Material Bodies: Bodies as Situations

Bodies are material and bodies matter, especially when things go wrong, but they also matter when things go right. As chapter 5 demonstrates, much of the debate about visibility, invisibility and silence involves bodies and corporeality. Bodies invoke the senses and sensation and, in explaining the status of the category woman and a politics of difference, embodiment carries specific meanings as well as generating problems and questions. The body seems to offer the boundaries of the self (Price and Shildrick, 1999), a tangible manifestation of the person (Bourdieu, 1984) and are important sites of difference among women and between women and men. Body practices are the source of success and human achievement as well as the body being the site of pain and the limit to what we are each able to do. Bodies are particular to each of us, no more so than in the experience of physical breakdown, yet bodies are also social. Gender is one of the categories universally applied, as Butler (1993) argues, at the moment a human being arrives in the world; the newborn is labelled by the equivalent of the pink or blue blanket as signifiers of sex which, she argues, starts the series of iterative, ritualised norms that create sex itself. Gender difference and the classification of humans into one of the two universally used categories have traditionally been made on grounds of visible, physical difference. However, social constructivist arguments that emphasise the discursive formation of the body through processes of inscription marginalise the materiality of the body.

One of the manifestations of the interrelationship between the social and the personal, the natural and the social, is apparent when we consider that this body is always a dressed body. It is subject to the social conventions of clothing, which are culturally and gender-specific, yet as these items of clothing are worn on the body it is also through
this clothing, how it allows us to move, and the cultural competences (Mauss, 1973) that pertain to this, that we experience this. Feminist thinking has been enormously influential in demonstrating the ways in which differences among and between people have been created through the meanings that are given to the bodies we have. Women have always been more closely associated with the body, its frailties and contingencies, than men in western culture; nature is itself called ‘mother nature’, as noted by scholars commenting on western culture (Spelman, 1982; Sulieman, 1986, Schiebinger, 2000) and anthropologists (MacCormack and Strathern, 1980). The history of bodies is significant because ‘gender differences are not fixed in the character of the genes but arise from specific histories and from specific divisions of labour and power between the sexes’ (Schiebinger, 2000: 1). Feminists, along with other critics like Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias, although not always from the same perspective, argue that bodies are cultural and political as well as biological. As Grosz argued in Volatile Bodies, ‘the stability of the unified body image, even the so-called normal subject, is always precarious. It cannot simply be taken for granted as an accomplished fact, for it must be continually renewed’ (1994: 43–4).

This reflects an intellectual movement towards the disappearing body and raises some of the important contemporary questions about the extent of mobility on embodiment and the implications this has for the further destabilisation of the category woman.

Bodies and embodiment have emerged as important aspects of feminist concerns with difference, which have often been framed by the question of essentialism. Feminist critiques have made significant contributions to the corporeal turn in the social sciences and humanities. However, the materiality of bodies has led to an elision with biology, in an equation of body and fixity or reductionism. This has the unfortunate consequences that an emphasis on social constructionism and a disregard for the specificities of embodied experience have sometimes ensued as the only possible and positive route into political activism. The debates that we have raised in previous chapters, such as those that focus on the tensions between equality and difference and the contradictions and tensions of visibility and invisibility, highlight the relevance of embodiment to feminist politics and the generation of feminist theories. Most notably, the matter of bodies raises questions about how to configure feminist political projects that relate to lived experience. This chapter focuses on the problem of bodies and embodied difference. Bodies also present particular problems in relation to the category woman. The body may be fighting back (Griggers, 2005) and