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Outsiders Within

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The Soldier and the Enemy:

Fat Bodies in the United States

In the social sciences, it is easy to analyze complex issues from the comfort of an armchair. On the aloof academic pedestal separating my identity from my work, I bemoan the systemic conditions that perpetuate homelessness and return to my bed at night. I criticize the apathetic white South African during apartheid and benefit, as a white person, from a paradigm of institutionalized racism in the United States. To be honest I wanted to largely ignore problems I myself faced. How could I be impartial, equitable, intellectual, about something holding sway over me emotionally?

I began to realize ignoring aspects of my identity that gave me a unique perspective severely limited my analytic voice. Specifically, I was reluctant to engage with my identity as a person with a fat body, especially in the realm of political theory. But I noticed a dearth of political literature suggesting or even mentioning fat bodies as outsiders, painfully contradicting my experiences. I realized I needed to speak up, to translate my lifetime of experience into academic parlance.

I have experienced visceral discomfort and antagonism because of having a fat body. I have experienced and at times believed cultural reinforcement dismissing my legitimacy as a person. Rarely stated directly, it is nonetheless clear I should view myself as distinctly outside the desirable normalcy of bodies. Most importantly, this is both my fault and responsibility to

fix. Nothing is more revealing than losing weight and being praised, by people I care dearly about, for shedding my undesirable self. It is acceptable from them to now state their true opinions of my fatter past body.

I am told losing all excess fat is winning a battle against myself, fighting off the outsider on my frame. I am now able to reap the spoils of victory: assimilation and inclusion in the definition of ideal. I think about the rhetoric of the “war on obesity”, how I am both the soldier and the enemy. Is this not prejudice, exclusion, abjection? Furthermore, *why* did this come to be? How is the paradigm of Thinness supported by exclusion of Fatness? What other hierarchies of value are supported by this relationship? And finally, *is* there even a “fat identity”?

I will explore these questions in relation to fat bodies in the United States, as opposed to their *natural, original* Thin state. There is no solid border between Fat and Thin, making constant external reinforcement of fat’s Otherness necessary to define the desirable body. Uncertainty over one’s status in relation to this can create intense feelings of shame, and internal vilification of the fat on their body. If perceived to truly have a fat body (which can be generally described as anybody with any excess fat), it is the fault and responsibility of that individual to contain themselves, to return to their true thin state, to go from *out-of-shape* to *in-shape*. Until this happens, fat bodies are unlivable.

The hostile relationship between fat and thin bodies is best described as a process of abjection: the continual declaration and casting-off of an outsider to define the legitimacy of insider values or norms. In her 2013 text *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed defines the term “abjection” in relation to encounters between bodies of strangeness, manifesting “in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other

bodies”¹. A strange body is “*the body out of place*”², one that perturbs and upsets the other, the “body-at-home”. Ahmed describes this primarily in terms of race, as white bodies have a sense of internal community built upon hate, legitimizing “the threat of invasion and contamination in the dirty bodies of strangers”³. This process clearly defines the boundaries of both bodies, and the interaction plays out primarily on the skin. She goes on to mention the added pressure on female bodies due to the correlation between “femininity and the body”⁴. With this in mind, I find it important to focus primarily on fat and female bodies. As an exploration of bodily boundaries and strangeness is the basis of Ahmed’s paper, I was surprised she failed to touch on the size of the bodies in these strange encounters. I strongly believe fat bodies are definitively abjected by society, why was this not worth mentioning?

Expanding on the foundations of Ahmed’s text, fat bodies face two kinds of abjection. Dependent upon the culturally negative connotation of the word “fat”, the difference between “I feel fat” and “you are fat” represents the difference between internal and external abjection, respectively. In both instances fat *itself* is the outsider, the stranger on a thin body. Concurrently, thin is perceived as the *insider* within a fat body, assumed to be the natural state for bodies. The excess fat is an “overrun boundary”, an excess of skin beyond the line society draws on the individual. While the language is abstract, concrete examples are not hard to come by: the size of airplane, theater, or stadium seats, the capability of medical equipment, the availability and market of clothing sizes, to name a few. All are catered to a body without large amounts of excess— the bigger one gets, the further they recede from inclusion in a thin-centered world.

¹ Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000, 39

² Ahmed 39

³ Ahmed, 39

⁴ Ahmed, 40

Examples of external fat abjection are not hard to find in the United States. One I find particularly provocative, as I mentioned earlier, is the so-called “war on obesity”. To a fat body, the message is clear: your body is hostile territory, an enemy collectively plaguing society, and we are prepared to fight back. Fat is vilified as the focus turns to the failed thin individual within. “Until the 1980s, excess weight was the target of most ads for diet products; today, one is much more likely to find the enemy constructed as bulge, fat, or flab.” To refer to the body attached to the fat as a body in its own right could undermine thin’s monopoly on livable bodies. Therefore, they *must* be deemed unlivable.

Consequently, society feels justified in dictating virtuous actions for fat bodies, as unlivable bodies lose the privilege to speak for themselves. Jacques Rancière, author of the text *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, articulates the dangers of a presumption of silence: Bodies without a voice are reduced to making noises such that an animal would make. The loudest perceived noise from a fat body is the incessant sound of want, which turns into physical excess. It is the opposite of the voice of reason, the *logos*. “The metaphor of the large and powerful animal is no simple metaphor: it serves to rigorously reject as animals those speaking beings with no position who introduce trouble into the logos.”⁵ Given the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic” and the “war on obesity”, fat bodies are seen as troublemakers, potentially corrupting thin bodies. There is only one action deemed virtuous: attempting to be thin. Anything else is inexcusable, merely another manifestation of failure. An example of the aforementioned virtue is the popularity of before-and-after pictures, thin individuals standing next to their fatter past body. “The before-and-after sequence gets to the heart of mainstream fat representation and the

⁵ Rancière, Jacques. *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

resulting paradoxes and impossibilities of fat identity.” Indeed, the presence of a fat state next to a thin state serves to reinforce the foreignness of fat.

Society is ashamed of the abundance of fat bodies, even the ones losing weight, and does its best to hide them from public purview unless represented in a stereotypical and objectifying fashion. In a 2001 collection of essays titled *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, Le’a Kent writes about how fat is perceived in her essay “Fighting Abjection”: “In contemporary culture, the fat body generally becomes visible only at the margins, if at all, and only when written into a pathologizing narrative in which fat is a cause of ill health and a symptom of poor behavior.”⁶ A focus on the former, ill health, is beyond the scope of my paper. It is nonetheless an equally important and often more physically dangerous manifestation of fat abjection. I am primarily concerned with the latter, the belief that fat is a “symptom of poor behavior”, reflecting badly upon the willpower of the thin individual inside.

This is made clear through representations of fat: “It is all too easy to find images of fat shot through with warnings about one’s impending death— images of revulsion, images in which fat bodies are fragmented, medicalized, pathologized, and transformed into abject visions of the horror of flesh itself.”⁷ During the process of abjection fat bodies become illegitimate bodies, and they continue to hold the title until they return to their thin state. In this sense fat bodies are true outsiders *within* normative thin culture: simply continuing to exist as real bodies in the same public space, when told it is impossible to do so. In accordance with the paradoxical nature of the term “outsider-within”, external fat abjection also presents a paradox. Through abjection, society takes the burden of fatness upon itself. But, fat people are the only ones with the agency to

⁶ Le’a Kent “Fighting Abjection” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Braziel, Jana Evans, and Kathleen LeBesco, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 132

⁷ Kent, 132

actually change. It must be constantly reinforced that they are outsiders, or they will have no motivation, no reason to try. How could personal initiative possibly be expected from a body built by laziness, gluttony, failure?

In *Bodies Out of Bounds* contributor Kathleen LeBesco, penning an essay titled “Queering Fat Bodies/Politics”, elaborates on the manifestation of the fat/thin relationship in contemporary culture. “Aesthetically, fat is the antithesis of the beauty ideal of the day: tight, lean, and toned. Viewed, then, as both unhealthy and unattractive, fat people are widely represented in popular culture and in interpersonal interactions as revolting— they are agents of abhorrence and disgust.”⁸ So pervasive is fat abjection that this disgust is not only felt by thin bodies— fat individuals often feel the need to disavow the fat on their frame, the internal counterpart to external abjection.

While fat bodies face strong abjection by the favored thin norm, the definition of a “true” fat body remains ambiguous. Importantly, the perception of a body as fat lies in the hands of the thin. “As slenderness has consistently been visually glamorized, and as the ideal has grown thinner and thinner, bodies that a decade ago were considered slender now have come to seem fleshy.”⁹ Therefore internal abjection occurs within the fat individual: if one fears the social exclusion felt by a fat body, any feeling of fatness is accompanied by feelings of revulsion and disgust. This act reinforces the otherness of fat, and asserts the desire of the individual to rejoin society.

Simply put, internal abjection manifests as shame because one is not who one truly is, and therefore is nothing at all. The outsider (fat), in all its excess, cannot help but obscure the

⁸ Kathleen LeBesco, “Queering Fat Bodies/Politics” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, 74-75

⁹ Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 57

insider within (thin). Shame consequently develops because of who one *is*, as opposed to feeling guilty for external actions. Abjection of fat in the individual is a declaration of agreement with societal norms reducing their bodies to nothing, while continuing to live in them. In this sense there is no true fat identity— with fat bodies perceived as abject and reaffirmed as unlivable objects masking the thin inside, the subjectivity of the person within is masked as well. “The process of abjection is the act of primal repression that founds subjectivity and begins a sedimentation of identity around the newly forming self.” The self that develops fat, forms a fat body, is unable to escape the influence of external abjection.

The language of forming in relation to identity is reminiscent (on a much smaller scale) of Bonnie Honig’s text *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Honig claims sovereign democratic states are constantly in the process of (re)founding: including and excluding foreigners, with each decision reaffirming the sovereign right of the state. Honig describes one type of bad foreigner as the “capitalist immigrant”: “The resources of democratic citizenship are diminished, not enhanced” by the presence of a foreigner who represents “the accumulation of extreme wealth and a complete disinterest in civic and political life.”¹⁰ Much of the message is the same as that directed at fat bodies: you are a display of excess, greed, without regard for the apparent war society is waging against fat. In a sense this is political apathy, as the mere existence of fat bodies directly contradicts the want of society. To go against that want is a refusal to support that norm.

If we continue to imagine bodies as sovereign states, then both internal and external abjection declare fat a bad foreigner. Only thin bodies, utilizing the latter, have the sovereignty

¹⁰ Honig, Bonnie. *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton University Press, 2003., 81

to make such a statement. Internal abjection is simply a reaffirmation of that fact, a voiceless but still expected echo. Fat bodies are expected to constantly attempt (re)founding, to declare fat the unwelcome foreigner who must leave so they can regain bodily sovereignty. Perceived as always having the capacity to reform, the person's actual ability to do so or not is irrelevant.

It may be grim to have a fat body in the United States, but it is far from hopeless. For one, the issue is of import to prominent feminist theorists such as Judith Butler. She claims the position of a fat body is in fact advantageous: "Fat people can tap into the resources of abjection in the margin in order to strengthen their claim to the kinds of entitlement felt only by those bodies deemed natural, healthy, and beautiful." It is an admirable cause, appropriating tools of oppression to declare their position as equal to that of insiders. However, doing so simply reaffirms the insider belief of inherent superiority, as they remain the "true" insiders. Butler's choice of the word *beautiful* highlights the problem with including fat bodies in the definition of the term "beautiful female body". Here, inclusion means adopting the correlation between beauty and value on one's body, now valuable *because* it is considered beautiful.

Given the critique I offer above, it would be unwise to write this paper without a feminist analysis; so much of fat abjection plays out on the female body. Susan Bordo's text *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* offers a poignant phrasing of the relationship between female identity and their bodies, by claiming they are "weighed down" by the bodies themselves. "Culture not only has taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical 'improvement': it also is constantly teaching women (and let us not forget, men as well) how to *see* bodies."¹¹ When fat

¹¹ Bordo, 57

abjection is inserted into this dynamic, a fat female ceases to have value. As fat bodies are supposed to have no identity or value, claiming a “fat identity” becomes a conscious political choice. This is achieved when the individual ceases internal abjection, regardless of the constant presence of its external counterpart. The consequences can be extraordinary: “The self, the person who one *is*, is presumptively thin— and the hard-won realization that one can live as a fat subject is nothing short of transformative.”¹² Fat identity is the process of reclaiming the identity *and* subjectivity of an individual when there should be none; a transformation indeed.

Important to note is the difference between actively reclaiming a fat identity and passively existing in the same space as thin bodies. The former is only available when person claims their body as both fat and whole, when internal abjection ceases. Conversely, there still is the possibility of internal abjection when one simply has a fat body in a thin space. Embracing the foreigner, claiming bodily autonomy with foreignness still attached transforms the viability of the individual as they reject the need for (re)founding, and societal norms claiming they are nothing. This is a true fat identity. However, this is different than Butler’s dream for self-proclaimed insider status. It is a declaration outright rejecting the insider/outsider relationship to begin with.

Fat abjection is problematic as fat and thin bodies have always been natural states for bodies. As the root of fat abjection’s power lies in the assumed natural superiority of thin bodies, simply observing this can pose quite a problem. At the same time, the acknowledgement of this fact His classic piece *Of Grammatology* defines and explores the role of the “dangerous supplement”, as opposed to the “origin”. The supplement, a complex notion unto itself, is

¹² Kent, 132

defined as “...everything brought together: progress as the possibility of perversion, regression towards an evil that is not natural, and that adheres to the power of substitution...”¹³ Decisively unnatural, a fat body substitutes what a thin body supposedly cannot have: “symptoms of poor behavior” such as laziness, gluttony, failure, excess.

The origin of the fat/thin relationship is the presence of fat, utilized by hegemonic norms in the process of calling into being the concept of “thin”. Derrida would approve of Kent’s analysis of fat abjection in particular: “In the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat women’s bodies in particular, are represented as a kind of abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible.”¹⁴ Indeed, the negative connotations and implications surrounding the term “fat” are created to reinforce the normativity of thin. If there was no vilification of fat, there would be no concept of thin. On the battlefield of the war on obesity, our soldier exemplifies this notion. The soldier always existed as a citizen, only to be conscripted when fat was declared an enemy, a land of hostile territory. Without the supplement of negative connotations for fat, our soldier would be just another citizen.

In an inversion of their capacity as an “enemy”, fat bodies seemingly pose a threat to thin bodies by embodying bad behavior, and to be blunt, making society look bad. Society takes an essentialist stance on fat identity, a “biological or sociocultural perspective” argue that a fat identity is “the unfortunately unavoidable outcome resulting from some original variable gone awry.”¹⁵ LeBesco earlier refers to fat bodies as “agents of abhorrence and disgust”, but more importantly as revolting.

¹³ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. 147

¹⁴ Kent, 135

¹⁵ LeBesco, 84

If we think of *revolting* in terms of overthrowing authority, rebelling, protesting, rejecting, then corpulence carries a whole new weight as a subversive cultural practice that calls into question received notions about health, beauty, and nature. We can recognize fat as a condition not simply aesthetic or medical, but *political*.¹⁶

Fat individuals as political actors expose the true origin of the fat/thin supplemental relationship. In contrast to the essentialist position, a reclaimed fat identity focuses on “the ability of human actors to participate in the creation of meaning...through the discursive processes of communication and politics.”¹⁷ Our soldier is indeed an enemy, but of hegemonic thin values, not society itself. In a perverse way political fat bodies confirm the original justification for fat abjection; the fear that the presence of fat taints a national image. However it is the victory of the soldier, not their initial presence, that taints the image of thin by revealing it uses a system of abjection and discrimination to reinforce its constructed norm, not a natural or rightful claim to superiority.

I want to stress the reach of fat abjection goes far beyond what I have described here. I mentioned earlier a common cause of fat is believed to be “ill health”, and this often manifests in bias and demonization by the medical community. Culturally, in an age where explicit forms of stereotyping and abjection against various groups (such as LGBTQ or POC (people of color)) becomes less and less socially acceptable, fat abjection remains surprisingly blatant. The rhetoric used by the media and medical officials leaves little room to doubt that fat bodies are still openly represented as detrimental to society. “The International Size Acceptance Association, in an attempt to draw a parallel between fat rights and other civil rights, calls antifat bias ‘one of the

¹⁶ LeBesco, 75

¹⁷ LeBesco, 84

last legally allowed forms of discrimination in the United States.’’¹⁸ Fat advocacy is challenging as fat bodies are a generally unrelated aggregate (some bodies considered fat will demonize other fat bodies to paint themselves as thin, for example).

A fat identity is a wondrous creation, as it can only be called into being by the fat individual themselves. No amount of external abjection, of recoiling from an overrun boundary, can make a fat identity less legitimate to the individual. Power is taken out of the hands of the thin by refusing to acknowledge the basis of their superiority. Given how prevalent thin normativity is, to do so is an inherently political act.

As fat abjection is an incredibly personal topic, this paper is essentially a personal manifestation of the political nature of fat identity. It was only when I stopped consenting to the reinforcement of thin norms that I was able to explore the world of the abject thin identity. In situations of overt abjection, internal reaffirmation can or cannot grant Thin power in one’s body. A refusal of that norm is a strength, a creation of internal power. It is my hope that fat bodies can use this power to combat one of the more pernicious elements of thin normativity in female bodies: the unhealthy correlation between beauty and value. If bodies are not beautiful, they are worthless. It is my strong opinion that a declaration along the lines of “fat bodies are beautiful too!” reinforces the correlation by simply calling for an expansion of the insider group. True fat activism must renounce the above, or the root of the problem will go unaddressed. If soldiers simply move from one enemy to another, the war is unending.

¹⁸ Kirkland, Anna. "Representations of Fatness and Personhood: Pro-Fat Advocacy and the Limits and Uses of Law." *Representations* 82, no. 1 (2003): 24-51. doi:10.1525/rep.2003.82.1.24., 25