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PROLOGUE

There’s a war going on over our bodies. There are unexpected players and uncertain outcomes. As in any war, resources go from one side to the other. As in any war, the ideologies that are perpetrated make the players and the playing field fuzzy: sometimes we see what’s in view and other times it’s just our normality, like gravity, unrecognised but inescapable.

The terrain of the body is changing. New developments – #MeToo, artificial intelligence, epigenetics, trans, egg freezing, cosmetic surgery apps for six-year-olds, selfies, Snapchat dysmorphia, the Kardashians, the mirror neuron system, influencers, Black Lives Matter, rape as a weapon of war, gut politics, womb rentals, implants, sex dolls – require new thinking. Two trends are bucking up against each other: the difficulty of living in the bodies we currently inhabit, with their many predicaments, and the promise of trouble-free, almost body-free existence as we move towards futures constituted by algorithms, AI chemistry and synthetic biology. Add to this a potentially dystopian future painted by the New York Times in a recent editorial, alerting us to the likelihood of a conservative Supreme Court trumping the rights of the foetus over the rights of the mother. The paper argued that now, as certain states have banned abortion and switched the rights in this way, drinking and smoking during pregnancy might invite prosecution. One woman undergoing surgery for breast cancer discovered that she would have her cancer treatment withheld if she were found to be pregnant as the foetus’s rights were deemed paramount.
An understanding of the bodies we inhabit as biological organisms with limits is no longer enough. As late capitalism changes the conditions and nature of work, of climate and the environment, of notions of government and governance, of those who are allowed to belong and those who are seen as other and must be kept outside, as social media rewrites the terms of engagement and what it means to be seen and heard, so too the body becomes a battleground. It is being stretched and pressed into new forms of service, display and identity as, at the same moment, we are coached towards a dematerialised existence where almost everything we understand about living – eating, breathing, moving, feeling, relating – will occur in the realm of thought, not in the physical, worldly body.

In South Korea, jawbone shaving is such a common cosmetic surgery procedure that artworks made of glass towers containing the sawn-off bone fragments are displayed. Contact lenses which change the look of the pupil, enlarging it to make its wearer resemble a doll with enormous blue, grey, violet, green, brown, turquoise or black eyes, are even more popular. The YouTube star Anastasiya Shpagina from Odessa, who drew 5 million viewers to her instructional video on how to look like Miley Cyrus, and Kandee Johnson from Los Angeles, whose human transformation into a Barbie has had some 33 million viewers, meticulously demonstrate how to change one’s look into that of almost any celebrity through ingenious application of cosmetics, fillers and hairstyling as proficiently as any of Hollywood’s best make-up artists. Anyone, it seems, can look like anyone. Anyone can look like a Japanese cartoon doll. Anyone can look like Barbie or Ken. Indeed, Justin, another YouTuber, has undergone 125 procedures and spent $158,000 to make himself resemble...
Ken by transforming his torso, face, biceps, triceps and hair-line; over 16 million people have seen his video. In China beauty bloggers are big business. A special phone app made by Meitu allows for easy transformation of selfies into three grades of beautifying and at least 3 billion of the 6 billion photos uploaded monthly have been edited by this process. HoneyCC, a leading blogger and influencer whose commercial acumen has brought her considerable wealth through the promotion of products to adorn and transform the body, says altered selfies are part of Chinese culture now. The term wang hong lian (internet-celebrity face) is used to describe the look that characterises these photos. Shade of skin, shape of face, whiteness of teeth and styling are now available at the touch of a button.

Closer to home, influencers – that’s to say individuals with followers on Instagram and other platforms who can command audiences of 30,000 or more – are finding some commercial value in selling themselves doing beauty, doing bodies. This type of work is unrecognised as beauty labour, but that’s what it is. Not just the sell of the bloggers but the work we are all doing when we make ourselves up. My three-year-old granddaughter recently went to a birthday party in a nail bar where there were two mums and two nail technicians in attendance. Today I saw a man having his eyebrows threaded in a department store in almost open view. Beauty labour is increasingly deemed essential to girls, women and men. The question is: why? And how has this work, whether it is supplied through surgery, dentistry or visual filters, become desirable?

This book argues that bodies are made. They are no longer seen or experienced simply as things to be washed, deodorised, dressed and perfumed before getting on with our
day. Bodies now are our ever-malleable calling cards, either erasing or articulating our class, geographic and ethnic backgrounds and gender aspirations. Except this isn’t only benign. The bodies of black boys and men in London, especially, are under attack. The bodies of girls and women have always been targeted and every day we learn more about what continues to happen to them in war zones around the world – think of the Yazidi, Isis, the DCR. We can see the serious assaults that start in childhood when refugee children are separated from their parents, or girls are exposed to FGM, or boys and girls are exposed to paedophiles, while daily attacks on the streets on those who are deemed the wrong class, the wrong sex or just plain wrong are increasing.

At another level but running parallel are artifice and construction – an assault so different we may not recognise it as damaging, especially since it is presented as fun (and it can be) and sometimes even necessary.

Want to look like a movie star? A female academic who has got just the right amount of sex appeal but not too much? A banker with an artistic bent? Smoky, sexy, glamorous, come-hither, sultry, baby-doll … etc., etc. eyes? No problem. These looks, available online and in-store, are felt to be – may even be considered – prerequisites for jobs that have nothing to do with appearance, and yet appearance reigns.

The surface is all, as the clothes and make-up emporia show. Surgical interventions can create a calf muscle, a high cheekbone, a reduced or inflated lip, a bottom curvy or flat, breasts that are enlarged or reduced, tummies that are flat, jaw-lines that show perpetual youth. Rigid gendered rules are challenged as top surgery to remove breasts comes to coexist with a penis or an enhanced clitoris from testosterone treatment. Appearance is crucial whether surgeon or secretary. The look,
once achieved, must be endlessly shared and approved through selfies and sexting. Visual muzak erodes what was once private or personal. Experience – whether watching one’s child somersault or eating a meal – falters unless it is circulated so that it can be seen. We find ourselves documenting experience as though without the visual muzak nothing has happened.

The search for visual recognition and reassurance is so powerful that not checking oneself in a mirror for a period of time can seem odd, even a tad perverse. But perhaps it is what is needed in order to challenge the compulsive self-reflection we engage in without even realising how much we need it. In *Mirror, Mirror Off the Wall*, Kjerstin Gruys, an assistant professor in sociology at the University of Nevada, writes interestingly about her year without mirrors, a practice few would feel comfortable imitating for a week, let alone a year (indeed, the year in which she herself got married), and certainly not in an age of selfies, when teenage girls sculpt their appearance to garner ‘likes’ and approval which, sadly, they rarely achieve. Research done by Edelman and Strategy-One for Dove, presented at the Women in the World summit in October 2015, showed that it takes 124 likes to feel OK, but most tend to receive under a fifth of that number, not because they aren’t likeable but because everyone is chasing a like and time is against them. Living online, seeking recognition online, living through identification and wanting to emulate celebrities like Kim Kardashian are now commonplace for girls and young women, but again we have to ask: why?

Simultaneously there is a craving in the exchange of sexualised body parts in the sexting between teenagers – an updated version of ‘If you show me yours, I’ll show you mine.’ Only mine doesn’t remain yours, but ends up in the phones of your classmates and travels across continents, sometimes to
end up as porn fodder for paedophiles and for a more generalised translation of sex into seeing – an erotic that is all the less for being generally fetishised.

We’ve gone mad in relation to bodies. Highly profitable industries wage war on us, including the cosmetic, fashion, style, food, diet, health, anti-ageing, wellness, surgical, pharmaceutical and fitness industries, as they promote the body beautiful. These are not small businesses; they are huge and growing. Fashion was worth £32 billion to the UK in 2017 (compare that to £1.2 billion for the steel industry). Beauty and fashion dominate our department stores – both the real and the virtual. And as they do so there are deadly psychological costs for us as individuals, as well as environmental costs for the planet. Two of the richest men in Europe, Bernard Arnault of LVMH and Amancio Ortega of Zara, make their fortunes from fashion. The wealthiest woman, Francine Bettencourt Meyers, is heir to the L’Oréal fortune. There are also social costs for society as appearance ideals eat away at girls, and increasingly boys, and detract from their well-being and academic performance, as shown in a 2014 report prepared for the UK government. There are medical costs to the increase in body troubles and eating problems, whether expressed as anorexia, obesity or bulimia or, as is the case with most eating problems, unseen, because the person’s size alerts no one to the agonies they are in. There are few specialist services and little understanding of the exponential growth in eating and body distress. As long as governments focus on obesity, they miss the huge number of people trying to make their bodies real and alive to themselves through strange eating and non-eating behaviours or through cutting, spending copious hours in the gym or marking themselves. Rarely is the question asked: what is the problem for which this behaviour
(eating, not eating, throwing up, cutting, bingeing, compulsive exercising) is the answer? The problem of body insecurity and body instability, which has reached epidemic proportions and is increasingly affecting boys and men too, lives in a lacuna, lamented by professionals as though it is mysterious, despite its rise being commensurate with the commercialisation of the body, with its lethal physical, environmental and psychological effects.

There is a price to be paid, whether from having to remove dangerous breast or pectoral implants or from the repercussions of the growing demand for labiaplasty. Meanwhile enormous profits accrue to those industries that purport to be fun while wreaking havoc with an individual’s sense of self and their means to feel secure.

Body transformation has seeped into the everyday in ways unimaginable until recently. Childhood games include cosmetic surgery apps marketed to girls as young as six. The games look innocent and playful enough, but they aren’t. They carve up the body, detailing all the areas that can be transformed: not just the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the forehead, the chin, the cheekbones, the eyes, the hairline, but all the way down the body from breasts to waists, then hips, bums, leg shapes and feet. Most remarkably, marking up a body in this way is not shocking to youngsters, because body transformation has become part of the story they grow up into. They use iPads and filter images from early on. Pictures of little girls looking to camera in a glamourised come-hither way are not unusual. Nor are pictures of little boys dancing or doing gymnastic feats to camera. There is an audience to whom one displays oneself. Inner eyes become the first scrutiniser, as the little girl or boy decides how to perform and photo-perfect themselves. When we learn that one in three
girls won’t go for a smear test because they feel so bad about their bodies, we can see how being primed from early on to critically assess themselves makes for pervasively abject bodies.

Just as childhood has become commercialised, so it continues. By the time a woman is in her fifties she has already learned that the menopause is an inconvenience, not the marker of one stage of life into another. Whether or not bi-identical hormones or hormone replacement therapy may be helpful to some individuals, the way they are promoted and marketed by big and little pharma sends the message that eradication of hormonal change is the only sane and optimal way to live. While some women will undoubtedly find periods or the cessation of them difficult physically and/or psychologically, the message of eradication is pumped out along with dire warnings about memory and bone loss. We are not allowed to age. It is considered a disgrace, not a sign of knowledge, wisdom and then decline. Seventy is the new fifty. Only it isn’t. Twenty more years changes a person biologically and experientially. Longings and desires shift, new challenges arise, thoughts reflect a longer personal history and so on. This is so obvious and yet it is discounted.

Women are encouraged to extend the limits and inconveniences of reproductive prompts. Now a young woman may take the Pill continuously to stop having periods and then take hormone boosters to have her eggs extracted. Ageing is no longer considered an absolute barrier to reproduction. The spurious argument runs that it never mattered how old the father was so why worry about the age of the mother? Ageing and dying are now being reconceived as infirmities and potentially unnecessary. There is an almost weekly story in UK or US newspapers about the latest breakthrough to disrupt
ageing. Cryonics, fasting and research into the role of specific genes such as MC1R are all part of a new academic field that explores ageing. There are ‘senolytic’ drugs that kill old cells, while cancer drugs such as Dasatinib and Querticin are being repurposed to prolong life. It won’t be many years before gene therapy cosmetics hit the marketplace, claiming to reverse the disability of looking one’s biological age, while AI helps us retrieve memories and capabilities that have been lost.

Meanwhile chemicals are changing bodies. As Penelope Jagessar Chaffer detailed in her 2009 film Toxic Baby, Puerto Rican children living near the chemical plants which manufacture birth control pills are menstruating before they start school. This is a serious finding. A 2010 study published in Pediatrics showed that 15 per cent of American girls now begin puberty by the time they are seven years old. Why? The chemicals bisphenol A and various phthalates found in plastics and tins, combined with the additional hormone load used in industrial farming and therefore present in our food and water, are thought to disrupt the endocrine system. We are learning more and more about the ways in which human culture is affecting the water. As I write this, a report from California details the transformation of the sea’s ecology, with purple urchins attracted by its new warmth; but this is an urchin variety which then gobbles up the kelp which cleans the ocean. It’s not just our bodies; it’s the bodies of other species which are taking unexpected turns. A compelling example concerns frogs exposed to atrazine, a chemical compound sprayed on corn, salad and other crops which has run off into frog habitats, turning tadpoles hermaphroditic. Dr Tyrone Hayes of the University of California at Berkeley has shown how the herbicide reduces testosterone levels in nominally male frogs to below that of female frogs.
Human gender-bending challenges the restricted and restricting notions of femininities and masculinities, as emphasised in this recent period where hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity have been reinstituted in response to the gender challenges instigated in the 1970s. With this has come a rise in our awareness of trans people and the possibilities of individuals changing their secondary sexual characteristics. But this cultural moment, which many welcome, cannot be said to be equivalent in frogs, whose volition is nil. Paradoxically, while culture is changing fast, nature is changing faster, because of chemicals and drillings and water diversions that damage our planet. And these changes may be irreversible.

This book questions why and how our bodies have become so available for transformation – transformations that first stimulate, but then fail to stem the hurt and horrors that affect us as individuals, as well as our environment. It examines what is happening to bodies in our time and why, introducing some extreme examples while at the same time asking the reader to review some of the very ordinary things we find ourselves doing. It presents developmental theory from the perspective of the body, showing the ways in which early family life can inadvertently foster various kinds of body insecurities, creating the sense that the body we live in is alienated, somehow not our true body. It discusses visual culture and the way it is affecting us, offering us a form of belonging through the personal replication of the images we see, and it looks at the ways in which the visual representation of a particular kind of Westernised body is enticing young people in those countries entering modernity through globalism to take up a body that may be at odds with the one they have. The attempts by young people in countries as diverse as Japan, Fiji, Saudi Arabia and Kenya to refashion their bodies
reveal the sorrow of troubled bodies around the world. Body hatred is one of the West’s hidden exports.

A search for contentment focused around the body is a hallmark of our times. As we meet people in difficulty, I hope to answer the question of why bodily contentment can be so hard to find. I look at phantom limbs and overabundant ones, and at body transformations, from cutting to cosmetic surgery, and seek to find out why such procedures are growing in number. Why is sex a must-have, wrapped up with performance and saturated with fantasy in a way that would have had Freud reeling? How might we understand the promise of redemptive bodies? What is wrong with our bodies as they are and why?

By probing these questions, I hope to theorise the bodies of today. Bodies are not in any sense matter-of-fact, the simple outcome of our DNA. Poised between a time when for many in the West bodies are no longer used to produce goods and one in which replacement body parts from hair to toes and personalised medication are promised, let alone the threat and promise of AI, with its dematerialisation of the body, it’s no wonder we are trapped in confusion. What exactly are these bodies we are trying to live in? What kind of part of us do they constitute? How are we to relate to them? How long will we have them for? I want to leave the reader with an expanded understanding of our bodies, to bolster our resilience in the face of unprecedented attack and to bring sustainability to our bodies so that we can live with and from them more peaceably for as long as we have them.

Fighting body oppression, fat shaming and body hatred can sound trivial, but it isn’t. It is driven by what appears to be, on the one hand, soft-sell yet insistent marketing practices and, on the other, brutal production processes which despoil
the environment while exploiting workers in countries all over the world, from the nail bar workers of New York City to the seamstresses of Bangladesh, Vietnam and, nearer to home, Sicily.\(^8\) Seen together, this amounts to a targeting of girls’ and women’s bodies. If we then think about the more recognised forms of violence, such as rape as a weapon of war, sexual violence, sexual harassment, the theft of women’s sexual pleasure and reproductive rights through FGM and so on, we see that women are vulnerable in what ought to be the most taken-for-granted place of safety, their bodies.

The upsurge of protest because they aren’t safe is important, as are the millions of conversations and the thousands of blogs and websites that contest the status quo and agitate for the body to be allowed to exist in all its magnificent varieties, strengths and vulnerabilities.

The Nobel Peace Prize 2018 recognised this and yet commerce and warlords act with impunity, creating a field in which women’s bodies are considered ripe for all manner of picking. #MeToo is an important fightback. It is related to the argument in this book about how we urgently need to change our relationship to our bodies. The breeding of body insecurity makes us vulnerable to exploitation in complex ways. As we take this topic on seriously, we will restructure our dialogue, not only to express our despair, but also to link individual hurt with action that stops this cruelty.

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