# *Matter Weighs:*

# *Weight Matters!*

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# *A Feminist Phenomenology*

# *of Body Weight*

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# *Table of Contents*

# *Introduction*

# *Matter Weighs, Weight Matters!*

'Fat is a feminist issue,' the writer and psychotherapist Susie Orbach proclaimed in 1978. Her statement was a battle cry against the high prevalence of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa among girls and women. It was a condemnation of the beauty ideals which told women and girls that they needed to lose weight in order to be considered beautiful, worthy, or even 'normal'. Today, more than 30 years later, Orbach's motto still rings true. Women's magazines are filled with the latest diet tips, advising readers on how best to get ready for the bikini season. On television shows such as MTV's "I used to be fat", weight loss is pursued through gruelling exercise regimes and diet restrictions – all with the aim of personal transformation. Debates abound about too thin fashion models and photo-shopping in advertisements which set unattainable and unrealistic beauty ideals for girls and young women. At the same time, the average person is getting heavier and heavier, and newspapers warn of an 'obesity epidemic' which threatens not only North America, but also Europe. Clearly, body weight is (still) a contested issue, and one which demands feminist attention.

For me, body weight is a topic which brings together a lot of different dimensions: the personal, the political, and the theoretical. The topic is very *personal*, because of course my own body is a weighing body too. I have days when nothing none of my clothes seem to fit right and I look at my own belly with disgust. I have a mother who comments on my weight: who appreciates and notices when I've lost weight, but will also let me know me when I've gained some kilos. But far from being only personal, the topic is also *political*, because, as difficult as they are to shake off, my feminist intuition tells me to be critical of these negative

feelings about weight. Looking around me, talking to friends and consuming popular media, it seems that I am not the only one whose sense of self-worth is tied to their dress size. Why do so many girls and women feel like they should lose weight in order to be considered 'beautiful', 'attractive' or even 'normal'? What about rejecting normative beauty ideals, what about criticizing the system that makes girls and women feel inadequate based on how much they weigh? What would happen if women and girls would stop dieting and worrying about their weight, and would instead direct all that energy into political activism and changing the system? Who knows what would be possible! Lastly, of course, the topic of weight is undoubtedly *theoretical*. The current thesis is the culmination of two years of academic engagement. It has provided a way to combine my two main academic interests: feminist theory and the phenomenology of the body. It is from this philosophical perspective, then, that I approach the weighing body – and the fat body in particular. If the body is indeed our way of being in the world, as the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty first claimed, then how is it different to be a fat body compared to a thin body? In which ways does weight affect embodied being in the world, and how does 'weight' intersect with other categories of difference, such as gender, race[1] and class? In the four chapters of this thesis, these questions will be approached.

In the first chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework of the thesis. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002) was a logical starting point for my investigation, as Merleau-Ponty is generally considered the first phenomenological thinker who had attention for the body. Yet although Merleau-Ponty considers the structures of embodied being in the world, the type of body he describes is actually a very particular one: a

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[1] The way in which I use 'race' throughout this thesis is in line with a Critical Race Studies perspective. By this, I mean that I challenge the biological basis of racial categories and reject an essentialist and universalizing perspective on racial difference. Instead of a 'fact of bodies', I consider race to be an 'effect' of racialization. As the critical race scholar Robert Bernasconi has powerfully phrased it: "racism has made race 'real' without making it true" (Bernasconi 2001: 287). In the discussion of Fanon in section 1.2.A, I will elaborate further on this.

male body, a white body, an able-bodied and young body. From a feminist perspective, this is clearly problematic, as it is exclusionary and limited. In order to question this implicit 'normative body' of phenomenology, I turned from Merleau-Ponty to the early critical interventions offered by his contemporaries Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir. While these authors are not always read in the phenomenological tradition, I have come to consider them as thinkers who took the first step in developing a phenomenology of difference. An intersectional framework, such as was first developed in black feminism, is needed in order to recognize and understand differences in their interrelatedness. Examining a more contemporary feminist engagement with phenomenology, I discovered a blooming tradition of 'feminist phenomenology'. In Chapter One, this theoretical trajectory is documented. I present the theoretical framework of the thesis and thus lay the groundwork for the engagement with the question of the weighing body.

From these philosophical debates on embodiment and corporeality, I turned to 'weight' as a political and societal question. I noticed that on the one hand, there is a growing concern with obesity and overweight – while on the other hand beauty ideals remain fixated on the thin and slender body. How can one make sense of these two disparate – yet probably related – phenomena? In my research on feminist literature around 'body weight,' I came across Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993/2003): already a modern day classic. Her passionate theoretical engagement with eating disorders such as anorexia, and her thorough and provocative analysis of advertisements provided food for thought. Through my literature research, I also discovered the more contemporary critical and feminist scholarship on body weight that is being undertaken under the banner of "Fat Studies". Fat Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary academic field which engages critically with body weight and body size. Closely connected to fields such as queer studies, critical race theory and disability studies, Fat Studies examines and challenges dominant cultural understandings of fatness, whether it

is the discourse of the 'obesity epidemic' or the way fat people are represented in popular media. In Chapter Two, I assess the insights gained from feminist and Fat Studies approaches to weight, and I examine 'body weight' as a field of cultural contestation. Focusing on the elements of 'health' and 'beauty,' I examine the dominant cultural imaginary in relation to the weighing body, and reflect further on how to study weight intersectionally.

In Chapter One, I reflect theoretically on the feminist phenomenological framework and in Chapter Two I establish the importance of the question of body weight for feminist philosophy. My next challenge was to bring these two together: to find a way to analyze embodied experiences of weight and cultural discourses on weight in their interaction and co-constitution. From the very start, the idea of studying 'lived experiences' of weight – or: 'lived weight' – intrigued me, as it seemed the most powerful way to put my feminist phenomenology into practice. Yet as determined as I was to study lived experience, I was also intensely unsure of how to go about it. I did what anyone would do in such a situation: I started to 'google' and discovered the existence of the online Fat Acceptance movement. I was amazed and fascinated to discover this wealth of online spaces in which bloggers were discussing body weight critically: from everyday experiences of discrimination, to their own conflicts with weight and eating, and the lack of clothing choices for 'plus size girls'. In a way, I learned as much about weight and embodiment from the blogger Marianne Kirby (www.therotund.com) and the activist Kyla Hagedorn (www.kylathegreat.tumblr.com) as I did from the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty or the feminist theorist Susan Bordo. Therefore, Chapter Three is entirely devoted to a study of online Fat activism. My analysis of the website 'Fat From the Side' (http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com) serves as phenomenological case study of 'lived fatness'.

Lastly, my philosophical and feminist study of 'weight' brought me to the works of the contemporary French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy. In his "Corpus", I found an intriguing

account of corporeality in which *weight* and *weighing* take a pivotal role. As difficult and elusive as it is, Nancy's work inspired and stimulated me to think of weight as an important and inseparable part of embodied being in the world. Chapter Four is thus devoted to a feminist reading of Nancy's thought on weight, in which Nancy is presented as an important ally to a feminist engagement with the topic of body weight. While this present thesis *closes* with Nancy, I consider his work exactly as a new *opening* for Fat Studies: a new, post-phenomological direction for thinking about weight and weighing.

Throughout my academic engagement with the 'weighing body', I have remained convinced of the two simple claims expressed in the title: that matter weighs, and that weight matters. *Matter weighs*: by this I mean the simple fact everybody (every body) has a weight. Some bodies weigh more than other bodies do. And in the contemporary Western context, it seems that having a weighing body means being concerned about that weight, wanting to reduce it. Fatness, it seems, is conceived almost exclusively in negative terms: as 'unhealthy' and 'unattractive', as I will demonstrate in Chapter Two. As a result, weight matters. *Weight matters*: by this I mean that it is considered important, both in the lives of individuals and in the cultural imaginary at large. My title is, of course, a reference to Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993). In this well-known book, Butler plays on the two connotations of 'matter': referring both to materiality (physical matter) *and* to 'mattering' in the sense of being important. These two aspects are also the two aspects of 'weight' which are central in this thesis. I look both at weight as an aspect of the (lived) body, and to weight as an axis of identity and of exclusion.

In German, Butler's *Bodies that Matter* was translated as *Körper von Gewicht* – or, 'bodies of weight'. Interestingly enough, the same double play that was expressed in English by the word 'matter' was captured in the German translation by 'Gewicht': 'weight'. Like 'matter', 'Gewicht' on the one hand refers to a physical/material quality of bodies, an aspect

of fleshiness. On the other hand, it is also linked to importance and significance. This symbolic meaning of 'weight' is familiar in English as well, e.g. in the expression that 'something has weight' when it is important. The translation of Butler's title, apart from providing an interesting anecdote, confirms to me how both 'matter' and 'weight' are closely connected to 'importance' ant 'what matters'.

Matter weighs: Weight matters. This title thus expresses exactly what I aim demonstrate in the four chapters of this thesis: that body weight is a weighty matter indeed.

# *Chapter 1.*

# *Phenomenology from the Margins*

The natural sciences have always studied the body. But since the late 1980s, 'the body' has also been an important theme in the social sciences and the humanities. The renewed interest in topics of embodiment and corporeality is characterized as a veritable 'body craze' by feminist theorist Kathy Davis (1997). The rise of feminism, both inside and outside the academy, is crucial in understanding the widespread interest in questions of embodiment and corporeality, since feminist scholars have been instrumental in putting the body back on the theoretical agenda (Davis 1997). In doing so, they have countered a long tradition of mind/body dualism, in which human being has primarily been identified with the capacity to think, hope, dream and imagine. The disembodied and rational mind was privileged over the 'animal' and 'natural' body. In this hierarchy between mind and body, women were associated with the animal, and the natural and the bodily aspects (Lloyd 1984, Braidotti 1991, Bordo 1987). As feminist theorists on the body have resisted the widespread mind/body dualism which characterizes Western philosophy, they also found allies in this very same canon. An important ally against mind/body dualism has been the thought of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty[2]. His perspective on the body, developed in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002), has been an important source of inspiration for feminist theorists. However, Merleau-Ponty has also been critiqued for his masculinist bias and the blind spots which his philosophy has produced. In this chapter, which serves as a theoretical framework for this thesis, I will introduce and examine the phenomenological approach to the body. Before applying a phenomenological approach to a new question – the

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[2] 14 March, 1908 – 3 May, 1961.

question of body weight – it is important to first establish what exactly this theoretical approach consists of.

First of all, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body will be introduced, as it provides the starting point for this investigation. Next, the chapter turns to the work of Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir, presenting them as the two theorists who first challenged the universalist and undifferentiated model of the body offered by traditional phenomenology. Nevertheless, Fanon and Beauvoir take just the first step in recognizing differences in embodied experience. An *intersectional lens* is needed in order to recognize and understand differences in their interrelatedness. Taking on such an intersectional lens, 'feminist phenomenology' will be introduced as a philosophical perspective on embodied being which recognizes a variety of embodied differences in their interrelatedness, and critically examines why and how these different differences come to matter.

## 1.1. Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body

What makes phenomenology difficult to define and to introduce is the fact that it is not 'one', but instead it comes in many different shapes and forms. 'Phenomenology' is an umbrella term which unites a wide variety of different thinkers and theories. A common categorization is the geographical distinction made between on the one hand the German tradition, notably referring to Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and on the other hand the French tradition, designating thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas. The diversity within phenomenological thought is perhaps best demonstrated in the variety of different prefixes that may be connected to the term, such as existential phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology, ontological phenomenology and hermeneutical phenomenology. Given this great diversity in approaches and theoretical frameworks within the phenomenological tradition, one could question to which extent it is

even possible to speak of 'the' phenomenological perspective on the body. Nevertheless, I contend that it is possible to delineate certain characteristics specific to a phenomenological approach to body and embodiment. Indeed, phenomenological thought on embodiment and corporeality has produced a unique vocabulary and a set of practical tools on which theorists in a variety of different fields still draw today.

The first steps towards a phenomenological perspective on the body were made by the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Developing further the Husserlian framework, the French thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty is the phenomenologist who wrote most extensively about the questions of embodiment and corporeality. It is the Merleau-Pontian framework which will form the basis for the current discussion, as it is also his work which has been primarily taken up by feminist scholarship. However, I will draw on the work of Edmund Husserl occasionally, as it forms the necessary background to understand the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of the body.

Merleau-Ponty starts from the simple assertion that subjectivity is always already an embodied, and that this body-subject exists within a horizon of meaning: the world. As such, phenomenology in general and Merleau-Ponty's thought in particular offer a radically anti-dualist philosophy, providing a counterweight to the longstanding traditions of mind/body dualism and subject/world dualism in Western thought[3]. Merleau-Ponty's central claim that the subject is necessarily an embodied subject is derived from and supported by an analysis of the structures of perception. Perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, is necessarily perspectival. That is to say: it is always a perception *of something* and *from somewhere*. For example, when I look at a house, I am always looking at it from a certain distance and a certain angle. Standing in front of the house, I may see the front door but not the garden in the

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[3] The claim that Western philosophy presents a dualist legacy is not very controversial, and is one which is commonly held. (*c.f.* Robinson 2011). Feminist scholars who have specifically pointed to the intertwinement of these dualisms with the hierarchy between the sexes include for example Lloyd 1984, Bordo 1993/2003, Grosz 1994.

back, a piece of the living room through the window, but not the bedrooms upstairs. In other words: my perception is determined by my position in space in relation to the object of my perception. Merleau-Ponty rethorically asks: "Is not to see always to see from somewhere?" (1945/2002, 77), indicating that both a view from nowhere and a view from everywhere are simply impossible. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that I always perceive from a certain place – and this is not a place in objective space or universal time (1945/2002: 82). Time and space should *not* be considered as a grid in which my body is located at certain coordinates. Instead, in my experience the body is always my 'indexical here', it is the absolute zero-point for relating to the time and the space around me. It is a 'here' I cannot escape: when I move from one side of a room to another, my new location becomes my new 'here'. As Merleau-Ponty explains: "The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates" (1945/2002: 115).

This means, in a nutshell, that I only perceive through my embodied being in the world: perception necessarily implies embodiment[4]. The question that arises from this is then: how can this body, which is our means of perceiving and interacting in the world, be thought? Here, it is useful to refer back to the distinction which Edmund Husserl made between two modes of considering the body: the body as *Körper* and the body as *Leib*. *Körper* is Husserl's name for the objectified body: the body as seen by science and medicine. In this perspective, the body is primarily considered as a very complex biological organism, a combination of muscles and bones and brain activity and neurons which create sensations and emotions and

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[4] Merleau-Ponty's insistence of the perspectival nature of all vision and perception bears a strong likeness to Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* (1988), in which Haraway also stressed the embodied nature of all vision. Compare Haraway's statement of her aims: "I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere" (1988: 581). In alignment which Merleau-Ponty, Haraway is, as she puts it, "arguing for a view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (1988: 589). Sonia Kruks also makes this link between Merleau-Ponty and Haraway in her article "Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Difference in Feminism" (2006: 29).

thoughts. The *Körper* is something which we can heal when it is sick, fix when it is broken. Merleau-Ponty refers to the *Körper* as the 'objective body' (le corps objectif). *Leib*, on the other hand, is Husserl's term for the body as it is lived and experienced by me. It refers to the body as a subject that perceives. Merleau-Ponty calls this the 'lived body' (*le corps vécu*). As Donn Welton clarifies, phenomenology thus distinguishes

> between *Körper* and *Leib*, between 'physical body' and 'lived-body,' between an 'objective' characterization of the body, such as we find in natural scientific inquiry (anatomy, physiology, neurology, biology, and chemistry), and an experiential characterization that describes certain structures of our body in terms appropriate to the way we *are* and *have* a body, which is to say, to the way it is involved with human environments. This is not to the body as an 'object' but as a 'subject'. (1998, 2)

The citation makes clear that there are two completely different ways of considering the body. Welton emphasizes that for the phenomenologist, the human body is never *just* an object in the world, never just a thing among other things. Instead, the body is that through which we have access to world and the things in it: "The body is the vehicle of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 94). The notion of 'being-in-the-world', first developed by Martin Heidegger (1926/2006) and adopted by Merleau-Ponty, expresses this intimate relationship of body and world. As Taylor Carman clarifies: "it is misleading to say that we 'have' bodies, just as it would be misleading to say that we 'have' minds or selves. Better, we *are* minds, selves, bodies. To say that we are bodily is to say that we *are* our bodies" (2008: 11).

As such a 'vehicle' of world, the body does not solicit constant awareness, and embodiment is not consciously reflected upon in everyday engagements and interactions. We *can* take such a reflective and reflexive approach to our own body, through adopting a scientific attitude for example. However, in doing so, we leave the body as 'Leib' in order to reflect on the body as '*Körper*'. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the

body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality. (1945/2002: 231)

In other words, reflection on the body as object/ *Körper* is a secondary step, which relies on the primary experience of the body as my living body. Thus in contrast to the detached look of the scientist, Merleau-Ponty is interested in describing the 'body in reality'. This body in reality is primarily *habitual*: it is a 'habit-body'[5]. We learn motor skills and habits through practice, but once we have acquired a certain skill, we usually exercise it without reflecting on it. As Komarine Romdenh Romluc explains: "Once an agent has become skilled at some activity, they can perceive opportunities to engage in it, and immediately respond to those perceptions by acting, without the need to think about what they are doing" (2011: 79). In habitual action, the body itself fades into the background, as it were, while I am outwardly directed towards the world with which I am engaging.

This point regarding the habit-body can be illustrated by a simple example. When I am crossing the street, for example, I am usually focused on my destination and the traffic around me, and not on putting one foot in front of the other and the muscles that I use to move my body forward. This means that my body normally appears to me as "an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 114). The task or action which I am performing is what is in the center of my attention, and not my body itself. The parts of my body directly involved in the action may demand some attention, but generally I am directed toward the action, and not the body itself. Merleau-Ponty makes this clear in the following example:

If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and the whole of my body trails behind them like the tail of a comet. It is not that I am unaware of the whereabouts of my shoulders or back, but these are simply

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[5] The notion of *habitus* of the anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu is closely connected to the Merleau-Pontian habit-body. For an account of the differences and similarities between these notions, see Crossley 2001.

swallowed up in the position of my hands, and my whole posture can be read so to speak in the pressure they exert on the table (1945/2002: 114).

Here, it becomes clear that in Merleau-Ponty's example of leaning on the table, lower body and my feet are not at the centre of the attention. They need to be there in order for me to stand and lean lean, but they are in the background, 'swallowed up' or 'trailing behind' my hands, which are central in this position. Instead of being at the centre of attention, the body is "the darkness in the theatre needed to show up the performance" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 115).

As such a 'darkness', the body is only given through experience of that body. In general, one can define phenomenology, to paraphrase Heidegger's definition, as the study of the things as they are given to us – and they are given in experience. The phenomenologist thus studies experience 'as it is lived'. In Merleau-Ponty's words, phenomenology "tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologists may be able to provide" (1945/2002: vii). This quote makes clear that in phenomenology, it is the *experience itself* which is central: it is 'experience as it is' which is studied. Scientists, historians and psychologists all have very interesting things to say about how a particular experience comes about, for example by studying the structures in the brain or in society at large which could explain how and why this particular event came about. The phenomenologist, however, has a different focus: they are the one who studies that experience in detail and gives a *phenomenological description* of it. Approaching experience 'as it is lived' means approaching it in an open manner. As Carman explains:

> Phenomenology urges us to resist the temptation to press our own experience into prefabricated conceptual boxes in the service of tradition or theory. Phenomenology is in this sense a descriptive rather than explanatory or deductive enterprise; it seeks to reveal the basic forms of experience and understanding as such, rather than construct hypotheses and draw inferences beyond their bounds. (2008: 14)

Carman here emphasizes the 'descriptive' character of phenomenology. It is important to note, however, that this descriptive project does not preclude a critical attitude towards that which is being described. In fact, it is by describing carefully and precisely *how* things are given, that we can take the first step towards changing the status quo. As I will argue later, the phenomenological approach to experience can and should be connected to a more structural level of analysis[6].

## 1.2. Early Critical Interventions: Which Body /Whose Body?

In the previous section, I have outlined the account of the body offered by the 'classical' phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty, as I have noted, aimed to give an accurate account of the body as the vehicle of human being-in-the-world. Although he did emphasize that 'the body' is always 'my body', and thus stressed the inevitable 'mine-ness' of experience, it is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty in fact overlooked the specific bodily characteristics that shaped his *own* experience. As a result, Merleau-Ponty inadvertently took the young, male, able, and white body as his point of departure. It was this specific body, and these specific embodied experiences, that serve as the general model for embodied being-in-the-world. In this way, while claiming to describe the universal structures of experience and the general characteristics of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body actually described a very specific body and a very specific type of experience.

I argue that the phenomenology of the body offered by Merleau-Ponty and other 'classical' phenomenologists has effectively overlooked the possibility of differences in embodied experiences. Specifically, this traditional phenomenology has been both gender-blind and colour-blind, to name two of the most structural oversights. In other words,

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[6] This argument is made in Section 1.3.B

Merleau-Ponty had no attention for the ways in which the lived body is always already a body with a particular gender and a particular race, and how gender and race shape and structure lived experience. In this section, I want to examine two early critical interventions which build on, at the same time as they challenge, the Merleau-Pontian model. First, I turn to the work of Frantz Fanon. I argue that Fanon's work contains phenomenological elements and offers a first theorization of race and racialized experience. Next, I give an interpretation of Simone de Beauvoir which reads her as a phenomenologist of sex/gender. By pointing attention to aspects of experience that were overlooked by Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon make the first step towards dispelling the myth of a 'one size fits all' account of the body. However, while recognizing the importance of the early critical interventions made by Fanon and Beauvoir, I conclude the section by pointing out the ways in which their work also reproduces certain blind spots. The recognition of a need for an intersectional understanding of the ways in which differences shape experience lead into the ways in which a *feminist phenomenology* departs from the first criticism voiced by Fanon and Beauvoir. First however, I turn to Fanon.

*A) Fanon: The Lived Experience of Blackness*

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon powerfully shows the effects which colonialism and racism can have on a black psyche. He does this through a phenomenological description of his personal experience as a black man. Fanon recounts an anecdote which characterizes in a very concrete and powerful way his experience of being black in a white and racist society. 'Look, a Negro!' a young white boy calls out upon meeting Fanon in a train (Fanon 1952/2008: 84). The remark amuses Fanon at first, but as the boy continues to comment on his blackness, the situation makes him extremely uncomfortable. Fanon describes how the white gaze of this little boy burdens him like an "unfamiliar weight" and seals him into

"crushing objecthood" (1952/2008: 82). The interaction triggered not just an emotional or intellectual response, but Fanon also reports a strong bodily response: a feeling of nausea floods over him (1952/2008: 88). Fanon even describes the encounter in terms of a desintegration of his corporeal schema. He writes: "Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema" (Fanon 1952/2008: 84). The ways in which Fanon describes his experience and his explicit use of the notion of 'corporeal schema' indicate that he is in dialogue with phenomenological thinkers - in particular Merleau-Ponty. Several scholars share this assessment, and argue that it should be understood as a phenomenological account of racialized experience. Phenomenological readings of Fanon have been offered by David Macey[7] (1999), Robert Bernasconi (2001), Linda Martín Alcoff (1999) and Sara Ahmed (2006). In this brief account, I will focus on Sara Ahmed's interpretation in order to demonstrate how Fanon may be read as a first phenomenologist of race.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon analyses the ways in which being called out as a black man affected his way of relating to his body, the space he was in and the others around him. His account underscores that not all bodies are able to inhabit space in the same comfortable way. In the experience which he recounts, the body is not experienced as a field of possibilities, outwardly directed. Instead, this body is experienced in a problematic way: as a burden. This means that instead of being "an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 114), the body itself becomes the focus of attention. The habit body that Merleau-Ponty described ceases to be habitual and unremarked upon. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed interprets this in terms of 'orientation'

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[7] Macey severely qualifies his characterrization of Fanon as a phenomenologist, claiming that Fanon is "not a terribly sophisticated phenomenologist, and he is a very selective one, not least because he had little philosophical training and was self-taught" (Macey 1999: 10). While this may indeed be the case, I hold the way in which Fanon builds his argument and which model of the body underlies his account of experience to be the definitive hallmark of his quality as a phenomenologist, rather than the use of the correct philosophical terminology.

and 'orientatedness'. Colonialism and imperialism, according to Ahmed, created a society orientated around whiteness. Contemporary Western societies, as postcolonial societies which are still profoundly marked by racism and xenophobia, are still orientated around whiteness (Ahmed 2006: 21). In such a 'white context,' white bodies generally do not attract any special attention, and thus are able to fade into the background as habit-bodies or 'bodies at home'[8]. The black body, on the other hand, does not always have this privilege. In a context orientated around whiteness, the black body is constituted as a body 'out of place'.

Undoubtedly, the experience which Fanon describes takes place in a colonial context. As a result, the type of experience he describes differs profoundly from the type of experience Merleau-Ponty describes. Ahmed analyzes this difference as follows:

> If classical phenomenology is about 'motility,' expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance 'I can', Fanon's phenomenology of the black body would be better described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance 'I cannot' (Ahmed 2007: 161)

'Uncertainty, 'restriction' and 'blockages': these terms capture the experience which Fanon recounted. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty's describes the easy and care-free experience of a 'body at home'. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of embodied experiences thus categorically fails to account for the type of experience which Frantz Fanon describes; and this makes Merleau-Ponty's account of the body colour-blind. Analyzing the difference, Ahmed argues that Merleau-Ponty's account is, in fact, a 'phenomenology of whiteness' (Ahmed 2006: 160). By stressing the experience of a body which does not comfortably 'fit in', by expressing the lived experience of being black in a society orientated around whiteness, Frantz Fanon provides the first steps towards a phenomenology of race.

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[8] Ahmed's phenomenological insight resonates with the insights of critical whiteness scholars such as Richard Dyer, who has remarked that whiteness is, generally, an unmarked category (1997).

Nevertheless, Frantz Fanon's work has not generally been received as such. In fact, the scholarship on the phenomenological character of Fanon's work dates from the late 1990s and 2000s. How are we to understand this, if Fanon's work indeed offers "one of the profoundest critiques of phenomenology offered in this century" (Weate 2001: 170)? In large part, the potential phenomenological character of Fanon's work has been obscured by the problematic translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* by Charles Lam Markmann, as Macey and Bernasconi note (Macey 1999, Bernasconi 2001). The most explicitly phenomenological chapter of this work, which Fanon entitled "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" in French, was translated to English as "The Fact of Blackness". As we have noted, the term 'lived experience' is a specific philosophical term, which alerts the reader to the fact that they will be presented with an account of experience which is informed by a phenomenological perspective on the relation between body and world. Omitting this concept from the title is already problematic, since it obscures or even erases the phenomenological character of the work. Replacing it with a formulation that presents blackness as a 'fact', however, is adding insult to injury. As Macey clearly explains the problem:

> the point of Fanon's exercise in sociodiagnostics is to demonstrate that there is no 'fact' of blackness (or, by the same criterion, whiteness); both are a form of lived experience.. To mistake a lived experience for a fact is to betray Fanon's text to such an extent as to make it almost incomprehensible" (1999: 8).

Macey stresses here that race is not a 'fact', but instead a lived experience. This means that no claims about the ontological status or biological basis of racial difference are made. Instead, a phenomenological account of race shows how 'race' is produced in specific social contexts. Ahmed writes: "Phenomenology helps us to show how race is an effect of racialization, and to investigate how the invention of race as if it were 'in' bodies shapes what bodies 'can do'" (2006: 112). This means that the experience which Fanon describes is not a direct result of his skin colour: it is not a logical consequence of his blackness. Instead, it is a result of a social

context in which his appearance qualified him as different, in which the visual appearance of his body gained a specific meaning. For the phenomenologist, then, race does not primarily have to do with genetics or skin pigmentation. Instead, 'race' is something that emerges in interaction with others. In this way, a phenomenology of race takes race seriously without reifying race.

The mistranslation of Fanon here opens the door for a misinterpretation of his philosophical perspective. Interestingly (or perhaps sadly) enough, the mistranslation of Fanon reminds of a very similar case: the mistranslation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. In the discussion of Beauvoir that is to follow, I will draw a parallel between these two cases, since I believe that the erasure of the philosophical and specifically phenomenological signalling words in the texts of both these two authors is not coincidental. First, however, I turn to the content of Beauvoir's phenomenological account of womanhood.

*B) Beauvoir: The Lived Experience of 'Being a Woman'*

Simone de Beauvoir's canonical *Second Sex* has been read in many different ways by many different generations of feminist thinkers. Departing from the assertion that Simone de Beauvoir should be fully recognized as a philosopher[9], I argue that in fact, Beauvoir's work should be considered the first step towards a phenomenological account of the lived experience of being a woman. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir quite explicitly states her commitment to a phenomenological perspective on the body. She writes: "Nevertheless, one will say, in the perspective I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty – if the body isn't a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the sketch [outline] of our projects" (Beauvoir cited in Moi 2002: 1022).

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[9] The philosophical and character of Beauvoir's work has often been downplayed, both in the reception and by Beauvoir herself. Feminist Beauvoir scholars such as Kruks, Weiss, Moi and Simons have challenged this interpretation and established that Beauvoir should be taken seriously as a philosopher in her own right.

Phenomenological readings of Beauvoir's work have been offered by a variety of scholars, including O'Brien & Embree (2001), Sara Heinämaa (2003) and Silvia Stoller (2010). In this short discussion, I will focus on Heinämaa's reading, as it not only places Beauvoir squarely in the phenomenological tradition, but highlights how Beauvoir's phenomenological account of the experience of being a woman provides an important critique to the Merleau-Pontian framework for thinking embodiment. In *Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir: Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, Sara Heinämaa argues that "it is only in the methodic and thematic context of Husserl's phenomenology that we can identify Beauvoir's fundamental questions and understand her original way of answering them" (Heinämaa 2003: xiii). But although Beauvoir makes use of the Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian notion of the 'lived body,' she also innovatively adapts it and offers an important corrective to their accounts. In doing so, Beauvoir takes the first steps in developing what Heinämaa calls a 'phenomenology of sexual difference'[10].

The Merleau-Pontian frame, as I outlined above, emphasizes the potentiality of the body: the bodily 'I can'. This means that in the Merleau-Pontian framework, I 'am' my body in a quite unproblematic way. Sometimes, there is even an element of instrumentality[11] to his account of embodiment, with the body figuring as something which I can control, and through which I control (parts of) the outside world. Beauvoir's account, in contrast, points out that "our bodies never wholly coincide with any self, personal or anonymous" (Heinämaa 2003: 71). Instead, there is also always something unpredictable and uncontrollable about the body. So while my body is 'myself', it is also always already more than me. Heinämaa refers to this this as an 'alien vitality' which is at play in the body. As she explains:

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[10] Heinämaa frames Beauvoir's phenomenological contribution within a 'sexual difference' framework. Since Beauvoir has often been understood as an 'equality feminist' rather than a thinker of sexual differences, the combination of Beauvoir and a sexual difference framework is intriguing and notable for a feminist reader.

[11] Heinämaa connects this notion of instrumentality even stronger to the model offered by Martin Heidegger, and contrasts Beauvoirs account to the Heideggerian model (Heinämaa 2003: 62). In my discussion, I will not go further into the Heideggerian connection.

> "The living body is not simply an organ of the will nor is it a natural self; it also discloses a vitality that does not belong to us as individuals or as humans. The body that is my own, which is my necessary anchor point in the material world, is also, necessarily, a stranger to me. And this, Beauvoir argues, women experience, not exclusively, but 'more intimately' than men do." (Heinämaa 2003: 71).

Examples of this 'alien vitality' at play in the body include the experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding, sickness and aging. It may seem strange that Beauvoir groups menstruation and pregnancy – 'normal' and 'healthy' processes – under the same heading as 'negative' processes such as diseases. However, the point here is not that she considers pregnancy a disease. Rather, Beauvoir simply points out that it is an instance where the body is not under your control and may actually seem to be working against your personal goals. The examples further show that this 'strangeness' in the own body is not something which is specific to *women's* embodied experience. Men experience it as well at times, for example in illness or in sexuality.

Nevertheless, it seems that for Beauvoir, the alien vitality was considered to be more prominent in women's lives. They experience it 'more intimately', as Heinämaa put it in the quote above - as "a continuous cyclical vein in the flow of her experiences" (Heinämaa 2003: 72). The fact that this experience of 'otherness' and loss of control is less frequent in male bodies might explain why have been more able to deny or ignore this aspect of embodiment. Heinämaa suggests, however, that it may not just be a question of a mere forgetfulness or an oversight. She argues that this alien vitality itself is the object of horror (Heinämaa 2003: 131). Because people have difficulty accepting their own finitude, passivity and vulnerability, they have *projected* these phenomena onto women's bodies, making women "the location of death, carnality, and passivity" (Heinämaa 2003: 128). In other words, whether it is because this experience of 'alien vitality' is less prominent in men's embodied experience, or because it filled them with horror, these aspects of embodiment were overlooked or downplayed by the traditional male phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty. However, as Heinämaa warns,

this oversight has serious consequences. "Male theorists have taken their own experiences as exemplary and have described the feminine, not as a variation, but as a deviation" (Heinämaa 2003: 73). Simone de Beauvoir was the first to point attention to this, and in the *Second Sex* she gives an alternative by highlighting exactly those aspects of embodied experience that were ignored by Merleau-Ponty because he simply did not experience them. With Heinämaa, I argue that the strength of Beauvoir's critical intervention is that she thematizes elements of embodied experience that Merleau-Ponty overlooked: *not* by abandoning the Merleau-Pontian framework, but by creatively adapting it.

Lastly, I want to point out that, as was the case with the work of Fanon, the phenomenological interpretation of Beauvoir has been hampered by the choices and mistakes in the translation. To mention just one central flaw[12]: the second book of the *Second Sex* was titled "L'Expérience Vécue" in French, but was translated to English as "Women's Lives Today". As Margaret Simons has pointed out, this "effectively masks the significance of the work as a phenomenological description", which may account for "the nearly universal failure of contemporary American phenomenologists to acknowledge Beauvoir's contribution in the *Second Sex* to the articulation of a phenomenological analysis of the social world" (Simons 1999: 70). It is note-worthy and revealing that in the case of Beauvoir as well as in the case of Fanon, the philosophical and specifically phenomenological quality of their work has been hidden or even erased by a problematic translation. In my assessment, this is not a coincidence, but instead it has to do with the fact that both Fanon and Beauvoir do not just make use of phenomenology, but also provide important *challenge* to phenomenology. The fact that this challenge was not even heard, let alone answered to, has everything to do with the fact that both Beauvoir and Fanon occupied a non-dominant position in their contemporary contexts. Rather than an interesting piece of trivia, I think that the

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[12] For a good overview of the errors and omissions in H. M. Parshley's translation of de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, see Toril Moi (2002).

mistranslation of their work thus has to do with authority and recognition. Which bodies speak, and which bodies are spoken about? Which questions are deemed important, and which are trivialized? The politics of translation at work in the dissemination of Beauvoir and Fanon's work to an English language audience reveal the power relations at work in the philosophical realm. The erasure and dismissal of women philosophers and philosophers of colour from the philosophical canon has taken place and continues to take place in many subtle and less subtle ways. The case of the mistranslation of both Fanon and Beauvoir is a very obvious and literal example of exactly such an erasure. Reclaiming the philosophical and phenomenological character of their thought, as I have argued for in the preceding section, is the first step in undoing that historical erasure.

*C) Towards a Phenomenology Sensitive to Difference?*

I have demonstrated how both Fanon and Beauvoir used phenomenology as a *resource* for studying the specific questions they were interested in: for Fanon the question of racial inequalities and the experience of being black, and for Beauvoir the question of gender hierarchies and the experience of being a woman. I have argued that by using the phenomenological vocabulary and framework for these investigations, their work makes a critical intervention into the phenomenological tradition itself. By revealing the blind spots in the classical phenomenological perspective on the body, Fanon and Beauvoir have challenged the perspective on the body offered by 'classical phenomenology', notably Merleau-Ponty. Fanon and Beauvoir reveal the universalist assumptions that underlie Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied experience, by pointing attention to the fact that when he claims to be describing in general the structures of embodied experience, Merleau-Ponty in fact overlooks the gender(ed) and racial(ized) aspects of lived experience.

Although I have heralded Fanon and Beauvoir as the first step towards a phenomenology which is more sensitive to differences, it is also important to note the ways in which these two early 'interventions' produced their own blind spots. Although Fanon's account of his experiences of blackness reveals the colour-blindness of Merleau-Ponty's account of the body, his account nevertheless reproduces the gender-bias. Similarly, although Beauvoir points attention to how gender affects lived experience, she has little eye for the ways in which race plays a role. In other words: while pointing out one blind-spot, others are left unquestioned and even uncritically reproduced. While these approaches may be sensitive to one particular difference, they lack a critical attention for how differences are *intertwined* rather than just existing *alongside* each other. The theory of intersectionality developed in black feminism has emphasized that different inequalities in fact intersect and mutually constitute each other (Combahee River Collective 1977/2005, Crenshaw 1991).

In the case of Fanon, it is important to recognize that the experience described is not one of 'blackness' per se – it is the specific experience of a black *man*[13]. In the case of Beauvoir, it is important to recognize that the question which she asked may have been 'What is a woman' – but the question that she answered was specific to white womanhood in a historical and geographical and political context[14]. In contrast to this fragmented approach to

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[13] For a further elaboration on Fanon's lack of attention for the colonized/black woman, see Weiss 1991: 175n22.

[14] Beauvoir does 'compare' the fate of women with that of other groups such as Jews and 'Negroes' in a problematic way. Her argument is that all other subjected groups do find a community and sense of solidarity that she saw 'women' as a group lacked in the time in which she was writing. "Proletarians say 'We'; Negroes also… But women do not say 'We'" (Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 19), and this is because women "live dispersed among the males… The bond that unites her with her oppressor is not comparable to any other" (Beauvoir 1949/1997: 19). As a result, women find more allegiance with their class or racial category than with their gender-category: "If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women" (Beauvoir 1949/1997: 19). It would seem that Beauvoir here puts her finger on a sore spot, recognizing how different categorizations have divided women as a group. Nevertheless, she also implicitly seems to identify 'women' and 'blacks' as two discrete and distinct categories. For example, she writes: "There are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro" (Beauvoir 1949/1997: 23). Here, the woman in question is implicitly white, while the Negro is implicitly assumed to be male: the situation of a black woman is completely left out of consideration. For a more full analysis of potential racism in Beauvoir's comparison of women and 'Negroes', see Simons 1999, Chapter 2.

differences, the writing of the Black feminist poet Audre Lorde stresses the way in which inequalities and differences are interwoven and co-constitute each other. In many of the essays and speeches collected in *Sister, Outsider* (1984/2007), Lorde positions herself explicitly as a lesbian, as a woman, and as a Black person. These different elements all contribute to her identity and her situation, making it impossible to fully separate experiences of racism, sexism/patriarchy and heterosexism/homophobia. In the essay "Eye to Eye", Lorde recounts an interaction on the subway in which she realized that the discomfort and disgust of the woman seated next to her is not directed at some disgusting insect on the seat between them, but at Lorde herself (1984/2007, 147). The experience bears very interesting parallels to the interpellation which Frantz Fanon recounts[15], and has often been cited in scholarship as a more contemporary example of an experience of racism and racialization. Nevertheless, I want to focus here on an experience which Lorde recounts just a few lines later:

> My first interview for a part-time job after school. An optical company on Nassau street has called my school and asked for one of its students. The man behind the coutner reads my application and then looks up at me, surprised by my Black face. His eyes remind me of the woman on the train when I was five. Then something else is added, as he looks me up and down, pausing at my breasts. (Lorde 1984/2007: 149)

In this episode from her adult life, we see very clearly the intersection of gender and race (as well as sexuality) in Lorde's lived experience. A Black man might experience a similar kind of hatred and hostility that Lorde reads in the man's eyes, and a woman might experience the same kind of sexual objectification. However, the coming together of these elements – their

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[15] For one, both take place in a moving train, and both have to do with a sudden awareness of the racialized body and the feeling of alienation that follows it. However, a curious reversal of the roles of perpetrator and victim seems takes place. Where in Fanon's example the 'victim' of racialization and racism is a grown man, in Lorde's example it is herself as a child. Where the boy who calls out 'Look, a Negro' seems to be acting in a childlike innocence that is nevertheless hurtful and infused with a power inequalities, Lorde sees in the woman's eyes an explicit hatred and disgust. These differences and similarities are connected to the different historical, social and political contexts of their happening, but they are also not disconnected from the axes of gender and age. This comparison demonstrates the importance of recognizing the intersectional context in which epxeriences of discrimination take place, and the difficulty of making blanket statements about difference and oppression.

intersection – is crucial to the experience that Audre Lorde recounts. In this encounter, Lorde is neither just Black, nor just a woman: she is a Black woman.

Focusing on one aspect of difference in isolation, as Fanon and Beauvoir have done, can be productive in laying bare a blind spot in the classical phenomenological framework. However, it is only the first tentative first step towards a phenomenology which is truly sensitive to differences. Audre Lorde's experience as a Black woman gives us the first indication of how these tentative leads offered by Fanon and Beauvoir should be further developed in an intersectional feminist phenomenological manner.

1.3 Feminist Phenomenology

Leading up to this section, I have stressed that I consider *both* Fanon and Beauvoir as the forerunners of a feminist phenomenology. This may seem puzzling, as it is in direct contradiction to an approach which would consider 'feminist' only those theories and theorists which are explicitly or primarily concerned with questions of sex and gender. However, it is my contention that a true feminist approach must have eye for the complexity of structures of difference and inequality which co-constitute each other. The intersectional frame introduced by my reading of Audre Lorde indicates that gender does not exist in isolation from other axes of difference, nor does it stand in a hierarchical relation to them. In my definition, then, proper feminist scholarship is per definition intersectional[16].

Perhaps my use of the adjective 'feminist' in the designation of feminist phenomenology is misleading to some readers. I could also have argued that this research should be considered a 'queer phenomenology', following the label introduced by Sara Ahmed (2006). Of course, there are important alliances between this project and that of

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[16] In Chapter Two, Section 2.2, I will reflect further on intersectionality as I consider the implications of taking an intersectional approach to the question of body weight.

Ahmed. In the critical attitude towards the canon and the employment of phenomenological tools and concepts, the adjectives 'queer' and 'feminist' perform a similar function. My inclusive and intersectional understanding of feminist scholarship insures that a 'phenomenology of gender or sexual difference', a 'phenomenology of sexual orientation / queerness' and a 'phenomenology of race', to name just a few, are not to be read as mutually exclusive or contradictory projects. In the way I am using these terms, a feminist phenomenology is per definition anti-racist, and a queer phenomenology is per definition feminist. Nevertheless, I choose classify my work generally and this work in particular as 'feminist phenomenology'. First and foremost, this is because I consider it important to place the revived interest in and re-appropriation of phenomenology in the larger context of feminist philosophy and feminist scholarship. Secondly, 'feminist phenomenology' designates an already-existing and steadily growing tradition of scholarship. In this section, I will sketch the rough contours of the emerging and growing field of feminist phenomenology, before turning to the contested question of 'experience'.

## A) Feminist Phenomenology: Mapping the Field

In a recent special issue of *Continental Philosophy Review*, Sara Heinämaa and Lani Rodemeyer make clear that feminist phenomenology as a 'school of thought' is currently in the making (2010). Indeed, a wealth of recent publications is a testimony to this development. Besides the aforementioned *Continental Philosophy Review* issue devoted to "Phenomenology and Feminism", consider for example the following edited collections: *Feminist Phenomenology* (eds. Fisher and Embree, 2000), *Feministische Phänomenologie und Hermeneutik* (eds. Stoller, Vasterling and Fisher, 2005) and *Time in Feminist Phenomenology* (Schües, Olkowski and Fielding, 2011). Two monographs explicitly devoted to feminist phenomenology are Sara Heinämaa's *Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir: Towards*

*a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference* (2003) and Silvia Stoller's *Existenz, Differenz,*
*Konstruktion: Phänomenologie der Geschlechtlichkeit bei Beauvoir, Irigaray und Butler*
(2010). The recent publication of an edition on Merleau-Ponty in the series 'Re-reading the
Canon', *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Olkowski & Weiss 2006)
further illustrates the actuality of feminist Merleau-Ponty scholarship.

So what exactly is 'feminist phenomenology'? Heinämaa and Rodemeyer give the
following characterization:

> feminist phenomenologists claim to find powerful concepts and methods, as well as
> fruitful questions, in original phenomenological works and in their unprejudiced
> interpretations. Specifically, they see these sources as indispensable in their attempts
> to answer fundamental questions concerning the meaning of sexual difference, the
> gendered body, and equality in difference. (2010: 6)

In other words, feminist phenomenology bridges the fields of phenomenology and feminist
theory, and this bridging allows – or even calls for – a crossing that is not just one-way, but
rather works in two directions[17]. On the one hand, this means bringing phenomenological
methods and concepts in relation to feminist questions and concerns. On the other hand, it
means taking on the canon of phenomenological scholarship with a feminist lens. Bringing
feminist theory in dialogue with phenomenology produces an exchange which, ideally, affects
all conversation partners. Phenomenology provides feminism with a rich methodological and
theoretical repository that can supplement and complement dominant feminist approaches – as
well as challenge these. For example, the phenomenological focus on lived experience
provides an interesting counterpoint to the poststructuralist stress on norms and dominant
discourses, a point I will return to shortly. Feminist scholarship also issues a challenge to
traditional phenomenology: it provides what I consider to be an important corrective to
traditional phenomenological scholarship.

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[17] Although the advocated and undertaken crossing is bi-directional, it should be noted that the bridge-building
seems initiated and executed by philosophers who have a broader investment in feminism and feminist theory.

As my reading of Beauvoir and Fanon has made clear, I consider the central achievement of a feminist phenomenology of the body to lie in making classical phenomenology sensitive to *difference*, notably the differences in embodied experience. Instead of taking the male, white and able-bodied body as an unacknowledged starting point for a supposedly neutral and universal description of the structures of human being-in-the-world, feminist phenomenology implies a recognition that *the body* does not exist, but instead, corporeality and lived experience are fundamentally affected by embodied differences such as gender and race. This intersectional perspective is mediated through the centrality of 'lived experience', a concept I turn to next.

*B) Situating Lived Experience*

'Lived experience' is a central concept in phenomenology. Yet how can this focus on experiences be reconciled with the feminist insight that the 'personal is political', a stance which implies that individual experiences are always part of a larger system of inequalities? Does the focus on experience lead to individualism or voluntarism, with each experience being absolutely 'unique'? In other words, how does the focus on experience within a phenomenological approach in general and a feminist phenomenological approach in particular fit with a feminist eye for the structural elements in the creation or maintenance of hierarchies, inequalities and oppressions?

A focus on the 'lived body' and 'lived experience' does not exclude or preclude attention for the structural level. In my opinion, these two perspectives complement each other, and *both* levels of analysis are necessary for feminist philosophy. The phenomenological notion of 'lived experience' cannot be equated with the concept of experience that Joan Scott criticized in the important article "The Evidence of Experience" (1991). In this text, Joan Scott warns against an uncritical appeal to experience in feminist

scholarship: the approach in which "experience is taken as the origin of knowledge" and thus "the vision of the individual subject (the one who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence" (Scott 1991: 777). The danger which Scott signals is that the historical, societal and cultural factors which shape experience are downplayed, and experience is *naturalized* instead of *contextualized*. Scott's critique is very important and pertinent. Rather than dismiss it, I want to demonstrate that the notion of lived experience as it is used in feminist phenomenology takes to heart the poststructuralist suspicion of experience.

Iris Marion Young's canonical essay "Throwing Like a Girl" from 1977 offers a feminist phenomenological account of female body comportment which takes embodied experience seriously while not taking experience 'as evidence'. In this essay and in the others collected in *On Female Body Experience* (2005), Young gives a creative an original reading of female embodied experiences, without essentializing or individualizing those experiences. It is important to note that whereas Young's *description* of the difference in body comportment, motility and spatiality is phenomenological, in her *explanation* of the differences Young goes beyond phenomenology and appeals to social structures. According to Young, women's situation in patriarchal society explains why women generally live their bodies differently than men do. In a careful balancing act, Young combines a phenomenological focus on experience (in this case: body movement, the ways in which young girls and women throw a ball) with an eye for larger structures which shape those experiences. This means that Young does not essentialize the types of movement and engagement with space that she describes as typically feminine: they are not a logical consequence of a female anatomy, and she leaves open the possibility that they can change with time.

In the essay "Lived Body versus Gender", Young reflects more explicitly on how the two levels of analysis go together. The 'gender' mentioned in the title refers here to the structural level. Notably, Young mentions the sexual division of labour and normative heterosexuality as the two basis axes of gender structures (2005: 22). The 'lived body,' on the other hand, refers to the phenomenological concept, and is as such the entry point for a study of lived experience. Young stresses that the body does not exist in a vacuum: "The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation" (2005: 16). The concept of the lived body and the concept of gender are both important to Young, exactly because of this 'situatedness' of experience. In Young's words:

> each person takes up the constrained possibilities that gender structures offer in their own way, forming their own habits as variations on those possibilities or actively trying to resist or refigure them. Gender as structured is also lived through individual bodies, always as personal experiential response and not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common. (2005: 26)

Young stresses that people "live out their positioning in social structures" (2005: 26). In this framework, structures of inequality are not separate from experience. Instead, these structures fundamentally *shape* experience. In this way, the study of lived experience can bring to light underlying norms and rules that govern those experiences. And converse to the way in which gendered (or racialized/classed etc) structures shape lived experience, individual actions contribute to the reinforcement or subtle shifting of the gendered norms.

The reading which I have just presented is very close to the Butlerian theory of performativity (1988, 1990, 2003). Drawing on a Foucaultian understanding of power as both enabling and constricting, Butler points out that subjectivity always involves a dual-process of subjectivation and subjectification. Performing gender means taking up and living out norms of gender that are already in place – but at the same time, it offers an opportunity to subtly shift these norms. Indeed, it is my contention that a feminist phenomenological approach and

a Butlerian performative approach are not irreconcilable. In the early article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) Butler presents her theory of performativity exactly in terms developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir. Although Butler is more critical of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir in other texts[18], the early article demonstrates that a feminist phenomenological approach is reconcilable with a structural and a poststructural feminist approach.

Therefore, I agree squarely with Silvia Stoller who posits that "to take seriously the poststructuralist critique of experience does not imply that we must do away with the concept of experience altogether" (2009: 729). It is important to note that even Joan Scott herself, who criticized experience from a poststructurlist feminist perspective, does not advocate doing way with the notion. Instead, Scott also recognizes that experience "is not a word we can do without" (1991: 797). Instead of discarding 'experience', Scott argues that we should "work with it, analyze its operations and redefine its meaning" (1991: 797). Indeed, rather than taking a simplistic and empiricist notion of experience as a starting point, feminist phenomenology is engaged in a critical revaluation of experience, in order to make the notion fruitful for sophisticated feminist scholarship. Feminist phenomenology is an approach which is attentive to the poststructuralist critique of experience. The notion of lived experience as developed by Young is able to incorporate societal critiques into an account which nevertheless has eye for the concrete subject and his/her experiences. As Johanna Oksala explains,

> phenomenology can account for gender by helping us to understand how gendered experiences are constituted and how their constitution is tied not only to embodiment, but also to the normative cultural practices and structures of meaning. (2006: 240)

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[18] For a comprehensive overview of Butler's ambivalent relation to phenomenological thought, and an analysis which similarly reads her in proximity to phenomenology, see Stoller 2010.

Oksala here emphasizes that focusing on experience does not imply taking experience for granted, but instead, it can be the entry point to examine how and why such experiences come about. This is exactly what I intend to do in my study of lived experiences of fatness: I do not take these experiences in isolation, but examine them in relation to the socio-cultural context in which they come about. The dominant societal ideas around weight significantly shape individual experiences of fatness or thinness. Thus, following the example set by feminist phenomenologists such as Young, Stoller and Oksala, my phenomenology of body weight needs to situate experiences of fatness in a broader socio-cultural setting. Therefore, I turn now to the cultural context, examining the dominant Western cultural imaginary on body weight and the bodily ideals which govern individual experiences of weight. The following chapter will examine the ways in which the weighing body has become a field of intense cultural contestation.

# Chapter 2.

# "Weight Watchers"

# Cultural Imaginaries and Bodily Ideals

Body weight is usually measured by standing on a scale: a display will reveal your weight in kilograms or pounds. But instead of being just a neutral objective observation about the relative heaviness or lightness of a particular body, the 'number on the scale' has a lot of power. For example, it can have the power to inspire positive emotions such as happiness and pride, when the number confirms weight loss or an ideal weight that has been reached. In other cases, the number on the scale can lead to disappointment, self-loathing, or even disgust. In this way, the number on the scale is, for many people, intimately connected to a measurement of self-worth and feelings of achievement of failure. Although very personal, these individual feelings and lived experiences do not exist in a social vacuum. Instead, they are directly related to dominant socio-cultural ideas and ideals about health, beauty and bodily perfection. One could even say that they are the *product* of these societal discourses around the weighing body.

The close connection between the experience of the individual weighing body and the dominant societal understandings of body weight has been noted by feminist theorists studying eating disorders (*c.f.* Bordo 1993/2003), and feminist theorists studying obesity and fatness from a critical perspective, such as the Fat Studies scholar[19]  Samantha Murray

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[19] "Fat Studies", as I mentioned in the introduction, is the name of a newly emerging interdisciplinary research field, devoted to the critical study of body weight and body size. For an introduction, see Rothblum & Solovay 2009, LeBesco 2010 or Cooper 2010.

(2008a, 2008b). In line with the insights of these feminist and Fat Studies scholars, the feminist phenomenological approach which I am adopting recognizes that cultural discourses profoundly influence and shape lived experiences of embodiment. In the case of the body weight, this means that dominant cultural ideas about 'fatness' and 'thinness' profoundly affect how the weighing body is lived. Thus, in order to fully understand and situate the 'lived experiences of fatness' which will be central in Chapter 3, it is crucial to have a view of the cultural context in which these lived experiences take place. In other words: what are the dominant ideas about body weight which the fat-bodied bloggers which I will discuss in Chapter Three incorporate, respond to and dispute in their online practices? How do these cultural ideas about weight relate to ideas about gender, race and class – to name but a few intersections? In this chapter, I will sketch the dominant cultural imaginary around body weight, making use of the critical feminist and Fat Studies literature. I will bring to the fore the two aspects which I consider most striking: on the one hand, a preoccupation with *beauty* and on the other hand, a concern with *health*.

I use the term 'cultural imaginary' to refer to the dominant cultural ideas and ideals connected to the weighing body[20]. Like the feminist theorist Moira Gatens, I am concerned specifically with "the (often unconscious) imaginaries of a specific culture: those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment" (1996: viii). Gatens here exactly points out the elements which I am after: how do we collectively make

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[20] Of course, 'the imaginary' is a term closely associated with the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In my assessment, phenomenology and psychoanalysis are not at all incompatible theoretical frameworks. Historically, there has been a rich exchange between these two traditions. This exchange is perhaps most notable in the work of Paul Schilder, a pupil of Freud who combined phenomenology and psychoanalysis in his foundational work on 'body image'[20] (1987). In contemporary feminist scholarship on the body, psychoanalytic and phenomenological concepts are often employed alongside each other (*c.f.* Weiss 1999, Salamon 2010). Often, "phenomenological and psychoanalytic accounts are interwoven" (Lennon 2010), as Kathleen Lennon phrases it. In this thesis, I will *not* examine the Lacanian imaginary at length, nor will I go further into the relation between Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty and Schilder. Nevertheless, as I explain in the following, my use of the term 'imaginary' is deliberate. Incidentally, another genealogy of the term 'cultural imaginary' links it not to Lacan, but to the political theorist Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' (1985).

sense of fat bodies and thin bodies respectively, and how do these cultural imaginaries affect the value and status accorded to different body types? In *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Gatens refers to 'the imaginary' both on an individual and a social level, connecting it both to the ways in which bodies are lived, and culturally understood. Likewise, my use of the term strives to deliberately link the societal/cultural level – the *cultural imaginary* examined in this chapter – to the individual/bodily level: the *body images* which will be examined in Chapter Three. How these levels of 'imaginary' and 'imagery' are related will become clearer when I discuss the work of Gail Weiss in Chapter Three (section 3.5). First, however, I turn to the cultural imaginary itself, to examine how it shapes bodily ideals related to weight.

## 2.1 Examining the Cultural Imaginary: Beauty, Health and Weight

The notion of 'lipoliteracy' which was introduced by the anthropologist Mark Graham suggests that all bodies are *read*, and that body weight and body size in particular are often considered to 'reveal' a lot of different information about the person in question (Graham 2005). Seeing a person who is thin, we might conclude that this person probably likes salad and exercises a lot. Moreover, we might conclude that they are probably quite disciplined and that they care about their appearance. Seeing a person who is fat, we might conclude that this person likes ice cream and does not think exercise is very important. But we could also conclude that they are probably lazy and perhaps indifferent about their looks. On the basis of the visible appearance of the body, conclusions are easily made about eating habits and life styles – but also about core values and character traits. 'Reading' a fat body, negative assumptions about the person are likely to prevail. As Samantha Murray has summarized these negative associations in the case of the fat woman:

the fat woman is (presumed to be) inactive, lazy, defiant: she is out of control, she is a moral failure, she is unhealthy, she is an affront to normative feminine bodily aesthetics, she is a food addict, she cannot manage her desires, her level of intelligence is below average. (Murray 2008a: 8).

These negative associations with fatness are widely shared, although they are not always consciously held or explicitly voiced. Nevertheless, I believe that they are recognizable as belonging to the dominant cultural imaginary of the fat body.

While the fat body is linked to with these negative connotations, reading a thin body is likely to bring up positive associations. Analyzing the 'tyranny of slenderness' Susan Bordo notes that thinness is associated with a "capacity for self-containment and the control of impulse and desire" (1993/2003: 191). The thin body-subject is able to resist the myriad of temptations: she has 'control' over her physical appearance as well as her eating habits and desires. On the other hand, it seems that this self-control can also be taken too far and lead to excesses such as the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. This is a point which I will return to later.

Generally, then, the contemporary context is one in which 'thinness' is culturally appreciated, while 'fatness' is valued negatively. Sociologists Abigail Saguy and Anna Ward use the term *fatphobia* to characterize the contemporary context, defining it as a situation in which "thinner bodies are defined as morally, medically, aesthetically and sexually desirable, while heavy bodies are vilified" (Saguy & Ward 2011:54). In my opinion, the contemporary common attitude towards weight is best captured in the name of the popular dieting method 'Weight Watchers'[21]. While of course not everyone is participating in this program, in a sense we are all 'Weight Watchers': concerned with weight, anxious about weighing either too much or too little to 'fit in'. The metaphor of 'Weight Watchers' ties together the two extremes that seem in first instance so different: obesity and anorexia. Both are a product of a

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[21] 'Weight Watchers' was founded in 1963 in the United States. It is a company which sells diet products and weight loss packages. The diet works on the basis of a points system and group therapy. The 'Weight Watchers' formula was exported to 30 different countries, and the company has 28,000 employees.

context in which weight has become the subject of intense cultural contestation. The two main elements of the cultural imaginary on body weight are on the one hand a medical(ized) discourse which brands fatness as unhealthy, and on the other hand a beauty discourse which values the thin and slender body above all other body shape.  As I stressed, these discourses do not exist separately from each other, but are instead deeply intertwined. Nevertheless, they will be discussed separately here for the sake of conceptual clarity.

*A) The Tyranny of Slenderness*

The deceptively innocent question 'does my bum look fat in this?' has become a well-known cultural trope in the late 1990s and 2000s. It is familiar as a *trick question*: a question which does not solicit an honest reply, but should always be answered in the negative. Of course these jeans don't make your ass look fat, you look wonderful! A 'yes' would not just imply an observation on the size of the body part in question, but a negative evaluation on the attractiveness of that body part.  This question is only understood properly in a cultural context in which fatness is disavowed and thinness is appreciated. Thus, the context in which the question 'does my bum look fat?' can only be answered in the negative, is the context which has aptly been labelled the 'tyranny of slenderness' by feminist theorists (Chernin 1982). The feminist philosopher Susan Bordo has powerfully traced the cultural obsession with the thin and slim body in her landmark work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993/2003). Through an analysis of advertisements and other popular media (such as talkshows and movies), Bordo convincingly demonstrates that 'thinness' is the aesthetical ideal which is propagated in cultural imagery. In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo analyzes "the complexly and densely institutionalized *system* of values and practices within which girls and women – and increasingly, men and boys as well – come to believe that they are nothing (and frequently are treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless,

bulgeless, and sagless" (1993/2003: 32). A decade after Bordo's landmark study, Fat Studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco notes that the correlation of thinness with beauty and fatness with ugliness has not changed (2004). She notes that in mainstream media "fat women are depicted as ugly, disgusting, sometimes laughable objects of derision" (LeBesco 2004: 41).

The first thing that we note about the conflation of 'fatness' and 'ugliness' is that it is not just any fat body which is considered ugly. Instead, Bordo and LeBesco write specifically the *fat female body*. This gender dynamic is also implicit in the question 'does my bum look fat in this?' It is understood or presupposed that the bum in question belongs to a girl or a woman, and that the one who is invited to judge on the fatness of that bum is a boy or a man. The gaze in question is undoubtedly a male gaze, although in this case it seems to be one which female *invites* explicitly. In the already-mentioned essay *Throwing Like a Girl*, the feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young argues that the experience of 'being looked at' is strong in female embodiment – stronger than in male experiences of the body (Young 2005: 39). According to Young, "the woman's social existence as the object of the gaze of another… is a major source of her bodily self-reference" (2005: 39). This mode of 'being looked at' is internalized by girls and women, who consequently start living their body as a thing "a fragile thing,… a thing that exists *as looked at an acted upon*" (Young 2005: 39). Young's hypothesis is shared by Laura Mulvey, whose theory about scopophilic pleasure and the male gaze has gained great prominence in feminist theory since it was published in 1975. According to Mulvey, classical cinema presents "woman as image [and] man as bearer of the look" (Mulvey 1975/1999: 837). The 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of women extends beyond the cinema – or rather, it is a symptom of a larger societal trend. Young and Mulvey show that women are, still today, the object of a male gaze, and this gaze is so omnipresent that it is internalized by women who start to live their bodies as objects. To put it simply: women,

more than men, are 'looked at' in Western societies. As a result, women, more than men, are affected by the beauty ideals which privilege the thin and slender body.

This does not mean, however, that men and boys are not affected by the dominant beauty discourse in which 'fat' is considered 'ugly' and 'unattractive'. In fact, I would that they increasingly are affected. In the 2003 foreword to *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo notes that the "men and boys, who once seemed so immune" (2003: xxii) are in increasing numbers suffering from the eating disorders which were previously considered predominantly female ailments. It is clear that for men, as for women, fatness is culturally framed as a bodily condition that is to be avoided. It is not just women who are insecure about their bodies, and it is not just women who experience social pressures to look a certain way. As the phenomenologist Don Ihde has rightly noted, "Boys growing up experience insecurities, tensions between social expectations and bodily realities, and variations upon recognizable gender themes" (Ihde 2002: 25). But, as even Ihde concedes, "At least, for boys, 'the gaze' is relatively muted" (Ihde 2002: 22). Women and girls are both historically and in the contemporary situation most 'exposed' to the gaze. For them, fatness caries the strongest (aesthetical) stigma. Therefore, is hardly a big surprise that most feminist scholarship and Fat Studies scholarship examining the cultural evaluations of fatness is primarily written *by* women, *about* women (and, it seems, *for* women). Nevertheless, it should be clear that the intersection of fatness and masculinity is an important one which requires more scholarly attention.

Besides this gendered dimension of cultural assumptions about fatness, it is often assumed that race and ethnicity may play a role in different aesthetic evaluations of weight. For example, in the edited collection *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, Kulick and Meneley state that

> Fat bodies … are not always stigmatized. There are places, like Niger, where they are considered sexy and ideal. There are other places, like the Andes mountains, where

they symbolize strength and health… There are cultures like hip-hop, or pornography, where fat bodies are the object of adulation. (2005: 4)

Here, a variety of places and contexts are named in which the fat body carries a positive rather than a negative meaning. However, I would argue that in all four of these examples, an 'Othering process' is going on. Appreciation of fatness is projected onto cultural, geographic and ethnic Others. In the first two examples, this is explicit. In the third and fourth examples, the 'othering' is more subtle, since these examples have to do with subcultures within a Western as well as a global context. Yet in the case of 'hip-hop', this nevertheless carries ethnic and racial connotations, as it refers to a musical scene connected to an African-American or black youth culture. It is only in the fourth example, that of 'pornography', where cultural and ethnic overtones are absent[22]. Thus, although they do not frame it in these terms, Kulick and Meneley make an implicit connection between an appreciation of fatness and an 'Otherness' from the supposed white/Western norm in which fatness is abhorred. This connection is not exceptional at all, but rather reflects a more widespread cultural imaginary.

Referencing this imaginary, Susan Bordo warns us: "we should be cautious about assuming too *much* 'difference' here" (1993/2003: 63). In the case of a black American subculture in which fatness would be more acceptable, an idea which is implicit in the reference to 'hip hop' by Kulick and Meneley, Bordo sharply points out: "To imagine that African American women are immune to the standards of slenderness that reign today is, moreover, to come very close to the racist notion that the art and glamour – the culture- of femininity belongs to the white woman alone" (1993/2003: 63). These black subcultures do not exist in isolation from a mainstream cultural imaginary, and although different norms may be in place, the idea that black women are 'exempt' from the large cultural obsession with

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[22] This example also strikes me as the least convincing of the four, because although there are many pornographic contexts in which different non-normative bodies are central, I would reject the assumption that in mainstream 'pornography', non-normative bodies are necessarily celebrated.

slenderness is problematic. As Bordo has argued, "in the 1980s and 1990s an increasingly universal equation of slenderness with beauty and success has rendered the competing claims of cultural diversity ever feebler" (1993/2003: 103). Indeed, this tendency has only continued and strengthened in the 2000s. Global capitalism has effectively 'exported' norms which might have their origins in a white Western culture to many different parts of the world. In contrast to Kulick and Meneley, I would not underestimate the role of pornography in this exportation of thinness as an aesthetic ideal. While noting ethnic and cultural variations in the evaluations of fatness and thinness, we should be wary of explanations which argue that in certain cultural contexts, fatness is more accepted or even valued. Such arguments may function, in many cases, as Othering mechanisms, and serve to conceal the pressures on women in a variety of cultural contexts to live up to the 'tyranny of slenderness'.

So far, I have discussed one element of the cultural imaginary on body weight: the beauty discourse in which thin and slender bodies figure as a bodily ideal, whereas fat and chubby bodies are considered unattractive. However, the aesthetical imperative to be thin is only one aspect of the cultural imaginary on weight. Another important aspect is the health discourse, which I will examine in more detail now.

*B) The Thin Line of Health*

The BMI, or Body Mass Index, is a classification system which works on the basis height/weight ratio. The BMI classifies bodies as being 'underweight,' 'normal,' 'overweight,' 'obese' or 'morbidly obese'. As the labels indicate, being either too heavy or too light is considered unhealthy. A high weight is associated, for example with a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. A low weight is associated with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. In between these two extremes is a range of weight that is considered 'healthy'. In the Western world, the majority of people fall into the

categories of overweight and obese. For example, according to the latest EU statistics from 2011, more than half of the population of the European Union is overweight to obese .[23] This situation is considered highly problematic by medical authorities. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaims obesity to be "one of the greatest public health challenges of the 21st century" [24] on their website. Obesity is seen as a problem and a threat because its leads to the aforementioned chronic diseases, as well as causing "various physical disabilities and psychological problems" [25]. In fact, in the terminology employed by the World Health Organization, obesity is not just seen as problematic because it leads to diseases. Instead, obesity itself is framed as a disease: a disease which is dangerous to both the individuals afflicted, and to society at large. In a 250 page report commissioned by the World Health Organization with the significant and ominous title *Obesity: Preventing and Managing the Global Epidemic*[26], it is stated that "Obesity is a complex and incompletely understood disease" (WHO 2000: 4).

The dominant contemporary discourse on fatness and health could thus be characterized as a discourse of the 'obesity epidemic'. This discourse is ubiquitous in medical literature on obesity, but it is also widely reflected in media and public opinion (Boero 2007, Saguy & Almeling 2008). Critically evaluating the medical discourse and its representation in mainstream media, Campos et al have argued that it is not obesity itself which is epidemic, but instead, the "claims that obesity is a serious health problem on both a national and international level have become epidemic" (Campos et al 2006: 58). The increased media attention towards obesity indicates, according to these scholars, a 'moral panic' more than an actual health crisis. In the characterisation of obesity as an 'epidemic', medical terminology is employed in order to give an air of scientific objectivity to a claim which actually says as

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[23] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Overweight_and_obesity_-_BMI_statistics
[24] http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity
[25] http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity
[26] Available to download on: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894.pdf

much about the social context in which it is produced as it does about the 'facts' it claims to express. Obesity is, as Samantha Murray points out, in fact "not a communicable, infectious disease and, thus, does not strictly adhere to the medical definition of an epidemic... It has emerged as a profound social infection despite its non-infectious character" (2008b: 10). Referring to obesity as a disease effectively *pathologizes* a certain body weight. Labelling the prevalence of obesity in large parts of the world population an *epidemic* indicates that it is thought of as a danger and a threat. Yet this threat seems as much of a social nature as it is of a medical nature. In the discourse of the obesity epidemic, it is clear that the language of science and medicine is strategically employed to legitimize and reinforce a negative evaluation of fatness.

Making this argument, Samantha Murray points out that "medical knowledges are intimately involved in disciplinary processes of pathologization and the ascription of deviance" – processes that have effects "not only in the clinic but are (re)produced in wider social understandings of the fat woman and the production of so-called truths about obesity" (2008b: 8). Murray here points out that dominant medical discourse of the 'obesity epidemic' carries a strong authority. This authority causes this 'medical knowledge' to spill over into other realms. Politicizing this point, Campos et al argue that "propagating the idea of an 'obesity epidemic' furthers the political and economic interests of certain groups, while doing immense damage to those whom it blames and stigmatizes" (2006: 59). While the dominant medical discourse equates 'fat' with 'unhealthy', arguments like those of Campos and Murray make clear that this conflation is contested by scholars who unite under the banner of a critical 'Fat Studies'. As Charlotte Cooper explains, "Fat Studies enables the reframing of the problem of obesity, where it is not the fat body that is at issue, but the cultural production of fatphobia" (Cooper 2010: 1020). Fat Studies scholars like Samantha Murray "interrogate critically the role that medical narratives play in producing a particular public perception

about 'obesity' and unhealth" (Murray 2008b: 8). Many Fat Studies scholars draw on a theory about 'Health at Every Size' (HAES) to counter the conflations of fatness with unhealthiness in the dominant discourse[27].

While I have so far characterized the dominant discourse on weight and health as the discourse of the 'obesity epidemic', it is of course not only fatness which is pathologized. *Underweight* is also considered unhealthy, with the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa as the extremes. While these eating disorders are culturally framed as a pathological states and diseases, Susan Bordo has convincingly argued that these 'extremes' are in fact a logical result of the widespread cultural concern with thinness. Bordo thus considers them a 'crystallization of culture' (1993/2003: xxi): arguing that "eating disorders, far from being 'bizarre' and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture" (1993/2003: 476). By this, Bordo means that anorectics and bulimics are simply taking the cultural ideal of thinness to its logical extreme; implying that the dividing line between a 'normal' interest in dieting and exercise and a pathological obsession with weight may be, in fact, much *thinner* than we might like to admit. By questioning the 'exceptionality' of eating disorders, Bordo does not question their severity or the damage that they do. Instead, she places the medical discourse in the socio-cultural context of which it is a product. Contextualizing the medical knowledge about eating disorders, such as Susan Bordo has done, we can now relate it to the medical knowledge about obesity.

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[27] The 'Health at Every Size' movement presents itself as an alternative to the dominant discourse of fatness and health. However, there are also fat activists and Fat Scholars who have taken a different route in countering the dominant health narrative. They have asked more radically: why should 'health' be considered a value in the first place? Do individuals have an ethical or social responsibility to live healthy lives and strive to become as old as possible? On the one hand, suggesting that fatness should be considered *as* disability may seem to support a dominant medical discourse which pathologizes fatness. On the other hand, it may also be considered a political tool for subversion through an alliance between fat activism and fat scholarship and movements and scholarship arguing for the rights of disabled people (crip theory).

It is striking to notice that although *both* extremes are diagnosed as pathological in the contemporary medical discourse, the 'unhealthiness' of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia on the one hand, and obesity on the other hand, are culturally framed in very different ways. In a comparative study of news media reporting on respectively obesity and anorexia[28], Saguy and Gruys (2010) note that while anorexics and bulimics are often portrayed as victims of an illness that is outside their control, obesity is often portrayed as a personal responsibility and the result of bad eating and exercising habits. These different representations are of course connected to the different cultural valuations of fatness and thinness. As Susan Bordo cynically points out, while the obese and the anorectic both fail to live up to the cultural norms, "The anorectic at least pays homage to dominant cultural norms", whereas in the case of the obese, "their defiant rebellion against normalization appears to be a source of the hostility they inspire" (1993/2003: 203). This would explain why anorexia is framed differently – in a more 'forgiving' light – than obesity is. In addition, it is important to note how the different response to anorexia and obesity is deeply intertwined with dominant ideas about gender, race and class. In news media reporting, Saguy and Gruys note that it is typical that "a young white girl from a well-to-do family provides 'the face' of anorexia, while a young boy and his low-earning black single mother are discussed in an article on obesity" (Saguy & Gruys 2010: 232). Summarizing the results of the study, Saguy and Gruys conclude:

> because anorexia and bulimia are described as more often affecting middle class white girls and women, the analyzed news reports on these disorders reinforce the image of white middle class girls and women as victims. Since overweight/obesity is described as a problem most common among the poor and minorities, such news reporting on obesity reinforces stereotypes of poor minorities as ignorant or willfully defiant of health guidelines. While articles discussing blacks, Latinos, or the poor are more likely to blame weight on social-structural factors, they are also more likely to blame ethnic preferences for larger women or ethnic cuisine. (2010: 247).

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[28] The representative sample is constituted by the reporting in the New York Times and Newsweek between 2000-2005. The articles in this sample have been analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Saguy and Gruys here note that societal notions about race/ethnicity and class inform and shape news media representations of eating disorders related to thinness, and overweight and obesity respectively.

The intersection of weight and class, which Saguy and Gruys point attention to, is a complex terrain. Generally, fatness has long been a marker of high social status, and this is still the case in some contexts. This positive valuation of fatness can be related to food scarceness: in situations where food is limited, a fat body could be 'read' as a sign of wealth and prosperity. Since the industrial revolutions in the twentieth century, however, the symbolic meaning of fatness has reversed, and instead thinness has become a mark of social status (Saguy & Gruys 2010: 233). As Susan Bordo notes, "The moral requirement to diet depends on the material conditions that make the *choice* to diet and option and the possibility of personal 'excess' a reality" (1993/2003: 192). The higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among lower socio-economic classes is often considered to be connected both to the high(er) cost of healthy/nutritious food, and a presumed ignorance about the importance of health and nutrition. Nevertheless, the study by Saguy and Gruys shows that not only the *prevalence* of overweight/obesity classed, but that, more importantly, the perception or evaluations of fatness are themselves highly classed. Here, a tricky question is of course: what is cause and what is effect. Is poverty fattening, or is fatness impoverishing? While this question may be impossible to answer definitively, I would agree with Susan Bordo that the class connotation of body weight is, in fact, more related to an ideal of *social mobility* than a fixed class location.

> When associations of fat and lower-class status exist, they are usually mediated by moral qualities – fat being perceived as indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform, and absence of all those 'managerial' abilities that, according to dominant ideology, confer upward mobility. (Bordo 1993/2003: 195)

Whether fatness is the 'cause' or the 'effect' of a class identity, it is clear that in the contemporary Western context it, it has highly classed connotations. The assumed ignorance of 'willingly' choosing to be unhealthy is widely looked down upon.

*C.) Conclusion: Unhealthy and Unattractive*

I have here introduced the dominant medical narrative about body weight as a narrative of an 'obesity epidemic'. However, it is important to note the current research is first and foremost a *philosophical* study of body weight. As such, I am not primarily concerned with the proving or disproving the healthiness or unhealthiness of any particular body weight. Therefore, I do not want to make any strong claims about the accuracy or inaccuracy of the dominant medical discourse. Instead of either 'refuting' or 'confirming' the medical truth claims, I simply note that that the conflation of 'fat' with 'unhealthy' is ubiquitous in medical studies, mainstream media and popular opinion. I also note that this dominant understanding is challenged by a variety of scholars that unite under the label of a critical Fat Studies. Noting the ubiquity of the medical narrative of the 'obesity epidemic' is important, because it is exactly this discourse that the fat bloggers that I study in the following chapter respond to. The counter-narrative of the Health at Every Size movements and the Fat Studies scholarship is one on which they draw to counter the dominant medical discourse which pathologizes their bodies.

All in all, I have shown that in contemporary societies, fatness is associated with a range of negative meanings. When it comes to aesthetics, being 'fat' is equated with being unattractive. When it comes to health, 'fat' people are understood as being unhealthy and even diseased. Connecting these two discourses, it is clear that 'fat' is culturally framed as a health transgression, an aesthetical transgression, and consequently often even as a moral

transgression[29]. Nevertheless, I have also noted that although these negative associations may seem very strong and widespread, they have also been contested. Feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo and Fat Studies scholars such as Samantha Murray have critically studied the cultural construction of 'fatness' as a negative quality, and have opened the space for more positive understandings of 'fat'. These voices are in the minority, however, and the dominant cultural imaginary on weight is quite persistent. In the discussion of the cultural evaluations of fatness, I have noted that although 'thinness' is generally valued positively and 'fatness' is valued negatively, these evaluations are not the same across the board. Instead, at various points I have noted the ways in which ideas about 'fat' and 'thin' cannot be seen separately from assumptions about gender, class and race. I want to close this chapter by reflecting on the importance, but also the difficulties, of studying body weight from an intersectional perspective.

### 2.2.Axis of Fat: Reflections on Intersectionality

In Chapter One, I have stressed the importance of an intersectional approach for a feminist phenomenological perspective. An intersectional awareness is crucial because different elements of identity do not exist in isolation from each other, but rather co-constitute and construct each other. At this point, it is important to become a bit more concrete, and reflect on what an intersectional perspective on *body weight* implies. On first sight, body weight might seem a rather trivial addition to the 'classical' intersectional categorisations such as *gender*, *class* and *race*. Is 'sizeism' really comparable to structures of oppression such as racism, sexism and class hierarchies? In my view, it is important to realize that studying weight from an intersectional perspective does not mean comparing or equating weight-based

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[29] Here, I am thinking of negative character traits such as laziness and gluttony which are associated with fatness (*c.f.* Murray 2008).

discriminations with other types of inequalities. Instead, I consider 'intersectionality,' following the working definition by Nina Lykke, primarily as a "thinking technology" for feminist scholarship (2011: 208). Lykke has cautioned against using intersectionality as a 'black box' in feminist theory, "a machine for throwing more and more new categories on the table" (2011: 210). In a similar vein, Kathy Davis (2008) warns of the danger of intersectionality being used as an empty 'buzzword'. Taking heed of these warnings, I consciously refrain from making a theoretical argument to add body weight as an axis of difference to the familiar categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, age, etc. Instead, I realize that the strength of the intersectional lens is that it allows me to analyse weight in its *interconnection* with other categorisations, without making any judgments about the ontological primacy of any of these categorisations. Moreover, I follow Dorthe Staunæs' (2003) assertion that intersectionality should not be considered only on the level of social systems and 'master identities'. Instead, it is important to recognize the ways in which "these categories work and intersect in the lived experiences of concrete subjects" (Staunaes 2003: 101). Staunæs asks: 'Where have all the subjects gone?', and with this question she comments on the way in which poststructuralist theories have focused on the level of social structures and 'dominant discourses' at the expense of attention for the individuals who 'inhabit' those discourses. My feminist phenomenological approach, as I stressed in Chapter One (section 1.3.B), straddles these two extremes and so seeks out a balance between social structures and lived experiences. As such, my work is aligned with Staunæs' call for 'doing' intersectionality rather than only reflecting on the categories on a theoretical level.

An exemplary case of an intersectional analysis in which body weight emerges as a factor of difference *alongside* other categorisations is provided by an anecdote Sara Ahmed recounts in *Differences that Matter* (1998). Ahmed's analysis of the anecdote shows how body weight can play a role both in affirming an assumption of another social categorisation

(in this case, a racial assumption), and how it can work as a parallel to other categorisations. Moreover, the anecdote reaffirms, in a clear and distinct way, the persistence of some of the cultural meanings of fatness which I have pointed out earlier.

Ahmed recounts that as a teenager walking on the street in a suburb of Adelaide, she was stopped by a police car which was on patroul in relation to some break-ins that had taken place in the area. Because of her clothing ("I was in a 'scruffy' phase") and skin colour (her British/Pakistani heritage), the police were under the assumption that she was Aboriginal. Ahmed recounts: "the policemen addressed me, in the first instance, as working class (from dress), and as Aboriginal (from colour). This identification *read* me as a subject, *by rendering me a suspect*, as a danger to the Law (of property), a potential robber" (1998: 115). The assumption about class and the assumption about race work together to position Ahmed as a suspect to the policemen: a possible threat or at least an intruder in the neighbourhood. When Ahmed answers negatively to the question whether she is an Aboriginal, the policeman winks and suggests that it must be a sun-tan. With this comment, gender enters the picture: "this quip both made light of their mistake... while positioning me as a woman, as a recipient of a wink (and of a gaze), and as somebody who sun-bathes, who tans her body" (Ahmed 1998: 116). With the mistaken assumptions about class and race 'corrected', the suspicion was lifted: "Inscribed as a white woman, I was the legitimate object of the policeman's protective gaze" (Ahmed 1998: 116)

Ahmed's analysis of the incident reveals the subtle ways in which ideas about gender, race and class came together in the exchange. Interestingly enough, *weight* enters the equation when Ahmed's sister later implies that her fatness was a factor in being mistaken for an Aboriginal. Commenting on this linkage between 'fatness' and 'Aboriginality', Ahmed writes:

> Fatness not only inscribes certain negative values to Aboriginality, but also positions me as a woman who has failed, who has failed to police and discipline her body into acceptable 'feminine' contours. Within this structure of address, the fat woman is (like) an Aboriginal, in excess of the norms and values inscribed by a proper social and sexual order. (1998: 117)

In this fragment, we get an idea into how weight intersects with other markers of identity in the encounters between Ahmed and the policemen and Ahmed and her sister. It seems that ideas about body weight contribute to an evaluation of gender performance, and thus lead to an assumption about race and class position. The relation between fatness and Aboriginality in this fragment is clearly a complex one. On the one hand, fatness is seen as a 'sign', an indicator of Aboriginality (Ahmed 1998: 117). On the other hand, the social position of the fat woman is likened to that of the Aboriginal. The first relationship is predicated on a causal logic (fat means Aboriginal), whereas the second implies a parallel relationship (fatness is like Aboriginal). Nevertheless, what is clear that fatness and Aboriginality are both disavowed, and each disavowal reinforces the other. Ahmed urges us to "Read the text implicit here: laziness, indulgence, excess" (1998: 117). This brings us back to the dominant cultural discourses on body weight discussed in the first half of this chapter. Ahmed's anecdote has linked these to categorisations of gender, class and race in her complex reading of an encounter between her teenage self and a police officer.

In summary, this chapter has been devoted to an examination of the general cultural imaginary around the weighing body and the bodily ideals which it engenders. The chapter has closed on a further reflection on how to 'do' intersectionality (Staunæs 2003) in such a way that 'weight' can be considered as one factor among others . In the following chapter, we move from the 'general', societal level back to the level of embodied experience, to examine how the cultural imaginaries recounted in this chapter are incorporated as well as resisted by the fat bodied women and girls active in the online Fat Acceptance movement.

# Chapter 3.

# Lived Fatness:

# A Phenomenological Case Study

In this chapter, I will bring into practice the feminist phenomenological approach to the body which was introduced in Chapter One. Thus, I turn from the level of the cultural imaginary back to the level of the individual and the body. I will do so without forgetting how bodies and experiences are intertwined with the social and cultural context – how they are shaped and constituted by the cultural imaginary. The current chapter presents what I will call a 'phenomenological case study': a case study which raises important questions about how weight is lived in the 21$^{st}$ century, by shedding light the importance of blogging practices and digital culture in embodied experiences. Furthermore, the case study will lay bare how the cultural imaginary which equate fatness with 'unhealthy' and 'ugly' is experienced, renegotiated and resisted by the fat-bodied bloggers on the blog *Fat From the Side*[30]. The

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[30] www.fatfromtheside.tumblr.com. I recognize that the material presented on *Fat From the Side* – both the text and the image – are for many of the participants intensely personal and private. I considered presenting the material pseudonymously or asking the participants for their explicit permission to use and reproduce the material. However, I chose not to do so because, as 'private' as the material may seem at times, is nevertheless undeniably and unapologetically 'public'. They are, as an early reflection on the ethics of online research puts it, "public acts deliberately intended for public consumption" (Paccagnella 1997). As Jenny Sundén writes in relation to 'newsgroups', the blogposts on *Fat From the Side* "could be compared to letters to the editors, or scribbles on the walls in public bathrooms, where messages are not only likely but *meant* to be read by a lot of people" (Sundén 2003: 38-39). As part of a larger Fat Acceptance movement, the images and words shared on *Fat From the Side* should be read both as a personal statement and a political statement. Of course, I have taken care to attribute the material to the source from which I retrieved it – as I would do with any source. In discussing and analyzing contributions to this blog, I have chosen to reference the blogpost in question in a footnote. While this is not in line with the author-date referencing style (APA Style) that I have been employing throughout this thesis, I make this exception in order not to unduly interrupt the flow of the text by links that fill up almost a whole line.

analysis of the blog serves to provide an insight into lived experiences of weight: in particular, lived experiences of fatness.

*Fat From the Side* is a tumblr-blog on which participants share photographs of their fat bodies accompanied by text. The blog is part of an online community dedicated to the political cause of 'Fat Acceptance'. First, I will situate the case study, introducing the Fat Acceptance movement both in its online and offline variations. Next, I turn to the question of technology and digital media in mediating or transmitting these lived experiences of fatness. Since the internet is often considered a disembodied medium, one can question whether it makes sense to a blogging practice as an expression of 'lived fatness'. Through an engagement with phenomenological approaches to the relation of bodies and technologies, I will argue that online and offline are two closely intertwined domains, and that on *Fat From the Side*, the fat body is indeed lived. After these reflections on context and medium, I turn to the content of the case-study material itself. Paying attention both to the visual and textual expressions of the participants on *Fat From the Side*, I will analyze the blog phenomenologically. I consider the role of the 'progress narratives' which often accompany the photographs, detailing a path from self-hatred and shame to pride and joy in their fat bodies. Subsequently, I examine the presence of mind/body dualisms in the narratives of fatness which are presented. Lastly, I offer a phenomenological reading of the practice of self-photography. Here, I make an intervention into the theoretical discussion around the distinction 'body image' and 'body schema'. First, however, I turn to the larger Fat Acceptance movement, in order to set the stage for my analysis of *Fat From the Side*.

## 3.1. Introducing (Online) Fat Acceptance

In Chapter Two, I already mentioned the existence of Fat Studies as a critical academic study of body weight. Like feminist theory and queer theory, Fat Studies emerges from a social

movement and an activist context. Just as feminist theory is linked to feminism as a political movement and queer theory is linked to the LGBTQ movement, Fat Studies finds its roots in the Fat Acceptance movement. 'Fat Acceptance' is the name of a social justice movement which campaigns for the acceptance and appreciation of bodies of all sizes and shapes, and against the discrimination of fat people. The movement first emerged in the 1960s, in the wake of other more well-known emancipation and social justice movements. In this time, for example, a first 'Fat-In' was organized in New York in 1967, and members of the radical organization 'Fat Underground' published a 'Fat Liberation Manifesto' in 1973. However, as *Time Magazine* has ironically put it, "Amid all the other tumult, causes and revolutions of the 1960s — race, sex, war, feminism — the fight of the fat is a historical footnote" (Fletcher 2009: 1). Pieces of the 'forgotten' history of Fat Activism have been retrieved by the activist and scholar Charlotte Cooper, who initiated the creation of a 'Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline' at a 2010 NOLOSE[31] workshop.

The relative invisibility of Fat Acceptance compared other emancipation movements can be partly explained by the fact that, rather than working through large organizations and lobby groups[32], Fat Activism has been propelled mainly through individual initiatives and grassroots collectives, usually active on the local level. Through the years, various prominent figures have advanced the Fat Acceptance cause through performances, zines and other publications. For example, the prominent activist Marilyn Wann produced zines under the title Fat?So!, which were published in book form in 1998. In recent years, the Fat Acceptance movement has become increasingly active online. The use of the Internet is central in the increased visibility of Fat Activism. The online presence has improved connections between local activists, helping to forge new connection and strengthen existing ties. It has also made

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[31] NOLOSE is an organization which "started out as the *National Organizations for Lesbians of SizE* before expanding scope to a broader community of all genders, bound by a common queer, feminist, and fat-positive ideology." (http://www.nolose.org/)

[32] Such larger organizations do exist. Examples are the NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) and the ISAA (International Society for Size Acceptance).

local actions and individual projects accessible to broader audiences. Whereas a paper zine has a limited distribution, a blog is less limited to a particular geographical context[33]. The use of the internet has played a large role in spreading the Fat Acceptance message beyond the existing and to some extent isolated local activist circles. By making possible new modes of expression and political activism, the use of the internet has effectively opened up Fat Acceptance for a new generation.

Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby, two prominent figures in the online community, estimate that the Fatosphere really took flight in the year 2007 (2009: 183). The term 'Fatosphere', used for the online communities of fat activists and bloggers, is an ironic reference to the term 'blogosphere' which is used for the blogging world in general. The fat bloggers form a *community* in the sense that they maintain close ties, engage with each other's posts and actively support each other. As Marianne Kirby and Kate Harding assert in *Lessons from the Fatosphere*:

> By and large, people are incredibly supportive of each other, which really helps to mitigate all the pressure we get from family, friends, and perfect strangers to feel ashamed of our bodies and try to become thinner. (2009: 183)

That feeling of belonging to a community, which Kirby and Harding stress here, is also stressed in the recent qualitative study on the Fatosphere by Dickins et al (2011). The study, devoted to investigating "The Role of the Fatosphere in Fat Adults' Response to Obesity Stigma: A Model of Empowerment Without a Focus on Weight Loss," as the title indicates, is a pioneer of sorts: the first to report on the Fatosphere and the Fat Acceptance movement in the context of qualitative social science research and health research. The researchers interviewed bloggers active in the Fatosphere, focusing on how their participation in this

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[33] Of course, blogs are not 'placeless', and geographical markers do play a role in their distribution and reach. Nevertheless, contrasting the blog with the zine, we can note that while they have their grassroots-feeling and DIY approach in common, it is clear that the blog has a wider geographical potential and is less bound to a local context. I follow Christenson, Jansson & Christenson (2011) in their argument that online spaces as closely connected to offline contexts: as extensions of physical spaces. While I do not go into the 'territorial' nature of blogs any further in this chapter, I do discuss at length my take on the relation of online/offline in section 3.2.

movement affected their vulnerability to weight-based stigma. Dickins et al assert that the "Fatosphere provided a safe space of acceptance where participants could counter, respond to, and resist dominant obesity discourses" (2011: 1683), and that "a key factor in helping participants challenge dominant and stigmatizing reactions to fatness was *belonging to a community of acceptance* in which they could identify with others with similar experiences" (2011: 1687, my emphasis). As this study has affirmed, Fat Acceptance blogging is experienced by many participants as a path of self-empowerment and self-acceptance, by means of sharing experiences, giving and receiving support, and generally connecting to others who are going through similar things.

Giving a complete overview of the 'Fatosphere' in this section would be a difficult task. Like other online communities, this group is not fixed or static, but constantly in flux. Furthermore, there is not simply one coherent and demarcatable 'Fat Acceptance' community. Instead, online Fat Activism is a large and diverse movement, with a lot of different groups who differ significantly on many points. Therefore, I will only offer a very brief overview which introduces and distinguishes between two different 'modes' of online Fat Acceptance blogging: on the one hand, the classical solo-blog and on the other hand the tumblr-communities. In introducing these two types of blogging practices, I will mention some of the prominent bloggers and blogs at the moment of writing. It should be clear that at most, this overview gives a 'snapshot' of the Fatosphere: highlighting some general tendencies and mentioning some blogs which have been prominent in shaping the movement.

*A) Solo Blogs*

The first type of blog is the classical solo-blog, which typically makes use of the blogging platform "Wordpress". On the solo-blogs, essays and opinion pieces are usually posted by one writer. These blogs are often of a more reflective nature, with the author sharing their own

experiences or commenting on societal phenomena and popular media. The author's voice is strongly present, and in the comments section the presented opinion is discussed by the followers of the blog. In the past years, three strong and influential voices in the Fat Acceptance blogging community have been those of Kate Harding (Shapely Prose[34]), Marianne Kirby (The Rotund[35]) and Lesley Kinzel (Two Whole Cakes[36]). In their 2011 study of the Fato-Sphere, Dickins et al have confirmed the pivotal role of these three bloggers, noting that for their interviewees, "Involvement with these blogs was often a gateway to the Fatosphere" (Dickins et al, 2011: 1685). In fact, these three blogs have become so successful that their authors have landed publishing deals and have made writing their career. In 2008, Kirby and Harding published *Lessons from the Fatosphere*. In April 2012, Lesley Kinzel published *Two Whole Cakes: How to Stop Dieting and Learn to Love Your Body*. Additionally, Kirby and Kinzel have both started writing for the popular women's blog *XOJane*[37]. As a result, their blogs have become less active. The 'rise and fall' of popular blogs such as *Shapely Prose, The Rotund* and *Two Whole Cakes* is not surprising. Like any other online social movement, the Fat Acceptance community is constantly changing shape, and as these particular writers become less active online, other voices take their place. However, it is my impression that this 'second generation' of fat bloggers is using a different type of platform to spread their ideas. Instead of choosing the format of the classic solo-blog, Fat Acceptance blogging is now often practiced through 'tumblr communities'.

*B) Tumblr Communities*

The micro-blogging tool Tumblr offers very different possibilities than the blogging platform 'Wordpress' does. Although the solo-blogs do often have a 'comments section' and the

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[34] www.kateharding.net. Active between March 2007 and September 2010.
[35] www.therotund.com. Started in April 2007. Still active.
[36] http://blog.twowholecakes.com. Previously known as 'The Fatshionista', active since March 2008.
[37] http://www.xojane.com/

authors do respond to other bloggers in their posts, tumblr allows for a much more immediate and quick interactions between users. Users follow each other, and 'reblog', 'like' and 'comment' on each other's posts. Rather than being primarily focused on producing and disseminating 'original material' (such as the reflective blog post), tumblr-blogs mainly work on the basis of reblogging material and commenting on existing content, often snippets such as quotes, pictures or video-links. For example, the popular *Hey, fat chick!* [38] exclusively collects and reblogs the (photo-based) posts of different fat bloggers, and so provides a good picture of what is going on in the Fat-o-Sphere at any given time.

An interesting phenomenon in the Fat Acceptance tumblr-communities is the popularity of collective tumblers which are focused on photography. Many tumblr-bloggers will post photos of themselves recurrently, often in the context of showing an 'Outfit of the Day'. Additionally, there are 'collective tumblrs' on which photos are submitted by followers or other users. After they have been approved by the moderators, they posted on the site. In some cases, the photos are submitted anonymously. In other cases, they may include a link to the tumblr or website of the submitter. In terms of themes, one can distinguish those dedicated to 'fatshion' (fat fashion), and those focused on the fat body itself. On the fatshion-oriented tumblrs, participants typically share photographs of their favorite outfits, listing where they bought the clothes, and which sizes they wear. Examples are *Fuck Yeah Fatshion!*[39] and *Death Fatties*[40]. On the tumblrs that are more oriented on the body itself, participants share pictures of naked or partly clothed fat bodies or body parts. Examples are *Big Belly Babes*[41] and *Fat From the Side*[42].

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[38] http://heyfatchick.tumblr.com/

[39] http://fuckyeahfatshion.tumblr.com/. Started in May 2011. The "Fuck Yeah" blogs are a trend on tumblr, the title indicating that the blog is devoted to celebrating one particular thing or issue.

[40] http://deathfatties.tumblr.com/. Started in May 2009. The term 'death fat' is an ironic term used in the Fat Acceptance community for the medical category of morbid obesity, which is defined by having a BMI (Body Mass Index) of 40 or higher.

[41] http://bigbellybabes.tumblr.com/. Dis-activated in beginning of 2012.

[42] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/. Started in September 2011.

After introducing the general tendencies of the online Fat Acceptance movement, I now want to zoom in on the tumblr *Fat From the Side* for the rest of the analysis. On *Fat From the Side*, as on the other photo-tumblrs which I have introduced here, participants post photographs which are accompanied by text. What sets *Fat From the Side* apart from the other blogs, is that photos which are shared on this blog are taken from a very particular angle. Rather than the more standard front angle, these photographs show the fat body from the side profile. The screenshot in figure 1[43] is an example of such a contribution to *Fat From the Side*. This post was uploaded on June 24, 2012. The picture, which shows a woman holding up a camera, takes up a central place in the blogpost. On the foreground of the picture, a sink is visible. Together with a towel in the background, this indicates that the photo was taken in the bathroom-mirror by the woman in the picture herself. This technique of taking the photo in the mirror is used by many of the submittors. The woman in the picture is identified as Christina B. in the text under the image. She introduces herself as "twenty eight,
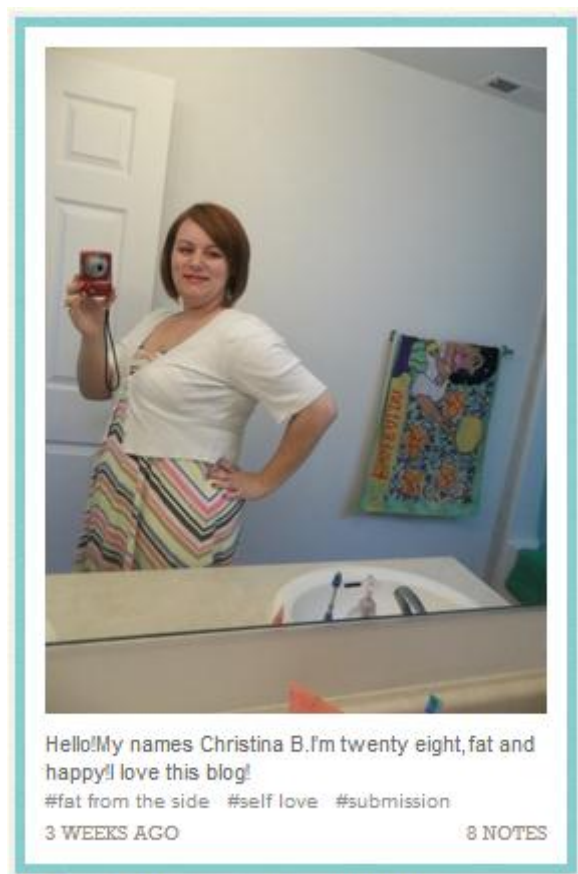
**Figure 1.** Last Accessed 24/07/2012
http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/25750576759/

fat and happy!" Under the text submitted by Christina, there is another, smaller line of text. It reads: "#fat from the side #self love #submission". These are the 'hashtags' that Kyla Hagedorn, the moderator and initiator of the site, has added to this post. The hashtags, a symbol popularized on the social networking site 'twitter', are a way to categorize the posts.

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[43] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/25750576759/

In this case, they allow the readers to search the blog for a particular topic that strikes their interest. Clicking on #self love, for example, the archive of all the posts filed under this particular hashtag becomes availablr. Under this line, there is one last line of text. To the left, the approximate date of the post is recorded, and to the right, we can read that the post received '8 notes'. This means that it was reblogged, liked or commented upon by eight other tumblr users. The number is relatively low: popular posts on *Fat From the Side* can receive hundreds of notes. The low number of 'notes' to this post can be explained by the fact there is nothing particularly exceptional about it, neither in the image nor in the text. Posts with more text, less clothes, a sexy image, or those showing a couple instead of an individual will usually receive more attention. Posts submitted by recognizable bloggers with a strong presence in the Fat Acceptance tumblr community can also count on a lot of 'notes'. For example, a post the moderator Kyla Hagedorn herself from September 2011 received 305 notes[44]. A last characteristic of the blogpost is that it is outlined by a turquoise square, which effectively frames the image and text together, creating a coherent whole.

This short discussion of a 'typical' post to *Fat From the Side* should already show that that the bodies which present themselves on this blog are never just 'any' body. Besides the shared characteristic of 'fatness', these fat body is always already marked by other identity categorizations. Besides being some-body with a certain weight, we always also see some-body with a certain gender, age, ethnic/racial background, and class status. In  case of Christina (figure 1), one of the first features which could catch the viewer/reader's attention is the fact that it was a woman's body, an assumption that is made through a 'reading' of photograph (long hair, breasts) and text (the name Christina). Although *Fat From the Side*

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[44] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/10814609473

explicitly welcomes contributions from fat men[45], girls and women do make up the majority of contributors. Compared to other Fat Acceptance websites, it is also important to note *Fat From the Side* is a relatively 'white' space. Few contributors state their racial identification explicitly, and of course, making statements about race on the basis of visual indicators alone is dangerous (Alcoff 2006). Significantly, the only contribution which includes an explicit statement about racial identification is one by a non-white participant[46]. This demonstrates the point by theorists of whiteness that whiteness as such is often invisible (Dyer 1997, Ahmed 2007). Of course, this is extremely problematic, because "Social categories do not count only for the Others, the non-powerful and the non-privileged: they also count as conditions for the more privileged and powerful people" (Staunæs 2003: 105). From an intersectional perspective, then, it is important to remember that 'race' is not only at play when non-white subjects are in the picture – although this is generally when the issue becomes 'visible'. The intersection of fatness and whiteness on *Fat From the Side* is thus notable and striking in itself. In this short introduction, I have called attention to some of the features that I will return to in the more detailed analysis of the material that is to follow. Before I turn to this, however, I will first address the meta-theoretical question of the (im)possibility of 'online embodiment'. To which degree is the fat body of the blogger is absent or present in the Fatosphere in general, and on *Fat From the Side* in particular?

## 3.2. Bodies and Technologies: Lived Experience in the Digital Age

My choice to take an online community and a blogging practice as the entry point to study the lived experience of weight may seem counterintuitive, or even problematic. The internet is

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[45] In response to a follower who asked whether the project was only for girls, the moderator answered: "Heck no, it's not ! I really, really, really wish we had more male bodied submissions, so please submit if you wanna ! And spread the word !" (http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13696654888)

[46] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/21450299635: A participant who describes himself as "a 25-year-old fat, brown, queer cisdude."

often considered a disembodied medium: one in which the body is *absent*, if not outright *negated*. As a result, it could be questioned whether, and to which extent, the weighing body is actually 'lived' online. The current section addresses these crucial questions that are raised by the case study. In order to address these fully, a foray into the *feminist* and *phenomenological* theorizing on the relation between bodies and technologies is necessary. Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' from 1985 is an important landmark for feminist thought on the relation of bodies and technologies. Haraway introduced the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1985/1991: 149). She stresses that the cyborg is both real *and* fictional, simultaneously actual and mythical. The feminist figure of the 'cyborg' is thus both a commentary on actual technological developments, *and* a utopian and visionary figuration for feminist politics. Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' inspired a rich tradition of feminist technoscience studies and cyborg feminism. In contrast, phenomenological reflections on the relation between bodies and technologies are relatively underdeveloped. The philosophers Herbert Dreyfus (2001), Don Ihde (2002) and Mark B. Hansen (2006) have all departed from a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of the body to think about embodiment in relation to the new developments in technology and media. However, from their common phenomenological starting point, these three thinkers come to very different conclusions. I will introduce and contrast these three different phenomenological takes on the lived body in the age of digital technologies, and connect them to the insights from cyborg feminism. My aim is to create a strong theoretical alliance in order to reject the idea that the internet is a 'disembodied medium': effectively breaking down the supposed opposition between the 'online' and the 'offline' realm. Instead, I will argue that the body is a primary factor in any experience: even those experiences that take place in so-called 'cyberspace'. I argue that online experiences of body weight are not in any way disconnected from offline experiences of weight – nor should

they considered any less 'authentic' or 'real'. In order to develop this position, I will first turn

to the phenomenological thinkers, starting with the skeptical Dreyfus.

*A) Dreyfus' Disembodied Telepresence*

Herbert Dreyfus' *On the Internet*[47] sketches a scenario in which "we will soon live our lives

through… a vast, invisible, interconnected infrastructure" and suggests that as a result, we

will "take leave of our situated bodies in exchange for an ubiquitous telepresence in

cyberspace" (2001: 52). For Dreyfus, then, cyberspace is per definition and necessarily

*disembodied*. And according to him, this disembodiment has very problematic consequences

because "if our body goes, so does relevance, skill, reality, and meaning" (2001: 7). As

Dreyfus sketches the scenario:

> when we enter cyberspace and leave behind our animal-shaped, emotional, intuitive,
> situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain a remarkable new freedom
> never before available to human beings, we might, at the same time, necessarily lose
> some of our crucial capacities: our ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish
> the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that
> is necessary for learning, and our need to get a maximum grip on the world that gives
> us our sense of the reality of things. Furthermore, we would be tempted to avoid the
> risk of genuine commitment, and so lose our sense of what gives meaning to our lives.
> (2001: 7)

This passage makes it abundantly clear that Dreyfus is pessimistic about the existential and

ethical consequences of "living our lives on-line" (2001: 4). And this bleak outcome, a

meaningless and inauthentic state, is according to him a direct result of a lack of bodily

engagement. Dreyfus thus builds his entire argument on the claim that the internet is

'disembodied', arguing that when we engage online, we 'leave our bodies behind'.

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[47] The book was first published in 2001. However, a revised second edition came out in 2009, indicating that Herbert Dreyfus stands by his interpretation of the limitations of the internet.

However, is this really the case? How can the body, which is our phenomenological access to the world according to Merleau-Ponty, ever be 'left behind'? Surprisingly enough, Dreyfus himself does not raise this deceptively simple question. In fact, although Dreyfus talks quite flippantly about 'leaving the body behind' and 'disembodiment', this seems more a figure of speech than a serious philosophical or ontological statement. When Dreyfus argues that it would be impossible 'to get along without the body' in cyberspace (2001: 72), he does not address the *phenomenological* impossibility of 'leaving the body behind,' but is instead referring primarily to the bleak *psychological*, *existential* and *ethical* consequences of a lack of bodily engagement. It is highly paradoxical that at the very same time that Dreyfus claims that the body is left behind on the Internet, he is operating within philosophical framework that implies the very impossibility of such a disembodiment. This paradox remains implicit in his text, and so the question of 'disembodiment' is taken up figuratively rather than addressed ontologically.

*B) Ihde's Bodies in Technologies*

The phenomenologist and science-studies scholar Don Ihde engages more seriously with the question of disembodiment in relation to new technologies. According to Ihde, these technologies *seduce* us "to think we can transcend our bodies by the disembodiments of simulation" (2002: xi). However, this seduction is ultimately deceptive: the temptation cannot be fulfilled. The possibility of 'leaving behind the body' which Dreyfus feared is fundamentally called into question by Ihde. Commenting on the relation of 'virtual reality' to 'real life', Ihde stresses that virtual reality cannot replace or supplant real life (2002: 13). Instead, the two domains always exist in extension of each other: "both RL [Real Life] and VR [Virtual Reality] are part of the lifeworld, and VR is thus both 'real' as a positive presence and a part of RL" (Ihde 2002: 13).

From this quote it would seem that Ihde does not hierarchize the virtual and the real, but instead recognizes that both work together in the bodies and lives of 21st century subjects. However, the following quote reveals that Ihde does in fact posit a primacy of what he has called 'Real Life':

> VR bodies are thin and never attain the thickness of flesh. The fantasy that says we can simultaneously have the powers and capacities of the technologizing medium without its ambiguous limitations, so thoroughly incorporated into ourselves that it becomes living body, is a fantasy of desire. And when we emerge from the shadows, effects, and hyperrealities of the theater into the sunlight in the street, it is not Plato's heaven we find, but the mundane world in which we can walk, converse, and even find a place in which to eat. (2002: 15)

In this passage, Ihde cleverly reworks Plato's analogy of the cave to offer a commentary on the illusion of disembodiment (or different-embodiment) that the virtual world seems to hold. In Ihde's scheme, disembodiment is merely a 'fantasy of desire'. While in the moment that we sit in front of the computer, we might be under the illusion that we can leave (the limitations of) the body behind, this is revealed as fantasy as soon as our body calls us back to the everyday embodied existence. For instance, I might be engrossed in an online game in which my avatar looks nothing like myself. But the moment that my stomach growls, I am called back to my 'real' body in my 'real' life. Ihde's concept of a 'body in technology' posits that the body does not exist in separation from technologies, yet the incorporation of technologies into bodies nevertheless has its limits in Ihde's framework. For one, it is always the body which incorporates technology and not vice-versa. Although our bodies have "an amazing plasticity and polymorphism that is often brought out precisely in our relations with technologies" (Ihde 2002: 138), this plasticity and polymorphism knows limits: limits dictated by the body.

*C) Hansen's Body-in-Code*

In opposition to the outright sceptical account by Dreyfus and Ihde's relatively sceptical variation, Mark B. Hansen offers a much more far-reaching interpretation of the relation between digital/virtual and the material/physical. Hansen stresses that both the sphere of physical reality and the sphere of virtual reality phenomenologically rely on the body as the vehicle of perception and world (Hansen 2006: 5). Because human being is embodied being, the body plays a vital role in *any* experience - even virtual experiences or experiences in cyberspace. Where Don Ihde's notion of the 'body in technology' still posits the body and technology as two distinct, albeit interrelated domains, Hansen's concept of the body-in-code is much more radical. In the notion of the "body-in-code," Hansen overcomes the oppositions between bodies and technologies and between online and offline altogether. Hansen's body-in-code refers to "a body submitted to *and constituted by* an unavoidable and empowering technical deterritorialization - a body whose embodiment is realized, *and can only be realized*, in conjunction with technics" (2006: 20). Hansen thus stresses that technology does not stand at a distance from the lived body. Instead, "technologies are always already embodied" (Hansen 2006: 59), and as a result, there "technical element that lies at the heart of embodiment" (Hansen 2006: 15).

Because of this intricate interconnectedness of the body and technology, Hansen argues that we "need to develop a fundamentally or 'essentially' technical phenomenology of the body, one that takes as its primary task the elucidation of the originary technical basis of embodied experience"  (2010: 21). Hansen's project of a 'technical phenomenology of the body' departs from Merleau-Ponty, at the same time as it updates the Merleau-Pontian frame to make sense of the 21st century 'mixed reality'. According to Hansen, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment is, from the beginning, "a philosophy of embodied technics" (2010: 39). Here, Hansen refers to the fact that Merleau-Ponty has attention for different

technologies that may be incorporated into the body schema. A notable example is that of the

blind man's stick (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 162). The stick is no longer 'just' an object, but

becomes an extension of the body, effectively extending the reach of the blind person:

> The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term… The position of things is immediately given through the extent of the reach which carries him to it, which comprises besides the arm's own reach the stick's range of action. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 165-166).

Other examples Merleau-Ponty mentions are driving a car[48], and wearing a hat with a

feather[49]. According to Merleau-Ponty, "To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be

transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of your own body"

(1945/2002: 166). These Merleau-Pontian examples may seem dated in a high-tech 21st

century context in which we speak of 'cyberspace' and 'virtual reality'. Despite the

technological advances that have taken place, however, the relationship of the body and

technics is nothing new. In this sense, I agree with Hansen's statement that "the technologies

that saturize our contemporary world [are] in this respect no different from the earliest flint-

chipping tools used by protohumans" (Hansen 2006: 61). Just like the blind person's stick

becomes integrated in their body schema (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 162), Hansen posits that

technical or virtual elements become integrated in the body schema of the twenty-first century

subject. While Mark Hansen takes his examples primarily from art practices, it is clear that he

is hinting at a broader integration of technological and 'virtual' elements in everyday life. One

could think, for example, of the advanced smart-phones, GPS and navigational systems.

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[48] "If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can 'get through' without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 165)

[49] "A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which might break it off. She feels where the feather is just as we feel where our hand is" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002: 165).

This point brings us back to Donna Haraway, who significantly asked: "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (Haraway 1991: 179). Haraway's rhetorical question is answered by Hansen, who replies that embodiment "is necessarily distributed beyond the skin in the context of contemporary technics" (Hansen 2006: x). Like Merleau-Ponty's example of the blind-man's stick shows, and like Hansen's elaboration of it into a body-in-code, the body of Haraway's cyborg is not just made of flesh and bones. Instead, it incorporates nonhuman elements – technical elements. Towards the end of the cyborg manifesto Haraway concludes: "Cyborg imagery can suggest a new way out of the maze of dualisms by which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (1999: 181). Here, she is referring to such dichotomies as that of mind/body, human/animal, machine/organism, nature/culture. In this anti-dualist stance, Haraway and Merleau-Ponty are united, since Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body is engaged in the same task of 'getting out of the maze of dualisms'. The body which Merleau-Ponty described, in which the blind man's cane becomes integrated in his body-schema, was already a cyborg body: a body which did not "end at the skin" (Haraway 1991: 179) but was, as Mark Hansen explained, "necessarily distributed beyond the skin" (Hansen 2006: x).[50] Although Mark Hansen does not refer to the work of Donna Haraway directly, I consider it safe to conclude that Hansen's phenomenological account of body as a *body-in-code* is, in fact, an account a cyborg body.

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[50] Here, as in Chapter One (page 13), I have offered a reading which places Merleau-Ponty and Haraway in close relation to each other. Nevertheless, the Merleau-Ponty / Haraway connection is not the main subject of this study, nor is it necessarily as symbiotic as I have perhaps made it come across. In the case of the argument made above, Haraway's comment in 'Situated Knowledges' that "embodiment is significant prosthesis" (1989: 588) could give cause to question the connection I have made between Merleau-Ponty's account of prosthetics in the example of the blind man's stick and Haraway's cyborg. Here, Haraway seems to consider *embodiment itself* as prosthesis. This is clearly problematic from a phenomenological perspective, as it reduces the body to an instrument (c.f. Hansen 2006: 255 fn. xvi). Such a position is phenomenologically untenable, since it would assume the body as an instrument *of something else* – a disembodied agent. This instrumentalism would seem implies a dualist view of embodied subjectivity that it irreconcilable with the non-dualist or even anti-dualist perspective offered by Merleau-Ponty.

*D) Weighing-Bodies-in-Cyberspace*

In the above account, I have shown that although the three phenomenologists Dreyfus, Ihde and Hansen all depart from a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of the body, they come to significantly different conclusions regarding the relation of technologies to the lived body. I have depicted Mark Hansen's notion of the 'body-in-code' as the most sophisticated phenomenological take on the relation between bodies and technologies, because it is the one which is the most tuned-in to the contemporary situation – the 'mixed reality' in which the virtual and the real are not so easily separated but always already interwoven with each other. Moreover, although Hansen himself rarely directly refers to the *feminist* theorizing on bodies and technologies, I have shown that the perspective developed by him strongly resonate strongly with a Harawayan cyborg-feminist position[51].

The contemporary theorists Nicki Sullivan and Samantha Murray have argued that "technés are not something that we add or apply to the body, nor are they tools the embodied self employs to its own ends. Rather, technés are the dynamic means in and through which corporealities are crafted, that is, continuously engendered in relation to others and to a world" (2009: 3). This insight, whether it comes in the guise of Sullivan and Murray's concept of 'somatechnics', Hansen's notion of the 'body-in-code' or the classic Harawayan 'cyborg', offers a vision of embodied being in the world which recognizes the important role that technologies play in lived experience and embodiment itself. Without suggesting that these perspectives are completely interchangeable, I same central point away from the phenomenological and feminist approaches that I have discussed: bodies and technologies

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[51] Analyzing Hansen's reading of Merleau-Ponty in relation to feminist takes on bodies and technologies, I have chosen to focus on the question of prosthesis in relation to the cyborg. Another interesting point of comparison could also have been the question of a *chiasmatic relationship* between bodies and technologies. Here, an interesting debate takes place between Gail Weiss and Mark Hansen. Weiss argues that Haraway's cyborg "is itself a chiasmatic notion that foregrounds the reversible, mutually constitutive relationship between the human and the nonhuman" (1999: 117). However, with the notion of the 'chiasmus' and the 'flesh', we move to the work of the *late* Merleau-Ponty, which departs significantly from the perspective on the body developed in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This is the reason that I have not gone into this discussion in this account.

simply cannot be separated, and as a result, the internet should not be considered a disembodied medium from which the lived body is absent. The weighing body, then, does not suddenly become irrelevant in cyberspace. Consequently, the blogging practices such as those on *Fat From the Side* should be considered significant expressions of lived experiences of fatness. Although they make use of the internet, these expressions are just as significant and 'real' as any experiences which would be verbally expressed, for example[52].

As the feminist scholar Sandy Stone claimed: "No matter how virtual the subject may become, there is always a body attached. It may be off somewhere else… but consciousness remains firmly rooted in the physical. Historically, body, technology, and community constitute each other" (1999: 93). Stone here clearly and succinctly summarizes the position taken in this thesis. What makes Stone's assertion even more compelling in this context is the fact that she brings in the element of *community*. Indeed, the body-subjects participating in *Fat From the Side* are not isolated individuals. They form part of a larger community: the online Fat Acceptance community. In the previous section, I have already noted the important role which the feeling of *community* and *solidarity* plays for the bloggers active on the Fatosphere. I have also stressed the fact that these online communities are engaged in a *political* project. By this, I mean that they are not just a group which shares experiences and opinions. Instead, they profile themselves explicitly as part of a movement: fighting for acceptance and appreciation of fat bodies and fat people. As Sandy Stone has pointed out, "electronic virtual communities have the capacity to make significant strategic interventions

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[52] I have chosen, at this point, not to go further into the question of the mediated-ness of experience. I can summarize my position by saying that I reject the notion of an 'authentic' experience. Instead, our access to experience (both others' experience and our own) is always already mediated and remediated (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Since there is no immediate and unmediated access to experience, the mediation of the internet is not any more an 'obstacle' than mediation through spoken word would be. I would have gotten any 'closer' to the lived experiences of fatness by choosing different research methods, such as conducting interviews or doing participant observation.

into the social, economic and cultural realities of contemporary life" (Wolmark[53] 1999: 17).

The participants of *Fat From the Side* make such a strategic intervention by challenging, in their photographs and the accompanying texts, the negative societal meanings associated to their fatness which I have outlined in Chapter Two. Rather than being a disembodied practice, online Fat Acceptance blogging is a direct result of fat embodied being in the world, and these online practices help to rethink and reshape the offline context of living as a fat body today. However, this challenge which the bloggers issue to the dominant cultural imaginary is not unequivocal or unambiguous. Instead, it is hard-won and accompanied with insecurities. In the next section, I will examine the ways in which participants to *Fat From the Side* frame their submission as part of a larger and on-going journey of Fat Acceptance.

## 3.3. The Journey of 'Fat Acceptance'

In the previously mentioned study of the Fatosphere, Dickins et al noted that the Fatosphere functions as "alternative pathway for individuals to resist and respond to obesity stigma" (2011: 1688). However, the pathway of Fat Acceptance is not without bumps or challenges. The bloggers Harding and Kirby write: "body acceptance does not come easily or all at once – it's a process. A long, slow process" (2007: 211). It seems that for many of the bloggers in the Fatosphere, posting photographs online is considered an important step on this journey of Fat Acceptance. Although the photographs are also intended to be seen by the other bloggers and any visitors to the website, I would argue that the primary audience of the photographs is the person in the picture herself. The idea is that seeing the photo is a way for them to come to terms with their own body, a step in the journey of Fat Acceptance. In the text accompanying their photo, many submitters do express their difficulties with coming to terms with their fat

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[53] This comment in made by Jenny Wolmark in her introduction to Stone's contribution. I share Wolmark's assessment, and quote it here because it clearly and sharply formulates my own position as well as that of Stone.

bodies and with the photographs. For example, one submitter writes: "I suck in my belly most of the time, because I'm afraid of what it looks like. I'm afraid to admit that it's fat, that it's a fat belly and it shouts to the world that it is fat and visible".[54]

On the tumblr, a warm and welcoming environment is created. So-called 'body shaming' is not accepted on *Fat From the Side* and such negative comments will be removed by the moderator. The person who posts a photo generally receives a lot of support from the moderators and the readers of the site. Yet despite this sense of community, sharing the photographs is not easy for many of the submitters. One submitter writes: "I won't lie, I'm a little nervous about submitting."[55] Another submitter, posting a nude photo, expresses her feelings of vulnerability: **"**I feel like I'm telling my biggest secret"[56]. Through comments such as these, it becomes clear that for many of the participants, posting the photo is a difficult and challenging step. But breaking through these insecurities and posting the photo anyway is experienced by many as a victory, another step in their journey of Fat Acceptance.

Some submitters consider posting the photo a rebellious and empowering act. They express a defiant or celebratory attitude towards (their) fatness. For example, one submitter writes defiantly: "From the side AND wearing unflattering stripes? If you're gonna rock fat, you might as well accentuate it!"[57] This submitter here responds to dominant beauty ideals which would instruct her to



today is a day for celebrating big, fat, fluffy arms and thick calves that take me to where i need to be.

*submitted by morethanasmidge*
#fat from the side  #fat acceptance  #body positive
#submission
1 MONTH AGO                                    7 NOTES
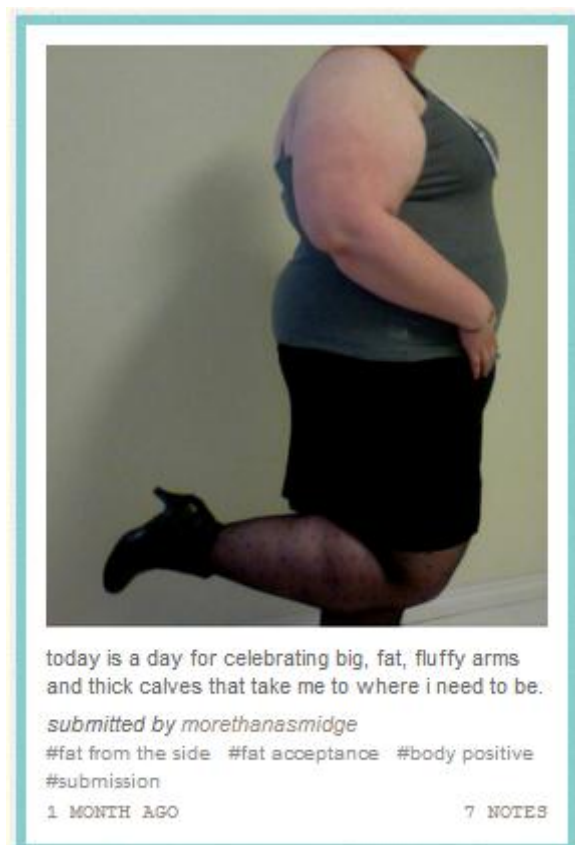
**Figure 2.** Last Accessed 24/07/2012.
http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/21732474008

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[54] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/20362533732
[55] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/17332861767
[56] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/20331740157).
[57] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/20440328799

'hide' her fat with 'flattering clothes'. Similarly rejecting the idea that she should be ashamed of her fat body, another submitter (screenshot in Figure 2) writes: "today is a day for celebrating big, fat, fluffy arms and thick calves that take me to where i [sic] need to be."[58] In this post, the functionality and the potential of the fat body is stressed. Instead of something that is *looked at*, the fat body is celebrated for its possibilities to act in the world. Understanding this in the terms offered by Iris Marion Young in "Throwing Like a Girl", we can say that a bodily 'I can' here prevails over the 'I cannot' (2005: 37). Instead of experiencing her body as "a fragile thing… a thing that exists as *looked at and acted upon*" (Young 2005: 39), the blogger stresses her possibility to "use [her] full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world" (Young 2005: 43).

In posts like these, then, the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the fat body (the fat female body in particular), which I discussed in Chapter Two[59], is challenged. Instead, the participants show, through the photographs and the text, a more joyful and positive relation to the fat body than is generally allowed for in the negative cultural discourses.


*A) Facing the Side-Profile*

As I have already noted, the photos shared on *Fat From the Side* are taken from a very particular angle: the side-profile of the body. The founder and moderator of *Fat From the Side*, Kyla Hagedorn, expresses the motivation behind her project as follows:

> The seed for *Fat, From The Side* was first planted in my mind when I noticed myself thinking about my own body differently when seeing the profile of it. It sprouted as I discovered I wasn't the only one out there who was unfamiliar with this view of their body and had less than great thoughts about it.[60]

Hagedorn here posits that the side-view of the body is a specific aspect of the fat body which many fat bodied people have trouble coming to terms with. Her assumption is confirmed by

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[58] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/21732474008
[59] Section 2.1.A, page 42
[60] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/bout

many of the contributors. Seeing the pictures of themselves taken from the side is experienced as confronting and frustrating for many of the followers and contributors of the blog. One submitter writes, for example: "Pictures from the side have always terrified me" [61]. Many submitters also express that they have in the past avoided photographing themselves or being photographed from this angle, and have even forbidden others to photograph them from this angle.

In her explanation for starting the project, Hagedorn admits that she too had a difficult time coming to terms with her 'fat from the side', despite being active in Fat Acceptance for a long time. The same counts for raggedy-andy (screenshot in Figure 3) who considered herself on the path towards fat acceptance, but nevertheless had to 'work through some denial' in order to post her photo to *Fat From the Side*. Raggedy-andy writes: "I know I'm fat, but I feel acceptable from the front. Face on, I love myself, but from the side? That seems like a whole other woman to me"[62]. It is significant that the picture which raggedy-andy submitted was not taken purposefully, but "accidentally" by her mother. Raggedy-andy writes that seeing this picture helped her come to terms with aspects of her body that



I've been wanting to submit ever since I found this blog, but I had work through some denial I have about my body. I know I'm fat, but I feel acceptable from the front. Face on, I love myself, but from the side? That seems like a whole other woman to me.

Then my mother accidently got this shot of me... And its ok. I have a double chin, small boobs and rolls of fat around my belly. I have back fat and no bum! Seeing this picture made me feel ok about it. I stopped denying the whole picture, the 3D model that is my body. I don't have to make sure my 'best' side is always showing. It's a start.

*submitted by raggedy-andy*
#fat from the side   #fat acceptance   #self love
#submission
4 MONTHS AGO                                20 NOTES

**Figure 3.** Last Accessed 24/07/2012
http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/17032488713

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[61] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/20322570508
[62] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/17032488713

she had previously denied, such as her back fat. She writes that "Seeing this picture made me feel okay about it". In this way, she frames the confrontation with the picture, and sharing it on *Fat From the Side*, as a step in her process of self-acceptance.

Raggedy-andy's comments about 'knowing' that she is fat, but being able to 'deny' it until seeing this photograph, are very interesting from a phenomenological perspective. How could she be 'denying' something that is undeniably there? How can it be that the knowledge about her lived body is mediated through a photographic image, instead of generated through embodied experience? In the next section, I will address these questions, which have to do with the relation of a fat *body* to a fat *self*, and the role of the image in either broadening or bridging that gap. To conclude the findings of this section, I note that while residual feelings of shame, and hatred and disgust for the own fat body can be hard to shake, many of the participants in the *Fat From the Side* tumblr see their contribution as a step forward in the on-going journey of self-empowerment and self-acceptance. As one participant phrases it, they are on a path of "Learning to accept my side profile one picture at a time"[63].


3.4 Fat Bodies, Fat Selves? Mind/Body Dualism in Narratives of Fatness

Like raggedy-andy does, various contributors to *Fat From the Side* talk about their bodies in the third-person. For instance, one submitter under the username 'afatfrenzy' (screenshot in Figure 4) writes:

> My body and I have come a long way. I've hated it, treated it badly, starved it, cut it, bruised it, and called it names. Now, I'm on my way to loving it, embracing it, appreciating it and showing it off. My body used to be my enemy and now, I'm pretty sure we're on our way to becoming best friends.[64]

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[63] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/18078119709
[64] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/16290468801

'My body and I': this very first characterization already implies a dichotomy between the body/it and the 'I'/self. Throughout the fragment, the body is referred to as an 'it': an entity wholly distinct from the speaking 'I' who nevertheless enters into a relationship with 'it'. On the one hand, the term 'it' seems to relegate the body to the status of a thing. On the other hand, the relationship with the body is described in terms that are reminiscent of relationships between human beings (friends and enemies), rather than the relationships between a human and a thing.



My body and I have come a long way. I've hated it, treated it badly, starved it, cut it, bruised it, and called it names. Now, I'm on my way to loving it, embracing it, appreciating it and showing it off. My body used to be my enemy and now, I'm pretty sure we're on our way to becoming best friends (:

submitted by afatfrenzy

#fat from the side   #fat acceptance   #self love
#body positive   #submission

4 MONTHS AGO                          78 NOTES

**Figure 4.** Last Accessed 24/07/2012
http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/16290468801

The fragment is a prime example of the mind/body dualism which phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty have argued against, but which are still very much engrained in everyday ways of thinking and speaking about the body. Discussing eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, Susan Bordo notes being "intrigued by the classically dualistic language… students often used to describe their feelings" (1993/2003: 137). Although she recognizes that "anorexia is a not a philosophical attitude; it is a debilitating condition" (1993/2003: 147), Bordo points out that the anorexic mindset or metaphysics is a highly dualist one: "the anorexic's metaphysics makes explicit various elements, historically grounded in Plato and Augustine, that run deep in our culture" (1993/2003: 147). The elements of classical dualism which Bordo identifies in
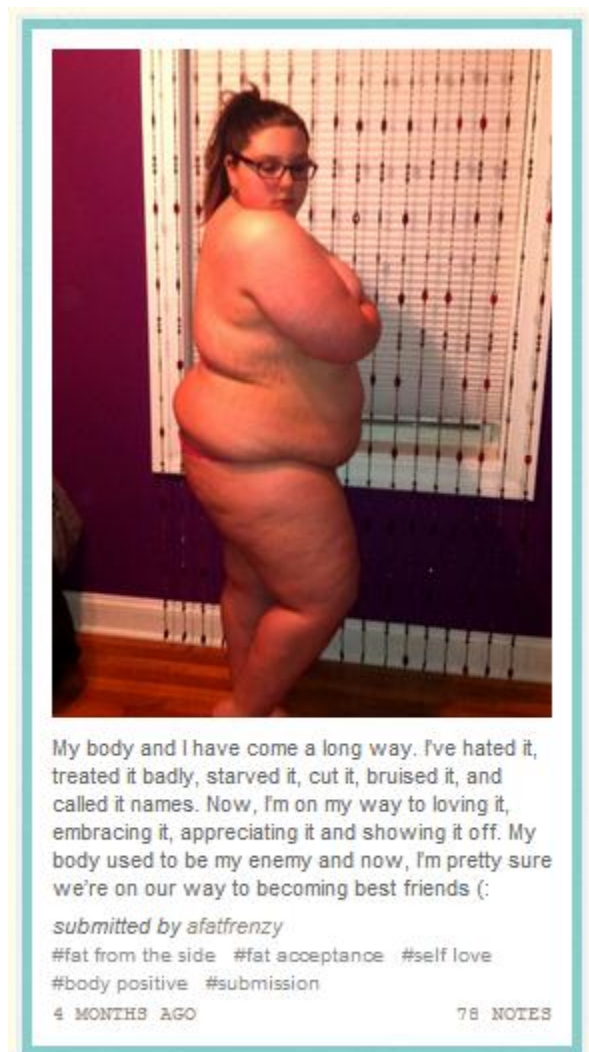
anorexic modes of speaking about the body are: (a) experiencing the body as alien (not-me), (b) experiencing the body as confinement or prison, and (c) seeing the body as the enemy.

These three elements which Bordo identifies are, to some extent, present in the *Fat From the Side* post by afatfrenzy. The body is indeed presented as "ontologically distinct from [the] inner self" (Bordo 1993/2003: 144) through the distinction that is made between 'I' and 'it'. The 'body as enemy' trope is strongly present in the text as well: the submitter writes about a variety of practices that she engaged in to punish her body, including starving and cutting. However, afatfrenzy also indicates that this relationship is changing: rather than enemy, she is starting to see her body as a friend. Although clearly an improvement, the relationship remains a dualist one, predicated on the fundamental distinction between body and self. The second element which Bordo brings to the fore is not found in the short fragment. However, it is a common theme in everyday modes of speaking about fatness. Many fat activists have parodied the idea of an 'inner thin girl' waiting to break free from the prison of the fat body – saying for example that it was not a thin girl waiting to break free, but a fat girl after all.[65] My short discussion should make clear that the dualist mindset which Susan Bordo identified in the case of anorexia is not limited to the anorexic alone. The dualist mindset is shared by those submitters to *Fat From the Side* who write about their body in the third person. This is in itself not surprising, since Bordo diagnoses this dualist frame of mind as one which 'runs deep in our culture'. Saying that the anorexic and the fat blogger share a dualistic way of thinking about body and self, however, is not to equate these experiences. The comparison is also not intended as a comment which would 'pathologize' fatness[66] by comparing it to anorexia, which is generally recognized as a disorder or a disease. Instead, my intention has been to note that mind/body dualisms are deeply ingrained in Western modes of

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[65] The youtube video "Fat Dinosty: Episode One, the Thin Person Inside" by Erin Remick is a good example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aWMbbjKWjI. In this first episode of the homemade webseries 'Fat Dinosty', Erin's thin person inside is introduced as "kind of an asshole, she talks shit about me" and eventually eaten by the fat stegosaurus Sebastian, after which the protagonists dance around in horizontal striped shirts.
[66] Indeed, I have exactly argued against such a pathologizing of fatness in Chapter 2, Section 2.1.B.

thinking about body, self and world, to such an extent that they shape everyday narratives of talking and thinking about the bodies that we are. Even in a body-based movement such as Fat Acceptance, these dualist modes of speaking and thinking occasionally shine through.

*A) Being Fat or Having Fat?*

This discussion raises a larger question about the status of the (fat) body on *Fat From the Side* and the Fatosphere at large. Fat Acceptance would seem to be a movement that takes it starting point squarely in embodied experience: a reclaiming of the fat self's right to be, instead of negating the body. The 'Acceptance' in 'Fat Acceptance' refers to an acceptance of fat bodies, in their very carnality and corporeality. For the fat bloggers, their fatness seems to be a central and inextricable element to their being: not something that they should try to change through diet and exercise, but something which other should acknowledge, accept, and embrace.

But is 'fatness,' in the narratives of the fat bloggers and in mainstream societal narratives they respond to, really framed an essential characteristic of their embodiment, or is it a coincidence, a temporary state? To put this in Heideggerian terms: is fatness an *existential* state (on the ontological level), or is



The other day my husband expressed some confusion as to why I've been following all these fat-acceptance blogs. "I don't think of you as fat," he says.

I AM fat. I have fat. I can feel it and touch it and see it. I know my rolls and flaps and measurements. Yet strangely, when I look at this picture and others taken from the side, it doesn't match up at all with the image I have in my head. In my brain I don't picture myself as fat, so every photo, every mirror reflection, is a brand-new experience. Sometimes it's not a very good one. Sometimes it's better than what I imagined.

This is what I look like, Brain. Absorb it. Accept it.

*submitted by baital*

#fat from the side   #fat acceptance   #submission

7 MONTHS AGO                    15 NOTES

**Figure 5.** Last Accessed 24/07/2012
http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220

it an *existentiell* circumstance (on the ontic level) (Heidegger 1926: 12)? In more everyday terms, the question could be rephrased as follows: Is a fat body something you 'have', like you can 'have' a certain clothing style or haircut, or perhaps even like you can 'have' a car? Or is it something that you 'are', like you 'are' alive, you 'are' a human being, or a woman, or white? Or are even these latter examples not on the ontological level, and are even categories such as man/woman, black/white, human/nonhuman socially constructed rather than ontological bedrocks?

Questions such are these are called forth by the submission by baital (screenshot in Figure 5), in which she reflects on their difficulties of coming to terms with the photographic image of their fat body:

> I AM fat. I have fat. I can feel it and touch it and see it. I know my rolls and flaps and measurements. Yet strangely, when I look at this picture and others taken from the side, it doesn't match up at all with the image I have in my head… This is what I look like, Brain. Absorb it, Accept it.[67]

In the first two sentences, a fundamental ambivalence is expressed: 'I am fat. I have fat.' This wavering between 'being' fat and 'having' fat is extremely interesting. Are 'being' and 'having' fat presented here as two mutually exclusive alternatives – or are they reconcilable, each representing one aspects of this submitters experience of fat embodiment? In the Theoretical Framework (Chapter 1), I have emphasized that Merleau-Ponty considers the objectifying gaze on the body, the gaze which considers the human body primarily as a biological organism (Husserl's *Körper)*, a secondary and derivative step. I stressed that, for Merleau-Ponty, this objectifying perspective on the body always relies on a more primary and fundamental experience of the body: the body *as lived* (Husserl's *Leib*). Although this distinction is important for the phenomenological approach to the body in general and

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[67] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in particular, it is also important to recognize that these two ways of considering the body are not completely and wholly distinct from each other.

While the lived body is, according to Merleau-Ponty, the primary experience of the body, he does not at all negate the importance of that second mode of considering the body. Instead, this 'objective body' - the body as a thing - is always already a part of the lived experience of the body. Explaining this with the help of the Husserlian distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, the phenomenologist Jenny Slatman makes clear that *Leib* always includes a dimension of *Körper*. As Slatman explains: "*Leib* separated from a *Körper*, does not exist. *Leib* therefore is a *Leibkörper*: it entails an experience of ownership as well as the experience of one's body as a thing, which is not necessarily experienced immediately as one's own" (Slatman 2009: 325). Slatman here implies that besides the experience of 'me-ness' and 'mine-ness', there are also always elements of strangeness in the experience of the own body. In Chapter One[68], we already encountered this 'strangeness' in the form of the 'alien vitality' that Simone de Beauvoir called attention to. As Heinämaa explained, "The body that is my own, which is my necessary anchor point in the material world, is also, necessarily, a stranger to me" (Heinämaa 2003: 71). We have seen that while Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that the human body is never *just* an object in the world, never just a thing among other things – it is, at times, experienced as exactly that. I recall here also the position of Iris Marion Young, who wrote that as a result of patriarchal and sexist structures, "the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject" (Young 2005: 44).

It is exactly this 'strangeness' of the own body which is at play in posts such as that of baital. Her fat – her 'rolls and flaps and measurement', as she put it – are an element of her body which remain to some extent 'strange' and hard to come to terms with. While I previously argued that the alienation that the submitter to *Fat From the Side* expresses could

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[68] Section 1.2.B, page 23-24.

be read as an expression of the mind/body dualisms ingrained in Western modes of thinking and speaking about body and self. In this case, however, it could also be connected to the ambiguous relation of sameness and alterity at play in any body-subject, and especially in women. Phenomenologically, we both *are* and *have* a body – and this body is always lived both as *subject* and as *object*. This double-sidedness of embodiment which is expressed in the post on *Fat From the Side*, in which the baital says: "I AM fat, I have fat"[69]. Another interesting element in baitail's post, which I will turn to next, is the role which various 'images' play in coming to terms with this 'strange' element of her embodied self.


3.5 The Phenomenology of Self-Photography

In the post, baital expresses a mismatch between her mental image of herself (the one in her head/brain) and the visual image of herself (the one she sees in the picture). She writes: "When I look at this picture and others taken from the side, it does not match up at all with the image I have in my head"[70]. She goes on to implore her brain to acknowledge the 'truth' expressed in the image produced by the camera: "This is what I look like, Brain. Absorb it, Accept it". Different ways of knowing seem to be in competition here. There is a disconnection between a 'cerebral knowing' and a 'bodily knowing', a 'mental knowledge' and a 'carnal knowledg'e.  The different ways of knowing are significantly connected to different types of images.

First of all there is the image baital sees when she looks at her body directly. It seems that this image is not the same as the image she sees in the photograph, however. Baital contrasts between the two images in a subtle way: "I know I am fat. I can feel it and touch it and *see* it… Yet strangely, when I *look at this picture*…"[71] In this phrasing, 'Looking at the picture' in the second sentence is different from 'seeing' her fat body referred to in the first

[69] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220
[70] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220
[71] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220, my emphasis.

sentence. In a way, baital can look at her fat in at least three ways: directly, in the mirror, and through the camera lens[72]. In baital's narrative, it seems that the photographic 'truth' has the upper hand: it is considered more fundamental and more truthful than her the image in her mind. Her brain has to adjust to accommodate the truth of the photographic image, adapting her mental image accordingly. The last image which is mentioned in the post is the image that baital's husband has of her body. Baital writes: "The other day my husband expressed some confusion as to why I've been following all thee fat-acceptance blogs"[73], indicating that her husband does not 'see' her as fat[74].

I have introduced a wide variety of images which are at play in one post to *Fat From the Side*. These different images do not match up neatly at all. In a sense, they are not the same image; although they are all images of the same body: baital's body. In this sense, we could call them 'body images'. This term, 'body image,' is often used when discussing women's relationship to their own bodies. The term has gained great currency in social scientific studies, feminist cultural analyses as well as popular media. In the phenomenological tradition, however, the term has a very specific connotation. I will examine this phenomenological notion, which has been the subject of an intense discussion, in order to better understand and evaluate the relation of the various 'body images' which are at stake in baital and other fat bloggers' relation to the photographic image and their fat body.

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[72] I say 'at least' because there are of course many more ways and many more modes of mediation. For example, we can see in the photograph that baital wears glasses. Is the 'body image' produced by looking at her body with or without glasses a different one? Furthermore, I have deliberately chosen not to expand on the role of the mirror in 'mediating' the body image, nor to go into the relation between the camera and the mirror. It could have been very interesting to compare and contrast Merleau-Ponty and Lacan's account of the 'mirror stage' and the importance of the image of the self in the construction of the self. However, this is beyond the scope of the current thesis.

[73] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220

[74] The way in which baital brings the image that her husband has of her, opens up an interesting dimension: the difference between the view of the other and the view of the self. In this sense, I could also make a distinction between the photographic image which baital sees, and the photographic image which the viewer is confronted with. I would argue that even these images are not the same. For instance, baital sees an image of her own body, while the viewer sees an image of the body of a stranger. Baital sees this image (first) on her own camera, while others see it on a website: in the context of *Fat From the Side*. I will not go into this distinction more deeply, as it is more connected to how a particular 'frame' influences the reception of an image (c.f. Butler 2009), than it does have to do with body images themselves.

*A) Body Image and Body Schema?*

In general, the phenomenological vocabulary distinguishes between two closely related concepts: body image and body schema. However, there is a lot of confusion about these two notions, as Shaun Gallagher (2005) has pointed out. According to Gallagher, "the terms have been used interchangeably to signify, an unclear and ambiguous manner, a group of related but not necessarily identical concepts" (Gallagher 2005: 18). The most clear example of this terminological confusion is the in the translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*: the French 'schema corporel' was rendered in English simply as 'body image'[75]. The confusion between the terms raises the questions whether there is a difference between body schema and body image, what this is difference and why it is important?

According to Shaun Gallagher it is important to clear up the conceptual confusion and make a strict conceptual distinction between the two notions, although he does recognize that they do interact closely. Gallagher explains the difference as follows:

> a *body image* consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to one's own body. In contrasts, a *body schema* is a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring. This conceptual distinction between body image and body schema is related respectively to the difference between having a perception of (or belief about) something and having the capacity to move (or an ability to do something). (2005: 24)

Gallagher's distinction implies that *body image* takes place on the conscious and reflective level, whereas *body schema* is rather connected to preconscious and subpersonal level of experience. To put it differently: body image has to do with perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, whereas body schema has to do with motor capacities, abilities and habits (Gallagher 2005: 26). Because it takes place on this reflective level, body image can be influenced and shaped by social and cultural factors, such as for example beauty ideals. According to Gallagher,

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[75] In a later edition, this translation has been revoked and the distinction has been made. However, the confusion persists as the different editions are still available alongside each other.

"Conscious feelings about one's body are sometimes straightforward, and sometimes indirect and symbolic; they may be motivated by conscious or unconscious experience, and in many cases they are conditioned by cultural norms" (Gallagher 2005: 30). In this context, Gallagher references to the work of Susan Bordo and Gail Weiss – two feminist theorists who, not incidentally, play an important role in this current study. While the reference to feminist theorists is interesting, the politics of citation at work is rather curious. Gallagher's reference to the work of Gail Weiss seems to imply that they are on the same line when it comes to body image and body schema. However, this is far from the truth, since Gail Weiss' use of the concept of 'body image' differs fundamentally from that of Shaun Gallagher.

Gail Weiss explicitly disagrees with the conceptual distinction that Gallagher makes between body image and body schema, explaining her philosophical stance on this question in *Body Images, Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (the very work that Gallagher references). While Shaun Gallagher insists that it is only the *body image* which is affected by 'social and cultural factors', feminist phenomenologists such as Gail Weiss and Iris Marion Young have argued that this is only the surface. They claim that it is not just the body image which is affected, but the very corporeal schema itself. In *Body Images*, Gail Weiss makes note of Gallagher's distinction between image and schema[76], but she argues that the distinction is not central to Merleau-Ponty's argument, and that Merleau-Ponty "uses the words body image and corporeal schema fairly interchangeably" (1999: 2). Thus, rather than distinguishing between the two, Gail Weiss chooses to use only the term 'body image'. She uses this term in a very loose and inclusive sense, which incorporates both elements that could be attributed to the body image, as well as elements attributed to the body image in Gallagher's definition. Body images, according to Weiss, necessarily include physiological, social and psychical dimensions (Weiss 1999: 2).

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[76] Weiss references a 1996 article by Gallagher, in which he makes essentially the same argument as I have recounted on the basis of his 2005 book.

Comparing Weiss' broad and inclusive use of 'body image' with Gallagher's clear-cut definitions, one might be inclined to prefer the precision of the latter. However, it is my contention that the deceptive simplicity of Gallagher's conceptual distinction should be resisted. Gail Weiss is right: the two concepts of 'body image' and 'body schema' cannot be pulled apart as strictly and neatly as Gallagher would have it. However, where Weiss opts for 'body image' as the overall, general term, I would instead argue that the umbrella term should be 'body schema' instead. It is the body schema, of which body image is an essential and inalienable part. Echoing Judith Butler's famous insight that 'sex is always already gender (Butler 1990: 11), one could say: body image is always already body schema. By this I mean that the prereflective and anonymous layer of body experiences (body schema) is profoundly shaped and even structured by cultural norms and meanings (body image). To put it simply: body image is a part of body schema, because how others see you determines how you see yourself, and this determines how you act and engage in the world. In order to explain further how this works, I turn again to Iris Marion Young.

When Iris Marion Young wrote about the 'being looked at' which affects women more than men in a patriarchal society[77], she argued that the result of this was that that many women come to experience their bodies "as a mere thing" (Young 2005: 39) – something which exist to be looked at and acted upon by others. As Young explains:

> The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it." (2005: 44)

In Chapter One[78], I have already argued that the feminist phenomenology presented by Iris Marion Young combines an eye for the structural level with a keen attention for how these structures shape experience. This quote makes it clear that something which takes place on the

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[77] Previously discussed in Chapter Two, section 2.1.A.
[78] Section 1.3.B.

level of societal structures literally becomes *incorporated*: the 'attitude of others' is 'taken up' by the woman herself. Societal imaginaries are literally incorporated – and in Young's argument, this results in the three modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility which she identifies in *Throwing Like a Girl*. In other words: not just a woman's self-image is affected, but the way in which she talks, walks, runs, throws and moves in the world. In a similar vein, Gail Weiss notes that "many women mediate their own relationship with their bodies by *seeing their bodies as they are seen by others* and by worrying about what they and these (largely invisible) others are seeing' (1999: 47). Weiss continues to argue that "the imaginary perspective of these often imaginary others can come to dominate and even supersede a woman's own experience of her bodies capabilities so that the latter becomes conflated with the former" (Weiss 1999: 47). Like Young, Weiss here stresses that women's *bodily capacities* are fundamentally shaped by the 'gaze' which they internalize and respond to.[79] What is affected by societal structures and discourses, in other words, is not limited to those aspects which Gallagher designated as the body image, in contrast to an unaffected body schema. Remember that Gallagher characterized the difference between body image and body schema as "the difference between having a perception of (or belief about) something and having the capacity to move (or an ability to do something)" (Gallagher 2005: 24). In the situation which Young and Weiss refer to, it is actually the capacity to move itself which is affected – the field which Gallagher referred to as body schema. Young and Weiss show that motor capacities, abilities and habits are shaped by perceptions, beliefs and attitudes. This means that body schema and body image do not exist separately from each other, but are, instead, fundamentally intertwined.

Lest we conclude that it is only the case for women that the corporeal schema is affected or disrupted by the body image, I want to recall Frantz Fanon's invocation of the 'racial

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[79] Here, we can think back to the post by 'morethanasmidge'
(http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/21732474008), visible in Figure 2 and discussed on page 77.

epidermal schema'. With this notion Fanon referred *explicitly* to the effects of (racist) social

structures on the body schema. Racist societal ideas about blackness literally caused Fanon's

corporeal schema to crumble, turning a bodily 'I-can' into 'I-cannot'. As I have argued in

Chapter One, the experiences which Beauvoir and Fanon recount are neither exemplary nor

exceptional. Instead, they bring to the fore some elements which may have been more easily

overlooked phenomenologists who come closer to embodying the 'normative body' (white,

male, able-bodied, young). Yet these overlooked elements may, nevertheless, be central to

embodied being in the world.

Without making here any assumptions about the bodily conditions which allowed Shaun

Gallagher to construct his theory on the disconnection between body image and body schema,

one could argue that it is not really surprising that this theory should come from a white male

philosopher. Nevertheless, it is not just female/feminist phenomenologists (Young, Weiss) or

black phenomenologists (Fanon) who have recognize that the difference between body

schema and body image are not as clear-cut as Shaun Gallagher would have it. Mark Hansen,

the phenomenologist of the digital age who we have encountered in section two of this

chapter[80], has also argued that the distinction between body image and body schema made by

Gallagher is too clear-cut. According to Hansen, the distinction particularly falls apart

because of the increased importance of virtual reality in 21$^{st}$ century art, technology and

everyday experiences. Hansen writes:

> This perceptual differentiation between self-representation (body image)  and enactive
> spatialization (body schema) *can no longer be made in virtual environments… the
> difference between them – and with it, the role of representation – has been entirely
> effaced* (2006: 49)

Hansen's assertion is particularly interesting for the case-study, because it points to the role of

technology in 'undoing' the separation between image and schema. According to Hansen,

"self-experience today necessarily encompasses the power of imaging as a power of the

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[80] The discussion is found in section 2.2.C, page 70.

organism… With its technical support in our world today, imaging has become what it always has been potentially: an aspect of *primary* self-experience (and not simply a derivative of the image of oneself held, and thus mediated, by the other" (2006: 12). Hansen here captures a crucial element of 21st century digital culture: imaging as a central aspect of self experience. The bloggers on *Fat From the Side* have understood this, and have thus taken the power of imaging into their own hands: rather than letting mainstream-media (mediation through the other) dictate their image of themselves, they use self-photography to imagine fatness differently. In the next section, I will expand on this, to examine how exactly they intervene in the cultural imaginary through this technological and imaged based blogging practice.

*B) Body Images, Body Image Ideals and Bodily Imaginaries*

I have shown that Gallagher's strict distinction between body image and body schema is not adequate to understand the complex relation to the photographic image that the submitters to *Fat From the Side* describe in their posts. Taking up Gail Weiss' more inclusive use of 'body image', I will now turn to analyze the variety of images that I identified as being at play in the post by baital[81]. For Weiss, this multiplicity does not come as a surprise. She argues that all "human beings tend to have multiple body images and ... these body images overlap with one another and are themselves constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed through a series of ongoing, intercorporeal exchanges" (1999: 165). Rather than causing fragmentation, this multiplicity of body images is according to Weiss crucial to develop a coherent and stable sense of self (1999: 167).

Weiss urges scholars to have attention for "the complex interconnnections that continually occur among body images, body images ideals, images of the female body... and the cultural imaginary that actively supports them" (1999: 66). In my feminist and

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[81] http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/13508989220

phenomenological interpretation of *Fat From the Side*, this is exactly what I am aiming to do. In Chapter Two, I have analyzed the cultural imaginary as one which frames fat as 'unhealthy' and 'unattractive'. This cultural imaginary thoroughly affects the body images available to baital and the other participants on *Fat From the Side*. In simple terms, we could say that how others see them, affects how they see their own bodies, how they see themselves. Societal 'body image ideals' which privilege the thin and slender body effectively invade the 'body image' (or as I should say: body schema) of the fat girls and women who participate in *Fat From the Side*. This thin body image ideal is culturally shaped and shared, but it also manifests itself on the very individual and personal level.[82] Many of the participants are in the process of shaking off the thin 'body image ideal', but it is persistent and can still catch someone off guard. This can be when someone sees a photo from an unexpected angle. All of a sudden, they might realize what they knew on some level all along: that they are also fat from the side.

Instead of striving for thinness – the body shape favoured by the cultural imaginary and often still at some level held as a private body image ideal, the bloggers on *Fat From the Side* are working towards acceptance of their fat bodies – acceptance by others, and by themselves. Gail Weiss speaks of "the imaginary as an ongoing site of cultural contestation" (1999: 66), and she suggests that "exploring the corporeal possibilities that have been foreclosed by a given imaginary, itself helps to bring into being a new imaginary" (Weiss 1999: 67). In my opinion, this is exactly what the participants to *Fat From the Side* do. By bringing these 'alternative' images of fat bodies into the public eye, images that clearly deviate from the societal 'body image ideal', the participants to *Fat From the Side* are

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[82] Perhaps the best example of this is the fact that I might be writing my thesis on Fat Acceptance, but still am susceptible to the socially shared body image ideal of thinness/slenderness. Although I have become a vocal supporter of the Fat Acceptance message, there is still a step between accepting and appreciating fatness in others, and holding it as an acceptable image for myself. For example, while I can appreciate the beauty in the fat girls on *Fat From the Side*, and in people around me, I can still be upset when trying on clothes in front of the mirror.

working towards reshaping the mainstream bodily imaginary. (Photographic) images, (body) images, (cultural) imaginaries and (political) imagination are thus revealed to be closely connected and interdependent. So far, I have considered the image on a largely abstract level, speaking about the body image. In the last section of this chapter, I want to analyse the role of the photographic image specifically.

*C) What is Fat? Who is Fat? Questioning the Photographic Image*

Going back to the earlier discussion about 'disembodiment online' (section 3.2), the place of the photograph on *Fat From the Side* functions as a reassurance of sorts: a reassurance that the physical dimension is still there, because the fat body is visible even in the virtual space. Any doubt that online Fat Activism is a 'disembodied' activity, divorced from fat embodied being, is removed. This is because photographic images are often taken as 'evidence'. In the case of this blog, the photographs may serve as 'proof' or 'evidence' of fatness: both for the readers/viewers of the site and for the person in the photograph themselves. This was clear in the contribution by baital, who urged her brain to accept the photographic truth, as we saw in the previous section. In this section I want to reflect on the difference between text-based online fat blogging, and the practices of self-photography which are central to my case study. What is the role of photography in the lived experiences of fatness, and how does this relate to the political power of the Fat Acceptance statement?

In her early ethnographic study[83] of two text-based online discussion groups on fat politics Kathleen LeBesco declared "the erasure of the physical on text-based sites" (2004: 99). LeBesco reflects on the possibility that the participants to the 'fat listserv' could in fact

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[83]Published as a chapter in her 2004 book *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, the research is based on LeBesco's PhD thesis completed in 1998: *Revolting Bodies: The On-line Negotiation of Fat Subjectivity*. LeBesco made an ethnographic study of two online discussion groups (a 'listserv' and a 'newsgroup') that she conducted in the late 1990s. These are two early types of online discussion forums that were popular in the 1980s and 1990s. These forms are still in use today, but they are less popular. To an extent, you could consider micro-blogging tools such as 'tumblr' an heir to these early forms.

be *thin*, and simply pretending to be fat. She writes: "Other than the narrative assertion 'I am fat' with accompanying anecdotes about fat oppression... there is just no simple way to be sure" (LeBesco 2004: 106). In this text-based online space, 'fat' becomes here a free-floating signifier, which could– potentially wrongly – be attached to any-body. Fat subjects, according to LeBesco, "exist on-line only as words detached from their bodies" (2004: 103). Because of the role which the image of the fat body plays on *Fat From the Side*, it would seem that the situation is quite different. Nevertheless, the argument that LeBesco makes about the 'insecurity' provided by the text-based blog is not one which I agree with on principle.

In *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment*, the feminist media scholar Jenny Sundén offers a very different take on bodies and text in cyberspace. Like LeBesco, Sundén undertook an ethnographic study of a text-based online community[84]. However, rather than claiming that the body is 'erased' or 'absent' in text-based online communities, Sundén writes of "The *invisible presence* of physical bodies in online encounters. The body of the other is still there, on the far side of the screen, but it cannot be looked at, or touched – other than through typing" (2003: 151). Sundén's concept of a 'material textuality' is one in which participants are continually engaged in a process of 'writing the self' into existence. Online modes of being, according to Sundén, are characterized by a 'doubleness'. There is a constant "mediation between an embodied self and a textual I" (Sundén 2003: 3). Although Sundén here distinguishes and contrasts two 'I's, it should be clear that rather than contrasting the physical/real and the disembodied/virtual subject, Sundén convincingly argues for their mutual co-construction. As such, "*physical bodies are never opposed to virtuality, but are rather an intimate and integrated part of its very constitution*" (Sundén 2003: 137).

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[84] Sundén studies a text-based virtual world called "Water MOO". It is a type of "MUD", a Multi-User-Dungeon, an online role-playing world, where participants take on characters and move through a fictional and collaboratively constructed world (in this case text-based).

Sundén's account of 'material textuality' does, in my opinion, help to alleviate some of the widely-held fears or suspicions surrounding a disembodied virtual space in which people are able to 'deceive' others about who they 'actually' are. Her discussion shows that the physical self and the online self do not always overlap fully – there is, clearly, a 'gap' there which makes it possible for people to take on different identities online. However, she also argues that in a way, it really does not make a big difference whether the people are 'true' to their offline selves in their online presentations. As Sundén claims, "The crucial thing… does not seem to be whether a textual body is a 'sincere' reflection of the typist or not, but the fact that a body in text is *there*" (Sundén 2003: 88). Relating this to the case of online Fat Acceptance, we could say that it is in a way quite irrelevant whether people who presents as 'fat' online in fact has a fat body offline. This is also what Kathleen LeBesco eventually concludes. Even though LeBesco holds that the physically fat body is absent or erased online, insists that this does not strip online Fat Activism of its political charge. As LeBesco writes:

> It is entirely possible that the fat bodies presented in these on-line sites could be total inventions, but admitting that does not strip them of their political volatility. In a language-only space, where nobody can see your hips, your belly, your legs, to say that you are fat is a strong, meaningful political gesture that says that fat will not be erased. (LeBesco 2004: 105-106)

LeBesco seems to suggest here, that exactly the 'invisibility' of the fat body online is what makes online Fat Activism powerful. Claiming a fat identity in a context 'where nobody can see your hips' is a powerful gesture, because it means claiming a disadvantaged position in a situation where it is not strictly necessary. While a fat person could easily 'pass as thin' online, they explicitly choose not to do so. They bring in their fat embodiment in a forum where it is not inevitable or unavoidable to be 'seen' as fat.

The analysis by both Sundén and LeBesco was grounded in a study of online groups who communicate specifically and exclusively through text. On *Fat From the Side*, however, lived experiences of fatness are not only shared through text and commentary, but through

image as well. While LeBesco links her argument about the political power of online Fat Acceptance to the *invisibility* of the body in a text-based space, I would argue that that political gesture 'which says that fat will not be erased' is also made by the photography-based blogging practices on *Fat From the Side*. Perhaps it is even strengthened through the blogging practices in which self-photography plays a central role. I venture this because it is my opinion that the photographic images shared on *Fat From the Side* unsettle ideas about what fat is, rather than fixing and reifying it. Thus, even when the photographic image would in first instance be taken as a confirmation of the presence of absence of a 'genuinely' fat person, the security is deceptive: fat remains a free-floating signifier. This is because the photographs on *Fat From the Side* shows the diversity of fat embodiment. They show that 'fat' is not one particular thing, but can take many different shapes. For me, perhaps most striking and unsettling posts are the ones in which I see a person which I might not in first instance have classified as 'fat'. An example is the post by m00dym00n shown in figure 6. Posts like this one show that, although it is an embodied reality, fatness is primarily a *lived experience*.

In the cultural context shaped by the discourse of an 'obesity epidemic' and a 'tyranny of slenderness', many different bodies live fatness. On *Fat From the Side*, women of many different weights and sizes participate. Although their degree of fatness may vary, their blog posts are all expressions of lived experiences of fatness. They all share a journey of Fat Acceptance, and feel a connection based on this three letter word: fat.
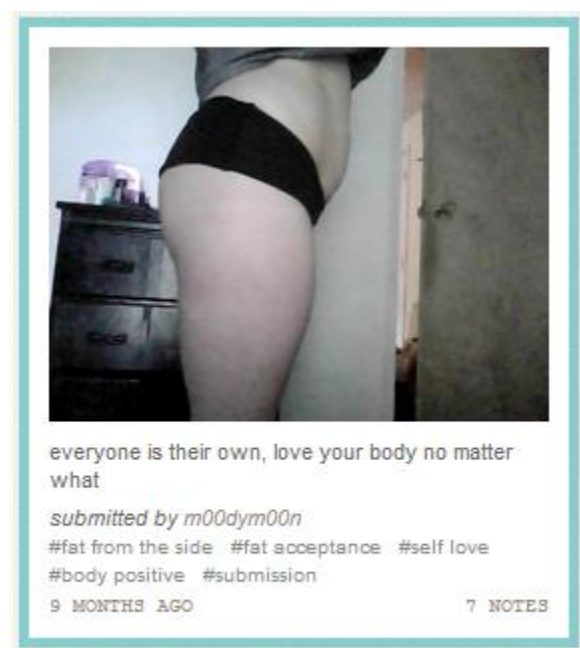


everyone is their own, love your body no matter what

*submitted by m00dym00n*

#fat from the side  #fat acceptance  #self love
#body positive  #submission

9 MONTHS AGO                    7 NOTES

**Figure 6.** Last Accessed 24/07/2012
http://fatfromtheside.tumblr.com/post/11871015803

They share the lived experience of fatness, and, in turn, they share this experience with the readers and the viewers of the blog. What the participants of *Fat From the Side* have in common, is that they all, at some point or other, and in some way or other, have 'felt' fat.

This may seem highly paradoxical: on the one hand I have stressed that weight is an aspect of embodied being in the world – and now I am claiming that 'fatness' is a feeling, a lived experience. This paradox, and this double-sidedness of weight in general and fatness in particular is exactly what I have wanted to capture in this thesis. In the next chapter, I will approach it in more philosophical terms, turning to Jean-Luc Nancy. Here I can already note that I do not consider this 'unsettling' of what fat means a problem, because my point in writing about fatness has never been to police the concept. When I am writing about 'fatness', I am not just writing about people who are medically classified as overweight or obese. I do not believe it is possible to set 'objective standards' for who counts as fat and who does not. A large part of the importance and urgency of this thesis comes exactly from the fact that no standard definition of 'fat' exists. As Fat Studies scholar April Herndon has pointed out:

> Part of the power of 'fat', when used as an insult, is lodged in the very fact that no standard definition exists. There are, of course, the weight charts referred to in the medical accounts, but *culturally, 'fat' can mark any woman*, referencing body size in general, a jiggle of a thigh, or the slight swell of a belly" (Herndon 2002: 132)

Herndon here poignantly notes that 'fat' can mark any woman – indeed, I would say any body, because as I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, the negative meanings associated with weight do also affect men. Thus, while undeniably an embodied characteristic, 'fat' is at the same just as much about the context in which those bodies are lived. This context shapes cultural imaginaries and bodily ideals as I argued in Chapter Two. In turn, it also shapes how individual bodies are lived. Consequently, as material and fleshy as 'fat' is, it is equally cultural and contextual. As the blog *Fat From the Side* demonstrates, 'fatness' is a lived experience: an experience that a variety of bodies share, not wholly independent of their BMI or the kilograms they weigh – but not completely tied to it either. This two-sidedness of

weight, weight as something that is both thoroughly bodily and as 'transcending' the material

dimensions in some ways, will be further explored in the next and last chapter of this thesis.

# *Chapter 4.*

# *Rethinking the 'Fat' Subject,*

# *Encountering Jean Luc Nancy's 'Corpus'*

So far, this thesis has investigated the 'phenomenology of weight' through a focus on the *lived body* and *lived experience*. The main question addressed could be phrased as follows: "What is it like to have/be a fat body in a society which privileges thinness?" With this central question, I have focused on 'weighing' as a feature of individual body-subjects, though I have taken care to situate and contextualize the embodied experiences in the broader contemporary cultural and political context. Undeniably, my 'phenomenology of weight' has in fact taken the shape of a philosophical anthropology so far: the main focus has been on *fat embodied subjectivity*. In this last chapter, however, I want to move away from the focus on the fat-bodied subject, and explore a very different path for a feminist phenomenology of weight. This path will be opened up through an encounter with the 'thought on weight' of the contemporary postphenomenological thinker Jean-Luc Nancy. In Nancy's *Corpus* (2008, 1993a), an extremely intriguing and original take on weight and weighing can be found. Instead of approach weight on an *anthropological* level, Nancy approaches it on an *ontological* level. Weight and weighing, in Nancy's framework, become an entry point to rethink the relation between the material and the discursive, or between bodies and thought. In *Corpus*, Nancy opens up for a radical rethinking of subjectivity. He provides an alternative to the unitary and coherent model of subjectivity – the masculinist and humanist model of the Subject with a capital S which has been criticized by feminist thinkers. Because of the central role which 'weight' and 'weighing' play in this challenge to the Subject, I argue that Nancy

opens up an important new direction for Fat Studies, which is presently still primarily engaged with 'weight' on the anthropological or societal level. Thus, although Nancy's thought has not so far been taken up by feminist theory or Fat Studies, my aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how his work may offer an incentive for a crucial re-direction for feminist Fat Studies scholarship.

First, I will briefly introducing the thinker Jean-Luc Nancy. Next, I will present the original and complex perspective on the body that Nancy develops in *Corpus*. In my reading of Nancy, specific connections with feminist thought will be emphasized. The pivotal role that 'weight' and 'weighing' play in Nancy's writing on the body will be explored and related to the contemporary emerging field of Fat Studies. In the conclusion of this chapter, I show how Nancy's thought breaks through a problematic model which conceives of Subjectivity as coherent, unitary and one.

## 4.1 Introducing Jean-Luc Nancy

The contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is probably most known for his political thought. A central thematic in Nancy's political philosophy is his rethinking of *community*. The theme of community is notably central in *The Inoperative Community* (1983/2006). In this work, as in others, Jean-Luc Nancy draws on a rich intellectual heritage. As Ian James points out, "the thought-paths Nancy takes are closely bound by those taken by others in his French literary-philosophical community: those taken by Blanchot…, by Bataille and Levinas, Derrida and Deleuze, to name but the most obvious candidates" (James 2006: 7). Besides these French contemporaries, another important influence on Nancy is that of the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. Nevertheless, Ian James warns against overstating the Heideggerian influence. Rather than being a faithful follower, Nancy is highly critical of Heidegger and continually "unties and reworks" Heideggerian concepts (James

2006: 7). This is certainly discernible in *Being Singular Plural* (1996/2000), a work in which Nancy radicalizes the Heideggerian notion of 'Mitsein', giving it a much more central role than it had it Heidegger's *Being and Time*. James convincingly contends that Nancy should be considered "a thinker who demonstrates the continued importance of Heidegger for contemporary thought and whose breadth of philosophical engagement is far from reducible to any more or less orthodox 'Heideggerianism'" (2006: 7).

Nancy also draws on a phenomenological legacy in his account of the body. In that context, it is primarily the late thought of Merleau-Ponty which forms the backdrop, as we will see in the next section. While Nancy thus draws on the work of phenomenological thinkers and engages with the phenomenological tradition, he also critically questions phenomenology and phenomenological concepts. One could say that Nancy's work "emerges both as a reinscription, but also as a radical critique, of the phenomenological account" (James 2006: 66). In my assessment, Jean-Luc Nancy is best characterized as a postphenomenological thinker. Here, the characterization 'post' does not imply a rejection: it is not a question of transcending or overcoming phenomenology. Instead, the term pays tribute to an important heritage and mode of thinking, which is taken up anew, and turned a different direction. I use the term to place Nancy in a particular philosophical trajectory, yet to keep in mind the important differences between him and the 'classical' phenomenological thinkers. Following Ihde's use of 'postphenomenology', the term also designates a nonfoundational phenomenology (Ihde 1995): a phenomenology which has taken the poststructuralist and postmodern criticisms of the 1960 and 1970s in. What sets apart Nancy's postphenomenology from classical phenomenological approaches is the decentering or splitting of the subject. Subjectivity and the embodied subject are undeniably central in classical phenomenological pursuits (*c.f.* Lawlor 1998), and this is also the case for feminist

phenomenological scholarship[85]. In Nancy's work, however, subjectivity emerges instead as fundamentally fragmented and split. In the discussion that follows, I will attempt to make clear exactly how this works, and what the consequences are.

Given the contemporaneity of Nancy's thought, there is not yet a lot of secondary literature on his work. Ian James' *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (2006) is unique and path-breaking in this respect. As a result of the dearth of secondary literature, there is also an absence of work that examines the relations between Jean-Luc Nancy and feminist philosophy. In his own work, Jean-Luc Nancy rarely explicitly refers to feminist theory or feminist thinkers. Conversely, Nancy's thought has not often been taken up by feminist philosophers[86]. Nevertheless, I believe that important connections can be made between Nancy thought and feminist thought. In particular, there is a potentially rich relationship between Nancy's 'corpus' and feminist theorizing on the body. In this chapter, I want to make a first step in exploring these potential connections. My aim is to demonstrate that "Jean-Luc Nancy's reconceptualization of corporeality... can be an important ally to feminist theories of the body" (Perpich 2005: 75), as Diane Perpich has suggested. In order to do so, I will now first go into this 'reconceptualization of corporeality', which is presented in the works entitled 'Corpus'.

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[85] Of course, I have previously argued that feminist phenomenology has also combined poststructuralist insights with phenomenological models and methods. In this sense, it is also fair to say that feminist phenomenology is a ´postphenomenology´ in a certain sense. Nevertheless, different from Nancy´s postphenomenology, feminist phenomenological approaches do often ´start from the subject´.

[86] An exception is the work of Vikki Bell. In *Feminist Imagination: Genealogies in Feminist Theory* (1999), Bell draws on Jean-Luc Nancy for a genealogical investigation of feminism as a political/philosophical community. Bell explains that Nancy's anti-identitarian model of community may be fruitful for feminism: suggesting that "feminism might be thought of in Nancy's terms, not as an expression of a shared identity but as the exposition of a shared non-identity with those with whom we, ecstatically, share that finitude" (Bell 1999: 19). Another engagement with Nancy is found in Nicki Sullivan's *Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003).

4.2 A Feminist Reading of 'Corpus'

Potentially a source of confusion is the fact that Jean-Luc Nancy has written *two* essays entitled 'Corpus'. The first shorter essay was presented at a meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at the University of California Irvine in 1990. In 1993, it was translated to English and published in the essay collection *The Birth to Presence*. On the basis of this first shorter 'Corpus', Nancy wrote a longer essay under the same title in1992. This 'Corpus' was not translated to English until 2008[87]. According to the translator Richard A. Rand, this second 'Corpus' should be read "as a *summa* of his [Nancy's] work in the decades preceding and a formulation for the work in the decades to follow. It sweeps, like the torch of a lighthouse, over the points of its author's compass" (Rand 2008: ix). Despite the fact that 'Corpus' is relatively short, and far from the most well-known text by Nancy's hand, Rand assigns it a central – even pivotal – role in Nancy's oeuvre. In the comment, Rand also takes notice of the density of the text; recognizing the variety of different strands that are woven together in 'Corpus'.

I find Rand's metaphor of the lighthouse torch very apt in capturing my reading experience. A lighthouse torch sweeps over a vast terrain, illuminating some areas, while others pass into darkness again. In reading Nancy, I am again and again struck by the impression of seeing things clearly, of getting to something important and valuable. Yet inevitably, the torch moves on, and in that sweeping motion those areas which were momentarily illuminated pass into darkness again. Trying to pin down that spotlight, trying to re-create and convey the moments of clarity, seems a near-impossible task, and a highly frustrating one. This type of reading experience, in which I felt myself torn between frustration and inspiration, is of course connected to Nancy's style of philosophizing. It is a style which intentionally blurs the lines between philosophy and literature, and which

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[87] In order not to confuse the reader even further as to which essay I am referring to at which moment, I have chosen to reference this work simply as Nancy 2008, instead of the more correct 1992/2008.

conceives of philosophy *as* literature (James 2006: 21). Although this style makes Nancy's work a great challenge to read, and an even greater challenge to summarize and reflect on, this is definitely a challenge that I want to take up. I take up the challenge in the conviction that what Nancy has to say about 'corpus' is of importance to feminist thought on the body in general, and my own thought on body weight in particular.

I will start my examination of Nancy's 'Corpus' by examining at the choice of the title. This is important because Nancy's use of the Latin term 'corpus' rather than the ordinary French word for body, 'corps', is far from a coincidence. Indeed, the Latin word 'corpus' carries an wide range of connotations, which Nancy calls upon on purpose. First of all, 'corpus' references a *Christian heritage*. Nancy opens the 2008 essay with a reflection on the phrase 'Hoc est enim corpus meum'. These words, 'Here is my body', were originally spoken by Jesus and are repeated in church ceremonies around the world. According to Nancy, it is the "cult phrase" of Western culture par excellence (Nancy 2008: 3). Nancy discusses this phrase at length, because the legacies of Christianity still strongly influence how the relation of mind and body are conceived of in Western traditions (James 2006: 14).[88] Despite the echoes of Christianity that 'corpus' carries, Nancy nevertheless believes that the move from 'corps' to 'corpus' offers a new entry point to write on the body. Rather than the singularity implied by 'corps' (or in English: *the* body), Nancy suggests that "We need a *corpus*, a *cata*log… a corpus of the bodies *entries*: dictionary entries, entries into language, body registers, registers of bodies" (Nancy 1993a: 189). 'Corpus', more than 'corps', opens a thought of the body to plurality and multiplicity.

Here, the first connection to feminist thought on the body can be made, since an important theme in feminist thought on the body is the insight that '*the* body' as such does not exist. Rather than repeating the universalizing gesture that institutes a certain type of bodies as

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[88] It is also central in the legacy of mind/body dualism which I have critically discussed at various earlier points in this thesis. See, for example, the start of Chapter One (page 10) and section 3.4 (page 79).

the norm-body, feminists have stressed difference and variation among bodies. I have made this point at length in section 1.2 of Chapter One, where I noted that Merleau-Ponty implicitly builds his phenomenology on a particular type of body: a male, white, able-bodied body. Against such a problematic starting point, I stressed the importance of recognizing the differences in embodied experience from an intersectional perspective, and presented 'feminist phenomenology' as that tradition which has an eye for these differences. Jean-Luc Nancy's take on corporeality thus shares its anti-universalist tendency with feminist theory in general and feminist phenomenology in particular. As Diane Perpich points out, "Nancy rejects the idea of "the" body... substituting in place of '*le' corps* a *corpus* or a catalogue of singularities that evoke bodies without essentializing them" (Perpich 2005: 83). The anti-essentialist and anti-universalist approach which is designated by Nancy's use of 'corpus' is thus the first element which places him in alliances with feminist theorizing on the body.

A second reason why Nancy uses the Latin 'corpus', is that it allows him to thematize in an original and complex way the relation between matter and thought, or bodies and language. With 'corpus', Nancy intentionally refers both to the *oeuvre*, the body of thought - and to the actual, fleshy, material bodies. As such, 'corpus' is, as Christopher Watkin points out, "a term which intentionally blurs the boundary of the corporeal and the literary" (2009: 175). The blurring of this boundary is already expressed in the very first sentence of the 1990 'Corpus': "A *corpus* is not a discourse: however, what we need here is a corpus" (Nancy 1993a: 189). While the text written by Nancy is a discourse about/on corpus, this is simultaneously claimed to be impossible in that very discourse. Paradoxically, although a corpus is not a discourse, it seems that the only way to approach the corpus is in/through discourse. Nancy calls this a double bind or even a double failure: both "a failure to produce a discourse on the body, also the failure not to produce discourse on it" (Nancy 1993a: 190). This 'double failure' stresses the mutual irreducibility of matter and discourse. Nancy

suggests that materiality cannot be reduced to discourse, nor can discourse be reduced to materiality. Indeed, rather than pulling apart and distinguishing between matter and discourse, Nancy is interested in the boundary, border or *limit* between them. It seems that exactly the body – or 'corpus' - is this limit.  Nancy writes:

> *Bodies don't take place in discourse or in matter.* They don't inhabit 'mind' or 'body.' They take place at the limit, *qua limit*: limit − external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a continuum of matter. An opening, discreteness. (2008: 17)

This passage makes it clear that Nancy's thought of corpus radically breaks through dualist thought. Rather than presenting an either/or, in which either everything is text (the caricatured position of social constructivism), or everything is matter (the caricatured position of biological realism), Nancy transcends that duality altogether. He rejects the very terms of this either/or. Rather than picking either 'either' or 'or', we could say that Nancy stays with the slash / between them. This slash is separating as much as connecting the two options that are presented as an either/or.

Here, a second connection to feminist theorizing on the body can be made, because the anti-dualist stance which Nancy develops in 'Corpus' resonates strongly with the feminist critiques of dualisms (see, for example, Lloyd 1984). As Diane Perpich notes, "it is the notion of corpus itself that is employed in an attempt to overthrow the barriers that divide body and meaning, matter and mind" (2005: 85) – a position that she rightly connects to feminist approaches to the body. Indeed, although feminist theory has often been portrayed as leaning towards a social constructivist position in which 'everything is text', in fact this position is a caricature. Rather than 'reducing everything to language', feminist theory has a keen eye for the materiality of the body, while not falling into a biological essentialism. This is true for both 'feminist new materialism' (Van der Tuin 2008), as well as the 'feminist phenomenology' that I introduced in Chapter One (section 1.3.A). Similarly, Nancy's notion

of corpus is neither exclusively discursive nor exclusively material. Instead, it incorporates both these elements and transcends their opposition.

Transcending the opposition between the discursive and the material means that 'corpus' has to do with *limit* between them. Reflecting on centrality of the 'limit' in Nancy's thought, James notes: "This point of contact between the limit of sense and signification on the one hand, and the fleshy and impenetrable materiality of the body on the other, is what Nancy's rethinking of existential phenomenology and fundamental ontology seeks to address" (2006: 114). James here characterizes Nancy's thought as a thought of the limit, "a thinking of touch, tact, or contact at the limit, which would allow signification, sense and materiality to be thought together or alongside each other" (James 2006: 115). Here, James links together the notion of 'limit' with 'touch'. In other words, the 'limit' which Nancy is speaking of, is not approached either through reflection or contemplation, but it is *touched*. Of course, it is significant that the corporeal term of 'touching' is here employed to characterize the approaching of a limit between the material and the immaterial, the corporeal and the incorporeal. 'Touching' seems a very simple and material term, referencing to the physical contact between two bodies, a touching of skin to skin, a material closeness. Yet the 'touching' of the limit is not one between two bodies in this sense. Instead, this touching takes place *in writing*. Although this is a different kind of touch from the physical touching of two bodies touching, it is also not that different after all. Again, the double play of text and matter is of importance here. Writing, according to Nancy, is in its essence a touching upon the body (2008: 10, 11). Nancy writes:

> touching upon the body, touching the body *touching* – happens in writing all the time. Maybe it doesn't happen exactly *in* writing, if writing in fact has an 'inside'. But along the border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing nothing *but* that happens. Now, writing takes its place at the limit. So if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*. More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) *with the incorporeality* of 'sense.' And consequently, *to make the incorporeal touching*, to make of meaning a touch. (2008: 11)

This quote indicates that writing takes place at the limit: it is a touching of the limit. Rather than *in*scription or *de*scription, Nancy characterizes writing as *ex*scription (2008: 19, 87). Nancy writes: "The body's neither substance, phenomenon, flesh, nor signification. Just being-exscribed" (2008: 19).Nancy rejects such previous conceptualizations of the body, and posits that instead, the body is being-exscribed. And this being-exscribed, as has been noted, happens through writing. "And so we have to write from a body that we neither have nor are, but where being is exscribed. If I write, this strange hand has already slipped into my writing hand." (Nancy 2008: 19), Nancy writes. The quote is intriguing: a 'strange hand' is said to slip into my writing hand. The hand with which I write is my hand, but at the same time a strange hand – or a stranger's hand? 'Strangeness' here seems to allude both to 'oddness' and to 'otherness'. Nancy is pointing out that this body that is a limit between sense and matter, touched by writing and being written, *is* my own, but it is also at the same time a very strange body. Although it is my own, my body always maintains an element of strangeness[89]. In this sense, Nancy writes: "corpus *is never properly me*" (Nancy 2008: 29).

Nancy's model of 'corpus' is thus one in which alterity is central to the self. As such, it effectively shatters the idea of a 'wholeness' of the self. As Perpich comments:

> Nancy's rejection of the unified, integrated body (*the* body) of humanist discourses in favor of a dis-integrated body constituted by multiple alterities and his reinterpretation of body as 'being-exscribed' begin the task of thinking the notion of bodies beyond traditional dualisms and their ahistorical and rationalist framework. (Perpich 2005: 76)

Here, Perpich claims that *the shattering of an ideal of bodily integrity* is central to Nancy's 'Corpus'. Nancy, according to Perpich, rejects the unified model of body/subject of humanist discourses. I would characterize this as a move away from the 'Subject with a Capital S'. It is

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[89] This 'strangeness' in the self was already encountered in Chapter 2, section 3.4, page 84. It is further touched upon by Nancy in the essay *L'Intrus*: Nancy's philosophical account of his own heart transplant. I have chosen not to address *L'Intrus* and the themes developed in this work any further in the current thesis.

important to recognize that Nancy is not alone nor particular innovative in making such a move. Instead, this move should be understood in the larger philosophical context, and in particular, Nancy's French intellectual heritage. As Rosi Braidotti points out, Continental and particularly French thought in the late 20$^{th}$ century has gone through a time of 'crisis': a crisis of subjectivity and rationality (Braidotti 1991: 1). As a result, the 'death of the subject' was proclaimed by poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers. This movement already started in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, but found its strongest expression in the thought of, for example, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. As I pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, it is exactly this intellectual tradition which forms one of the important backdrops for Nancy's thought. It is thus not a surprise that Nancy shares such a rejection of the rational subject with his French intellectual circles.

Diane Perpich sees a connection between Nancy's 'shattering of the subject' and feminist theorizing on embodied subjectivity. Of course, Perpich recognizes that the fragmentation and de-centralizing of the body-subject is one that is not shared by all feminists. She notes that "Nancy's ontology is seemingly at odds with a host of feminist discourses for which bodily integrity is an almost unquestioned good" (Perpich 2005: 85). Yet, despite the fact that not *all* feminist thinkers would agree to such a fragmentation of the self that Nancy offers, this position is in fact in agreement with significant developments in contemporary feminist theory. Thus, the question is: what are the connections between, on the one hand, the decentralizing and shattering of the subject in postmodern thought, and feminist theory on the other hand? This question has been addressed in depth by Rosi Braidotti in her 1991 study *Patterns of Dissonance*. Braidotti points out that it is rather ironic and in some ways a bit suspicious that the 'death of the subject' was proclaimed at the very moment that women, persons of colour and other 'marginalized subjects' were starting to speak *as subjects* for the first time. "The age of 'crisis' and/or the 'death' of rationality is also, historically and

discursively, the age which has witnessed the social and theoretical emergence of feminist theory and practice" (Braidotti 1991: 7), she notes. In a similar critical vein, the black feminist theorist bell hooks wrote:

> Considering that it is as subject that one comes to voice, then the postmodern focus on the critique of identity appears at first glance to threaten to close down the possibility that this discourse and practice will allow those who suffered the crippling effects of colonialization and domination to gain or regain a hearing…Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time. (hooks 1990: 28)

Despite this suspicion and this irony, neither Braidotti nor hooks advocate that feminism should just 'give up' on postmodernism. Instead, they both consider the postmodern move an important one. Therefore, they rather implore us to consider exactly what *kind* of subject is proclaimed dead in the first place. This is, as Judith Butler fairly points out in *Undoing Gender*, a very specific model of the subject: the model of the *unitary subject*. "The unitary subject is the one who knows already what it is, who enters the conversation the same way it exits, who fails to put its own epistemological certainties at risk in the encounter with the other, and so stays in place, guards its place… *refusing self-transformation, ironically, in the name of the subject*" (Butler 2004: 228). In other words, it is this problematic type of subjectivity which is rejected by feminism – not subjectivity altogether.

Rejecting this unitary subject, feminism has replaced it with a 'multiple subject' or a 'fragmented subject', new models of subjectivity that Butler relates to the thought of the Chicana feminist Gloria Anzalduá and the postcolonial feminist thinker Gayatri Spivak. Similar to Butler, Rosi Braidotti claims that following postmodern thinkers in their proclamation of the 'death of the subject' does not mean giving up on subjectivity altogether. According to Braidotti, "feminist epistemology proposes a radically different vision of subjectivity as embodied, sexually different, multiple and relational" (Braidotti 1991: 276). This new model of subjectivity that Braidotti envisions likewise criticizes what Butler called

the 'unitariness' of traditional models. In Braidotti's words, "Feminism thus defined has become a form of resistance against the One, against the vision of subjectivity that posits rationality as the dominant mode, in favour of the multiple, the plurality and multiplicity of women's discourse" (1991: 278).

Thus, calling into question the foundational status of the category of the subject does not mean doing away with subjectivity altogether, or rejecting its usefulness. Instead, it means rethinking subjectivity, and finding new models which go beyond the male, white, phallogocentric and rational Subject with a capital S. Nancy's 'Corpus', then, offers a fruitful dialogue for feminist thought that is likewise engaged in the deconstruction of the humanist, masculine or phallogocentric Subject. While such a deconstruction may seem a radical and extreme project, it in fact is shared by many feminist thinkers working in poststructuralist, postmodernist, posthumanist and deconstructionist traditions. In this vein, Perpich argues convincingly that because it undoes the hegemonic position of the Subject, Nancy's 'Corpus' creates a space for marginalized or otherwise 'queer' bodies. According to Perpich, "it takes account of those bodies usually considered borderline without having to position them at the outer limits (or, for that matter, at the center)" (Perpich 2005: 87). Those bodies that transgress or defy traditional categories, such as intersexed bodies, pregnant bodies, punk bodies, can be considered in a meaningful way through the lens which Nancy offers.

All in all, I thus argue that by breaking open a model of the subject which is predicated on the male, white, rational agent, the fragmented and split subjectivity which Nancy presents, is in line with feminist, queer and postcolonial rethinking of the subject. In the next section, I will examine how this connects to Nancy's thought on weight. As Nancy points out, it is impossible to write on the body "without ruptures, reversals, discontinuities (discreteness), or trivialities, contradictions, and displacements of discourse within itself" (2008: 21). But even though the body *estranges* language and thinking (Nancy 2008: 19), Nancy also stresses that

we should not give up trying. We have to continue in the attempt, this is absolutely necessary. "Whereof we can no longer speak, thereof we must not stop talking. We have to keep pressing speech, language, and discourse against this body, whose contact is uncertain, intermittent, hidden, and yet insistent" (Nancy 2008: 61). We have to keep touching that limit, attempting to 'make sense' of the place where sense happens. Insisting on this centrality of the body, despite the problems it brings, could be considered a last connection between Nancy and feminist theorizing on the body.

## 4.3 Thinking Bodies, Weighing Bodies

After outlining these general alliances between 'Corpus' and feminist theorizing on the body, I now want to reflect in more detail on the pivotal role which *body weight* plays in Nancy's texts on the body. In fact, more than 'weight' (noun), it is the adjective of 'weighing' which is prominent in 'Corpus'. This is because weighing, according to Nancy, is a central and undeniable aspect of embodiment. He writes:

> A body always weighs; it lets itself weigh, be weighed. A body does not have a weight, it is a weight. It weighs, it presses against other bodies, onto other bodies. All bodies weigh against one another: celestial bodies and callous bodies, vitreous bodies, and all other bodies." (Nancy 1993a: 199[90])

In this quote it can immediately be noted that 'body' is taken in a very broad sense. Different kinds of bodies – both 'celestial' and 'callous' – are named alongside each other, and what they all have in common is that they weigh and are weighed. Gravity and weighing are closely connected in this quote: weight is always something that happens in a relation between bodies, in which something weighs on/against something else. In this quote, we see that in Nancy's thought, having a weight, being a weight, is considered a central characteristic of *body*. In fact, Nancy even writes that "*Body* would then first be the experience of *its own*

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[90] Compare Nancy 2008: 93.

*weight*" (Nancy 1993a: 200). In this framework, body and weight even become inseparable: "the body itself weighs: it is sunk into itself, according to a specific law of gravity that has pulled the body so far down that it can't be distinguished from its own weight" (Nancy 2008: 7). Interesting is also the difference between *weighing* and *being weighed* that grabs Nancy's attention: while weighing presupposes a universe, being weighed is the process of world: "being weighed requires the assistance of another body and the extent of a world… Bodies come to weigh against one another, such is the *world*" (Nancy 2008: 95). Having weight, and the process of being weighed, thus implies plurality and a spacing/sharing of bodies[91].

In 'Corpus', Nancy makes a deliberate play on the closeness of the French terms for weight and thought: *peser* and *penser*. He speaks of "the weight of a gram of thought" (Nancy 1993a: 201; 2008: 43). This relation is further explored in the book *The Weight of a Thought* (1993b). Here, although he stresses that "Etymological relations are of limited worth" (Nancy 1993b: 75), Nancy nevertheless posits that there is an important connection between the two concepts. This connection is expressed in the impossible yet meaningful concept of "the weight of a thought" (Nancy 1993b: 76). The impossibility of the connection is because "thinking can never grasp weighing; it can offer a measure for it, but it cannot itself weigh up the weight. Nor can weighing touch thinking" (Nancy 1993b: 76). According to Nancy, I can have "no access to the weight of thought, nor to the thought of weight" (Nancy 1993b: 76). However, despite this very impossibility and the paradoxical nature of the coupling of weight and thought, the relationship is crucial to examine. Because we are "thinking [beings] as well as weighty beings" (Nancy 1993b: 76), we need to examine the relationship and dissonance between weight and thought in order to make sense of our own being.

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[91] In 'Corpus', as in other works, Nancy plays with the double meaning of the French word 'partager' – as both sharing and dividing: 'sharing in' and 'sharing out'. It would be very interesting to compare Nancy's thought on the 'sharing of voices' and 'sharing the world' with that of the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, as 'sharing' is also an important theme for Irigaray and one of her most recent publications is entitled  "Sharing the World" (2008) However, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

So, on the one hand it seems that the extreme materiality of weight and the abstract immateriality of thought form absolute opposites. On the other hand, however, *human beings* do combine these two elements in their own being. What seems to be a relation of infinite distance is at the same time a most intimate connection. Of course, this is highly reminiscent of the way in which Nancy described the paradoxical relation of matter and discourse: the relation of bodies and language that I examined earlier. Indeed, in the case of thought and weight there is a very similar relation between two seemingly opposite terms that 'touch' at the limit. What connects 'weight' and 'thought' is that they both have to do with 'meaning'. As Nancy explains the connection: "The act of thinking *is* an actual weighing; it is the very weighing of the world, of things, of the *real* as *meaning*" (1993b: 76). Meaning, which one would normally consider an incorporeal, needs, according to Nancy, "a thickness. a density, a mass, and thus an opacity" (Nancy 1993b: 79). Because they are invested in meaning, and share in meaning, the things in the world participate in this heaviness of meaning. On the other hand, however, the heaviness of the things themselves also seems to puncture and break through thought. Nancy writes: "the existence of the slightest pebble already overflows; however light it may be, it already weighs this excessive weight" (1993b: 79). The heaviness of meaning leads to overflowing, and an openness. "The weight of thought is then the weight of the things insofar as that thing weighs *outside* of thought, insofar as it punctures and overflows the thought that it is, but that it can only be by being open *to* the thing, and to its heaviness" (Nancy 1993b: 79). Interestingly enough, while here 'heaviness' is stressed, Nancy posits elsewhere that "bodies weigh lightly. Their weight is the raising of their masses to the surface" (Nancy 2008: 93). Pushing down or rising/bubbling up: weight has to do with relations between different bodies. When Nancy writes that 'bodies can weigh lightly', he is implying that the kind of 'weight' which he is talking about has less to do with kilograms than with the mere fact of weighing againist each one another, and taking up a place in the world.

Between the two extremes of 'fleshy' and 'thoughtful', weight is the pivot or the limit that both connects and separates them.

This short account makes clear that Nancy takes the thought of weight far away from the concrete level of experiences of fatness and social discourses on fat and thin bodies which were my focus in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. In Nancy's text, 'weighing' becomes instead a pivot between thought and matter, language and bodies. Weighing is examined as an ontological (pre)condition of being *in* the world and being *of* the world. Thus, the way in which Nancy theorizes 'weight' seems very far removed from the way 'weight' is normally considered from a feminist perspective or a fat studies perspective. It seems very different from the way in which I have dealt with the phenomenology of weight in the previous chapters. In the second and the third chapter, I was concerned with fatness and thinness: experiences of weight and the cultural context in which they come about. Now, I am talking about 'weighing' as a pivot between thought and matter - as a different way to conceptualize being: not as disembodied and immaterial, but as always already weighing down, in relation to others in a world. How are these different modes of theorizing weight connected? What is the relevance of Nancy's way of conceptualizing weight to, for example, the critical Fat Studies approach and the fat-bodied bloggers that I focused on in Chapter Three?

In the introduction, I already positioned this present Chapter as a shift from a 'philosophical anthropological account' to an 'ontological account'. Another way to conceptualize the shift would be between the question "how is weight lived?" to the question "how can weight be thought?" Although Nancy's way of theorizing weight seems very far removed from a political feminist or fat studies approach which criticizes the cultural imaginaries which frame fatness as 'unhealthy' and 'unattractive', I would argue that the way in which Nancy accords to weighing a central role in his 'bodily ontology' (James 2006) could also be considered political. In a context where 'watching your weight' automatically

seems to imply trying to decrease in weight, Nancy reminds us that 'weight' is not just something that fat people have. Nancy instead insists that all bodies have a weight: remember that we are all 'thinking [beings] as well as weighty beings' (2003b: 76). Weighing is thus an essential and inalienable aspect of being in the world. Every-body weighs, and this fact of being weighty is central to embodied subjectivity. One might tend to think of 'weighing' as that one moment when you stand on your bathroom scale and look at the number – a moment that fills many with dread, anxiety or anticipation as I have suggested. Instead, Nancy reminds us that weighing is something we continually do, and something that occurs in relation to other bodies. Remember that "being weighed requires the assistance of another body and the extent of a world... Bodies come to weigh against one another, such is the *world*" (Nancy 2008: 95). Weighing and being weighed thus happens in relation to others: it is a mode of being with others and being in the world. In these ways, Nancy gives a positive meaning to 'thickness' and to 'weighing'. Weight is not something to be ignored, disavowed or reduced: it is a central part of being in the world.

Moreover, to connect this to the 'death of the Subject' and the rethinking of subjectivity that I discussed earlier in the chapter, I would argue that Nancy's thought of weight opens up an interesting new direction for Fat Studies. Fat Studies, which I have introduced in Chapter Two as an emerging interdisciplinary research field, is engaged in the critical study of body weight, in evaluating cultural imaginaries and bodily realities. In this process, however, it seems inevitably focused on the fat embodiment and the fat subject. While this is important, I think that it is also important for Fat Studies to branch out, and use the study of 'weight' as an entry point to address larger questions – such as the question of subjectivity. This is exactly what the Fat Studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco does. In an interesting reflection on interdisciplinarity, LeBesco counters the idea that a specific thematic research field such as Fat Studies would 'dilute or split' knowledge (2011: 102). Instead, she

argues that the fat body offers a theoretical lens through which larger issues come into sight: such as the dominant societal discourses which equate 'fat' with 'unhealthy' and 'unattractive', but also more fundamental questions of body and embodiment in general. Thus, Kathleen LeBesco's claims that "Fat Studies is not only about the body; it is about the Subject" (2011: 103). LeBesco gives an overview of the different directions which Fat Studies scholarship can take, and argues that in her own work, the fat body is a 'lens', or a nodal point through which to rethink questions of subjectivity. Here, I see a strong alliance with the role which weight and weighing play in Nancy's corpus. Weight, both for the type of Fat Studies which Kathleen LeBesco envisions, and for Jean-Luc Nancy, is not *just* about kilograms, eating disorders and Body Mass Index. Instead, 'weight' opens up to larger questions, questions about meaning and being in the world. In this sense, 'weight' seems to play a pivotal role both in Fat Studies and in Nancy's corpus as the lens *through which* one can engage with larger questions, for example questions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference in the way in which LeBesco and Nancy respectively see 'weight' as an entry point to open up the question of the subject. When Kathleen LeBesco references the question of 'the Subject', she seems to be implying a "restorative subjectivity-building project" (2010: 98), as she calls it. While I would agree with LeBesco that the question of the Subject and subjectivity are important themes that can be explored through the focus on the weighing body, I would suggest that instead of 'restoring' subjectivity, Fat Studies scholars would do better to take the route of a more radical rethinking and deconstruction of the Subject. The 'restorative subjectivity-building project' that LeBesco has in mind seems to envision a place in existing structures for the fat subject. It implies gaining access to a model of subjectivity that previously guarded with adjectives such white, male and rational. Such a goal could not be farther from the one implicit in Nancy's writing on corpus and weight. As I already noted, Nancy's work should be considered to

offer, in the words of Ian James' title, 'A Fragmentary Demand': a "thinking of... an exposure to, multiplicity and fragmentation" (James 2006: 2). Significantly, Diane Perpich's essay refers to "Disintigrating Bodies" in its title (Perpich 2005), implying that rather than a 'restorative subjectivity-building project', we find instead in Nancy a shattering and fragmenting of the subject.

Such a fragmenting of the subject is not easily reconciled with a theoretical or activist engagement with concrete/practical work of fighting for emancipation and recognition. Rosi Braidotti asked: "how to reconcile the recognition of the problematic nature of the construction of subjectivity with the political necessity of asserting women as the subject of another story?" (1991: 180). This question, which Braidotti posed for feminist theory in the early 1990s, is highly pertinent to the situation of Fat Studies in the present day. Both academic fields a close connection to a political movement: theory and activism are closely connected. The theoretical project should in fact often be conceived of as a form of activism, a different mode of fighting for recognition and emancipation – not in the political arena, but in the arena of 'what counts as knowledge'. To rephrase Braidotti's question: how can Fat Studies reconcile the recognition of the problematic nature of the construction of subjectivity with the political necessity of asserting fat people as the subject of another story? In answering this difficult question, we can also remember the way in which bell hooks brought the postmodern critique of identity and subjectivity into question: "It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics by saying: 'Yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you've got one'" (hooks 1990: 28). Similarly, then, we might ask whether Fat Studies, as a field of study closely allied to a political movement, can 'afford' such a deconstructivist and anti-identitarian move at the moment. As it has been the case for feminist theory, queer theory and the critical race studies which hooks was referencing, fat studies is going through a phase of 'identity politics' in

which a space for the fat subject is sought. Of course, this phase is an incredibly important one, and fighting (theoretically as well as practically) for recognition and respect for fat bodied subjects is essential. Yet as we have seen in the trajectory of feminist theory and queer theory, such an 'identity-focused' project *can* exist side-by-side with a more radical gesture in which also the categories themselves according to which 'bodies' and 'subjects' are envisioned are called into question. And it is exactly here that Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus* can be an important ally, since Nancy thinks of 'weight' not on the level of the subject and society. Instead, as I have explained, 'weighing' plays a central and pivotal role in Nancy's bodily ontology. In his thought of weight, Nancy decenters and shatters the subject – but he does so at the same time as he offers a new way of thinking about community and 'being with'. As the subject is shattered, intersubjectivity is not given up on.

This anti-identitarian path, in which 'weight' becomes a prism through which to rethink fundamental categories such as embodiment, subjectivity and ontology, has only been briefly hinted at here. It is an important path for a feminist phenomenology of weight, and a path that I believe should explore further in future Fat Studies scholarship.

# *Conclusion*

In the four chapters of this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate that 'weighing' is an essential and inextricable part of embodiment and being in the world. Every body has a weight – and that weight is always 'lived' in a particular social and cultural setting. Indeed, as much as 'weight' is an inseparable aspect of corporeality, it is always also more than that. In the weighing body, cultural anxieties about beauty and health become manifested. As a result, more than any particular amount of kilograms, what is lived are the cultural ideas and ideals connected to body weight. In my analysis of the blog posts on *Fat From the Side*, in Chapter Three, I have attempted to show exactly this: how the cultural imaginary discussed in Chapter Two becomes *incorporated* in the lived experiences of fatness.

It is clear that my study of weight has focused in particular on *fatness*. In Chapter Two, I focused on how 'fatness' is framed as undesirable, unhealthy and unattractive. In Chapter Three, I looked at a community of bloggers who openly and defiantly identify as fat. Some readers may object that my focus on 'fatness' in this study of weight has been one-sided: it could be said my 'phenomenology of weight' has focused only on one extreme. If every-body has a weight, as I claim, then would it not have been better to contrast fat experiences to thin experiences and to 'average' or chubby experiences? Of course, supplementing my analysis of fat bloggers and comparing it to practices and experiences of thin bodied and average sized blogging communities would have been fascinating, and it is something which I hope will be pursued in further research.

Nevertheless, I do not consider my focus on fatness one-sided. In fact, I hope to have shown in my examination that both 'fat' and 'thin' are both unstable signifiers. On the one hand, 'fat' seems to reference an aspect of embodiment that is straightforwardly physical. Fatness is visible and recognizable, and everyone knows what it is. Yet once we start to

examine it closer, we can notice that in fact, *who* is fat and *what* is fat is radically called into question. 'Fat,' I argue, is as much about bodies as much as it is about context. I (the writer of this thesis) might occasionally feel fat when I am reading a magazine, or when I have to find a larger size while trying on jeans. I might even be judged fat by others if I would participate in a beauty pageant or simply walking on the street. But in the online space of Fat Acceptance blogging, my body would probably not be considered that fat at all (perhaps I would fall in the category of the 'in-betweenie'). When I tell people about my research topic, I am often met by blank stares, and I can notice people suddenly looking at me with different eyes, scrutinizing my body, reading it for signs of fatness. Subsequently, they then turning to re-evaluate themselves. If I am apparently fat, then what are they? And if I am not that fat, then why do I care about fatness?

As I have argued in the different parts of the thesis, fatness is not about BMI or kilograms: it about bodies which, in some way or other, do not 'fit in' the dominant cultural imaginary. In this restrictive model, a great variety of different bodies may share the experience of fatness: even bodies that might at some occasions be considered thin by others. 'Fat' is thus not one extreme end of a spectrum of lived experiences of weight. In my assessment, it is a rather persistent experience – and therefore it is one in need of a critical feminist examination. It is such an feminist philosophical examination of the weighing body which I have attempted to provide in this thesis: through a theoretical engagement with feminist phenomenology and intersectionality (Chapter One), through an examination of cultural imaginaries and bodily ideals pertaining to weight (Chapter Two), through an phenomenological analysis of an online Fat Acceptance blog (Chapter Three), and through a feminist reading of the complex 'thought of weight' by Jean-Luc Nancy (Chapter Four).

I want to make a last remark about the trajectory of this thesis, which may be considered unconventional. I have moved from *theory* to an *application* of theory, and then

back to *theory* again. I have moved from an abstract level to a more concrete level, only to go back to the abstract once again in my last chapter. In Chapter One, I offered a theoretical reflection on feminist phenomenology. In Chapter Two, I looked at the contemporary context, analysing the dominant Western cultural imaginary on body weight. In Chapter Three, I applied my feminist phenomenological perspective on a concrete case study: the fat activist blog 'Fat From the Side'. In the last chapter, Chapter Four, I dove back into theory, to consider how the work of Jean-Luc Nancy's could provide an important new opening for a feminist philosophical examination of body weight. It would be a mistake to see this trajectory as a progress narrative in which a Merleau-Pontian subject-focused phenomenological approach is 'exchanged' for an ontological 'thought of weight' inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy. Instead, I rather see the path of the thesis as a cyclical one, in which theoretical reflections invite their concrete application and elaboration – but this engagement inevitably leads to new theoretical deliberations and opens up new directions.

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