I give up that name what else is there? /HM: right/ I'm still this shell inside.

In these extracts the discursively constituted relationship between the speaking subject and 'identity' is profoundly problematic. Without 'anorexia' and the 'anorexic' body, the self would be an empty 'shell' or a 'big bad blob' devoid of identity. Thus, Nicki 'had felt like nothing' before but now she had 'something to be': 'if [she] didn't have it, if [she] wasn't thin . . . then [she] wouldn't have an identity'. 'Anorexia' and the 'anorexic' body are thus constructed as providing an otherwise absent identity. Hence, Tricia explains how '[she is] the the anorexia. . . . This is my identity'. Yet, this 'identity' remains problematic (and not only in the sense that it involves profound personal distress and self-starvation). Whilst Tricia is constituted in the extract above as having an identity (as anorexic) the text simultaneously undermines this construction. 'Anorexia' is constituted as an identity, but an identity that signifies an absence of identity, so that Tricia is discursively constituted as both having and not having an identity. Her 'name' ('anorexia') signifies its own lack of

referent, just as Nicki's thin 'anorexic' body signifies an ('anorexic') identity which immediately disappears by signifying an absence of identity.

In these extracts then, I would argue, (women's 'anorexic') identity, like the body by which it is signified, is put under erasure. 'Anorexia' is discursively constituted as an identity and the 'anorexic' body is made to signify that identity. But, it is an 'identity' that signifies its own absence. 'Anorexic identity' is constructed here precisely *as* problematic, elusive and undecidable, *as* an absent presence, *as* deconstructed. It is a construction which, I would argue, can therefore be seen to be embedded in and constituted by the 'postmodern' condition of late capitalist, patriarchal, Western culture. As outlined above, one way in which the postmodern has been described is in terms of a deconstruction of modernist meta-narratives (Featherstone, 1991), a deconstruction of 'modernist epistemology and the human subject on which it depends' (Jagger, 1996, p. 192).

Thus deconstructed, 'identity' is shown to be never present in itself but always involving the play of absence in presence (Jagger, 1996) precisely because it is constituted in discourse and 'shaped by difference' (Spivak, 1976). As Hall (1996b, p. 4) has argued:

Precisely because identities are constituted within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites ... they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity—an 'identity' in its traditional meaning ... Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside, that the 'positive' meaning of any term—and thus its 'identity'—can be constructed.

A deconstruction or putting under erasure of the modernist concept of a self-contained, unitary and founded identity is, then, clearly a significant aspect of the postmodern (see also Spivak, 1976). And, as outlined above, this deconstruction of identity can be found not only in the critical theoretical works of, for example, Derrida and Foucault but also in the wider cultural context(s) in which we live; for example, in recent developments in the politics of ethnicity (Hall, 1996a) and gender (e.g. Weedon, 1987; Butler, 1993) as well as in a variety of other cultural formats (see Featherstone, 1991).

'Anorexia nervosa' has already been described as a 'self-pathology' (Geist, 1989) and as a pseudo-solution to intra- and inter-personal difficulties of consolidating a sense of self as a separate and autonomous individual (Bruch, 1973, 1982). Located within a 'postmodern' context, however, such difficulties can be seen, I would argue, not as psychopathology originating within the individual but as constituted within and by the complex, socio-economic, cultural and political dynamics of contemporary Western societies. That is, the construction of the 'anorexic' body as a disappearing body and as a signifier of (female/feminine) 'identity under erasure' can be theorized as a peculiarly intense and distressing expression of a wider postmodern cultural condition, a 'condition' which has, moreover, already been feminized.

As Jill Jagger (1996), amongst others, has suggested, the postmodern 'project' of deconstruction is already cross-cut by issues of gender and gender power relations. Not only have feminists been at the fore in critiquing the masculinism of

modernist epistemologies and in promoting alternative feminist methodologies and epistemologies (see e.g. Harding 1987; Bleier, 1984; Jordanova, 1989), such that feminist theory and research often converges with postmodern theory and research (see e.g. Walkerdine, 1986; Gavey, 1989), but, in addition, 'woman' has been used a trope for this very process of subverting the phallogocentrism of modernity; as a metaphor for deconstruction, for difference, indeterminacy and undecidability (Jagger, 1996; Spivak, 1989). As Jagger (1996, p. 192) points out, 'Derrida uses this notion of woman as his model for "writing"'; 'for the critical operation of questioning, doubting or deconstructing all truths' (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 48). 'Derrida's concern with woman', she argues (Jagger, 1996; p. 193) 'is as a trope for writing in the context of the critique of metaphysics and the Cartesian founding subject'. Braidotti (1991, p. 140, cited in Jagger, 1996, p. 193) has similarly highlighted the emergence of 'images of the feminine, or the becoming woman, to compensate for the void left by the loss of ontological security after the exhaustion of the classical subject'. Derrida, then, as a 'postmodern' theorist, re-writes identity as plural, de-centred, fragmented and fictional and uses 'woman' as a trope for this 'writing' of identity put under erasure. And he does so precisely because 'woman' is constituted as Other within the Symbolic order of patriarchal cultures (Jagger, 1996). It is because women have been systematically positioned as Other; as (impossibly) contained within an exclusion (Lacan, 1982; Rose, 1982); as lacking, inferior and problematic; that 'woman' can figure for Derrida as a metaphor for difference, 'writing', deconstruction, and the subverting of phallogocentric certainties. The construction of 'anorexic' identity as a (feminine) identity put under erasure can therefore, I would argue, be read as an already gendered construction located within a 'postmodern' cultural context, cross-cut by the inequalities of 'patriarchal' gender power relations.

CONCLUSION

That 'the woman does not exist' (Lacan 1982, cited in Rose, 1982, p. 48) was perhaps one of Lacan's more challenging assertions. Because, for Lacan, sexual difference is signified only in relating to the phallus, 'woman' is conceptualized as negatively signified, defined in terms of what 'she' is not, as Other, as not-I, not-One (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986). His re-reading of Freud thus indicating the profoundly problematic status of feminine identity as a position within a phallogocentric Symbolic order (Rose, 1982); 'That the woman should be inscribed in an order of exchange of which she is the object, is what makes for the fundamentally conflictual, and, I would say, insoluble character of her position ...' (Lacan, in Rose, 1982, p. 45). And in showing 'woman' to be an impossible fiction, Lacan also exposes the 'fundamental duplicity' (Rose, 1982) of the Symbolic order and of the phallus as the signifier of One-ness and identity. That is, in deconstructing 'woman', Lacan thereby deconstructs this 'omnipotent fantasy of the self as whole and undivided, showing it instead to be founded in the illusory elision of division—of inner and outer—at its very inception' (Sayers, 1990, p. 200).

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory may, however, be criticized for its lack of attention to the historical specificities of patriarchal gender identities (see Walkerdine, 1988). Yet, the postmodern deconstruction of identity and the feminization of deconstruction itself lends a specifically contemporary inflection to his elucidation of the

problematics of 'feminine' identity (and thereby of all identities) indicated by his assertion that 'the woman does not exist'.

Clearly, from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, there are positive aspects to the deconstruction of the category of woman. As the recent debates within feminism illustrate, deconstructing 'woman' involves a necessary acknowledgement and celebration of the diversity of women contained within that category. In this paper, however, I have focused on a more negative aspect of deconstructing identity, on a 'loss of ontological security' associated with 'the exhaustion of the classical subject' (see Braidotti, 1991, p. 14)⁹ and on the disappearance of the ('natural') body as guarantor or origin of identity. I have sought to show how 'anorexic' bodies and 'anorexic' subjectivities can be understood to be produced by and within this already gendered 'postmodern condition'. I have explicated a discursive construction of the 'anorexic' body as a body that appears to disappear and that signifies an 'anorexic' identity that is constituted *as* an identity put under erasure. In so doing I have sought to move beyond a medical or quasi-medical conceptualization of 'anorexia nervosa' as individual pathology, originating in the individual women concerned, and towards a re-conceptualization of 'anorexia' as a heterogeneous collectivity of subjectivities, experiences and body-management practices that are located within and constituted by a late capitalist, 'postmodern' discursive context that is cross-cut by the inequalities of 'patriarchal' gender power relations.

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⁹ As Jagger (1996), however, has argued, deconstruction itself does not 'cause' this state of indeterminacy but rather reveals the illusory status of 'identity' as self-contained and unitary.

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