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Cultured bodies – the social construction of the body

The body, which is central to dance, is socially constructed. This means that bodily behaviour is learnt rather than 'natural' and meanings which may be attributed to the body change over time and according to social circumstances. Whilst social context is significant it is also important to recognise the subversive potential of the body. Such a stance offers a challenge to the traditional interpretations of the body and so it is of particular advantage to women and to the status of dance. In this chapter I discuss how the body is socially constructed through concepts such as dualism, 'the natural', 'the essential self' and 'the feminine' which are evident in institutional practices such as the family, education and the arts. The subversive potential of the body is diminished through such constructions and women in dance, in order to have their work taken seriously, have to confront negative attitudes which arise from these constructions. In Western society we are surrounded with paradoxical messages about the body. On the one hand we are urged to keep fit, be healthy and enjoy physicality, on the other hand physical education and dance are generally perceived to be of less value than 'academic' subjects and manual work is often viewed as less significant than 'intellectual' work.

Dualism

These messages are examples of dualism which is concerned with two independent principles of, for example, good and evil and

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separates mind from body. Dualism is an obstacle to reclaiming women's power in Western society because women are traditionally denigrated through their perceived association with evil, the body and nature. At the same time, men are traditionally elevated by their perceived association with good, the mind and culture. Without the dualism which permeates our language, it would not be possible to write of 'the body' or of 'the mind'. The terms would be meaningless. However, the references in this book to 'the body' refer to the 'lived body' which assumes a body/mind position as far as possible, rather than in opposition to 'the mind' (Fraleigh, 1987).

References in dance classes and dance literature to the 'body as an instrument' and the need to be 'present with both mind and body' reinforce a notion of separation so that it is more 'mind over matter' than a 'lived body' or a 'thinking body' (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 9). Such references in the teaching and learning of dance encourage dancers to view dance training as purely physical. This results in a perception of the body as a machine, an object to be worked into shape. It is this approach which can lead to damage through injury when dancers push themselves too hard. In addition, dance training which endorses this approach limits the potency of the body through harsh control. But dance also offers the potential for an anti-dualist stance with the recognition that the 'body is not something I possess to dance with. . . . I do not order my body to bend here and whirl there. I do not think "move", and then move. . . . My dance is my body as my body is myself' (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 32). However, if dance is marginalised within society this liberating potential is hidden and reduced (Dempster, 1988). These values associated with a dualist position, which evolved during the Enlightenment when men were identified as more rational than women, restrict both women's and men's potential (Caplan, ed., 1987).

The early modern dancers in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s countered many of the negative connotations associated with the body. The dancers were one of the main symbols of the New Woman who emerged after decades of women trying to free their bodies through art, exercise and dress reform (Kendall, 1979). Doris Humphrey, an American modern dance choreographer in this period, began her lectures by describing modern dance as a theatre art 'of our time' saying that,

Dancers found that they were people first with new attitudes and feelings about life in a world of vast sociological, psychological and historical change... The old forms would not do, the resources of the human body had to be enlarged (renewed), revitalized to contain the new dance (Cohen, 1972, p. 118).

The women dancers of this time created movement from themselves as 'thinking bodies', recognising the futility of a practice which attempted to separate physical and thought processes. The path of modern dance parallels women's growing awareness that we have a right to instigate change and be involved in the social, political and economic areas of society.

The portrayal of women as either good or bad, virgin or whore, mother or mistress is another manifestation of dualism which confines women. Isadora Duncan, a pioneer of modern dance at the beginning of the twentieth century, attempted to solve this polarisation by thinking of her body as a temple which was exulted by the intellect and spirit which it encased. To her the idea that lust could be evoked in the audience by her body was unthinkable (Jowitt, 1988). Whilst this solution did not avoid dualism it can be seen as a positive view rejecting women's denigration. However, women in dance have to combat the frequently made connection between sexuality and dance if they wish to convey their own message. Sexual display and meanings are evident both in ballet and contemporary dance when for example, women are presented as desirable. Such meanings fit in very well with society's demand for a perfect body. Dance also provides images of 'the superhuman body in motion' (Copeland, 1986b, p. 12) and is sometimes viewed as a threat to moral standards (see Chapter 1).

It is commonly assumed that women are to be identified more with the body than men because of our bodily cycles and reproductive abilities. 'This closeness to the body is a potential source of danger in a rational technically orientated culture, in that this "nature" can erupt into the culture in the form of erratic or irrational behaviour' (Thomas, 1982b, p. 6). This potential subversiveness of the body offers a rich resource for women for social change. However, the fear of the eruption of 'nature' into culture results in a wide variety of social controls. Yolande Snaith uses some of these controls as an inspiration for her dance *Gems* (1989, a development of *Lessons in Social Skills*, 1988):

Extracts from *The Young Ladies Journal* 1866 provide the ingredients for a concoction of surrealist recipes, absurd demonstrations and moral sermons on matters such as vice and virtue, domestic education, etiquette and acceptable social behaviour (programme note).

The 'natural'

What is 'natural'? When comparing different societies it becomes apparent that a 'natural' way of doing things is culturally specific and not 'natural' at all. Margaret Mead's (1970) studies were influential for women's understanding of our roles and for the details they provided of the varied manifestations of gender in different societies. In particular her evidence made clear that that which is associated with men has status and power and that which is associated with women does not.

Until about 1860, sexual roles, marriage and the family were assumed to be 'natural'. However, for the next thirty years anthropologists showed that the Victorian middle class ideal family was not part of nature but the result of a resistance to nature. Such discoveries did not benefit women, because the male anthropologists used this information to justify women's confined roles within English culture (Caplan, ed., 1987). Victorian England was shown to be elevated from a 'savage state'. 'Savages' were equated with nature and sexuality connected with animality. Many anthropologists argued that the control of sexuality was crucial to the continuation of civilisation.

These Victorian values have continued to influence current attitudes. Some major dance studies have been criticised for ethnocentric approaches. For example, Sachs, in his much quoted study, *World History of the Dance* (1963) treats his own culture as complex and dispersed and other so called 'primitive' cultures as simple and static. In much dance history 'primitive' dance is cited and then Western dance is discussed more fully. The lack of detail applied to the former is, as Youngerman (1974) argues, to imply its inferiority. Rust (1969), Lomax (1978) and Langer (1973) all fall into the trap of assuming that because dance is important in some small-scale societies it is important in all of them (Thomas, 1986). Nonetheless, it is important to consider these studies as they illustrate some of the values which underpin the study of dance.

In Western societies dance as social activity and dance as art have become separate areas with art holding an elevated position. This has particular repercussions for women who have 'object-status' as performers.

Some artists, for example, Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly are concerned to deconstruct the 'natural' in their work. Marianne Wex (1979) is also concerned with this task in her photographic study of female and male postures and gestures. Her book makes clear the fact that women learn acceptable bodily posture and behaviour which is different from that of men. One example of this is a page of photographs of men's and women's standing postures. The line of male photographs are at the top of the page with the line of female photographs at the bottom. She organises them in this way, because this order reflects the patriarchal hierarchy. The men are all standing with their legs apart and hands clasped behind their back. The women are standing with their legs together and their arms crossed in front of them. The differing attitudes to their bodies and the amount of space used is very illuminating. Men clearly feel more at ease in presenting themselves and taking up a good deal of space whereas women shrink from the space and try to enclose themselves.

Another example from Wex's book is one of sitting postures. In these photographs the men sit legs apart sprawled out into space whereas the women sit with legs closed, again with arms crossed over themselves, as if for protection. Wex says that she takes for granted that women and men learn to move differently from an early age. She argues that this female and male body language is related to other female and male tasks.

'The essential self'

Theories of 'the natural body' and 'the essential self' have an appeal which has attracted some feminists. But does an 'essential self' exist? It is tempting when faced with a restrictive, oppressive set of social structures and practices to seek for a core untainted by such social confinement. However, whilst attempts to reclaim our identities and creations of utopian visions may empower us and enable us to envisage alternatives, they cannot be a substitute for a clear

perception of the factors which contribute to a socially constructed body (see Brown & Adams, 1979).

A reconsideration of the body from a feminist perspective entails a re-evaluation of the meaning of biology and its relation to psychological, social and cultural factors. Analysis of the body which resists binary oppositions offers a challenge to traditional perceptions and possibilities of new identities. Some French feminists, particularly, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, have focussed on a deconstruction of binary oppositions influenced by the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Their analyses of sexual difference reject the belief of fixed gender identities and a polarised opposition between male and female and offer instead a more fluid interchange of diverse elements. However, whilst the above can be a useful concept there is a danger of essentialism in their theses despite attempts to circumvent this. There is also the objection that their positions tend to discuss women universally without taking sufficient account of women's differences. Whilst Cixous' stance on the one hand usefully attempts to move away from a focus on the sex of the artist to a discussion of the place of sexuality and desire within the text (i.e. dance), Moi (1985) suggests that in other ways Cixous may actually not be undermining patriarchal ideology for example 'in her eagerness to appropriate imagination and the pleasure principle for women' (p. 123).

Cixous says, 'by writing herself woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display ... Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth' (in Marks & Courtivron, eds, 1985). The idea of the body being a means to discovery of the unconscious, 'the real self' is evident in some new dance practice (see Chapter 9). An underlying theme in many new dance workshops is the desire to free oneself of social constructions (Adair *et al.*, 1988). The value of such an approach is that it can offer a vision, as Cixous does, of women's creativity. Such a vision was Isadora Duncan's concern as she saw herself 'dancing the freedom of women' (see Chapter 6). However, the focus on expressing 'the essential self' and on the issue of whether women dance differently simply because they belong to the category 'woman' leads back to biological essentialism. These arguments result in a determined position, with no room for social change. The important point is that 'women do not [dance]

differently by virtue of being born with wombs but because they [have] learnt to become women' (Gunew, 1988).

Perceptions of the body do not remain constant. As Coward (1989) points out, the

body is no longer viewed as degenerate, subject to natural impulses, especially sexual impulses, which dragged man down among the animals . . . Nor, indeed, is it the sexually free body of the 1960s, where sexual connection was essentially the most important self-expression of the body. Instead, we have an essentially innocent body, born with whole-some impulses but gradually worn down by the hostile world (pp. 50-1).

'The 'feminine''

In the theatrical tradition of Western culture, the dancing body is often discussed in terms of the 'feminine', as for example Balanchine's statement that ballet is a 'woman, a garden of beautiful flowers' (quoted in Dempster, 1988, p. 38). As Dempster points out, 'it follows within the logic of patriarchal social order that its power [the 'feminine'] and the power of the body must be controlled, constrained, disguised or denied' (1988, p. 38). Aspects of this control are evident in traditional dance training.

Part of this control is woman's social role in which she learns to defer to others rather than to be the main actor in her own life. Given this framework, it is not surprising that female dancers accept male choreography which reinforces this view. This deference results in women undervaluing and feeling insecure about ourselves and our opinions. We also learn that part of our social role is to be connected to others and to shape our lives according to a man.

The social taboo against being an autonomous woman is internalised. Self-containment and separateness feel selfish, self-centred, and even aggressive for a woman . . . Since connection to others must be maintained, a woman must make herself into a person others will find pleasing; in making herself in their image she may end up not knowing who she is (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1982, p. 28).

Here then is part of the dilemma for female dancers. They are socialised as women to please others, their training encourages them to be performers rather than creators. The image of the ballerina is

a popular one with young girls and idealises 'feminine' aspects of woman. The reason more women do not challenge such an image, either as dancers or as audience, can be understood when one recognises how much woman's socialisation complements the female dancer's role and how much most dance images epitomise the 'feminine' (Furse & Lansley, 1977).

However, as McRobbie (1984) points out, there are contradictory aspects to women's role within dance. On the one hand there are social expectations that girls learn dance because it is a suitable 'feminine' leisure activity or career. The control of the body and presentation of girls and women for admiration are part of these expectations. On the other hand there are aspects of dance which can provide a space for resistance. Within fantasy, dance plays a role in an area which 'cannot be totally colonised' (p. 134). Also the popular ballet stories in girls' comics and books offer an alternative to the roles of domesticity which are the usual social realms for women.

Another role women learn is to nurture. The expectation is that women will care for others and assist them to express what they need. So if we look at the female dancer's role and male choreographer's role from knowledge of these socialising methods, it can be seen that they match exactly. The male choreographer has been taught that he has a right to consider the world his, that he is a human being rather than just a man and that women are there to meet his emotional needs. The female dancer has been taught that her role is to defer to others and to help them express their needs. The two are an ideal fit. The roles mirror those of society and it is hardly surprising that choreography is predominantly a male occupation.

Bodily expression

Women's physical expression is a key question in relation to dance. However, there has been an understandable ambivalence towards the body in feminist theory. The body has been cited as a source of women's oppression and there has been a good deal of focus on control of the body in terms of reproduction rights and fighting sexual harassment. It is not surprising that some feminists have taken on the mind over body stance of dualism, ignoring the 'lived-

body'. Nevertheless, a significant feminist theme has been the transformation of biological sexual differences into culturally gendered identities. Discussion of women's bodily oppression and the cultural meanings associated with our bodies has come from women's lived experiences and feminist research. So, from the oppressive effects of rape, pornography and domestic violence to the potential of sexuality, reproduction, sport and fitness, dress reform and paid work, new theories of the body are being formed (Allen & Grosz, 1987). Women's performance work has particularly challenged cultural norms and forged new perceptions as evidenced, for example, in M. Roth's book *The Amazing Decade* (1983).

So is bodily expression 'natural' or socially constructed? There have been two major traditions of study. The first is the evolutionary tradition, following Darwin. The universalists hold the view that bodily expression is either innate or inherited and cross-culturally universal. They, therefore, assume that similar behaviour patterns can be understood by people from different cultures without reference to the social context in which they take place. This view reinforces the 'natural' and does not offer the potential of social change for women. In contrast, the interpretative symbolic tradition following Durkheim presents the view that movement is learnt and culturally variable. This view offers women the potential for change because learnt behaviour can clearly be modified.

Mauss (1973) considers different bodily techniques in a variety of cultures. He takes into account the biological and psychological aspects and concludes that these techniques are governed by what we learn in society.

Dance as a symbolic art form consciously attends to its bodily technique through its encoded system. What Mauss seeks to show is that natural everyday movement is also a symbolic form with an encoded system, but that its form is treated by societal members as natural (non-social) behaviour (Thomas, 1982a, p. 5).

Douglas develops Mauss' work further and maintains that there is a reciprocal relationship between society and the body, with each symbolising the other. In *Purity and Danger* (1970) she considers the body's boundaries and maintenance of these, illustrating the information about a society which these offer. In *Natural Symbols* (1973) she concludes from the fact that all societies have a form of bodily symbolism that there is a natural tendency for the body to

express society, although this needs to be considered within a particular system. She says that the 'social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society' (1973, p. 93). So in viewing the body in dance, we will also be viewing aspects of society.

One aspect of which is, as Thomas (1982b) points out, how bodily expression is discussed in different categories of literature. The popular journalism approach aims to teach people how to understand gestures and postures. A typical focus of such books is advice for men on how to interpret women's body language so that sexual advances may be made more easily (for example, see J. Fast, 1971). There are also psychological studies which stress the positive aspects of communicating non-verbally (Montagu, 1978).

Nancy Henley (1977) in her book *Body Politics* attempts to show that differences in non-verbal behaviour in terms of sex, race and class can be shown to be power differences which are learnt to keep the status quo. Henley recognises that although the body can be studied in isolation the main concern is to understand bodily behaviour in its social context. People are concerned about this form of communication because there is an assumption that it can reveal our 'true selves' in ways that speech cannot. 'We view body movement as pre-linguistic, and expressive of some inner emotional state' (Thomas, 1982b, p. 4). This is also an existing notion in dance theory and dance anthropology. However, the study of non-verbal behaviour can only tell us about particular socially learnt traits which we display bodily. It can be an important aspect of change to alter physical behaviour patterns, for example, so that women take up more space and men stop invading women's space; women stop smiling inappropriately and men begin displaying emotion. However, such action is not a substitute for changing the social order, rather a step towards it.

The American tradition of study of the body as a medium of expression has been developed by ethnographers and anthropologists. Birdwhistell (1972) and Hall (1969) have studied everyday movement and interpersonal spatial relations using communication and linguistic models. They have developed theories concerned with the way the conceptual sense of the physical body is socially constructed. Goffman's (1972) tradition is concerned with uncover-

ing the social rules governing people's spatial behaviour and territoriality. This work can inform us of the ways in which dance technique, choreography and performance convey meanings which we understand and interpret in the social setting and also the ways in which social values inform our viewing, production and performance of dance. It is interesting to note, however, that, despite the power of bodily communication which these studies make clear, when dancers want to make their work more accessible or political they frequently include verbal language. Hence many women's choreographies with a political bias have used words, for example, Lansley *Frank* (1986), Sergy *Gold* (1988), Claid *Grace and Glitter* (1987), Snaith *Lessons in Social Skills* (1988).

A reviewer writing about *Real Life Adventures* (1985), (see Figure 26) choreographed and performed by Mary Fulkerson, lamented the fact that the dancers needed speech training but enjoyed the way they could not hide behind their technique and were forced to contact the audience. She concluded, 'Perhaps there was something unnatural about those silent bodies and it's simply a relief to know that they can speak' (Mackrell, 1985, p. 35). This comment demonstrates our uneasiness with physical communication without the much safer, known world of language. For women, however, because bodily communication is largely unrecognised and unvalued, the female performer can be viewed as an object. When women use voice in performance they challenge this view, they become speaking human beings to be taken seriously rather than objects to be dismissed.

Institutional practices

Clearly, attitudes towards the body have not remained static in the course of history. Such changes are apparent in the institutions and practices of, for example, religion, education, medicine, the family and art. These changes are also revealed in dance styles. The formal placement of the ballet dancer which evolved from the aristocracy of Western Europe, was challenged by modern dancers whose expressionist style was determined by their specific creative needs. Each choreographer shaped the body in their own particular way. The postmodern dancers jettisoned 'trained bodies' for 'any old bodies of our any old lives' (Johnstone, 1971, p. 137). It is evident

that, whilst it has not necessarily been the case in the past, there is the possibility for these changing attitudes and assumptions towards the body to benefit women.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault argues that the economic changes of the eighteenth century which elicited popular dissent led to a requirement for more systematic control over individuals. The invention of prisons and legal hierarchies were for the purpose of social control with an emphasis on 'reform' rather than punishment. This resulted in training individuals to be docile and useful and similar forces were apparent in the army, education and the work place. Foucault's description of training docile but useful bodies can be applied to dance training. From 'an inept body, the machine required can be constructed; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit' (p. 135). Traditional dance classes emphasise control of the body, working for stamina, flexibility and strength at the same time as creating automatic responses. The power employed in such training is not only repressive but also productive. The role of the body is significant here because it is trained to be active and useful. 'The power of the body corresponds to the exercise of power over it. Hence the possibility of a reversal of that power' (Sheridan, 1980, p. 219).

The discipline of the above institutions is in addition to learnt behaviour within the family. It is within the family that we learn what is socially acceptable and what is not, including bodily control. The role of the family changed in the twentieth century. Earlier the family, as part of the capitalist structure, distributed property. Today one of its main roles is that of consumer. The myth of the idealised family and the particular organisation and ideology which goes with it is central to women's oppression. Part of this oppression is the way sexual desire is restrained and used by the dominant power (Foucault, 1981).

The potential power of the body is limited by the commercialisation and commodification of sex. We receive the message that sex and bodies exist to be consumed. Consumerism works by creating everlasting desire in the consumer and much of this is focussed on the body. Foucault suggests that the revolt of the body is no longer controlled by repression but rather by stimulation. So now we are told to display as much of our bodies as we can, provided they are

attractive and slender (Foucault, Gordon, ed., 1980). However, Outram (1989) suggests that a Foucaultian analysis is less than adequate in terms of women and men. There is no place for the question 'Whose body?', which is clearly of central importance to women as it is our bodily experience which is so often confined.

Changes in attitudes and social conditions

Dance roles are very much influenced by the prevailing views of societies which change over periods of time as do attitudes to the body. A hierarchical model of the body has existed from ancient times to the eighteenth century. This model established woman's body as inferior and an inverted version of the male body. In this view, woman's reproductive organs were considered as underdeveloped equivalents of male organs (Gallagher & Lacqueur, eds, 1987).

In Victorian society the body was central to social communication. There was an obsession with sanitation and with excluding body contact where possible (Gallagher & Lacqueur, eds, 1987). Class and gender differences were consolidated through notions of correct behaviour which were partly realised through the body so that by their external behaviour, 'ladies and gentlemen' were clearly distinguishable from each other and from other classes (Stone, 1977, p. 257; also Davidoff, 1983).

The dominant views about women have permeated all forms of knowledge so that scientists generally reinforce the idea that nature is a basis for social inequality. In the study of anatomy, in the early nineteenth century, the 'ideal' woman's skeleton was thought to be a wide pelvis, narrow neck, small rib cage and relatively tiny skull. The smallness of skulls and special adaptation of pelvises in female skeletons led scientists to assume that women were 'in the depth of their bones . . . unsuitable for intellectual labour' (Gallagher & Lacqueur, eds, 1987, p. ix). There is a paradox central to modern science with regard to women. Women were denied equality (and access to science) in the eighteenth century so that when scientific investigations into the nature of women were undertaken, women were excluded from the body of researchers. Yet it is frequently scientific results which are used to justify our exclusion. It was argued that woman's ability to produce children, even if she did not do so, dictated her health and she was, therefore, defined by her

reproductive ability (Gallagher & Lacqueur, eds, 1987). Women's viewpoints were totally disregarded. Only scientific language was listened to by the medical profession and as women had been excluded they inevitably spoke a different language.

The female body was, then, a silenced body and a space in which meanings could proliferate: 'What medical men identified as women's sexuality was obviously as thoroughly what they did not want to see in themselves as it was what real women felt' (Poovey, 1987, p. 155). The female dancing body too is usually silent and attracts many meanings. However, silent images can be powerful and women in new dance recognised both the potential and the need to connect their dancing with the wider social context. They were concerned not to create just another new 'look' which could easily be appropriated, but to express their own viewpoints (Furse and Lansley, 1977; see Chapter 9).

Breaking the bounds of silence

The colonisation of women's bodies within the media and art practices has been so pervasive that we may be forgiven for assuming that this must always have been the case. However, whilst in the visual arts, in the past two hundred years, it is the female nude which has so obsessed artists, for nearly two thousand years previously, it was the male nude which was central to visual arts (Walters, 1978).

In the two formative periods of Western art, the Classical Greek and the early Italian Renaissance, the male body was of crucial importance. At both of these times there was a curiosity about the make-up of the human body and the belief of man as god and central to the world. Hence the figures which artists created reflected these beliefs and they produced idealised images of the human body. The study of the nude has been central to artistic training from the fifteenth century to the present day. However, gender stereotypes abound, with the posture and movements of the male nude suggesting potency and those of the female suggesting passivity. Giorgione's Venus, whose eyes are closed, 'is at once receptive and mysterious, endlessly desirable because any desire can be projected on to her' (Walters, 1978, p. 8; this point is developed in relation to dance in Chapter 4).

Feminism is concerned with intervening in cultural practices and making new readings. The issues of sexual difference, power, sexuality and gender are now seen as relevant to art work. Radical social change is the aim of the Women's Movement, which in turn threatens male domination of politics and ideology, often resulting in hostility. Many feminist art practices focus on women's bodies, for example, those of Sonia Boyce, Judy Chicago, Cate Elwes, Suzanne Santoro and Susan Hiller. Some of these attempt to celebrate women's bodies, and bodily processes. Whilst these works fulfill an important function of removing the mystery, secrecy and disgust frequently associated with women's bodies, they are limited by the social context in which they are read. Unfortunately, attempts to decolonise women's bodies in art can frequently be reappropriated (Pollock, 1977). In addition, there is a contradiction in trying to form a women's culture based on our bodies and ideas of the feminine when we are also saying that these are distorted by patriarchal structures. Instead we need an understanding 'of *culture* as a collection of (ideological) representational practices and a concept of *women* produced as a category within the social totality' (Tickner, 1984, p. 16).

Conclusion

The above discussion indicates the changing attitudes and meanings attributed to the body which do not remain static. Rather the historical and class contexts affect attitudes and meanings towards the body and towards gender. Whilst it is clear that there are physiological differences between the sexes, what is important is how these differences are given meaning. The early training we receive in the family, through the education system and the messages we receive from the dominant culture, all contribute to the social construction of the body. The cultural practices of any particular group define and reflect ideas about the world and the behaviour which is expected of people within it. From this viewpoint it is possible to see that behaviour and attitudes are not fixed but are affected by cultural practices and social contexts. Therefore, challenges to the social structure and dominant culture can affect women's experiences of our bodies and contribute towards ending our oppression. In the next chapter, *Colonised Bodies* I discuss the

specific connections between women's oppression and our bodily experiences.