

# MA(R)KING ESSENCE- ECOFEMINISM AND EMBODIMENT<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that ecofeminism can consolidate its tradition of elucidating the interconnections between different oppressions by expanding upon its philosophy of the body. By looking at the ways in which particular bodies become 'marked', and so devalued, ecofeminism can point towards various unexpected and creative coalitions. Here I concentrate especially upon two intertwined sets of markings, namely those related to aesthetic discourses and those related to discourses of Western reason. I argue that both of these ultimately revolve around notions of control of the body as being constitutive of Western ideas of human identity. Moreover, I want to affirm that those ideas which encourage us to devalue certain bodies stem from discourses related to nature and animality. Through considering how ecofeminism might re-think embodiment, I argue for an alternative conception which stresses the inherent vulnerability and agency of human embodiment.

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## INTRODUCTION

**"This body will never be safe from harm"<sup>2</sup>**

Ecofeminist writings are at the forefront of attempts to critique and theorize a space beyond that of our Western dualistic heritage (Plumwood 1993). The political commitments of ecofeminism, informed by an insistence upon an elaborate web of interconnection, entail that this exercise is not just an academic game, but is rather a matter of urgency. In tandem with the at times overlapping positions of feminists, postcolonialists, and postmodernists, ecofeminists have been kept busy, cogently using dualism as both a resource *and* as a potential, though complex, set of signposts directing us away from Western biophobia. If dualism can be said to have partly configured the emergence of ecofeminism<sup>3</sup>, then it could be that a reflexive ecofeminist theory could learn from this and glean possible clues from the mistakes of dualism.

I shall briefly frame ecofeminist ideas on embodiment within the debate that is currently taking place amongst feminist philosophers, emphasizing how ecofeminist accounts may differ from certain postmodernist ideas. I will then offer my own ecofeminist perspective on the body. By concentrating on human embodiment this paper intends to, in Greta Gaard's words, "recognize and articulate our many bases for coalition" (1997, 114). Ecofeminism is no longer only about articulating connections between the dominations of 'women' and 'nature' but has become, perhaps inevitably, concerned with the further intersections of class and 'race' (Plumwood 1993; Sturgeon 1997). It is my contention that this focus upon embodiment not only adds stitches to this endeavor, but *also* implies connections with other oppressions. Consequently, this can inspire novel coalitionary possibilities.

Embodiment is of fundamental importance to ecofeminism. Historically, the human body, as a constant reminder of our organic embeddedness, has been the location of the intersection between both the mastery of nature *and* nature-associated peoples. The anxiety that the master-identity<sup>4</sup> (Plumwood 1993) has shown towards his own embodiment intertwines with that similarly expressed towards 'nature', 'femininity', emotionality, and so on. The important point here is the way in which meaning percolates vertically through the structure of dualisms, with each pair obtaining reinforcement in alliance with others. As a parallel to and aspect of the West's categorization of 'women' as 'closer to nature' has been the domi-

nant view of 'women' as 'more embodied' than men. While the body has figured within ecofeminist writings since the early texts (Ruether 1975), it may be argued that there remains much work to be done<sup>5</sup>, and I intend here to make a small contribution. Few theories seem prepared to make the reader uncomfortable, to deal with the 'oppressor within'. Thus, I frame this paper as part of that attempt to unsettle the dominant ways of looking at and judging bodies. Centrally, what I argue in this paper is that Western discourses of rationality and aesthetics have been fundamentally important in the marking out of particular bodies. These have been articulated along a wholly unrealistic ideal of mastery or control that has been set as *the* template for authentic embodiments of human citizenship.

Recent works have referred to powerful subject positions as a series of 'unmarked categories' (Haraway 1991, 191). For example, historically it has been less clear to think of the 'master identity', configured through a privileged location in terms of class, gender, specie, and 'race' as *actually being embodied*. The notion of an unmarked position has also surfaced in the recent theories of 'whiteness' as a nonracialized identity (Dyer 1997). It is self-evident that unmarked bodies cannot exist outside a relation to *other* bodies that are somehow positioned as marked. What I focus on in this paper is this social construction of marked bodies. What exactly does it mean to talk of certain bodies as being *marked*? It is possible to imagine marking processes that either literally or symbolically devalue or confer status upon a person. I will concentrate primarily upon those processes that symbolically devalue forms of embodiment, though these always relate implicitly to the construction of 'superior' bodies. In particular I will be interested in some of those mechanisms involved in the marking process, as well as considering those dominant discourses that have been brought forth in the categorization of bodies, for example, 'reason', and aesthetics. Moreover, I will be interested in how these marking processes are symptomatic of different understandings of underlying human essence. Finally, I will offer tentative recommendations for theorizing embodiment and essence that would less easily lend them to the marking of otherness.

## ECOFEMINISMS AND THE BODY

In terms of approaching embodiment the most obvious break that different ecofeminist positions have made with past feminisms has been to refute the liberal feminist advice of transcending the female body and bodies in general. Ecofeminists have also illustrated a degree of scepticism

towards approaches that have conceptualized emancipation by employing a rhetoric of increased control of one's body (Diamond 1994). However, a distinction should be made here between reclaiming one's sense of embodiment from others (for example, contraception and abortion) and adopting an actual highly disciplined and mastering approach to one's embodiment.

As mentioned previously, bound up in the celebration of 'women's connection with nature' put forward by some ecofeminists has been the call to celebrate women's bodies, often viewed as providing a privileged relationship with nature. This is problematic on a number of levels, though first it should be said that the initial reaction vehemently disputing such claims is often itself the result of an uncritical humanism which finds grave offense and even humiliation at the thought of being posited as 'closer to nature'. Decisively this reaction still retains the dualistic, Enlightenment view of nature, the body, and animality as inferior to reason. However, the initial argument, claiming a special relationship between women and nature or embodiment, remains objectionable and has been thoroughly questioned by later ecofeminist writings (Roach 1991).

These have included illustrating that idealizing motherhood and those reproductive aspects of female embodiment represents a false universalism which erases differences between women, for example, those that do not prioritize bearing children as essential to identity (Roach 1991, 58). An ecofeminist discourse that constructs female power as chiefly based upon motherhood is inherently ambiguous and risks an antifeminist complicity with patriarchal ideas that for so long have constructed and constricted women to a childbearing role (Cuomo 1994, 97). Furthermore, when a concept undergoes idealization it typically becomes a platform for stereotype formation that hides the underlying diversity of, in this case, heterogeneous motherhoods, mediated by the intersections of class, 'race', sexuality, and so on.

Moreover, calls to celebrate one's body, while well-intentioned, usually frame this as something that can be summoned at will from within the individual. There is little critique here of how people, especially women, are encouraged to construct their sense of self in relation to aesthetic categorizations of bodily appearance. This individualistic approach ignores the sociality of the body and the way in which we are situated within certain discourses that constrain the ability to simply 'celebrate embodiment'. For example, within the West there are well-established gendered

and racialized regimes of aesthetic judgment, an argument I will return to later. A further criticism that may be leveled against this approach towards the body is that it colludes in the erasure of male embodiment and, we may risk, *reproductive* aspects of the male body. As strange and as politically risky as this may sound, there are counterdualistic possibilities here. Reminding men of their embodiment potentially subverts the gendered mind/body dualism, and reminding men of reproductive aspects of male embodiment subverts the gendered production/reproduction dualism and could entail greater sexual responsibility from men in the heterosexual context. As Catherine Roach (1991) argued, there is something fundamentally confused in asking who is 'closer to nature' or 'more embodied' (59). It is premised upon the notion that such states are contrary to freedom, and that some people, by virtue of their essence, are more capable than others of escape. This allows us to glimpse an important method by which bodies have been historically marked, namely by dualistic associations. It is only by moving beyond this thought cage that ecofeminism can make *all* aware of their closeness to nature and embodiment.

Now, it may be argued that this previous statement contains a degree of simplicity in its apparent confidence of knowing just exactly what 'nature' or 'embodiment' is. At this moment one senses a potential conflict between certain ecofeminist notions of the body and those feminist-postmodernist accounts of embodiment which are currently in the ascendancy. Postmodernist accounts of both 'nature' and the 'body' are correct to problematize these terms. It is, after all, a vital correction to Western dualistic thought to emphasize the social constructions and aspects of 'natures' and 'bodies'. This has involved endowing the 'body' and 'nature' with a history and emphasizing the cultural differences that exist in their conceptualization. Part of this process has been to be aware of the policing role certain of these constructions have performed, upholding, for example, a gendered and heterosexual orthodoxy<sup>6</sup> (see Soper 1995); living under the dogma of what is deemed 'natural', *for* or *against* nature, and so on. Moreover, we have been reminded that, because knowledge accumulates within a social and political context, all of our understandings of nature and the body are in a sense, cultural.

It is unlikely that there is anything here that an ecofeminist<sup>7</sup> would want to take issue with. However, one can highlight an antagonism by illustrating a recent critique of feminist-postmodernist theories of the body.

This came from within a recent anthology which proclaimed to be ‘reclaiming radical feminism’. One of its editors, Renate Klein, accuses postmodernism of “dismembering women’s bodies” (Bell and Klein 1996). More specifically, Klein argues that these accounts are guilty of omitting women’s experiences of their embodiment (349). Moreover, she is critical of the language used in reference to the body that, for Klein, contributes to the dismembering process. Citing Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994) as an example, Klein writes:

In post-modern writings real live women (who do not exist) have been reduced to bodies which in turn have become texts. As texts, bodies are objects, (thinking) fragments, or surfaces, to be inscribed, marked, written on. (349)

It is debatable as to whether this argument holds. It is inaccurate for example to state that Grosz ignores the lived realities of ‘women’. What may be more accurate is to point out that it is rare to find such postmodern analyses that are actually combined with empirical research. However, Klein’s criticism implies a similar potential problem with postmodern accounts, which has a special relevance for ecofeminism. For it may be argued that postmodern accounts of the body contain hints of a reductionism that is in fact very modernist in nature. Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994) again can be used as illustration. The blurb on the back of this book states:

*Volatile Bodies* demonstrates that . . . biology or nature is inherently social and has no pure or natural ‘origin’ outside culture. Being the raw material of social and cultural organisation, it is subject to the endless rewriting and inscription that constitute all sign systems.

Given that Grosz occasionally contradicts this version (which I take as being reductionist) within the actual pages of her text it is reasonable to argue that there appears to be some ambivalence, occurring over the ubiquitous nature/nurture debate, and so also over underlying theories of essence. For example, Grosz writes in relation to sexual difference:

I am reluctant to claim that sexual difference is purely a matter of the inscription and codification of somehow uncoded, absolutely raw material, as if these materials exert no resistance or recalcitrance to the processes of cultural inscription. This is to deny a materiality or material specificity and determinateness to bodies . . . it is to make them infinitely pliable, malleable. (1994, 190)

This, I argue, is more in line with ecofeminist concerns that wish to reflexively grant some agency to bodies and nature. A failure to do this merely reproduces the modernist *and* anthropocentric framework of culture/nature dualism, granting more value and explanatory power to culture. This implies that for postmodernism to be truly postmodernist then it must have some meaningful ecological dimension. A position of radical social constructionism in relation to nature and bodies defiantly shifts notions of essence firmly into the realm of ‘culture’ and ‘mind’. Thus with not a scent of irony, such a postmodernist conceptualization actually completes the modernist project of mastery. Recent feminist theory<sup>8</sup> has hinted at this by critiquing the constructionist/essentialist split (esp. Fuss 1989), arguing that radical social constructionism can itself be thought of as a form of (discursive) essentialism<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the self-confidence and strength of the constructionist strategy has been somewhat upset by some writers, for example, Diana Fuss, who argues that

this strength is not built on the grounds of essentialism’s demise, rather it works its power by strategically deferring the encounter with essence, displacing it . . . onto the concept of sociality. (1989, 6)

There is an obvious reason why it has taken so long to reach this critical stage. First it must be recounted that the familiar list of Western dualisms have been mapped over with the distinction between active/passive, with agency and dynamism being confined to the master’s sphere and a marked fixidity projected onto the devalued sphere of nature, women, and the body. Consequently, given that the social sciences have been constituted through dualism, it is not surprising that decisions concerning agency and determinacy have been made while wearing this lens. This very strongly implies the impossibility of the social sciences adopting the body, nature, and gender as a hobby or sub-discipline, rather these concerns seep into and re-configure social science. I will return to this question of essence towards the end of this article. Having said something of ecofeminist concerns over the current debate over the ontology of embodiment, I now turn my attention to tentatively consolidating and expanding an ecofeminist theory of embodiment.

### **Ecofeminism and ‘Body People’**

As a route into discussing in more detail the issue of how bodies become *marked* I wish to recall an early ecofeminist concept and attempt to

expand it. I refer here to Rosemary Radford Ruether's idea of 'body-people' (1975, 79). This names an important way in which *otherness* to the master-identity has been constructed<sup>10</sup>. It refers to a wide set of discursive markings which have accentuated the embodiment of others, while leaving the centralized master-identity in certain ways 'unmarked'. This has projected a sense of uncontrolled flesh and desire out from the master-identity and onto marked others whose essence or identity is regarded primarily as being 'bodily' rather than rational. From these markings follow particular assumptions, for example, over-intellectual ability. This move only has the power to render certain people inferior due to a particular construction of the body. More important, in contrast to feminists, eco-feminists have argued that this is a conception closely informed by dominant views of 'animal' bodies (Birke 1994, 117). The animalization of certain peoples has been made 'logical' by the very vertical matchings of Western dualisms. It is the symbolic presence of the absent animal in particular, which has marked 'body-people' as inferior.

Several writers have seen Descartes' particular contribution to Western dualism as having a decisive role here (Noske 1989; Plumwood 1993; Birke 1994). Descartes conceived of animals as 'just' body, as clockwork, and eroded their capacity for subjectivity to such an extent that he denied animals the capacity to feel pain. This discourse provided a template for oppression in general especially at a time of growing Western colonialism. Thus for human others to be similarly rendered as 'just' body entails a process of agency-stripping which is comparative with that experienced by nonhuman animals. This operates as the crossover point specifically between the oppression of 'body and nature-associated humans' and nonhuman animals. The human/animal boundary is conveniently shifted within certain contexts to allow the considerable cultural symbolics that the West has constructed in relation to animality to be applied to animalized *humans*<sup>11</sup>. Thus it may be argued that the West has relied upon a rather mobile notion of the category 'animal' to allow *unsettling humans* to be marked out as similarly wallowing and constrained, in particular, by their 'out of control bodies'.

Bodies then (as conceived) can be seen as disruptive sources of abjection, which render uncertain the neat attempts at boundary construction of Western history. Fundamentally they disrupt culture/nature and human/animal dualism and call into question those hegemonic Western attempts to essentialize human identity, attempts that have always been led by a

disembodied mastering identity. I will turn now to some of the specific discourses by which ‘*body people*’ have become marked and constituted as such.

### *Marked Bodies - Rationality and Aesthetics*

In contexts where oppression is barely recognized as such, where it remains significantly normalized and its expression overt, the marking of bodies is often literal as well as symbolically inscribed. Thus we may recall the marking of bodies during slavery in the United States, during the Nazi Holocaust, and also within modern farming<sup>12</sup>. This literal marking performs the role of identification, classification, and control simultaneously and is often bound up in bureaucratic preparation for some economic purpose, as part of the commodification process. But as Iris Young argues, contemporary oppressive practices have been forced to operate far more covertly both within the individual *and* society due mainly to the formal de-legitimization of (most) inequality (1990, 131). This, I think, increases the importance of subtle, less explicit, and *discursive* associations and markings of the body. Space prevents me from discussing some important types of markings; notably those associated with categories of ‘health’ and ‘disease’. Instead, I will concentrate on the categories of ‘rationality’ and ‘aesthetics’ and how they continue to mark bodies and how they overlap with each other. As I aim to show, both these categories are in some sense related to the notion of *mastery* or *control* of embodiment.

### *Bodies marked as rational/irrational*

The Western sensibility towards the body that emphasizes rational control accelerated particularly from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This appears related especially to two interwoven themes. First, we can notice the construction of Western humanism, preached as a universal human identity, which stressed individualism and distance from nature. Second, the rapidly developing ‘rational economy’ was assumed to require particular types of bodies, those that it was thought could most efficiently master their ‘burden of embodiment’. That these two themes are interrelated stresses both the inseparability of analyses in terms of ‘identity’ or ‘economics’ *and* the links between the oppression of the human and nonhuman.

In order to highlight especially the first theme it is useful to turn to *The Civilising Process-The History of Manners* (1939) by Norbert Elias. This

stresses the changes that took place in the bourgeois relation to human embodiment in Western Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the way in which this was expressed through changes in the deployment of certain emotions. This was the backdrop to which the concept ‘civilised’ was to develop. Elias’s text can in effect be read as a deconstruction of ‘civilisation’ and thus as an important part of the critique of the arbitrary conclusions of modernity. He compares manuals on manners, advocating certain ‘correct’ behaviors in certain contexts, from the 16<sup>th</sup> with the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that when comparing the work of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century educationalist Erasmus (1469–1536) with similar works of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there is a greater degree of openness in the former when discussing the details of bodily functions. For Elias, this is indicative of an overall trend that has seen an advance of the thresholds of emotions such as shame and embarrassment applied to the body (1939, 100–101). Thus what was regarded in certain contexts as childlike behavior in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century was the prevalent adult norm in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The range of bodily functions that came under scrutiny from the bourgeoisie was immense. For example, a strong feeling of disgust and embarrassment was encouraged around sneezing, coughing, farting, crying, spitting, menstruation, nose picking, nudity, body-proximity, and body odor, as well as general table manners. One’s membership of human citizenship (for this *read* membership of Western, male, white, bourgeois-defined human identity) was measured in terms of one’s ability to distance and deny such bodily functions which implied far too much commonality with the ‘irrational’ sphere of nature. I would argue that these changes in our relation to embodiment which Elias<sup>13</sup> outlines are inextricably linked, through the dualistic coding of ‘body as nature’, to the project of mastering nature, which was explicitly outlined and initiated within this same period.

The second theme from above relates more specifically to interrogating the economic efficiency of the human body within the context of an emergent productivist paradigm. Important assumptions here are that optimal economic performance is predicated upon the transcendence of the human body, of emotions, and, in the case of the most efficient capitalist, transcending those morally connective emotions such as empathy, which are not conducive to profit.

In relation to the ageing body, Simon Biggs (1993) has employed the notion of ‘social usefulness’.

This 'fitness' of the body as an intellectual and physical tool significantly affects other sources of value. Most important of these are productive and reproductive capacity, which are used to locate the individual within dominant definitions of *social usefulness*. (36; my emphasis)

This is a useful concept not merely because it helps us to think of the ways in which bodies are subject to evaluation, but also because it suggests an important commonality between different oppressions. Such evaluations inform people's sense of self-embodiment and thus self-worth. Biggs, for example, is concerned with age. The contributions which people over a certain age make to society, economic or otherwise, are often not given value, their agency is denied. Older age, as Biggs argues, is one context in which we find it more difficult to *transcend* or *control* our bodies (36). Certain forms of disability provide another. Given that control of embodiment, as I argue, has been an important marker of a particular construction of human identity, ageing is thus surrounded by a tremendous amount of fear with death acting as the ultimate reminder of our inescapable connection to our embodiment and our environment. So much so that the aged person is (almost) perceived already as nonhuman, since their very being confounds this hegemonic reading of human identity.

It is not too difficult to extend this concept of *social usefulness* to other areas. It has of course been a repetitive, misogynous argument to assume that all women want to or actually do give birth, and then to assume that this impinges upon female socio-economic efficiency. This is a belief made possible by the gendered dualism that values production over reproduction or even separates the two in the first place. As always this exaggerates the biological fact that women give birth to a far from self-evident socio-economic consequence which then furnishes the private/public dualism with divided gendered meanings.

The construction of 'raced' bodies is another area where this idea of 'social usefulness' has been evoked. For example, during and since Western colonialism and slavery, the discursive practices employed against racialized bodies emphasized an essence of irrationality, laziness, and indiscipline, and portrayed the colonized as overly-sexual or grotesque (see Fanon 1952). The general intention was to represent non-Western people as unable to master their embodiment, and ultimately as *in need of* Western 'civilisation'. It has been argued that these representations were in fact projections from the Western mastering identity at a time of Western inse-

curity over identity, in particular, over animality, the passions, femininity, our bodies, and our general location in nature (Higgins 1994, 257). Just as ecofeminists have pointed out the Western feminization of nature (and naturalization of 'women'), we can here note the interconnected racialization of nature (and naturalization of the racialized). Examples of this have been the animalization of the racially marked and portrayals of nature as 'dark' and exotic. In the context of Western expansionism, the lifestyles of those found in colonized cultures were constructed as vastly more primitive in comparison to the West that was introducing

an ethic of personal self-denial in the service of expanded production, justified by the prospect of material gain and heavenly redemption. (Higgins 1994, 258)

The perceived inability to want, or achieve, Western levels of self-denial was then related to a perceived socio-economic *uselessness* amongst colonized peoples. Disability is, of course, another area where bodies are marked as inferior owing to a perception of suspected socio-economic uselessness.

It can be argued that the marking of human embodiment in terms of rationality and irrationality has been a particularly Western process. This accelerated during the Enlightenment and served the interrelated processes of constructing a new identity (a disembodied mastering-identity which was put forward as a universal humanism) *and* demarcating and legitimizing who could be the profiteers of the newly emerging 'rational' economy. An account of this kind on the marking of bodies is important and implies how embodiment and nature have been exploited as a rich source for images of otherness. However, a deeper appreciation of this, and by implication interconnections between seemingly different oppressions, can be grasped by considering other (related) phraseologies of otherness. I now consider the use of the aesthetic markings of bodies with this in mind.

*Bodies marked by dominant aesthetic discourses*

First, it is helpful to explain how this kind of marking relates to and was partly bound up with that related to 'rational/irrational markings'. It may be argued that the perception of a body as rational or otherwise was inherently contingent upon visual or aesthetic evaluation, but more important a type of socially constructed perception which stressed the immoral or moral nature of different appearances. This type of perception which, in particular, attempts to moralize the other's character by simply survey-

ing the other's body or face has historically been named as physiognomy (Finkelstein 1991; Magli 1989). Naming this social practice has the important effect of rescuing these discourses from their normalization and their safe, essentialized attachment to ideas of 'human nature'. Moreover, it makes clear that something such as perception or vision is not an asocial process, but rather a further potential site of power. Given what I said earlier, it is clear how a belief in the asociality of vision (and embodiment generally) is likely to be a mistake resulting from the effect of dualism upon categorization and epistemology.

One example of overlap between these two groupings of bodily markings, namely 'rational' and 'aesthetic' markings, can be found in Elias's (1939) analysis of Erasmus mentioned earlier. The concern of Erasmus with manners, discipline, and 'rational' behavior, particularly among children<sup>14</sup> of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was very much based upon his *observational* 'research'<sup>15</sup>. But more so, this was 'research' which absorbed and used the physiognomic beliefs that certain appearances were moral "*expressions of inner man*" (Elias 1939, 55). Of particular interest to Erasmus were people's eating/drinking habits (a partly biological behavior which has potential to imply human-animal similarity), and he employed 'animals' (nature) and 'peasants' (lower social class) in the role of those who 'civilised' people should distance themselves from (Elias 1939). Thus, I argue that bound up within judgments and markings of particular bodies as 'rational' or 'irrational' have been particular configurations of vision, or as John Berger has put it before, specific 'ways of seeing' (1972). I shall briefly describe further examples to support this claim and in the process make clear some of the ways in which bodies have been and *are* aesthetically marked.

An important historical element of this discursive visuality named physiognomy has revolved around distinctions between the 'classical' or 'beautiful' body *and* the 'grotesque' or 'ugly' body. First, the definition of both became normalized in terms of class, gender, 'race', and age, and second, 'beauty' was taken to correspond to an inner virtue in terms of character while the latter historically has been assumed to correlate with a 'sinful' character (Synnott 1990, 1993). Just as with those markings related to discourses of 'rationality', the master's body commonly has not been subjected to the same degree of evaluation in terms of aesthetics<sup>16</sup>. Thus to a certain extent, by perpetuating a myth of disembodiment the master identity escapes these markings and those evaluations that they evoke. Now, to take this classical/grotesque way of categorizing people's

bodies and appearances, it may be argued that this maps onto the very dualisms which background the evaluation of bodies as 'rational' or 'irrational', especially upon that dualism of reason (culture)/nature. As David Morgan writes,

Generally speaking and with some simplification, classical bodies are controlled, in conformity with dominant aesthetic standards, and are constructed as being much closer to culture or to the civilised. In contrast, the grotesque body is uncontrolled, unappealing according to dominant aesthetic standards, and constructed as being *much closer to nature*. (1993, 81–82; my emphasis)

I would suggest that the link here between the two types of markings I discuss rests upon the notion of *control*. A 'grotesque' or 'ugly' body is often also one marked as 'irrational' and 'out of control'. For the onlooker, such bodies do not offer themselves up for easy categorization into those narrow definitions which Western culture has made available. In other words, these are bodies which threaten certain visually constructed boundaries which in their very ethos rely upon physiognomic logic which states that outer appearance corresponds to some inner essence. Narrow categories of gender, class, 'race', age, and physical ability are all accompanied by expectations of bodily appearance that can impinge upon one's social acceptance. It is in the bravery, ignorance, or lack of choice over neglecting these conventions (and so challenging constructed boundaries) that bodies risk becoming marked as 'grotesque' or 'ugly', an example being to be perceived as occupying an ambiguous space between humanity and animality or between masculinity and femininity. Part of the onlooker's disgust is certainly dependent here upon the normalization of physiognomic discourse. An example is the coding of body fat as *excess*, literally '*out of shape*', and then physiognomically, of 'fat' people as both greedy and as unable to control appetite.

As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued, another element related to the marking of certain bodies as 'grotesque' relates to how individual bodies control their *own* boundaries, focusing especially upon orifices (1986, 23). These are those areas where we cannot so easily be defined as 'individuals', sealed off either from other people (bodies) or from nature. So generally we may state that the 'classical' body is one that more effectively polices bodily fluids and smells. Mary Russo provides a further useful definition of the two concepts:

The grotesque body is open, protruding, extended, secreting . . . the body of becoming, process and change, opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism. (1994, 62–63)

If one imagines how failure to police one's own body in this way brings with it the threat of being associated with animality, we may notice how this brings the conception of 'grotesque' right back to the territory of 'irrational' nature. This illustrates an area of overlap between the two sets of discourses I discuss.

Physiognomy, I argue, is an important component of the process whereby bodies are marked, made possible by the belief in an unproblematic and static correspondence<sup>17</sup> between appearance and essence. It is the normalization of physiognomy and its 'taken for granted' nature in everyday life that compels many to adopt such a controlled perspective towards embodiment and appearance more generally. The relationship between physiognomy and mastery can be made clearer by analysis from a different perspective; from that of those writers<sup>18</sup> (especially between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) who tried to establish physiognomy as a formal science. The reader may notice links between physiognomy and other character theories such as astrology, craniology, and phrenology that were all concerned with establishing and stabilizing inner human essence, often concentrating upon moral features of character. Indeed, when scientific support for physiognomic ideas waned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of its central tenets survived under the guise of phrenology, craniology, and anthropometry and later into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as criminal anthropology and eugenics.

Physiognomy suited the Enlightenment desire to observe, classify, discipline, and control the human body. The popularized manuals of physiognomy featured precise drawings of certain facial features in particular which readers could then employ to judge others. It is such representations of the face and body that are of special interest. For it could be said that physiognomic discourse freezes and attempts to master the inherent motion and agency involved in the emotionality and materiality of the body. For Patrizia Magli, physiognomy

introduces us into a new time: no longer is it the non-time of an actual face, lost in the interrupted fluctuation of lights and shadows. Rather, it is the time of a 'measure' that stills things, develops a formal image

and locks it into an absolute fixidity, wherein it then interprets proportions, defines outlines, and attempts to establish essential traits. (1989, 90)

This fits well with the ethos of Enlightenment science with its imperative to master embodiment and nature. Moreover, it animates the idea of using an internal/external distinction when thinking of the self, and in particular, comforts the anxiety over rendering those internal aspects of the *other* transparent, and supposedly more knowable, which has been a constant through Western science. In summary, *both* the act of compiling physiognomic codes, such as arguing that a particular shape of nose or color of skin relate to a certain personality essence, *and* changing one's body and general appearance according to a fear of physiognomic judgment, involve a mastering and controlled approach towards the body. This latter aspect was acknowledged by Erving Goffman (1959) with his concept of 'impression management', used to refer to people's attempts to influence how they will be judged by others by managing or controlling appearance.

While physiognomic discourses are undoubtedly not the only set of ideas which structure the aesthetic markings of (especially 'otherized') bodies, space limits confine me to them here. It is worth illustrating an example of their use within a specific historical context. When writing on Jewish people in *Mein Kampf* Adolf Hitler wrote:

The cleanliness of this people, moral and otherwise, I must say, is a point in itself. By their very exterior you could tell that these were no lovers of water, and, to your distress, you often knew it with your eyes closed. Later I often grew sick to my stomach from the smell of these caftan-wearers. Added to this, there was their unclean dress and their generally unheroic appearance. (1934, 53)

Here, both particular social constructions of vision and smell were employed to imply an immoral essence or character, which was, of course, part of the process of marking out and dehumanizing Jewish people. Also, the unsubtle animalization contained in this quote attempted to posit Jews as closer to nature, due to a supposedly more 'animalistic' body. Taken together, these two techniques or markings (the 'rational' and the 'aesthetic') create a strong and mutually reinforcing picture of otherness. The most unsettling aspect of Hitler's words should be that they cannot be simply pinned to him and that moment of time, and then forgotten. He was merely using discursive tools that had evolved over time, and of course remain today. Western consumerism thrives on such discourse, albeit in a

less overt form. Much capital is made from the Western construction of the 'beautiful body' that is necessarily selective. Aesthetic markings not only devalue many bodies, but also provide a significant source of profit. Phrases such as 'looking good' speak of a contemporary physiognomic legacy which combines the 'aesthetic' and the 'moral' and is now thoroughly normalized, despite its element of fantasy and impossibility (Synnott 1993). As long as the physiognomic processes, which underpin particular aesthetic markings of the body, retain legitimacy, it will remain simple and convenient for people to make generalizations equating, for example, black skin with criminality or wrinkled bodies with senility.

I have summarized two major and related groupings of discourse that are brought into play during the symbolic marking of embodiment. With the intention of constructing an understanding of embodiment not so tied to notions of control, I now consider particular conceptions of human essence that underlie these discursive groups.

### **Approaches to Essence**

It is clear from the discussion on 'aesthetic markings of the body' that physiognomy is a friend of homogenized thinking. It leads to generalizations and visual stereotypes. What I have written so far indicates something of a struggle over pre-conceived ideas of human essence or identity. For instance many would assume that practices such as physiognomy, that is, 'making moral judgments on others by their appearance', or homogenized thinking<sup>19</sup> are 'natural' aspects of 'being human'. Such a thorough-going essentialism risks legitimizing and naturalizing important conceptual components of the process of oppression. The effect of Social Darwinism illustrates that moves to outline components of human essence should always be treated with caution. The debate over whether generalized and homogenized frameworks of thought are unavoidable in everyday life is replicated in social theory with regards to the construction of concepts. This appears especially in that variety of essentialism found within the use of 'unified' categories such as 'Western', 'women', 'working class', or 'black', for instance, which are employed as explanatory shortcuts. Disregarding these could lead to something of a theoretical impasse, inspired by an endlessly particularizing postmodernism. As long as it is borne in mind that the meanings attached to such categories are not unproblematic or static representations and that a sophisticated degree of reflexivity accompanies their formulation, then such categories can be useful, and possibly un-

avoidable. They are what Noël Sturgeon has called “*strategic essentialisms*” (1997, 189). The reflexivity lies in recalling that the essence of each category is constantly creative and capable of change. Moreover, each conceptualization is some sort of boundary creation that includes and excludes. The wisdom received from the experience of eco/feminist theory would be to always think about the diversity within each category. Failure to do this has led to the reinscription of oppressive, exclusionary, and silencing practices. Hence for strategic essentialisms we should read conceptualizations, that are highly reflexive and aware of the inherently transitory nature of essence.

This suggests a rather complex relationship between constructions of essence and time. Mastering identities have a history of constructing otherness by fixing in time the essence of the oppressed, and also that of their own. A padlock that maintains hierarchy then encloses subject positions. This atemporal concept of essence has also clearly been one response of oppositional movements in constructing their own identities, examples ranging from post-colonial *negritude* to cultural eco/feminisms employing notions of ‘women’s essence’. Fixing essence in time is also one effect of the discourse of the ‘natural’ briefly discussed earlier, which attaches ideas of ‘nature’ to cultural traditions to produce a conservative morality/dogma of what is ‘normal’.

Prior to fixing essence in time, I would argue that the discursive practices of especially mastering identities first perform a sideways treatment that *oscillates* essence according to power. The results are bound to the familiar hierarchical orderings of Western dualism. Thus for the master, ‘reason’ is his essence. The master sees himself as an essentially rational, ‘mind person’. As I have argued, the essence of those deemed inferior along lines of gender, class, ‘race’, age, and physical ability is informed by constructions of animal essence as residing in instinct and the body. Thus the two groupings of bodily markings that I have discussed imply other oscillations of essence, although *both* have the effect of constructing inferiorized ‘body-people’.

First, those discursive markings associated with rationality construct an *essence of flesh*, with all the connotations of animality, femininity, sexuality, and nature. This represents the body and biology as sites of truth in explaining otherness, selectively projecting biological determinism onto ‘body-people’; in the same way that it has been used against nonhuman animal bodies (see Birke 1994). Second, those discursive markings associ-

ated with aesthetics, which pretend to render the internal external, construct an *essence of appearance*, which also implies an association with the body, but a further association with *superficiality* or *inauthenticity*. Patriarchy is an illustration of the effectiveness of these groups of markings when they are employed together. (A more recent entrant into debates around essence, which achieves a disturbing explanatory ubiquity, is the gene.)

Strategies of resistance, I think, require a completely new notion of essence. As well as resisting an association with atemporality, this would employ other features. First, it would require an understanding of self not so simply arranged around dualisms of mind/body or internal/external. This would render the oscillation of essence problematic. Second, ecofeminists and others must make sure that any spaces which open within the very definition of human essence or identity be filled with nondualist critiques which make clear the embodied and ecologically embedded aspects of humanity. In fact the tasks of re-defining essence and escaping dualism are intimately tied to each other. This is due to the role of dualism in constructing essence. Val Plumwood recognizes this with one definition of dualism as “a process in which power forms identity, one which distorts both sides of what it splits apart” (1992, 12). The problems that feminists such as Diana Fuss have identified with the essentialist/constructivist debate relate to the atemporality discussed above which has become attached to notions of essence, when it is projected onto ‘biology’ or ‘nature’. It is due to the ascendancy of and over-dependency upon social constructionism in the human sciences that the charge of essentialism has become attached to the side of biology. In some ways this sociological critique misses its target since it ignores how dualism *has* ‘distorted’<sup>20</sup> both sides of what it splits apart’, for example, in this case constructing ‘biology’ or ‘nature’ as incapable of agency.

So perhaps a deeper critique does concern itself with re-conceptualizing ‘essence’. Several writers have argued for what may be termed a *process theory of essence* that would make it difficult to fix essence in time and perhaps more accurately reflect the instability of essences (e.g., Young 1990; Abram 1996). Iris Young sees potential in formulating essence in terms of fluids. She writes:

Fluids, unlike objects, have no definite borders; they are unstable, which does not mean that they are without pattern. Fluids surge and move, and a metaphysic that thinks being as fluid would tend to privilege the

living, moving, pulsing over the inert dead matter of the Cartesian worldview . . . . A process metaphysics, a metaphysics of fluids, where the being of any location depends on its surrounding and where we cannot delineate clearly what is inside and outside, is a better way to think about the world from an ecological point of view. (1990, 193)

Such a framework is certainly more temporal and could be challenging to many dualisms, notably that between self and other. David Abram produces a framework not so different from this, specifically on the body:

The boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends. (1996, 46–47)

Such a conception confuses most traditional understandings of essence and importantly makes clear the interdependency between the human and non-human. Both Young and Abram provide the beginnings of alternative notions of essence that may well be more sensitive to an alternative construction of embodiment which is less easy to exploit as a means to negative symbolic marking.

#### *Can 'Body People' Form Coalitions?*

At the outset I mentioned the importance of forming coalitions to ecofeminist politics. Just what role may this and other critical constructions of essence play in forming coalitions? How, for example, does knowledge of the social construction of 'body people' relate to the resistance to such inscription upon human embodiment? Coalitions, I think, are always strategic and opportunistic. By this I mean it is necessary that oppositional movements should respond to the way in which different oppressions are interconnected with an interconnected and reflexive reply.

In this respect Noël Sturgeon sees ecofeminism as a potential conduit for this process but not as a straightforward form of identity politics. In contrast, Sturgeon wants to challenge "the notion that movements produce fixed identities" (1997, 4). This challenges what may be termed an essentialist view of social movements or coalitionary politics, and instead

stresses the transformative and negotiative aspects of political action, in other words, a process theory of identity politics. Sturgeon's framework is also useful in that it points towards an 'identity politics' which is not so clearly open to the critique of essentialism (in the sense of using unified categories as rallying calls). This points to more reflexive political manoeuvrings and also implies that ecofeminism itself may be, in time, a strategic and transitional term (Quinby 1990, 127). To finish, I briefly consider how an alternative understanding of embodiment to the master and a newly refined concept of 'body people' may assist in the patterning together of oppositional groups.

At this point it is worth asking whether *social movements* can operate without making what could be termed essentialist or foundational claims. Does a politics require a ground upon which to anchor itself? (the discussion above over essentialism in theory may be a guide), this being one of *the* questions of contemporary liberation theory I do not feel ready to answer either way. However, as a counter against the entrenched moral belief in Western culture that we *should* in significant ways control our embodiment as a condition of membership of the 'human', it may be that a certain strategic essentialism has a role. Very simply, this would be to assert that the human body is inherently fragile or vulnerable. This varies in degree along a continuum according to socially constructed identity and position in life-course. Human embeddedness in nature (and so guarantees of birth and death) ensures that this vulnerability is accentuated for prolonged periods of our lives. Moreover, we should take into account the agency of our embodiment. For example, human bodies may produce side effects to animal-tested medicines, invasive cosmetic surgeries, and other ill-thought-out technologies that forget this fragility. The humility of acknowledging both vulnerability and agency in relation to all human embodiment undermines the socio-historical Western moral imperative to deny and control our bodies. Yet this remains too anthropocentric. However, the marking discourses I have outlined are also applied to nonhuman bodies, and consequently there is scope for rethinking how we perceive and devalue nonhuman embodied life. Given that the methods of marking bodies I have discussed converge upon the notion of control, then such a strategic essentialism could have important emancipatory effects in terms of challenging the authority of the master identity, in its particular colonization of the 'human'.

Readers here may point to the robustness and malleability of the body

in, for example, tribal body modifications or avant-garde performance art as providing positive aspects of bodily control or mastery. This argues against a blanket judgment of all variations of extreme bodily control, and cautions us to be reflexive towards the power relations present in each context.

This outline of two of the main discursive fields within which marked bodies become trapped and made to graze, namely 'discourses related to aesthetics' and 'discourses related to rationality', is intended to enhance the ecofeminist project of illustrating commonalities between different oppressions. One further avenue of resistance for oppositional movements would be to unsettle and then re-formulate these discursive fields: to remove the imposed fences surrounding these areas of moral categorization. Moreover, it may be argued that if there is this degree of commonality then there should be greater scope for coalitions between seemingly different groups. The discourses of rationality in particular highlight how oppression in terms of gender, 'race', class, age, and disability relate to the oppression of nature in complex and specific ways. Those related to aesthetics are implicated in all of these differences and extend into the largely unspoken oppression (in academia) of those constructed as 'grotesque' or 'ugly'.

The reader may wonder if this goes far enough to actually drive groups together into a stronger coalitionary<sup>21</sup> position. One point to concentrate upon may be the effect of marking on differently oppressed bodies. I argue that there is a certain similarity across differences imposed by these marking processes. This similarity is found in the subjective feelings of the oppressed, especially in the alienated relationship that the oppressed individual is encouraged to have towards her or his own embodiment. For to have one's body marked in the sense that I have outlined is to be made conscious of one's body in a certain negative way. It is in fact to be made to think dualistically, to split off one's mind from one's body. Not all oppressions encourage the oppressed to feel alienated from their bodies but I suggest that most do. That control of one's embodiment is so morally important in Western cultures entails that failure to meet these expectations can result in covert blame from others (Wendell 1996, 98), thus reinforcing feelings of worthlessness or disempowerment.

So it may be said through the colonization of the subjectivity of the oppressed with dualism, that there is a degree of commonality in 'emotional relation towards oneself and one's embodiment' across different oppressions. Feelings of shame and embarrassment are to the fore. Frantz

Fanon (1952) illustrated this subjective side of oppression, in relation to 'race' and colonialism. As the category of 'reason' has historically been denied to 'black people', the 'white gaze' has tended to see only a 'black body'. By means of physiognomy, various negative associations can then mark such bodies. Fanon emphasizes how this becomes internalized.

The man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema . . . The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (110–11)

This entails a self-depreciation and an internal alienation from one's body. In this way the black man<sup>22</sup> at times resembles, on one level, both the anorexic or the woman deemed ugly. Providing for agency not all oppressed peoples respond with self-hate and not all oppressions are exactly the same in this manner. However, I argue that there is enough here to make interesting links and ground coalitions. Oppressed groups could together reject the way in which they are encouraged to think of themselves dualistically and so negatively. Moreover, they could reject the physiognomic logic that allows static associations between appearance and identity/essence to be constructed and perpetuated. Indeed, many movements have resisted this already. For example, slogans such as 'black is beautiful' attempt to critique the physiognomic assumptions that are prevalent over 'black' skin, typically a negative aesthetic constructed to imply a lack of morality or civility.

Given that the body has been an important site of the contest over essence, and so 'truth' and power, it is not surprising that bodies should figure in the project to connect liberatory movements. This entails not only reconstructing essence, but, at last demands, a concerted attempt to escape dualism, which necessitates overcoming human alienation to both embodiment and ecology. I have attempted to contribute specifically to an embodied ecofeminist theory that aims to reposition the 'human' which has been colonized by a mastering identity privileged in terms of gender, class, 'race', and species. Furthermore, I have tried to contribute to the continuing critique of dualism that has played an important role in identity-construction. Here I identified the importance of new understandings of essence for moving beyond dualism. In concentrating upon how bodies have been discursively marked I have intended to enhance understanding of how *others* have been positioned as inferior by an ultimately insecure mastering identity. Finally, I have suggested ways in which this knowledge

could benefit both the formulation of theoretical frameworks and, at least potentially, the creation of counterhegemonic coalitionary movements.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was entitled “Ma®king essence-ecofeminism and embodiment”. The use of the trademark ® was intended to signify the ways in which certain discourses symbolically inscribe themselves upon bodies with a connotation of identity ownership, very similar to the ways in which the ‘literal’ markings of bodies such as during slavery and the Holocaust very obviously represented ownership. This has been changed owing to possible future difficulties over typing ® when citing this paper.
2. This is a lyric from the late avant garde singer/guitarist/poet Jeff Buckley (1966–1997). It comes from “Mojo Pin” on his only album release, ‘Grace’, (Columbia Records, 1994). This line got me thinking about embodiment and vulnerability.
3. In the sense that the primarily Western socio-historical discursive matching of ‘women’ and ‘nature’ has provided a space and even a necessity for ecofeminist politics.
4. This is an important concept put forward by Val Plumwood with the intention of avoiding reductionist analyses of power. She writes:

Much feminist theory has detected a masculine presence in the officially gender-neutral concept of reason. In contrast my account suggests that it is not a masculine identity pure and simple, but the multiple, complex cultural identity of the master formed in the context of class, race species and gender domination, which is at issue. This cultural identity has framed the dominant concepts of Western thought, especially those of reason and nature. The recognition of a more complex dominator identity is, I would argue, essential if feminism is not to repeat the mistakes of a reductionist programme such as Marxism, which treats one form of domination as central and aims to reduce all others to subsidiary forms of it which will ‘wither away’ once the ‘fundamental’ form is overcome. (1993, 5)

5. It should be noted, however, that two of the most recent books on ecofeminism devote considerable attention to embodiment, namely Mellor (1997) and Salleh (1997).
6. This discourse is highly ubiquitous. A further example is when vegetarians are told that removing meat from their diet is ‘unnatural’.
7. This is no doubt a slightly mischievous assertion on my part since some ecofeminist positions may indeed resist such theories. So, here I am referring to those ecofeminisms that are well aware of the recent developments in feminist theories, and it is these that I identify with (e.g., Plumwood 1993). Some writers have begun to demarcate a boundary against essentialist ecofeminisms by

referring to their own position as ‘ecological feminism’ (e.g., Cuomo 1998). While these are the writers I find more relevance with I am not yet convinced of the usefulness of such a demarcation.

8. Recent ecofeminist theory also draws upon this strategy and influences me here, for example, Noël Sturgeon (1997) and Mary Mellor (1997). Interestingly, both of these allude to the ecofeminist relevance of Diana Fuss’s (1989) work.
9. The tendency of some postmodern positions to advance a discursively essentialist position may be connected to the critique (for example, by some feminists) of postmodernism as less political. It seems clear that liberation theories require a notion of how actual material bodies feel and experience *pain*.
10. Val Plumwood has also employed Ruether’s term (1993, 46; 1995, 163) and I thank her for correcting me on the identity of its original author.
11. Though obviously it is not always an inferiorizing move to associate people with animals. So it is important to be aware of the particular meaning attributed to certain peoples and certain other species in differing contexts (see Baker 1993).
12. It may strike some readers as highly insensitive to include the example of ‘farm animals’ here. This is a debate in itself. The dissonance you may have experienced is similar to that felt by some feminists when reading ecofeminist arguments which compare the oppression of nature/animals with that of women. It is sometimes felt as degrading when human and nonhuman oppression is juxtaposed in such proximity. I would argue that this dissonance is a result of the movement for animal ethics being one that remains before its time. This movement remains up against the considerable forces of naturalization, which keep hierarchy locked away in a safe space, largely hidden from mass reflection and critique. These are the same forces which feminism and antiracism had to (and of course still do) deal with also.
13. It may be said that Norbert Elias did not sufficiently take into account the effect of the public/private divide in filtering these changes. Thus one would assume that the majority do not exert so much control over their bodies at home where threats of social/moral judgement are reduced. However, I do not think that this argument detracts from Elias’s main point: that there *have* been important discernible changes in the way we regard our embodied embeddedness, and that this sensibility is no longer confined to bourgeois culture.
14. This children/adult distinction remains very much mapped onto nature/culture, with descriptive labels such as ‘childish’ performing a similar function to, for example, when someone is animalized.
15. As Elias pointed out, this ‘research’ was, rather, “a collection of personal observations” (1939, 71).
16. Though certainly, more recently, capital has spied opportunities of profit in the critique of white, male, middle-class bodies.

17. The reader may notice how physiognomy is the visual expression of the discredited 'correspondence theory of truth' usually discussed in relation to language: the belief in an unproblematic relation between words and things.
18. The Italian Della Porta (1536–1615) and Swiss Johann Lavater (1741–1801) are important figures here. However, given that Plato wrote on physiognomy it is clear that this was not only an Enlightenment discourse.
19. Readers should recall that 'homogenized thinking' or 'stereotyping' is an aspect of dualism, as articulated by Plumwood (1993).
20. The use of the word 'distort' should not, I assume, be read as implying a belief in an original essence in Plumwood's (1992) thinking.
21. My notion of coalition here concurs with that of Plumwood (1994). This is not about subsuming single groups; rather it is about mobile coalitions with single groups having a heightened reflexivity to interconnection. This is more complex than it sounds, since it requires an ecological awareness among traditionally humanist groups, and a feminist awareness among male-dominated groups, and so on.
22. It is noted that Fanon's analysis was disappointingly lacking in a gender component.

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