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Body Bazaar: The Market for Human Tissue in the Biotechnology Age

Lori Andrews, Dorothy Nelkin

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Body Bazaar: The Market for Human Tissue in the Biotechnology Age Lori Andrews, Dorothy Nelkin In the age of biotechnology, the body is speaking to us in new ways. Our DNA, blood, and bones — our very being! — have acquired currency in an exceedingly bizarre fashion that we could not have imagined even a decade ago. Valued as both a source of information and the raw material for commercial products, the tissues in a single human being can now attract millions of dollars, and with them new commercial uses for human blood and body tissue. Because of this, the risks --we face both individually and as a society --are massive and should be understood by everyone.

Body parts are useful to researchers and entrepreneurs, insurers and employers, law-enforcement authorities and immigration officials. And they are more easily available than most people suspect. Nearly all of us have blood and tissue on file. Whenever you have a blood test, a biopsy, or surgery, that tissue is potentially available without your consent. Genetic testing is mandatory in many contexts, and our DNA may become our primary identification --the social security number of the future.

Human tissue is crucial to health care, but it has also become a medium for artists who have found ways to sculpt in blood and to plastinate skin. Interior decorators buy human skulls in body boutiques. DNA can even be used to run computers, since its replications provide more memory than the binary code. As the body market expands, people have been dismayed to discover that their eggs have been given to other women without their consent and that scientists and biotech companies are making huge profits by secretly patenting their cell lines and genes.

Andrews and Nelkin illuminate the business of bodies, telling individual stories to show the profound psychological, social, and financial impacts of the commercialization of human tissue. They explore the problems of privacy and social control that arise with the extraction of information from the body, and the provocative questions of profit and property that follow the creation of marketable products from human bodies.

Their findings are shocking, groundbreaking revealing the existence of a $17 billion body business in a true story that reads like science fiction.

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