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## Clothing the lived fat body

### ABSTRACT

1. *In this article I consider the lived fat body and its relation to clothing by thinking fat*
2. *experience as analogous to the situation of women as laid out in The Second Sex*
3. *([1949, 1951] 2010).*
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Clothing is often seen as an artificial envelope that can be removed to reveal a 'natural', biological body. What is missed is the way in which clothing constitutes a bodily extension that cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self.... The limits of one's body are felt not at the skin, but at the surface and edges of the clothing one wears, redefining one's sense of 'here'.

(Al-Saji 2010)

Fat represents an interesting twist on notions of boundary transgression. The fat individual extends beyond 'normal' physical space while still existing within his or her own body; however, physical space is not the only threshold being crossed.

(LeBesco 2004)

Kathleen LeBesco writes that it would be truly radical to enquire into the meanings of fatness without a causal lens (2010: 4). So much of the discourse around fatness is focused on why someone is fat because it is targeted at eliminating the fat on fat bodies. Phenomenological method is radically different because it describes the subject's experience of responding to and creating

### KEYWORDS

fatness  
phenomenology  
clothing  
stereotypes  
stigma  
gender  
Beauvoir

meaning in lived experience. Focusing on description, phenomenology does not aim to explain the causes of experience, but rather to illuminate how it is lived. Phenomenology meets the subject at the level of her unique perspective on her situation, which resists reductive frameworks that read a necessary fat experience from the fact that she has a fat body. Even careful fat theorists have engaged in a kind of phrenological reading of character off of fat bodies by assuming their fat deposits signify shared experiences. The most common reading of fat people's experience is that they eat too much and are depressed. It is my contention that a fat person who experiences fat hating discourses may have many responses that shape their experience as we learn from phenomenology that we make meaning of ourselves as subjects in response to social situations. I draw on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* ([1949, 1951] 2010) in which she argues that subject positions are not neutral starting points but rather contexts of social ranking in which we define and are defined, where we challenge or fail to challenge, where we feel shame, joy, love or hatred in encountering others. Fat people, though much maligned, make meaning of their situation, protest, contest, concede and are frustrated by societal meanings about fatness.

I draw on an existential phenomenology in this article, which takes it that subjects have a perspective on their place within social systems and that they possess the ability for conscious reflection on their situations. According to Iris Marion Young, existential phenomenology 'aims to speak from the point of view of the constituted subject's experience, in ways that complement but do not duplicate the observational or interpretive methods of Foucault, Butler, or Bordieu' (Young 2005: 8). Existential phenomenology takes seriously the interpretations of the mentioned thinkers, but resists interpretive methods that purport to describe what experience is *really* about by pointing to larger social systems or cultural representations or even operations of power. Though informative, these theoretical engagements undervalue how subjects live their particular life positions. To put it more plainly, social and cultural formations and lived experience are co-constituting and thus individual's experiences of meaning making are important as are the meaning of social frameworks and representations.

Phenomenology relies upon description to illuminate experience, and as such it draws on the affective and descriptive strength of autobiography. In her autobiography, *Fat Girl*, Judith Moore demonstrates the levels of experience that we shift between in describing experience:

It may come as a surprise to you – or maybe it won't – but I often do not realize that I am fat, or how fat I am. When I am by myself I don't tend to think about how I appear. I think about what I am doing.

(Moore 2005: 42)

In this way, fat embodiment in particular reveals an aspect of embodiment in general—that we are engrossed in a practical mode of experience most of the time. We are doing, rather than thinking about what we are doing, including what others might think about what we are doing. Moore's experience illuminates that we do not solely experience ourselves this way.

When I got dressed that morning, I went all-out. I wore my black hat made by hand by an honest-to-God milliner and I wore sheer pantyhose and black two-inch heels and a black linen A-line dress with sleeves

1. that hit above the elbow. I didn't think I looked like a movie star but I  
 2. thought I looked pretty.  
 3. (Moore 2005: 41)

4.  
 5. Absorbed in a practical mode of experience, from within she feels herself to  
 6. be pretty. Getting ready by herself, Moore is not conscious of being seen from  
 7. the outside, judged and seen by others. She explains another dimension of  
 8. phenomenology when she describes how after seeing a picture of herself  
 9. in the above outfit, her knees went weak:

10.  
 11. My happy smile had made my mouth crooked; my eyes were slightly  
 12. unfocused and I appeared frantic and theatrically crazy, as if I were the  
 13. heroine in a silent film desperate to escape a mustached villain. My  
 14. black hat, out from whose brim my curls poked, looked bizarre.... The  
 15. worst was that the black linen dress pulled across my hips and the way  
 16. my stomach bulged out I might have been six months pregnant.  
 17. (Moore 2005: 41–42)

18.  
 19. Moore sees herself in a photo and is confronted with the other's view of  
 20. herself. She no longer feels herself as practically engaged in the world  
 21. (wherein she could believe herself to be pretty), but as a viewed object. She  
 22. is confronted with her fatness in the photo, revealing the ambiguity of both  
 23. living our embodiment from 'the inside' and being seen from without.

24. The phenomenological perspective can unpack layers of fat experience. In  
 25. this essay I consider the lived fat body and its relation to clothing by think-  
 26. ing fat experience as analogous to the situation of women as laid out in *The*  
 27. *Second Sex* ([1949, 1951] 2010). For Beauvoir, becoming a woman means  
 28. negotiating oneself in response to what has been said about women in society  
 29. much like how the fat subject must negotiate herself in encounters with other  
 30. subjects and the fat-hating discourses they might advocate. Samantha Murray  
 31. follows Eve Sedgwick when she posits that the encounters we have with fat  
 32. subjects rely on a collective 'knowingness' about fatness. She writes:

33.  
 34. As members of Western society, we presume we know the histories  
 35. of all fat bodies, particularly those of fat women; we believe we know  
 36. their desires (which must be out of control) and their will (which must  
 37. be weak). This constant 'silent presumption' in *knowing* certain bodies  
 38. reifies the culture of knowingness.  
 39. (Murray 2005: 134, original emphasis)

40.  
 41. Further, as Amy Farrell has argued in *Fat Shame*, fatness has been and  
 42. continues to be a '*discrediting attribute*, for which people will go to *extraor-*  
 43. *dinary extremes to eliminate*' (Farrell 2011: 6, original emphasis). Because of  
 44. the assumptions made beyond the physical presentation of a fat body, the  
 45. stigma is not only physical but it is a character stigma – 'a person is glut-  
 46. tonous, or filling a deeply disturbed psychological need, or irresponsible and  
 47. unable to control primitive urges' (Farrell 2011: 6). Fat people, then, cannot  
 48. hide from the stigma attached to their bodies even if they wear the most  
 49. flattering clothes for their shape, wear slimming undergarments and prune  
 50. and preen every aspect of their hair, nails and accessories. The fat on fat  
 51. bodies discredits the person and in order to get social credit back – to enjoy  
 52. 'standards of polite and respectful behaviour' (Farrell 2011: 6) that their thin

1. Unless you are a fat person yourself in which case this is normal. For example The Conners of Roseanne whose 'active mutual attraction can be easily rationalized because they both are fat (and hence can't do any better)' (Mosher 2001: 185).

counterparts do – fat people must portray themselves as working towards retrieving the social credit they lack. They must be seen as at least *trying* i.e., dieting. This is why even plus-sized clothing stores use only ambiguously fat women to model their clothing (sizes 6–14 depending on the retailer) because consumers do not want to buy clothes that associate them with stigmatized bodies.

Beauvoir's theory of gendered encounters in *The Second Sex* ([1949, 1951] 2010) provides a starting point for describing how clothing functions for the lived fat body. For Beauvoir, femininity and masculinity – the meanings of gender – are used to create a hierarchical pair of subject positions where one is valued over the other, and importantly the subjectivity of the feminine inessential is negated and obscured. The masculine subject is then legitimized as he who can define the inessential other, the feminine subject. In the same way the inessential fat subject – mystified through stereotypes about the character of fat people – negotiates oneself in encountering others who either embody normative embodiment or advocate it.

As Susan Bordo has argued, the meaning of slenderness became more narrow and unforgiving in the late twentieth century and so the 'not slender' category became larger and larger and ultimately festered into a category of sickness, or to use Mariana Valverde's phrase, a 'disease of the will' (1998). Checkstand magazines target the mildly overweight to get them closer to the more narrow definition of slender, they do not market to obese people who are already 'sick'. This is because the diet magazines are about keeping obesity at bay, a little overweight is potentially healthy but the obese person has gone too far. In fact, fat and health are so far from picking out the same objects it is figured as a fetish or psychopathology if one is sexually attracted to a fat person.<sup>1</sup>

Beauvoir argues that it is women's situation of being compelled to the position of the inessential other that marks her situation and her complicity that keeps her in it. Beauvoir argues that cultural understandings of woman describe and contour women's situation. It might be interesting to think of the encounter as being between the fat and the slender, the supposedly sick and the supposedly health. Much like in the case of the masculine and the feminine, hierarchical ordering is achieved via who holds definitional power over the other. Beauvoir writes:

But what singularly defines the situation of women is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential.

([1949, 1951] 2010: 16–17)

Discourses about fat people are similarly agency-denying. Just as females are made into women through cultural expectations and encounters with others, the fat subject, as a result of the sting of fat prejudice and medical discourses of acceptable and healthy bodies is constituted in and through obesity panic rhetoric.

1. One important stereotype about fat people that they must encounter is that  
 2. they lack agency. The pressure fat people find in their situations is one that  
 3. is strongly geared towards their weak wills, which mirrors feminine passivity  
 4. in light of male activity. Because of cultural phrenological impulses, the quali-  
 5. ties of a person's character are often read off of their body, much in the same  
 6. way that gender is read off of supposed secondary sex characteristics. Reading  
 7. of character from fat bodies creates a feedback loop: the fat person has a bad  
 8. character (and weak will) and so it is read on the body and, 'the care of the  
 9. body also has characterological repercussions' (Kukla 2009: 89). Thus, a fat  
 10. person has a weak will evidenced by her appearance and the presumption  
 11. that a lack of care *results* in a fat body allows the reading of the body back  
 12. into the person's character. In the encounter, fat prejudice takes the fact of  
 13. a fat body and encodes it as an inessential, agency-lacking obese other. Fat  
 14. people are made to bear the burden of stigma especially a medically patholo-  
 15. gized stigma – to use Beauvoir's phrase of being compelled to be the other,  
 16. one is compelled to become obese, with all the characterological repercus-  
 17. sions I have discussed.

18. Theorists who draw a necessary connection between the fat body and  
 19. a particular character are mistaken not just because 'why' someone is fat is  
 20. not easily explained in characterological terms, but especially because we  
 21. have the ability to make meaning out of our situation as the maligned other.  
 22. Tempting as assigning a 'fat personality' may be, especially feelings of desper-  
 23. ation and hopelessness, we must get the relationship clear. If a fat person has  
 24. these feelings it seems just as plausible that the feelings are due to occupying  
 25. a socially maligned subject position. The maligned position of the fat person  
 26. creates the context for self-building, rather than the ways that fat people have  
 27. built their selves has been to attract negative attention and feelings by making  
 28. themselves fat.

29. To draw another analogy to how fat hating rhetoric can structure our  
 30. encounters, I turn to Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 2008),  
 31. where he recounts an experience when he was walking in France where a  
 32. young boy, upon seeing Fanon, repeatedly shouts to his mother, 'look mom,  
 33. a Negro!' Fanon describes this experience of the white gaze as epidermaliza-  
 34. tion that shattered the extension of his lived body into his projects. His skin  
 35. is brought to the foreground of his consciousness by the racist space he inhabits  
 36. and as such he is unable to live his body as fluid and transparent. He is forced  
 37. to experience his skin as seen from without. For Fanon, when he remained in  
 38. Antilles and did not venture to France, he scarcely knew he was black. He was  
 39. black according to the white gaze. He writes:

41. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborat-  
 42. ing his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an  
 43. image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of  
 44. certain uncertainty.

45. (Fanon [1952] 2008: 90)

47. Fanon reveals a process by which his bodily schema, is broken down and  
 48. collapsed, is brought down into a bodily schema that extends no further than  
 49. the floors of his body – the surface of his skin. A schema that was once dilated  
 50. into projects and tasks beyond the body is now violently brought to his skin's  
 51. surface. He must negotiate himself in response to his situation that is consti-  
 52. tuted by cultural knowingness about him, that is, the 'legends, stories, history'

and other racist fantasies. This awareness of the body as object for the other collapses the transparency of the lived body towards projects. He describes this:

Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling stripping my skin, causing a haemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body. Yet this reconsideration of myself, this thematization, was not my idea. I wanted quite simply to be a man among men. I would have liked to enter our world young and sleek, a world we could build together.

(Fanon [1952] 2008: 92)

Fanon wanted to be a man among men – he wanted open space to live his projects through. He experienced open space with no encumbrances when he was in Antilles. As a man of education and privilege, he was at ease there. He was able to live his body freely into his projects without being seen as an object. Fanon's experience of epidermalization affected his lived experience by contracting its grasp in space.

In the same way, fat people are called names, bullied and similarly *adiposalized* on the basis of our fat. The 'look ma, a negro' becomes 'fatso!' 'tub of lard!' and any other pejorative, whether intentional or the result of living in a world that rejects our size: clothing stores that do not carry a range of sizes, small seats, small washrooms, refusal of romantic and familial love, exclusion from public and fitness spaces, and so on.

My own context of being raised in a family that had incorporated anti-fat values is that I was treated as though my fat was a temporary problem. Because of this my parents struggled to do whatever they could to keep me from adiposalized encounters, or situations where my agency was denied. My mother sewed clothes that fit my large body well, she bought me shoes, purses and expensive haircuts so that I would not be associated with 'one of those' fat people to escape the character stigma of adiposalization. Clothing became a vehicle through which I tried to locate myself as an exception to fat stereotypes. I thought if I 'try hard enough' to signify that I could take very good care of my appearance I would be seen as more than *just* fat, or that I could be seen as trying to overcome my fatness. The tactics I employed played directly into the discourses of fat hatred and so I was also reinforcing what I was trying to resist.

I'm interested in possibilities for resistance for fat people when they are relegated into the pejorative category of obese. Fat can appear on the body non-pathologically if it is not associated with other factors that contribute to the weighing down of society that obesity threatens, like perhaps in the increasingly restrictive case of pregnancy. I have often been told, for example, that I 'wear it well', my weight, that is, as if it were a piece of clothing I chose to wear. Fat people often have well-meaning people tell them that they 'don't even notice' that they are fat, which, failing problems with their perceptual systems must be because they were making us exceptions to their stereotypes. Striving against association with the obesity crisis, in my case, was communicated in the cultural currency of our time – purchases and economic success. It took a lot of money for the fabric, accessories, and so on not to mention the time spent at the sewing machine or hunting down specialty stores in a small, isolated city on the



1. Canadian prairies. My experience of refusing to be made to be obese was never  
 2. a success. It was obvious to my peers that I had to make my clothes, or that my  
 3. clothes were purchased in specialty stores (they looked far too old for me).

4. My refusal was proof that our relationships to discourses in the encounter  
 5. are more complicated than cause and effect. One of the ambiguities of lived  
 6. experience – that the encounter can go any number of ways based on the  
 7. conscious choices of fat people – should shed doubt on theorists who write  
 8. about the necessary low self-worth of fat people and the necessary careless  
 9. and willful eating of fat people. Being made to be obese carries the weight of  
 10. cultural figurations but it also carries a complex and shifting relationship to the  
 11. meanings of obesity. In accepting being made to be obese in the encounter,  
 12. the price is lack of agency, and the possible phenomenology one of adiposaliza-  
 13. tion. In refusing to be made obese one can – as I did and often do – buy  
 14. into the social currencies that reinforce fatness as a failed identity. Perhaps  
 15. the most challenging response to the stigmatization of these discourses would  
 16. be to see what it would be like to occupy an obese subject position without  
 17. shame. To say, 'I am obese' in a way and an environment that conveys none  
 18. of the shame that the medical category carries within.<sup>2</sup>

19. In the book *Fat Talk* (2000) Mimi Nichter argues that one of the important  
 20. ways we learn to value bodies is whether or not they 'appear' fat. Young girls  
 21. lie about whether someone is fat not to convince them that they have less  
 22. fat on their bodies, but to assure them that we think they are of good moral  
 23. character. This assurance mirrors the assurance that neat and tailored clothing  
 24. can bring to a fat subject experiencing adiposalization. In this way, though it  
 25. reinforces social stigma, clothing can act as important security and self-care in  
 26. a social and cultural environment of hostility and dehumanization.

27. Comedic genius Paul Mooney explains that the use of relaxer in black  
 28. hair is meant to help white people relax. He says that if you hair is relaxed,  
 29. white people are relaxed. Clothing can also help us to relax in the presence of  
 30. all kinds of socially threatening others, not just fat people. Clothing signifies  
 31. expectation, manners, social deference, respect and so on. In the case of those  
 32. who are especially burdened with performing social legitimacy, clothing – as  
 33. well as hair – can take on dense social signification that tells us not just what  
 34. you wear, but who you are and who I should be in your presence.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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