(Re)Framing the Body: Theatrical (Re)Presentations of Fat Embodiment on Contemporary Canadian Stages

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In a 2013 posting on the Theatre is for Suckers website titled “The Tale of Two Sandras,” Canadian actress Courtney Lyons notes the lack of diversity on North American television screens with respect to race, gender, sexuality, and, as is the focus of her article, weight—or to be specific, fat embodiment. Lyons grounds her criticism with a personal anecdote that details her first audition as a professional actress. The role in question was an appearance as a guest-star on a medical drama in which Lyons would have (potentially) been cast as Sandra, a young obese woman who, unaware that she is pregnant, goes into labor in a McDonald’s bathroom. Lyons, who self-identifies in her post as having been obese for much of her life, laments the “disgusting and offensive” (Lyons 2013: par. 2) stereotypes of fatness that the character embodied. As Lyons notes of the script in question: Sandra was depicted as weak-willed, lazy, incompetent, and repulsive as she was consistently shown eating junk food, had little coherent dialogue in the scenes in which she was featured, and was presented as a character so grotesque and repulsive that the fictional doctors were reticent about touching and examining her. Like Lyons, scholars within the field of fat studies and the Health at Every Size Movement have noted that not only are fat subjects vastly underrepresented in popular culture and media, the few representations of fat subjectivity within media and culture are overwhelmingly limited to such stereotypes and assumptions as those that Lyons challenges in her article. As Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco write in the introduction to their 2001 anthology Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression:
“In a postmodern capitalist patriarchy like the United States [and, as I wish to add, Canada], fat is seen as repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obese, and above all as something to lose” (Braziel and LeBesco 2001: 2).

Lyons concludes her post by contrasting this stereotypical representation of fat embodiment to her first professional theatre role in Hume Baugh’s *Crush* in which Lyons played Sandra Sumpter. While Lyons draws parallels between the two Sandras—primarily those related to weight and socio-economic status—she notes a significant difference between the two scripts. Specifically, the notion that fat embodiment can be staged in a manner that presents the subject as a complex individual and, as I wish to argue of Baugh’s text, can include (re)presentations of fat subjectivity that move beyond such stereotypical assumptions and tired tropes. In this paper, I will be conducting a close reading of both Hume Baugh’s aforementioned play¹ and Cameryn Moore’s *Phone Whore* (a one-woman show inspired by Moore’s own experiences as a sex worker).² In my analysis, I will be utilizing the work of feminist performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider and her notion of the “explicit body” (Schneider: 1997)—a term coined by Schneider to describe the ways in which feminist body and performance artists have utilized the self-fashioned display of the material body as a means of “peel[ing] back [the] layers of signification” that surround the material body as a means of explicating

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¹Hume Baugh’s *Crush*, first produced in 2008 as part of the SummerWorks Theatre Festival before being produced in 2011 at Toronto’s Factory Theatre, focuses on a complicated love triangle between Sandra, her best friend Ronny, and their new neighbor Martin. The play was loosely inspired by the 1995 murder of Scott Amedure who was gunned down by his friend Jonathan Schmitz after revealing his secret romantic attraction to Schmitz on the *Jenny Jones Show*.

²Cameryn Moore’s *Phone Whore* first premiered in the Canadian fringe circuit with productions mounted as part of the Victoria Fringe Festival, and Montreal’s Zoofest before a broader North American and UK tour.
“the sedimented layers of signification themselves” (Schneider 1997: 2). I intend to not only explore how these productions seek to carve out a cultural location for the depiction of fat subjectivity, but also to explore how such (re)presentations explicate fat embodiment from these aforementioned highly codified and stereotypical narratives of repulsion, uncleanness, and undesirability. Finally, in doing so, I seek to explore how these productions make the highly codified, tacit social processes that inscribe the fat flesh with such assumptions of supposed cultural and biological inferiority explicit.

A (Brief) Introduction to Fatness, Fat Studies, and the Connection to Disability Studies/Theory:

As scholars within the field of fat studies (including April Herdon [2002] and Charlotte Cooper [1997; 2010]) have noted, members within both the fat and disabled communities share similar salient experiences that include (but are in no way limited to): cultural invisibility and misrepresentation in popular culture and media, discrimination on account of their extraordinary or anomalous bodies, and barriers in built environments that limit accessibility for the subject. Furthermore, as both Herdon and Cooper note in their respective articles, such shared experiences are intimately related to the prevailing clinical discourse that pathologizes extraordinary or anomalous bodies. In much the same way that the clinical model of disability suggests that the body is malleable and can be modified via clinical intervention, it is presumed that fatness is a problem to be corrected or erased entirely. As Cooper writes in her 2010 article “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field”:

3 The medical or clinical model defines disability as a biological absolute that is linked to the functions and capacities of the material body—or rather, the body’s inability to complete, control, or maintain certain processes, functions and appearances. This is in comparison to the so-called “social model” which recognizes the social, cultural, and historical values and attitudes that, according to the Union of the Physically impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) “disable physically impaired people” (as qtd. by Shakespeare 2006: 38).
“fatness is a problem that requires a solution, that is, the physical reduction of the fat body and the elimination of the potential for individuals to become fat” (Cooper 2010: 1020). Moreover, as Susan Bordo notes in her watershed text Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, this perceived inability to gain control over our own flesh and to render our bodies “docile” (to borrow from Foucault [Foucault: 1975]) in the face of such self-disciplinary tactics (like that of weight loss) underscore the perceived moral underpinnings of fatness and gesture towards this tacit relationship between fat flesh and these perceived moral failures (Bordo 1993: 191).

Such perceived transgressions (and the anxiety it provokes) are closely linked to the notion of the abject (and its neighboring figure of excess—the grotesque [Russo 1994:24]) (Lebesco and Braziel: 2001; Eli and Lavis 2014; Leadley: 2015). As philosopher Julia Kristeva argues in her germinal essay “The Powers of Horror”, the abject refers to the visceral feelings of disgust, horror, and repulsion that are experienced in our encounters with sites (typically, processes and products associated with the material body—such as blood and sweat and food and digestive waste—insofar as these transgress the borders of the skin) that threaten to “disturb identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982:2) and threaten to disrupt our boundaries between self/subject and other. Certainly, as Lesleigh J. Owen (2015) and Le’a Kent (2001) argue, fat bodies can be classified as abject. Fatness (or, more specifically, the protrusion of fat flesh) not only transgresses the presumed invisible borders that demarcate personal space (Owen 2015: 6), but greater quantities of fat and flesh are also presumed to generate and secrete a greater quantity of abject fluid (such as sweat and digestive waste) (Owen 2015: 6). Finally, as Le’a Kent notes, not only does fat flesh signify illness, sickness, and death
(Owen 2015:6), the fat body (and the supposed need to expel and reject fatness) is synechdocal of our broader, cultural “horror of the body itself” (emphasis in original) (Kent 2001: 136).

**Staging Stereotypes: Sandra Sumpters in Hume Baum’s *Crush*:**

It is my contention that Lyons’s reflections on the two Sandras is a useful case study for Canadian scholars invested in fat subjectivity as her anecdote emphasizes such contemporary cultural locations in which this relationship between fatness and citizenship manifests (for example, within the first Sandra whose fatness is associated with the disgust and grotesque). Superficially speaking, Baugh’s play engages with similar stereotypes and depictions of fat subjectivity as he evokes connotations of laziness, uncleanliness, and a lack of self-control within Sandra. For example, in the opening scene of Baugh’s play, Sandra sits in a semi-darkened trailer on a couch smoking cigarettes and drinking beer while watching *Mary Montrose*, a day time talk program whose eponymous host Sandra idolizes. In her fantasy (the first of three within the play in which Sandra embodies both herself and Mary), Sandra is a guest of the program where she is interviewed about her aspirations of fame and celebrity. Yet, the fantasy quickly turns dark when Montrose (still as Sandra) chastises Sandra/herself stating:


Montrose/Sandra’s criticisms—specifically, the connotations of laziness and poor self-control (as demonstrated by both Montrose’s emphasize on her own work ethic and her
observations regarding Sandra’s perceived lack of physical ability and supposed poor physical fitness) are not only iterated throughout the play in these fantasy sequences, but are reinforced by her best friend Ronny when he refers to Sandra’s home as a “pig-sty” (Baugh 2014: 52) and teasingly labels Sandra “Mandra Dumpster” (Baugh 2014: 30).

Yet, it is my contention that the appropriation of such stereotypes—specifically so when employed by Sandra herself within her fantasy—act as a critical cultural intervention. It is salient that our first introduction to Sumpter is framed through the lens of the fantasy of television and Hollywood (a recurring motif throughout the play). As I comprehend this dramaturgical device, the fantasy scene in which Sandra at once embodies her fat self and the idealized (clean, thin, and disciplined) body of Montrose works to make explicit (to borrow from Schneider) the tacit relationship between cultural (re)presentations of fat subjectivity and these aforementioned negative assumptions that surround the fat body.

Moreover, in moving Montrose from the televised screen to the domain of Sumpter’s fantasy (and back again), Baume emphasizes the very fantastical nature of the idealized clean and docile body that Montrose signifies. As disability studies scholars Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Lennard J. Davis note, the very notion of normal⁴ itself is a cultural construct (Davis 1995: 49). Furthermore, as demonstrated by Garland Thomson’s notion of “the normate”, a neologism coined by Garland Thomson in her canonical publication Extraordinary Body: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature which refers to this hypothetical ideal, this idealized hypothetical body, by its very nature, can never be fully obtained or realized (Garland Thomson 1997).

⁴ As Michael Rembis proffers in his article “Beyond the Binary: Rethinking the Social Model of Disabled Sexuality” the notion of normal is inextricably linked to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality (Rembis 2014: 52;55).
Finally, as Bordo, Braziel and LeBesco, and Mary Russo (2005) note, as women (and as Russo and Richardson both note, in particular, women of colour [Russo 2005: 24; Richardson 2010: 83]) are, historically speaking, “profoundly” and “ubiquitously” subjected to such controls, the “resonances” (Bordo 1993: 187) of gender and female sexuality and desire are also intimately linked to such conceptualizations of fat subjectivity (and vice versa). Although Baum’s text is largely focused on the relationship between heteronormativity, male sexuality, and homophobia, Sandra’s own fantasies (and I use this term to encompass her fantasies related to celebrity and fame explored as well as her sexual fantasies and desires) exemplify the complex intersections between fatness and normative gender and sexual scripts (as outlined by Bordo, Braziel and LeBesco and Richardson).

As Richardson notes in his respective exploration of fatness within popular North American culture in his aforementioned 2010 publication, fatness “violates [the] traditional notions of feminine iconography” (Richardson 2010: 83). As a result of this violation, fat female subjects—not to mention (re)presentations of fat, female sexuality—are not only largely absent from popular culture and media altogether (as demonstrated in Baum’s text when Ronny dismisses Sandra’s dreams at stardom on account of her size and stature [Baum 2014: 7]), but what few depictions of fat female subject that are available to viewers either totally negate fat female sexuality or perpetuate stereotypes that suggests a link between physical hunger (and its resulting excess flesh) and an insatiable sexual appetite (Richardson 2010: 83).

In Crush, Sandra simultaneously embodies these contradictory binaries of heightened sexuality and asexuality/undesirability. For example, she is referred to as a
“nympho” (Baugh 2014: 2) and yet, in a flirtatious prelude to her first sexual encounter with Martin, she gestures to the trope of fat females as asexual and undesirable stating: “[n]o one wants to kiss the fat girl” (Baugh 2014:14). It is my contention that Baugh’s text is working towards a troubling of such stereotypes while simultaneously pushing against this erasure and denial of fat, female sexuality. As I read his text, the playwright presents a far more nuanced and complex representation that includes narratives in which fat female subjects can be both sexually desiring and desired, and pursue romantic and sexual relationships.

Cameryn Moore’s *Phone Whore*

Like Baugh’s text, the core focus of Cameryn Moore’s *Phone Whore* is not necessarily fat subjectivity—as Charlotte Cooper notes in her review of the play for the *Obesity Timebomb*, *Phone Whore* is not a “fat play” (Cooper 2013: par. 3) but instead is focused on “wider philosophical themes about consent, fantasy, and sex work” (Cooper 2013: par. 4). Yet, as Cooper (as a self-identified fat viewer) states of the work: “But I am looking for fat performance and, to my eyes, [this piece is] dripping with it” (Cooper 2013: par. 3). Indeed, much like *Crush*, *Phone Whore* is among a limited number of nuanced and complex representations of fat subjectivity that includes nuanced and complex narratives of sexual pleasure and desire and desirability.

In comparison to *Crush* however, Moore’s text is considerably more sexually explicit. While the physical act of sexual intercourse is only alluded to within Baugh’s play (we only see the flirtatious foreplay before cutting to the morning after, or, as in the case of Martin and Sandra’s sexual encounter, only hear about it after-the-fact), Moore’s play allows its audience members to witness the sexual encounter from flirtation to
ejaculation in vivid detail (albeit, only through Moore’s end of the telephone). As Moore states during one of her calls as she giggles and suggestively sucks her fingers:

Maybe just get my mouth down there and just nibble and kiss all along your balls. MmmHmm. I love the way you smell down there. Mmm. And when your balls get all heavy and tight like that, I know you’re going to give me a big load later. MmmHmm. Mmm. Do you have any pre-cum yet? Yeah? ‘Cause I wanna taste it. Just put my tongue out and pick up that clear little drop. Mmm! So salty and good! Mmm. I’m gonna open my lips a little more and slide the head of your cock a little further in… wrap my lips around it and just suck gently…Mmm. My tongue is probing your pee hole. You like that, huh? Yeah?

Much like the works of feminist body artists such as Annie Sprinkle or Karen Finley that Schneider explores in her aforementioned canonical text, Moore’s text deliberately blurs the binary categorizations of art and pornography in what Schneider categorizes as “binary terror” (Schneider 1997: 19).

As Schneider posits in her text, it is such acts of binary terrorism that underpin the explicit body in performance. Through the deliberate “strategic implosion of binary distinctions” (Schneider 1997:19), such cultural distinctions (be it between art and pornography, or—as in the case of texts such as Crush and Phone Whore—fat and thin or desired and undesired) are, as I understand Schneider’s text, a means to literalize the “fraught space between subject and object that demarcates one body from another” (Schneider 1997: 19). As she writes:

Binary terrorism assaults the generalizations of such symbolic constructs by privileging the cacophony inherent in unruly particulars. Social symbolism
organizes bodies by markings, relegating the male body, female body, colored body, white body, and so on, and the weight of historical social significances ascribed to bodily markings has literal impact upon particular bodies bearing those marks. Making any body explicit as socially marked and foregrounding the historical, political, cultural, and economic issues involved in its marking, is a strategy at the base of many contemporary feminist explicit body works. Manipulating the body itself as mise en scene, such artists make their own bodies explicit as the stage, canvas, or screen across which social agendas of privilege and disprivilege have been manipulated (Schneider 1997: 20).

As I read Moore’s explicit self-fashioned display, much like Baugh’s text and his representation of Sandra as a sexually desirable and desiring figure, Moore carves out space within the contemporary cultural landscape for depictions of fat female subjectivity that eschew the typical assumptions that fat bodies are not to be desired (or, that such desire is inherently pathological). Furthermore, as demonstrated in the passage above (specifically, the pleasure enacted in the fantasy of Moore ingesting the semen), Moore’s text not only re-imagines fat sexuality and desire, but also recasts the abject as a site of pleasure.

Returning to the intimate link between the fat body and the abject (specifically, Le’a Kent’s suggestion that fatness has become associated with our collective body horror) Moore’s own act of binary terrorism (specifically, the ways in which her play collapses the divisions between art and porn and abject and pleasure), when framed through the self-fashioned display of her own fat body and self-identified fatness, act as a salient cultural intervention. Indeed, Moore’s (and Baugh’s) respective explicit
performances gesture towards the disruptive and productive potential of fat bodies on contemporary stages. Specifically, the libratory and disruptive potential of such explicit (re)presentations in their literalization of the tacit processes which inscribe the fat body as culturally, socially, and biologically inferior, via Moore’s and Baugh’s destabilization of such rigid categorizations of pleasure and the abject, the sexual and asexual, or acceptable and unacceptable desire.

Works Cited


Richardson, Niall (2010), *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture*, Farnham; Burlington, VT, Ashgate.


