

# **unbounded embodiment vs. containment and control:** a critical analysis of fatphobia.

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"Fat! It's three little letters. What are you so afraid of?"  
-Joy Nash, "A Fat Rant"

Joy Nash's self-produced video, entitled "A Fat Rant," has garnered 1.6 million views on YouTube. During the course of its eight-minute running time, Nash unabashedly declares her weight (224 lbs), criticizes the fashion industry for its narrow range of clothing sizes, and cackles at the prospect of dieting. Embedded in her sassy monologue lies a radical proposal: that it's okay to be fat. Indeed, fatness is overwhelmingly feared and reviled within contemporary Western culture. The medical establishment, the diet industry, insurance companies, advertising media, reality television shows, and physical education curricula seem unanimous in their message that fat is unattractive at best, and lethal at worst. A critical feminist framework proves immensely helpful in dissecting discourses that position fat embodiment as undesirable, immoral, and dangerous. By investigating fatphobia through this lens, I endeavor to expose the cultural ideologies that underpin oppressive constructions of fatness and that designate fat bodies as requiring intervention. In their introduction to the anthology *Bodies Out of Bounds*, Brazil and LeBesco state that psychological discourses associate fat with recklessness, immoderation, and profligate gratification, and therefore with the violation of corporeal limits (3). Similarly, biomedical discourse serves to establish the fat body as excessive and uncontained, as "unbound" and "out of bounds"

(Brazier 235). The body in excess or the body out of bounds is transgressive, and thus subject to regulation and punishment, because it draws attention to the fluid nature of embodiment. Our bodies are not fixed; their boundaries are more flexible and more permeable than we might like to imagine (238-239). Bodies that fluctuate in their size and shape demonstrate the instability of material forms, and defy static categorization. Therefore, they trouble the binary logic that lies at the root of Western thought – that which is invested in concrete divisions between inside/outside, mind/body, male/female, Self/Other (232, 243-244). The intense fear and revulsion with which fat and fat bodies are treated thus becomes readable as a fear of that which crosses, confuses or challenges established boundaries.

Brazier notes that in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, fat is gendered as female. The dualistic understanding that governs categories of mind/body and male/female necessarily associates corporeality with the feminine, placing both in subordination to the mind and masculinity (238-239). Fat, then, as “excessive corporeality,” is also excessively female (239, 245). In a similar analysis, Margrit Shildrick theorizes femininity, corporeality, excess, and fluidity through the notion of the “leaky” body. She suggests that the desire to exert control over the body is a desire to contain the body within its appropriate borders, and thus to preserve the supposedly discrete territories of internal vs. external, mind vs. body, self vs. other. However, the female body is represented as unavoidably leaky; what belongs inside inevitably flows outwards. Women’s bodies therefore provoke anxiety and suspicion insofar as they are perceived to threaten the rigidity of barriers that keep “corporeal engulfment” at bay (16-17). Through a synthesized reading of Brazier and Shildrick, we can begin to understand how the Western metaphysical tradition constructs the fat body, like the female body, as exceeding normative standards of acceptability.

Brazier suggests that the gendered nature of fat is what produces such anxiety around fat embodiment. Heather Sykes explores this anxiety and elucidates the inscription of gendered meaning onto fat bodies. In accordance with dualistic conceptions, fat symbolizes the feminine. Fat women are therefore “too much woman” in a patriarchal culture that already devalues and circumscribes female subjectivity (54, 130). Additionally, the fat male body undermines its own gender performance: soft flesh is present when binary associations dictate that firm musculature should appear (54). Whether invoking feminine excess or failed masculinity, fat bodies transgress the boundaries prescribed by normative gender categories. Sykes also insightfully remarks that fat bodies enact transgression not only because of the way they look, but because of the way they move. In a culture that prizes athleticism, the “motions associated with fatness disrupt the type of human movements that are

socially constructed as acceptable, productive and skillful” (97). Since bodily movements are themselves highly gendered, fat bodies potentially “queer” normative gender definitions, if those bodies do not move through the world with masculine strength or feminine grace (95).

Applying a gender analysis to the visual perception of fat embodiment exposes the gender anxiety in which fatphobia is rooted. However, Susan Bordo avers that the desire for food and the act of eating are also saturated with gendered meanings that merit consideration in relation to fatphobia. Media images overwhelmingly depict women’s appetites as requiring restriction, while the indulgence of male hunger is portrayed as ordinary, even favorable (108, 112). In order to explain this discrepancy in representation, Bordo delineates the ways in which hunger is discursively linked to “sexual appetite,” highlighting the symbolic overlap between sexual and alimentary pleasure. Proliferating interdictions against “female indulgence” also convey and reinforce lessons about what constitutes befitting female sexual behavior (110-112). Imposed standards of female self-control over alimentary consumption can thus be understood as an element of ideological efforts to constrain female sexuality (114-116).

To substantiate her thesis, Bordo highlights the metaphorical man-eater as exemplary of the threat posed by the “devouring woman.” The man-eater’s ravenous hunger manifests as unbounded sexual desire, which has the power to consume and destroy her male counterpart (117). Her unfettered appetite is doubly grotesque in that it signifies transgression of normative female sexuality: she refuses her socially assigned role as a passive object of male lust. Within the popular imagination, the corpulent woman is akin to the man-eater in that she is assumed to eat voraciously and, by extension, to be sexually deviant, having abandoned all sexual discretion (Mazer 266-267). However, Sykes is careful to note that fat women are also regarded within hegemonic discourse as asexual and sexually undesirable, because their bodies do not conform to normative standards of femininity (130). These analyses reveal the heterosexist paradigm that supports fatphobia, wherein female sexuality is believed to require male presence and validation. At the same time, they hint at questions about fat’s queer potential.

If fatphobia is inflected with worries about the boundaries of gender and sexuality, it is also concerned with those encircling race. Cartesian thought holds the categories of white/black in binary opposition, dressing each side with the meanings attributed to mind/body, male/female and Self/Other. In the same way that corporeality, fatness, and femininity come to be conjoined, so too are people of

colour symbolically associated with the body and materiality. When placed within dualistic formulations, fat is both feminized and racialized (Sykes 54). Furthermore, the standards of female beauty that idealize thinness are themselves standards of whiteness (Bass 225, 228-30). Fatness is discursively ascribed to racialized bodies as a way of further marking and marginalizing them as outsiders, as Others. The figure of the black female body has been historically represented as fat within American culture – the mammy and the jezebel comprise conspicuous examples (Sykes 54, 130). Therefore, the insistence upon slenderness as a Western ideal of beauty is also an impulse to distance the white body from the bodies of racial Others. Feminine attractiveness is constituted as that which is expressly not characteristic of women of colour (LeBesco 59).

However, LeBesco reminds us that the rejected body always hovers against the signifying borders of the normative center. In her analysis of fatness and citizenship, she cleverly articulates the relationship between fatphobia, racism and classism:

“If fat people are understood as antithetical to the efficiency and productivity required to succeed in our capitalist economy, then their presence haunts as the specter of downward mobility. Big, profusely round bodies also provoke racist anxieties in the white modern West because of their imagined resemblance to those of maligned ethnic and racial Others; fatness haunts as the specter of disintegrating physical privilege in this case.” (56)

Fat is threatening because it prompts recognition of our own unboundedness, and the instability of our own bodies and social locations. LeBesco’s invocation of the ghost metaphor is especially appropriate here because it underscores the pervasive fear with which fatness is regarded. More significantly, her references to capitalism and the economy also provide a valuable entry point into thinking through fatness as a threat to the borders and integrity of the nation.

LeBesco posits that the regulation of fat bodies arises out of ideas surrounding citizenship. Because fat is presumed to signify the laziness and lack of self-restraint inherent to whichever bodies it marks, fat people are perceived as eschewing the moral values of hard work and self-discipline that supposedly define the American nation. This notion hinges on the assumption that body weight is within the domain of individual influence.<sup>1</sup> Of course, hard work is also required of bodies in order to perpetuate America’s capitalist economy. Discursive constructions of the upstanding American citizen come to equate morality with the ability to productively contribute to capitalist growth (55). As April Herndon indicates: “[A] major-

ity of people in the United States believe that fat is unhealthy, immoral, and often downright disgusting” (125). This designation of fat as immoral partially originates from the symbolic position of fat as that which prevents or opposes productivity, and by extension, the accumulation of wealth.

In direct contrast, the valorization of strong, athletic bodies is linked with the construction of the muscular, military body and its ability to secure the nation's borders while simultaneously advancing American imperialism abroad. Indeed, the strength of the nation depends on the fitness of the military body to defend the boundary between foreign pollution and domestic health (Sykes 31-32). Nationalist projects employ and rely upon metaphors of the body in order to reify distinctions between inside and outside, Self and Other. Anxieties about the fortitude of the nation-state are consequently brought to bear in the surveillance, regulation, and control of bodies that are suspected of transgressing boundaries in all their permutations. It is therefore unsurprising that the fat body, which challenges illusions of bodily containment and disturbs the defining limits of gender, sexuality, race and class, should be regarded with fear and suspicion.

The marginalization of fat embodiment is consistent with the marginalization of all bodies considered transgressive, excessive, or burdensome. Fatphobia is pervasively and intimately connected with racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. By approaching the fat body as a body out of bounds, the insidious hatred and pernicious fear of fat within our culture becomes intelligible as a hatred and fear of all that transgresses normative boundaries.

#### endnotes

1. It is also worth noting that the alleged mutability of fat is itself contested by many medical researchers (Herndon 125; Solovay 193-94)

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