

**Fat: A Fate Worse Than Death! Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory; Textual Bodies; Changing Boundaries of Literary Representation**

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**Abstract (summary)**

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My 13-year-old daughter was crying herself to sleep. "I'm so fat," she sobbed, "my stomach sticks out! I know people aren't supposed to judge you by the way you look, but they do! They always do!" I could empathize. After 20 years in the Western theatrical dance world, I had internalized and then fought against the very same sizism that plagues my daughter and millions of other American women. It was then that I picked up Ruth Thone's book, Fat, A Fate Worse Than Death. Thone's book is a painfully honest examination of her life as a woman, "old and fat, fat and old." Like my daughter, she knows how she is supposed to feel, but the reality of her lived experience is far different. As "a national leader of workshops on women and aging; self esteem; women, weight and appearance" (preface), Thone should communicate less angst; she readily agrees. She also admits an obsession with appearance, an obsession which forms the core concept of her book. Throughout her writing she swings back and forth between what she understands intellectually as a feminist and what she experiences as a woman. Appearance should not matter, but it is painful to be seen as old because you no longer color your gray hair or as fat because you have gained weight. She reminisces about her life as an alcoholic when her mother worried more about how Thone looked than about her drinking. Her husband grabbed a potato chip bag out of her hands because he was "concerned about [her] health." She decided to continue to smoke cigarettes and struggle with emphysema rather than quit smoking and risk weight gain. Thone's observations from her battle with alcoholism, her childhood traumas, and her current feelings about being old and fat are juxtaposed against inspirational quotes from such well known authors as Naomi Wolf, Audre Lorde, Susie Orbach, Deepak Chopra, and even Ann Landers. "Inner beauty is used by our culture as a consolation prize for those it finds ugly" (Schmidt 1985, 57). Though somewhat redundant, Thone's book well documents the continuing struggle women face with fatism and ageism in the United States.

The book, divided into four parts, begins with [Emily Martin]'s essay, "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause." Martin is known for her examination of both historical and contemporary medical writing and for her deconstruction of medical metaphors that continually portray a woman's physiology as problematic. She provides an example by Walter Heape, a nineteenth-century zoologist and antisuffragist, on the subject of menstruation as destruction: "The entire epithelium was torn away, `leaving behind a ragged wreck of tissue, torn glands, ruptured vessels, jagged edges of stroma, and masses of blood corpuscles.'" According to other early medical writers, menopause represented a "breakdown," a "decline," a "failure" of the female reproductive system. The breasts "wither," the ovaries become "senile" (27).

**Full Text**

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Fat: A Fate Worse Than Death! Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory; Textual Bodies: Changing Boundaries of Literary Representation.

My 13-year-old daughter was crying herself to sleep. "I'm so fat," she sobbed, "my stomach sticks out! I know people aren't supposed to judge you by the way you look, but they do! They always do!" I could empathize. After 20 years in the Western theatrical dance world, I had internalized and then fought against the very same sizism that plagues my daughter and millions of other American women. It was then that I picked up Ruth Thone's book, Fat, A Fate Worse Than Death. Thone's book is a painfully honest examination of her life as a woman, "old and fat, fat and old." Like my daughter, she knows how she is supposed to feel, but the reality of her lived experience is far different. As "a national leader of workshops on women and aging; self esteem; women, weight and appearance" (preface), Thone should communicate less angst; she readily agrees. She also admits an obsession with appearance, an obsession which forms the core concept of her book. Throughout her writing she swings back and forth between what she understands intellectually as a feminist and what she experiences as a woman. Appearance should not matter, but it is painful to be seen as old because you no longer color your gray hair or as fat because you have gained weight. She reminisces about her life as an alcoholic when her mother worried more about how Thone looked than about her drinking. Her husband grabbed a potato chip bag out of her hands because he was "concerned about [her] health." She decided to continue to smoke cigarettes and struggle with emphysema rather than quit smoking and risk weight gain. Thone's observations from her battle with alcoholism, her childhood traumas, and her current feelings about being old and fat are juxtaposed against inspirational quotes from such well known authors as Naomi Wolf, Audre Lorde, Susie Orbach, Deepak Chopra, and even Ann Landers. "Inner beauty is used by our culture as a consolation prize for those it finds ugly" (Schmidt 1985, 57). Though somewhat redundant, Thone's book well documents the continuing struggle women face with fatism and ageism in the United States.

Edited by Lori Lefkovitz, Textual Bodies is a collection of essays that examine depictions of the human body in literature. Each essay takes either a well known person, such as Sappho or Florence Nightingale, or a well known work, such as Great Expectations, and, by examining the portrayal and use of the body within the work, suggests a new reading of socio/cultural practices. Though I found some of the essays overly theoretical, most writers grounded their work in theory and then moved quickly into their topic, thereby making the book accessible to readers outside of the "Comp Lit" realm.

One of the most compelling essays was "Aristotle, Gynecology and the Body Sick with Desire" by Robert Con Davis. In this essay Davis provides historical examples of the female body as inadequate and "out of control." He explains that Aristotle understood the difference between women and men as the masculine ability to create sperm through heat. "The human body...is naturally given `form' (edios) through the presence of semen (sperma). The `concoction' of semen is the result of heat.... The very warm male body is that which is able to concoct, to cause to take shape and to discharge semen" (Aristotle 44). Because women have lower body heat and do not "concoct semen," their bodies are weak which results in, according to Hippocrates, the "wandering womb" (45). "Grievous female disorder frequently arose because the uterus was not anchored in place. It could get `displaced' and `wander' through the body's various cavities.... Severe problems required repeated vaginal insertions of powerfully sweet pessaries or suppositories to draw the uterus close, and fetid or pungent ones inserted in the mouth to move it away" (45-46).

Roberta Davidson explores the narrow margin between male and female in "Cross Dressing in Medieval Romance." She suggests that cross dressing provided men and women with certain liberties not available to them when dressed appropriately for their gender. According to traditional belief in fourteenth-century England and France, women who behaved as men had actually become men through cross dressing. Davidson relates folk tales of women who became men by "spreading their legs too far [and]...having their organs fall out, becoming male genitals" (65).

Another excellent essay used the life of Florence Nightingale to reread Victorian women's illnesses. After a career in nursing, Nightingale took to her sickbed and never fully recovered her health. In her essay, Miriam Bailin suggests both the nursing of others and the need to be nursed as offering two opportunities for middle- and upper-class women to be excused from their traditional family "duties." Bailin positions the nurse as a woman with "power over" a man. A woman's sickness "asserts the fact of self -- her claim to attention and recognition -- without incurring the guilt or risking the dangers inherent in self-promotion" (212).

Writing on the Body is a compilation of the best of the previously published body essays. Contributors include such well known writers as Emily Martin, Catherine MacKinnon, Susan Bordo, bell hooks, Sojourner Truth, Gloria Anzaldúa, Luce Irigaray, Audre Lorde, Donna Haraway, Nancy Mairs, Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and others. The book was an answer to the editors' need for a course text using the female body as the organizing principle. "Through a range of theoretical essays, we attempt to illustrate inclusive ways of thinking through female embodiment. All the essays have in common an understanding of the female body as a contested site -- a battleground for competing ideologies" (7).

The book, divided into four parts, begins with Emily Martin's essay, "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause." Martin is known for her examination of both historical and contemporary medical writing and for her deconstruction of medical metaphors that continually portray a woman's physiology as problematic. She provides an example by Walter Heape, a nineteenth-century zoologist and antisuffragist, on the subject of menstruation as destruction: "The entire epithelium was torn away, `leaving behind a ragged wreck of tissue, torn glands, ruptured vessels, jagged edges of stroma, and masses of blood corpuscles.'" According to other early medical writers, menopause represented a "breakdown," a "decline," a "failure" of the female reproductive system. The breasts "wither," the ovaries become "senile" (27).

In Part Two, "Bodies in Production," writers examine the intersection of capitalism and the commodification of the female body. Annette Kuhn's essay, "The Body and Cinema" asks in writing the same questions asked in the video "Pumping Iron II." Can a woman's body be both athletic and "feminine"? Who gets to decide? "Pumping Iron II" is the story of a competition between female bodybuilders. The front runners consist of two women, one extremely muscular and one less so, more womanly looking. Both the movie and the essay question the meaning of the athletic female body.

In Part Three, "The Body Speaks," essays attempt to reinvent speech and language. Gloria Anzaldúa, in "La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness," explains how the work of the mestiza, a woman who lives in the borderland between Hispanic and Anglo cultures, is to transcend duality, to heal "the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts" (236).

Anzaldúa writes in both Spanish and English, forcing an awareness of cultural diversity. Nancy Mairs forces an awareness of disability and diversity in her essay, "Carnal Acts." In this essay Mairs reflects on her life as a woman with a chronic, degenerative disease, Multiple Sclerosis. Although she admits to knowing the "rules of polite society...to `keep quiet'" about her condition, she continues to write, to scrutinize, to report and reflect on her life. "I speak as a crippled woman. At the same time...I redeem both `cripple' and `woman' from the shameful silences by which I have often felt surrounded" (305).

"Body on Stage" is the title of Part Four. "If `woman is a dark continent,' these essays explore newly discovered countries.... [They] trace the world of gender play -- a world in which the unruly woman erupts from the docile body" (10). Truly the "unruly woman" erupts in Mary Russo's essay, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory." Based upon her examination of carnivals from the Middle Ages, Russo brings the power of the spectacle into the contemporary feminist movement, both in writing and in film. Historically, carnival is defined in three ways: as ritual spectacle, comic verbal composition, and billingsgate (curses, oaths, profanations) (323). Russo looks to the writing of Luce Irigaray, for example, to analyze women's madness as an example of carnival in which the woman is making the invisible, visible. She reminds the reader that there is power inherent in being grotesque, a hag, a spectacle. Women must seize this power.

As a dancer, I learned the world through my body. Yet the validity, importance and significance of this physical way of knowing has seldom been recognized. To analyze the meanings of a woman's physical experience has, until recently, not been considered worthy of academic effort. But writers such as Michel Foucault and John Fiske insist that within under-analyzed topics there is power. Making the invisible visible is a highly academic endeavor. I believe that each of these books does exactly that. Finally the female body is a topic worthy of serious study, not just medical management! These texts insist on the significance of the social meanings of the construction of the female body. The authors pave the way for other writers and other works, as women increasingly analyze the intersections among the physical, the social, the academic, and the personal.

Reference

Browne, Susan E., Debra Connors and Nanci Stern. 1985. With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Woman's Anthology. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press.

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