

**GROSS MEN: FAT MASCULINITIES AND THE VIOLENCE OF
EMBODIMENT**

GROSS MEN:
FAT MASCULINITIES AND THE VIOLENCE OF EMBODIMENT

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Abstract

We have seen a veritable explosion of commentaries, particularly in the last three years, on the distension of the American body. What is at stake and why such commentaries must so venomously and desperately assail the fat body are theoretical questions which remain obstinately unclear. And what is perhaps even more opaque are the psychological consequences this assailment holds for fat people. I take up, in this project, the task of thinking the fat body (and more specifically the fat male body) using Michel Foucault's theories of subjection as they have been respecified by Judith Butler. I cast here a consideration of where the fat male body tends to get located socially, how it tends to get identified and represented culturally, and what it means to inhabit a body determined to be fat and identified as "masculine."

This project asks how being fat distorts what it is to be male. Sander Gilman, who has emerged as the first to ask this question in a systematic way, tells us that fatness signals a whole array of distortions for masculinity. I was most intrigued, as I started to build this project, by what psychic or affective impacts fat might have on the performance of masculinity. What I found was that the principal problem in interarticulating fat and masculinity for individual fat men, in public and in private, was complying with the demand that one reticently suppress any signs of distress over failing to comply with a model of ideal hardness.

I argue that the narrative of a contemporary "crisis of masculinity" might be one whose themes, in spite of their patent political expedience (the male establishment's

imperative to recover by means of crisis a traditional model of “hardness” (see Robert Bly’s *Iron John*) and its attendant privileges), are appropriable for a politics of radical “re-figuration” which returns fire at a culture that compulsively denigrates the fat body as “gross” and destructively induces men to stifle all indications that they have been scarred by the mandate of hegemonic masculinity.

This dissertation struggles to isolate the site of the fat male body (indeed in most circumstances an isolated and eschewed body) in order to observe and examine certain principles of present subjection; to examine, more precisely, the principle of what Foucault terms “the asymptotic movement,” a disciplinary force which works on and in subjects, supplying the occasion and condition for subjecthood, by means of introducing to and into that subject a norm (in this particular case an aesthetical/morphological norm) which is barely approximable: a norm which remains forever fugitive.

If, as I contend, the current “obesity crisis” is not actually concerned with health, but with aesthetic standards, and if physical beauty is not something transcendental, not a quality somehow intrinsic to an object (what Aquinas called *quidditas*), but instead a privileged “material” morphology in fact produced and determined discursively, deployed according to a *disciplinary* principle of unresolvable imperfection, what is the purpose of so urgently and prolifically affirming, as we have been in the West, that the haunting figure of the fat body is vilifiable because unhealthy? That is to say, if Americans so persistently label themselves the fattest nation in the world not precisely because a powerful uneasiness about public well-being incites them to do so, but because of a

particular consternation regarding declining standards of personal discipline, waning principles of self-surveillance—if this is the case, then why do we continue to imagine that the “obesity epidemic” is about health? I insist that the urgency with which the corpulent body is pathologized is informed by the need to recover interpellative influence over interstitial bodies marked by culture as recklessly underdisciplined according to unachievable standards of physical beauty (*hardness* in men): bodies which, as I say in my opening, are so profoundly difficult to cohere and to correct.

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PART ONE

1A. Containing Corpulent Masculinities

[G]iven that normative heterosexuality is clearly not the only regulatory regime operative in the production of bodily contours or setting the limits to bodily intelligibility, it makes sense to ask what other regimes of regulatory production contour the materiality of bodies.

-Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (17)

In a 1628 tract, *Via recta ad vitam longam*, Tobias Venner uses the term “gross” to convey his repulsed quantification of “full bodies” which, in Venner’s words, “abound with many crude and superfluous humors” (Venner 196). Venner’s warning in this document against what Joyce L. Huff terms the “horror” of corpulence for men—the spectral place of fatness as an image of the “*revolting*,”¹ the grotesque and unruly body; a body so difficult to contain, to cohere and to correct—registers in similar ways in many analogous dietetic texts after the seventeenth-century. These texts constitute a discursive field, an acutely motile representational praxis for talking about the care and character of the fat body, *the materiality of which* is contoured as “fat” in reference to, and in excess of regulatory ideals of thinness and muscularity. To our surprise, as we write and rewrite

¹ Kathleen LeBesco explains, at the outset of her recent *Revolting Bodies?*, that “if we think about ‘revolting’ in a different way, we can recognize fat as neither simply an aesthetic state nor a medical condition, but a *political* situation” (LeBesco 1). LeBesco’s move here is crucial, as it with succinct efficiency offers us the political subversion immanent in the representation of those bodies perceived to be “unsightly” and treated as requiring “containment”—meaning, in this case, being kept safely unseen. That said, we have to be careful not just to assume the significance of this clever turn. LeBesco’s theoretical supplementation of the meaning of “revolting” must be undertaken and taken up in ways that recognize that regardless how strenuously we affirm the politicality of expressing dis-taste for a kind of body, the vilification of fat will continue to resist renegotiation because it is, particularly in the context of something called an “obesity epidemic,” a response authorized by medical treatments of the epidemic, and by means of seemingly non-negotiable aesthetic standards purveyed in popular media.

the genealogies of contemporary fatphobia, *the intelligible limits* of this body emerge as gendered persistently and expressly, until the late nineteenth century, as *male*. Hillel Schwarz, who Sander Gilman calls the “most perspicacious critic of the history of fat” (Gilman 4), informs us that, indeed, until very recently in the history of Western culture, the “archetypal public dieters were more often male... despite that stoutness so praiseworthy in Victorian rhetoric about men” (Schwarz 17). There are, throughout the history of containing, of trying to figure and regulate the fat frame, discourses such as these which run athwart one another; and yet we find that, surprisingly, even *unaccountably*, given modern fatphobia’s tendency to take aim primarily at *women* as “archetypal” candidates for this kind of body correction, the gender of the addressee has most often been male.

But how can “fat,” in its contouring and containment, be said to have a *gender*? Is its discursive terrain inherently and inevitably en-gendered? Perhaps these questions seem too obvious. If we agree that our ways of speaking about fat are inherently engendered—in spite of that tendency in dominant North American discursive constructions to cache the genderedness of fat in an avowedly demographic concern with the health of a population—it will be necessary to restructure our understanding of “unsightly” mass to accommodate this insight. Medical accounts of the fundamental, “irrefutable” pathology of corpulence will in particular have to, in a thoroughgoing way, incorporate this knowledge into their representational praxis, their containments of corpulence. Indeed,

Gilman shrewdly and subversively asks if there is a history of medicalizing the fat body in a manner gendered *specifically* as male. What we grasp, even before asking this question, is that fat is *only* ever articulable in discourse through gender, that “size” is, to recall Butler’s helpful terminology, very much a “*highly gendered* regulatory schema [emphasis added]” (Butler xi). The phobic appraisal of fat in North America—though, in particular, within the U.S.—takes on a persistently gendered address: we hear figures speak at once jocularly and pejoratively in American media, with an unspoken licence for insensitive reference, about “fat dudes,” and “fat chicks.”² It is as impractical for us to speak of the fat body as non-gendered as it is profoundly perilous to speak of the *racialized* body as such. “Extraneous mass,” then, does and must have a gender; and fat, we will observe, assumes radically different meanings for the body depending on this (per)formative interarticulation of gender identification and size. One is assigned characteristics of ideational capacity, emotional temperament, etc., according to the constitutive convergence of such tacit normative criteria. We find that, for example, fatness is an image of masculine embodiment persistently antithetical to *scientific* ideation in early modern and modern philosophy. Stevin Shapin’s eye-opening research into what he calls the “dietetics” of scientific history makes clear that the “incarnation” of science, the

² LeBesco and Braziel: “Racial and ethnic jokes are less frequently punctuated by laughter. Stories that denigrate women and physically challenged people are not well received. Still, there is something about fat that escapes this change. People openly, disparagingly refer to themselves and others as fat” (LeBesco & Braziel 2).

contouring of the scientific male body, excludes corpulence as revolting, gross, as essentially unintelligible (Shapin 21). Shapin explains that science, in startling ways, authorizes only a phallogocentric economy of bodies contoured according to the ascetic aesthetic of the gaunt intellectual, the exteriorization and incarnation of a certain Kantian “hygiene in thinking” (Clark 207). Male corpulence, in a specifically American context, strikes me as being, in this way, a particularly useful site at which to begin to account for the operations of embodying temperament and ideational capacity according to the contours of the gendered body.

Sick and Tired of Being Fat: One Man’s Struggle To Be O.K., Eliot Alexander’s short memoir of his precarious engendering, his embodiment as a fat man, is a text which, with its limited release in 1991 as a sort of treatise against food addiction, enters into this overdetermined yet underaddressed discourse on gross men in a distinctive manner. Alexander’s own warning against the horrors of male corpulence, which I read as a narrative of *injurious subjection*,³ raises some crucial questions regarding the transgressively superfluous flesh of the fat man in the West, as represented seminally by Venner. At a certain point in his struggle to be “normal” or “O.K.” Alexander imagines getting a portrait made of how his body would look if it were “appropriately” shaped: that is, if it were taut and slimmer. We see this sort of projection, this fantasy of citational

³ Butler: “If one comes into discursive life through being called or hailed in injurious terms, how might one occupy the interpellation by which one is already occupied to direct the possibilities of resignification against the aims of violation?”

alignment with ideals of male body image, also in George “Fatty” Bowling, the witty protagonist of George Orwell’s *Coming Up For Air* (1939), who regards his fat in a dissimulated, even disavowing way in order to psychically excise, as it were, the part of his masculinity felt as illicitly or unintelligibly un-masculine; the part of his masculinity encoded, it would seem, as feminine: his “overly” and overtly soft exterior. We see it also in Kingsley Amis’s *One Fat Englishman* (1963), which describes a man’s anxious attempts at hiding his belly in deference, at least putatively (let us not forget Eve Sedgwick’s theorization of the homosocial circuit of desire in English literature), to *the female gaze*. This figure’s struggle—his, in the words of Richard Klein, “perpetual source of preoccupation and self-regard” (Klein xv)—is to disguise, to dissociate the traces of his transgressive *disregard* of the imperative for a man to “toughen up:” the soft contours and extraneous mass of his not-quite-male, borderline abjectionable body. Susan Bordo notes that, for Helène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Western philosophy has historically been predicated on the kind of opposition operative here: between a thing “privileged and identified with ‘self,’” and a thing “disdained and designated as ‘other’” (Bordo 622). The fat subject is made to imagine a division between the disdained, illicit excess of flesh—which the constitutive force of the performative in-forms us should be designated

“other”—and the *self*,⁴ an illusory and ever elusive identity supposed as latent in the fat subject, and produced through relations of power modelled in the interest of sustaining the body in a position of manageable docility. The terms and tacit normative criteria of the subject’s injurious subjection, his *punishment*, are reiteratively, one might even say—given that the issue at hand here is, specifically, staging the self-regarding/surveilling preoccupation of an “exercise regimen”—*ritually* interiorized.

There are multiple ways to articulate the constitutive force of injurious subjection, or the “violation,” as Judith Butler puts it, which contours and contains the body. The engendering violence of various normative criteria may be said to “occupy” and be “occupied by” the body—this is Butler’s chosen vocabulary for embodiment (Butler 123). This violence may be said also to inhabit and be *inhabited by* the body, in Foucault’s words. I tend towards the terms “inflect” and “infect” to describe the violating cultural project of containing and correcting, contouring and pathologizing fat bodies, as these verbs are particularly appropriate to the specific type of *unchosen interpellation* to and by which the fat body, divided against itself, is subjected. The consequence of this interpellation, where the body is split, as in traditional immunology, into a healthy “self”

⁴ One might even say “soul” in place of “self” here in explicit reference to Michel Foucault’s history of the present panopticon. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* figures the soul, discrete from any necessarily theological association, as the core imagined/produced at the centre of the lived body, the “correlative” aggregate of bio-power’s methods of surveillant discipline and interpellative correction: the thing “born,” in Foucault’s words, “out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint” (Foucault 29).

and an unhealthy “nonself,” is the scene of the fat subject grabbing hold of his peccant superfluity, trying to pull it from the body, pleading for it to disappear.

Alexander’s small book purports to be (or is at least presented in its marketing as) a sort of scientific tract along the lines of Venner’s, or William Banting’s influential nineteenth-century pamphlet on diet which so vexes and quickens Huff’s work. But, like Banting’s didactic tale of self-mastery, Alexander’s recounting of the “*Struggle To Be O.K.*” takes on a distinct narrative character—the author imagines, in certain ways too conveniently, a beginning, middle and, if only tentative, an end to his negotiation with normativity. The “struggle” is an explicitly disciplinary one which the book, if in occasionally obfuscatory ways, suggests *irrupts* upon the life of the abjectionably “unattractive.” It is a book, Alexander’s, which one reads as a more or less meticulous diary of the anxious endeavour to mitigate the shame of self-surveillance. This concept, “self-surveillance,” is pivotal in what is perhaps the first major work of cultural corpulence theory, Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (1993). The term is derived from Foucault’s examination of the mechanics of subjection under bio-power, a technology of social control originating in the seventeenth-century. Foucault explains that:

If you are too violent [in governing], you risk provoking revolts.... In contrast to that you have the system of surveillance, which on the contrary involves very little expense. There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself (Foucault 155).

In the case of men like Alexander who are subjected to what I call the intra-foreclosing gaze of hegemonic masculinity (an optic which, in a certain sense, is predicated on failing certain ancillary iterations of its self), the other, fat, is felt to be the entity which envelops the soul of a “real man” imagined to be beneath that fat.⁵ The burden imposed on the fat body is the excising of this excess, the liberation of the soul from the other which “encases” or abjectionably delimits it, and the coinciding achievement of citational compliance with a version of the male body as normal—that is, as “hard.” Whether “playful” or pejorative (can the two really be said to be mutually exclusive?), the appraising address which materializes a male body as “fat” puts the subject of the gaze, the subject of discourse in the awkward and, it will be shown, *structurally infeasible* position of achieving the kind of compliance or congruence with *compulsory mesomorphism* required of him—the inducement to align the body with impossible ideals of rigidity, invulnerability, even, according to Michael Kaufman, of “*omnipotence*” (Kaufman 148).

In making himself a subject of this discourse, in making himself, as it were, a subject of the injunction to disclose unresolvable physical incongruence, body

⁵ Provocatively, Stephen Whitehead writes that, while accepting “that for many feminists the authoritative gaze is male... it is also important to recognize that male bodies are not outside of the gaze, but, indeed, also subject to multiple gazes, including that of the female” (Whitehead 195). It is in the interest of modelling a method of accounting for male subjection that Robert Connell devises the notion of a “hegemonic masculinity,” a “project” devoted in part to the production of forceful, “hard” male bodies in compliance with the law, in relation to which the male subject is afforded licit subjecthood or, conversely, ascribed the mark of unintelligibility (Connell 79).

noncompliance, Alexander ensures that self-surveillance will be synonymous with a docilizing self-foreclosure. The man addressed as fat can, in most “dominant discursive frames” (Braziel & LeBesco 13)—that is, within or in reference to (North) American *hegemonic masculinity*—aspire only to perform a distorted or flawed version of masculine embodiment (though, as we will see in the proceeding sections of this introduction, there is a way in which all masculine subjectivities *must* be sustained by self-surveillance as flawed, failed). In the words of Sander Gilman, the “fat boy marks an anomalous state,” one that, Gilman adds, “rereads the body of the male in contradictory ways” (Gilman 33). How does the anomalous body learn to “carry,” to accommodate and account for fat within an agonistically regimented system of producing “regular” male bodies—a bio-regime which operates by means of compulsive and compulsory *foreclosure*, where we learn that “being a man” involves failing and being failed by the gaze of other masculinities in the context of what we will call, again remembering Eve Sedgwick, a homosocial *hierarchy*? During the ongoing project of embodiment, what do men learn about the meaning(s) of the size of their bodies? What kind or quality of a man is one whose body is dilated and soft, rather than efficient and “hard”? Is he “anomalous,” in Gilman’s LeBesco-like sense of the word (see footnote above)—does he really “reread” and rearticulate normative containments of the male body—or is he, in fact, mostly “normal” and innocuous?

The matter of “containing” has, of course, many histories. “Containment” in a contemporary filmic/televisual context, for Jerry Mosher, “pretend[s] to protect fat people from the possibility of degradation or exploitation” by ensuring that representation of, in particular, fat erotica is rigidly regulated (Mosher 171); that is, ensuring that representations of the transgressive body (particularly in scenes of sexual exchange) are all but withheld entirely. It is explicitly a coercion and a suppression, a punishment for the body’s anomalousness, or “anomaly” *vis-à-vis* a regulatory ideal which, while it alleges, as LeBesco tells us, to be “simply” aesthetic (LeBesco 1)—to designate, in other words, “simply” those bodies which are “empirically” or “irrefutably unattractive”—is always and already political.⁶ Containment is also, at the same time, the subjective process or project by which the “one,” the self initially *takes place*, and according to which it is deemed endlessly in need of corrective discipline. LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel—editors of *Bodies Out Of Bounds*, the first and only anthology of theory dealing directly with corpulence—ask us in their introduction how we might “begin to resist and deconstruct the discourses that place the ‘corpulent body’ under erasure, even as they demarcate its discursive terrain” (LeBesco & Braziel 1). Hegemonic *containments* of the fat body are operative, in other words, in the production of gendered bodily contours in

⁶ Cornell West’s “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” is an incendiary precedent for the critique of coercive “containment” deployed in terms which, being outwardly “aesthetical,” mark a more pernicious hegemonic mandate to at once deface and efface certain kinds of bodies. To, in other words, *foreclose* them.

the interest of issuing a sentence to disappear: their purpose being the relegation of these “revolting bodies” to the cultural and social periphery—to *make the unsightly unseen*.

There are, of course, numerous kinds of containments, numerous discourses of fat with their own characteristic constraints. I assume, for this thesis, the curious constraints of critical theory, and more specifically those at work in theories of subjection, to express an understanding of the cultural meanings of the fat male body. In so doing I find that rather than, let’s say, simply taking an inventory of fat masculinity’s frequently diametrically opposed meanings, the real struggle of the *critical theoretical* containment of fat is preserving that object of inquiry’s irreducible polyvalence: its remarkable inconsistency, its tendency to swell and recede, to shift and collapse. “[N]otions of ‘fat’ and ‘men,’” Gilman tells us, “constantly define and redefine themselves in the West” (Gilman ix). The awkward way in which “containment strategies”⁷ (including, and especially the containment strategies of theory) are forced to engage with the continually shifting boundaries of the fat male form suggests that possibilities for “the self-representation of fat men”—possibilities, in other words, for the high stakes enterprise of *re-figuration*—exist.

⁷ To clarify, I take this polyvalent term, “containment,” from Mosher’s “Setting Free the Bears,” an article which will figure prominently in Part Two, in my own negotiation of the position of gay “bear” bodies. Mosher describes, in particular, the “containment strategies” of televisual representations of fat bodies and the ways in which unanticipatable modes of audience consumption and reception can subvert these strategies.

I will argue throughout this project that “being fat” almost invariably *agitates* and *alters* what it means to be male. In Gilman’s neat description, fatness always “distorts” the male body (Gilman 9). That said, the discursive distortions which attend the male body’s distension are crucially erratic—they are, in many important ways, unpredictable. (This instability is particularly pronounced when we consider what LeBesco and Braziel call “minority discourses” of corpulence (LeBesco & Braziel 14).) The operative aim of hegemonic masculinity—of producing compliant, congruent and, paradoxically, innocuously “powerful” male bodies—requires the force of continuous reiteration to effect a fictive uniformity of subjectivities we have historically called a “patriarchy.” But this *disavowal* of plurality always, remembering Butler, signifies in excess of the parameters of its intended project; by which I mean that there is, inevitably, in the act of constraint or containment, the encouragement or inducement of discourses which cite the hegemonic mandate for uniformity in *anomalous* ways. Indeed, Robert Connell’s pivotal subversive pluralization of “masculinities” within theoretical discourses on male performance is a kind of critical anomaly enabled precisely by the dominant discursive *disavowal* of plurality.

I see two major tasks for the project of negotiating and of situating fat male embodiment. It is important to note that Gilman’s recent book, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book*, from which I appropriate the several capacious quotations above, is the only extant large-scale critical study of fat male bodies. And it is quite the antithesis of peremptory. My

study is to be arranged as an augmentative dialogue with Gilman's unique text because, as Gilman indicates even in his book's subtle subtitle, the account of the cultural phenomenon he presents is explicitly abridged and heuristically instigational in nature.

My project becomes, given the necessarily embryonic character of Gilman's, the building of a dialectical extension of specifically those areas that Gilman has found he must treat incompletely, indirectly, under-theoretically, or not at all. In my account, Gilman's treatment is too lean (pardon the pun) precisely and principally in its inadequate incorporation of *theories of subjection*, particularly within a post-Connell discourse on hegemonic masculinity where it is clear that not only does there exist a plurality of "masculinities," but that there is a discernable, and discernibly mutable *hierarchy* of male bodies, a hierarchy predicated on the violence of sustained injurious subjection. Gilman's book, while revelatory and remarkable in its historicism and often incisive commentary, does not do, in a trenchant enough manner, the thing that an examination of corpulent masculinity needs to do: position the fat male body in such a way that we potentiate a demystifying rearticulation of "*hardness*," the persistently pervasive regulatory ideal of maleness. This thesis will attempt to gain, to cite Tony Jefferson's primary directive for men's studies, "a firmer grasp" and a strategic point of leverage on "the meaning of hardness" (Jefferson 80) by seeing what happens to the meaning of the male body when it softens; that is, when it becomes the other of/in hegemonic masculinity. I will bring into focus the force of this "ec-centricizing" here by speculating briefly, and in more depth

later, on the life and trajectory of a single public masculinity, the late Marlon Brando, who was, as one biographer puts it, “nothing but body” (Grobel 3). Of course, what Lawrence Grobel means here is that Brando was “all body” in the sense that he was the embodiment of *an ideal body*, that his was an exemplary male body. But Brando’s body became that of the abject: a figure of deformation who, while still the “same man,” was not—his connection of exemplarity with hegemonic masculinity was, particularly in 1990s discourses of celebrity, severed.⁸

In addition to the issue of modelling an understanding of “hardness” through the investigation of its other, softness, we must also assume the important task of, using Gilman’s text as the occasion and condition, thinking the place of fat men within what has become, as Judith Kegan Gardiner states, “the dominant paradigm” of masculinity studies: the negotiation of “alternative” or anomalous (nonhegemonic) masculinities within an “intramale” (remembering Harry Brod’s term for a self-reflexive gender matrix (Brod 89)) or homosocial hierarchy. Why, in this discursive *explosion* on the issue of male subjects othered within hegemonic masculinity has there been virtually no mention of fat men? Is it that postmodern fat masculinity is simply not subversive or “alternative” enough to be spoken as qualifiably vulnerable to foreclosure? Are fat men not described

⁸ Interestingly, though, the body of the “squandered” public masculinity endures ridicule and othering, but coextensively the experience of a certain exhaustive fetishization. The point isn’t just to consume the failing public male, but to exhaust what is left of his waning “star power,” to help him to go supernova, so to speak. He is fetishized for his self-squandering, and the audience ogles at his distension, his emasculation. (That is, until his squandered body dies, and we mourn the prior undeformed, celebratable body—the “exemplar,” in Connell’s words.)

as counter- or nonhegemonic because fat men are (at least approximately and occasionally) hegemonically compliant or complicit? Is the absence of fat masculinity in scholars' indexes of male alterities explicable because fat male performance is popularly understood to be a basically "sustainable" or stable gender performance?

I submit the assertion of fat masculinity's anomaly, in the context of a gender regime which privileges a certain kind of performative *animality*, as a crucial condition for beginning to think the ways in which this subjectivity is "tyrannized," in Bordo's terms, by the normativizing criterion, the "mesomorphic imperative" of hegemonic masculinity. Bordo posits that "within a Foucauldian/feminist framework... it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy" as "most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control—and that they frequently feel tyrannized by" (Bordo 28). It is necessary to consider the ways in which men are interpellated into a discourse that appears reliably valorizing, privileging, and subjectivating—but to look though, again, for the interstices of and fissures in this phantasmatic and profoundly *unreliable* "power," and to observe the complicated operations of power *on* the male body, rather than *in* or *manifested by* the male body. This project, like Gilman's, *insists* that we begin to discuss fat as a "man's issue"—or, more specifically, that the vilifiably soft body of the "overweight" man be spoken as a complicatedly, and as an always inconsistently constituted

other of/within hegemonic masculinity, one which is “revolting,” in LeBesco’s bifold sense, according to and against this matrix of potential male embodiment.

More specifically, that it ought to be spoken of in ways that attend to the revolting body’s potential as a form of anomalous embodiment to signify in a manner that mirrors disruptively the *contradictions and instabilities* of hegemonic masculinity. Regarding fatness as anomalously male—given the appropriate methodology, which I take to be Butlerian—provides the opportunity to mine and undermine, investigate and subvert the violating and violent operations of male embodiment. Again and again, during the course of this introduction and this project’s successive sections, it will be imperative to affirm, in spite of the critical hazards of doing so, the anomaly or “alternativity” of male fatness vis-a-vis the *animality* of a pan-injurious hegemonic mandate. This affirmation will be performed in the service of interrogating precisely those narratives about our selves sedimented and naturalized by this regime of regulatory production: that the project of becoming “a man” is self-determined; that its *injuries* are endurable, and that, moreover, these violations and privations are *autonomously* endured; that the inevitable foreclosure of one’s body by a hegemonic matrix of licit male bodies is itself a thing easily brooked, belied—that it carries no scars, no psychic impacts.⁹ We will regard the fat male body as anomalous, as an “ec-centric” body (in Ed Cohen’s own interesting use of Teresa de

⁹ Jefferson’s notion of “splitting/projection,” which I will explain and engage with further below, suggests to us that the consequences of male embodiment are more severe, literally more violent—in ways where the causes and conditions are obscured—than we might think.

Laurentis's phrase (Cohen 85; de Laurentis 115)), in order to recuperate it as such within the context of a matrix of masculine subjectivities induced to believe that the violence of embodiment is natural and normal, that to dismiss and dissimulate the experience of having one's body foreclosed as incongruent (as all bodies must be) with regulatory ideals of morphology and performance is a facile move for the individual male subject to make. The suppression of the violence of an embodiment which inevitably entails foreclosure and privation is not so neatly executed. That brittle fiction that a man is "O.K." with his uncorrected, and uncorrectable body is one which contains curious and complicated implications for the social performance of masculinity. We must, it would seem, speak of the *fat* male body as anomalous and conceivably abjectionable precisely in order to dis-inoculate it, to, yes, *make it harmful*, even *infectious*—that is, harmful and infectious in the sense of a kind of gender performance which carries the capacity to contaminate "dominant discursive frames" for figuring the licit body. This is something of a unique take on what Butler calls *the politicization of abjection*, as the thing politicized must first be re-established, recuperated as abject before the crucial move of politicization may be performed.

There seems to be something persistently *revolting* about corpulence even as a subject of inquiry within critical and theoretical discourses of the transgressive. This seems particularly true when the issue of *male* corpulence is at hand. It seems to be a topic scholars are only beginning to model the tactics of interrogation for within the

context of a contemporary “obesity epidemic,” where, as Gilman tells us, the designation “fat” is taken to be “natural, given” (Gilman x), and the debate on the meanings of mass is thence confined to the binaristic question of whether fat is something to lose, or something to gain. I will engage in the following section with this key issue of fat as epidemic, with fat as indeed *the* principal health concern in North America: surpassing and subsuming, according to Gilman—and this is both vexing and incredible—popular cultural engagement with AIDS for the twenty-first-century.

1B. Critical Mass

Is the discourse in and through which that concession occurs—and, yes, that concession invariably does occur—not itself formative of the very phenomenon that it concedes?

-Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (10)

We in Canada and the United States are in the midst of a crisis. In fact, we are in the curious position of standing virtually at the moment of deployment, at the inauguration, as it were, of the phenomenon of a particular kind of crisis. An “obesity epidemic,” we are told, threatens the health of our bodies and the strength of our national economies. Not only that, but the situation will reportedly only become more dire unless, in the words of American pediatrician Dr. Stephen Ponder, we “get proactive” and declare war against this developing pathology. Ponder wonders in “Fat Kid in Class No More,” Geraldine Sealey’s “exposé” article for ABC on the horrible possibility of relaxed standards of body morphology, “what will be normal in 20 years if something doesn’t

change” (quoted in Sealey online). Both *Time* magazine and *National Geographic* have, in the last month, produced cover articles which herald the menacing spectre of this new epidemic and convey a latent consternation over the safety of certain morphological norms. The publication of related articles is becoming more and more frequent. We read in a recent Reuters Health article on a prototype anti-obesity technology that “innumerable studies” have outlined the pernicious health consequences of obesity and anxiously forecast the rapidity with which the problem swells. We can be quite sure that many more studies will follow.

Philip James, the head of the International Obesity Task Force, observes that this “pandemic of obesity is remarkably recent. It pervades the whole world and it is escalating at an alarming rate.... there is obesity in practically every country we've been to and assessed” (quoted in Gilman 32). A global outbreak of fat has occurred seemingly without warning and with “no good reason,” in LeBesco's words, “other than a lack of control” (LeBesco 29). Can the problem be simply, as a Malthusian might suggest (and as Cathy Newman argues), symptomatic of affluence, manifesting itself in the ideology of conspicuous consumption? If it is, are we to account for the reported spike in obesity within the developing world by citing, as Lisa Richwine does, the “exportation” of conspicuous consumption (Richwine online)? It would seem to be the apparent lack of any discernable cause for this “obscenity of a whole culture,” in the words of Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 28), the difficulty of ascribing *responsibility* for this global

distension, (and the parallel problem of not knowing how to administer discipline for this “lack of control”) that so terrifies those that purchase and read these issues of *Time* and *National Geographic*, as well as *Life*, the *New York Times* and other publications—all of which have run similar feature articles. If *National Geographic* cannot resolve this question, “Why Are Americans So Fat?”, and if we cannot definitively identify and isolate the major causes, there emerges no effective disciplinary remedy. But it is important, *imperative* for this study, to point out that while we witness the astounding proliferation of studies which attempt to uncover the reasons behind a culture's inexplicable and exasperating obesity, we witness also the in many ways troublesome formation of a representational praxis which, rather than merely figuring the relationship between obesity and illness as recurrently correlative, imbricates the two and consequently supplies the discursive conditions for the fat subject to imagine his or her body as split between a thing identified as self and one identified as other.¹⁰

Before we engage the crucial question of what the psychic effects of this careless medicalizing imbrication are, let us first point out the more frustrating symptom of the proliferation of pathologizing reports on the “obesity epidemic.” Without the inconvenient interference of any significant dialectical disruption, without any real critical

¹⁰ Gilman cites two remarkable reinforcements of this imbrication—he writes that “[o]ne early twentieth-century diet book states simply, ‘A fat man is an unhealthy man,’” and notes, as well, that “[t]he reality seems to be that if you see yourself as fat, as stated in a recent study by Kenneth F. Ferraro and Yan Yu, you will also see yourself as ill.” (Gilman 27)

intervention at the level of compiling and disseminating research results, the accumulation of these medical reports—a kind of critical mass of expert knowledge on the horror of an obesity epidemic—is forming, one might even say *inventing* a state of emergency that the public and the State are being induced to address. Fat, since the mid 1990s, has been made “irrefutably” pandemical by the aggregation of these reports. The imbrication of obesity and certain kinds of medical affliction is, by the sheer weight of these “innumerable studies,” rendered not just impossible to refute, but impossible to even *negotiate*. The pertinent question is this: is it the job of the corpulence theorist to obstinately *oppose* this almost entirely unchecked discursive aggregation? Is it our task to model a space in which radical re-figuration, a consequentially disobedient “re-framing” of the fat body can take place? Because, after all, isn't obesity—in spite of the often reprehensibly insensitive, expediently market-driven manner of its deployment—not a “myth,” as it is according to Paul Campos, but a *real problem*? Even if it was obvious to us how to intervene and disrupt discourses which figure fat as this kind of menacing illness, should we want to? If so, to what end?

Figuring out how and in whose interests the discursive “obesiting” of the heavy body is achieved, how fat people are *disabled*, is the necessary first step towards devising methods of negotiating a set of representational protocols which enable rather than patheticize and debilitate fat men and women. It is also, significantly, the first step towards enabling *any* negotiative rearticulation, of beginning to model methods for

making use of the anomaly of fat in a counterhegemonic politics which targets the violence and privation of embodiment. If we take what articles in medical journals and popular magazines are telling us about the pathological character of extraneous mass at face value, it will be impossible to investigate and challenge the political and economic expediencies of deploying fat as crisis.

This “remarkably recent” crisis finds its contemporary discursive origins in 1994, with two major events in the American history of flab. The first was the scientific discovery of the “obesity gene.” The fact that this reputed genetic root of obesity was actually not a human gene but that of a *mouse*, and that, it turns out, the gene accounts for merely “a fraction of severe obesity even among mice,” were pieces of information regarded officially as moot, and hence virtually unreported (Kent 132). Consent to the eschewal of fat as abjectionable and the disciplining of fat bodies as unhealthy is manufactured by the recurrent citing of these sorts of usually suspect findings. LeBesco compares the current medical containment strategies for corpulence to “public health approaches of the late 1800s,” calling it “science at its worst” and decrying that “a human condition (fatness)” could be “reduced to the workings of a pathogenic causal agent that can be obliterated with the help of chemical compounds” (LeBesco 33) It is the nature of the way in which extraneous mass is represented to the fat person that is in need of aggressive interrogation—the disdain with which it is treated, a disdain which, as I say, divides the “afflicted” body against itself.

The second critical event in the recent American history of flab¹¹ was the formation of an anti-obesity coalition featuring, as its “celebrity” spokesman, former surgeon general C. Everett Koop. The coalition was organized in order to lobby President Clinton to declare obesity a “national health crisis and to create a President's Council on Diet and Health” (quoted in LeBesco 30). Koop's crusade gained numerous followers and benefactors very quickly—Weight Watchers International, Heinz Foundation, the Kellogg Company, Campbell Soup, and the American Public Health Association among them. But one group Koop might have assumed would readily lend their support, the SNE or Society for Nutrition Education, did not. Koop received a letter from the SNE explaining that while they shared the consternated doctor's “commitment to prevention, to physical activity, and well-being,” they were more interested in constituting what they called “a new weight paradigm” which would dislodge fatphobic discourses predicated on a shaming discipline.¹² The letter describes the *new weight paradigm* as one which “deals honestly with the difficulties of long term maintenance of weight loss, accepts the goal of

¹¹ Most commentators on corpulence emphasize that fat is imagined as a specifically American problem. One wonders, with the very recent publication of books like Greg Critser's *Fat Land* (2004), and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2002), what it is about the always anxious American national psyche that impels its subjects to take great pains to relate in detail the shameful relaxation/expansion of what has become “normal” in body morphology. We wonder, in other words, why Americans tend to have a certain predilection for chastising themselves as “the fattest nation in the world.”

¹² LeBesco notes that “interventions to improve the health of obese individuals” typically encourage self-surveillant discipline by “target[ing] individual behaviors” instead of working towards a new weight paradigm which interrogates the systemic abjection of what George Hersey calls the “deselectable” body (LeBesco 30).

health promotion and quality of life rather than slenderness, and recognizes the rights of heavy people to make decisions about their own goals and behavior” (Kent 37). In short, a more respectful discourse on being heavy, one cognizant of the fact that the fat frame, gendered male or gendered female, has endured a history of identifying, in ways that degrade and disintegrate the body, with varyingly crude and abjecting forms of cultural representation.

For me, what emerges in the SNE letter as most remarkable (because most complicated/unresolved)—and there are many things to be said about this document—is the unusual “concession” or acceptance of the goal of promoting health and “quality of life” in the place of a seemingly single-minded privileging of thinness as ideal. How odd indeed to *concede* the justness of promoting health—because *of course* one should promote and privilege health. The concession is so striking rhetorically because it threatens to unsettle certain assumptions about health. To suggest—and that is all the author or authors of this letter do here—that one can *admit*, as though a debate actually existed, that health (a particular version of “health”), in the context of this particular “national health crisis,” is a good and right thing to promote, means that perhaps a debate *could* exist, or that it even should exist. It suggests, in other, briefer words, that this is all up for question: the notion of health, the notion of illness as they work themselves out at the site of the heavy figure. And indeed, as Gilman tells us and the SNE letter

demonstrates, “obesity can serve as an elegant object of study for negotiating the complexities of defining the 'healthy' and the 'ill’” (Gilman 17).

Koop's plan, titled “Shape Up America,” followed the publication of an NIH “study” (the interrogative quotation marks are not mine but Le'ah Kent's), which was little more than a selective review of pre-existing research “done by a committee stacked with interested parties from the weight loss industry” (Kent 133). NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, took aim at Koop's public demonizing of fat, pointing out that his coalition's “crusade” against the overweight, its call for an attack on the roots of an alleged health crisis, was founded in economic interests. At Koop's press conference for the new \$30 million State-authorized programme, members of NAAFA and other antifatphobic organizations succeeded, according to then president of NAAFA Sally Smith, in convincing reporters “that this is a multi-faceted... attempt to engage Americans in another [highly lucrative] round of weight obsession, and that the underlying principles and assumptions of the program are faulty” (quoted in LeBesco 37). This key critical intervention knocked some of the wind out of Koop's conference, and demonstrated the kind of disobedience fat bodies, bodies “out of bounds,” can perform in spite of, and in reaction to the forces of pathologization.

To return to an earlier question: what are the psychic effects for fat people of assuming an imbricative relationship between fat and illness? In the once again invaluable words of Kathleen LeBesco: “If our fat cells start with such a bad rap, one can imagine

the stigma attached to an entire *person* with an abundance of said 'defects'" (LeBesco 35). Culture in-forms, figures the fat body in ways that malign it as the site of an enveloping disease. The enveloped body, conflated with its illness, becomes the de-formed body, one assessed the responsibility, and this is crucial, for *permitting* the proliferation of that disease. Consider *Time* magazine's 1994 article ("Girth of a Nation") on Koop's in certain ways contestable initiative. The article never actually intends to represent *fat* per se, but aims instead to photograph the bodies of people enveloped by fat—it does so with the use of "distorting fisheye lenses," and "lurid colors," and seeks to capture these bodies in situations which reinforce particular sorts of sizist stereotypes. The abject objects of the photographer's gaze are shown shovelling Doritos and ice cream into their mouths, drinking Budweiser while laid out in front of the TV (Kent 133). They are represented and constituted, that is, in ways imagined to be native to that abhorrently sedentary, indolent and pathological subject: the obese.

In just ten years the endeavour to manufacture an awareness of a North American (and now, we are told, global) obesity epidemic, a crisis of putatively grotesque proportions has snowballed into the contemporary discourse on fat as metonymic of disease (the dominant discursive frame for fat), and the fat body as an abject organism "pregnant with himself" (to use Baudrillard's strange but resonant description) (Baudrillard 27) in the sense the he is saliently, empirically pregnant with the blight of his own "lack of self-control, leading to disease" (Kent 134). But what if the deployment of

an “obesity epidemic” was *not* about concern for the health of our bodies, or even precisely the strength of our national economies? What if we found, upon closer examination, that we are haunted by the horror of corpulence not because of an altruistic or broadly empathetic concern with the well-being of our other citizens, or not simply because of a capitalistic interest in removing all encumbrances to financial growth, but because these other citizens, in becoming widely fatter, perform iterations of gendered body size disconcertingly incongruous with certain fantasies of ideal embodiment?

1C. The Collapse Of Our Fantasy

[O]bsessive interest [in the fat male body] exists not primarily because of any 'real' concern for men's health but because it presents the outer limits of the performance of masculinity. When we contemplate the fat bodies of formerly slim males, whether Elvis Presley, Orson Welles, or Marlon Brando, it is not the spectacle of declining health that horrifies us but the very collapse of our fantasy about the male body.

-Sander Gilman, *Fat Boys* (33)

We measure ourselves not against an ideal of health, not even usually (although sometimes) against each other, but against created icons, fantasies made flesh. Flesh designed to arouse admiration, envy, desire.

-Susan Bordo, *The Male Body* (70)

Gilman undermines the picture Philip James (among many others) provides of contemporary obesity, explaining that rather than being an apparitional global phenomenon, “the ‘ghastly’ fat boy has always been with us” (Gilman 32). LeBesco's gesture in *Revolting Bodies?* echoes the one we find in *Fat Boys*: she states that while “[f]at has been around for ages, at varying levels of appreciation or disdain... it has

captured national attention as a public health problem in the United States during the last twenty years” (LeBesco 29). Gilman and LeBesco both insist that fat is a form of bodily experience by no means unique to postmodernity, but that it is one imagined for North American postmodernity (and soon in Europe) as an epidemic of incomparable proportions. The way Gilman puts it to us is that we have always known the fat body, but we have not always known it as we know it now. We learn from televisual and journalistic discourses of culture that the fat body is an addicted and/or pathological body—one whose “lack of control” threatens not just himself, but the health of the nation and in the case, specifically, of gross men, the stability of hegemonic masculinity's fiction of a uniform “patriarchy.”

But the reason for the fat boy's unruly persistence in popular representation is “not primarily because of any ‘real’ concern for men's health,” but rather because of an interest, an “obsessive interest,” Gilman tells us, in the fat man as an anomalous figure of masculine embodiment which re-presents “the [collapsed] *outer limits of the performance of masculinity* [my emphasis]” (Gilman 33). On this point, Gilman contends most notably that our fetishization of “spoiled” or “squandered” *celebrity* bodies—the once “fit” bodies of the hitherto exemplary—is not a consumeristic preoccupation attributable to any popular concern with health, but instead a sort of avowing disavowal, an awe at the “very

collapse of our fantasy about the male body.”¹³ In this section we will begin to track the details of this fantasy, we will attempt to bring into focus specifically what our fantasy about the male body is and does, what forms of cultural representation deploy and sustain it (which contribute, that is, to the constitution of an (always motile) *body canon* which George Hersey's book, *The Evolution of Allure*, historicizes)—and most importantly the ways in which the fantasy is *decoded and interiorized*, the psychic implications of this always collapsible norm. The question is—and it is not simple, as we are barred explicative recourse to “health”—why *hardness*? Why do fantasies of impervious prowess, of being a “man of steel,” so recurrently obtain for hegemonic masculinity? It is the question Tony Jefferson poses when he asks us why physical “strength is 'chosen' (so often) to carry, and reproduce, patriarchal power” (Jefferson 80). This characteristic, “strength,” is not in any irreducible sense “naturally” male, but has become, throughout a process of inculcation and exclusion, the ideal subject-marking and subjectivating principle by and against which the male body tends to be contoured.

But before we clarify and examine the details of our fantasy about the male body, let us for a moment consider the implications of dislocating, as it were, the politics of fatphobia. Even if fat and pathology *are* correlative (which we must concede, up to a point, that they are), the denigrative surveillance of fat as it persists culturally is not

¹³ Why are we both “horrified” and captivated by the spectacle of this failure? In Part Two, I will reconsider the problematics of celebrity enfreakment in more detail, using particular corpulent male celebrities, namely Ron Jeremy and Marlon Brando, as test cases.

actually about *health* (even and especially when it purports to be), but about aesthetical preoccupations, presuppositions about physical beauty or “sexual selectability” in Hersey’s very straightforwardly Darwinian phrase. Such preoccupations are, however, never simply aesthetical—as Cornell West has demonstrated—but are always part of a political bio-regime, part of ensuring social control by producing and regulating docile bodies. What is so important about making these moves to, as I say, “dislocate” the field of political rearticulation for corpulence? The moves I make at the outset of this section are intended to afford us a more appropriate and more productive picture of the discourses we are “up against,” so to speak. To proceed as though popular fatphobia and sizism were mobilized in a discourse that is strictly medical would not mean that we were interrogating the *wrong* containment strategies exactly, but that we would be following a misdirected avenue of politicizing the abjection of corpulence, one that leads us to doing so incompletely and thus un(der)productively.

The very fact that our subject is a question principally of, to gesture back to Bordo, “created icons” and social performance, rather than of any “real” or quantifiable social health crisis, causes us certainly to reconsider the fundamental underpinnings of representing fat bodies as abjectionable. The use of pathology in the formation of the fat frame, and of a frame to contain fat, is precisely as an alibi for another kind of less “authorized” abjection. Medicalization legitimizes prejudicial and superficial figurations of the fat body as a “spoiled” or “squandered” identity—it is responsible, as Michael

Moon puts it, for “transforming difference into etiology” (Sedgwick & Moon 230). The figure of the corpulent body is one which signifies as *revolting* within a certain Western body canon or aggregation of “iconic” bodies (*figures* not just licit or “authorized,” but ones valued and consumed above and against all others), and which therefore becomes a body deserving of eschewal, disregard and denigrating interpellation.

In excess, then, of its “irrefutable” pathology, the “pregnant” materiality of the fat body carries stigmas that implicate the fat person's *identity*. To put it in a different, more familiar way, fat infects and inflects a body's *legibility*. In advance of any sort of potential self-representation, the fat person's size establishes the way in which his or her identity will be interpreted. Sedgwick and Moon discuss this in their unique dialogue, published as “Divinity.” Moon notes that “in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn't herself know” (Sedgwick & Moon 240). The two theorists call this a “privileged narrative understanding” of the abject. Rather than one self-articulated, it is a narrative projected onto the “revolting” body which anticipates and intercepts the expression or self-representation that figure would normally be permitted in discourse. In place of affording the fat person the opportunity to articulate his or her “will,” “history,” “perception,” or “prognosis”—terms Moon and Sedgwick use to describe the manner in which fat people are labelled and libelled as “addicted,” “frustrated,” deluded, and suicidal, respectively—, normative containment strategies are employed to silence, to sequester and, according to Baudrillard, to in effect *efface*

(Baudrillard 29) or to place under “radical erasure” (Butler 8) the unattractively and thus illicitly massive fat body. The fat subject is “overlegible” in the sense that self-articulation is headed off by the intervention of the anomalous shape of one’s body itself: shape speaks the subject, communicates the “character” of the subject in anticipation of actual proof of that presupposition. The fat body is one that, because of its “ghastly” mass, matters by no longer mattering. Both fat women and men tend to be made into separate but comparable sorts of *species* according to this interplay, this alliance of medical and aesthetical discourses—a critical mass of materials that inter-react to form an overlegible yet underarticulated body defaced and effaced in and according to two types of body canons.

As we return to the question of the function of Bob Connell's “exemplar,” what *our fantasy* is and does, we should keep two things in mind: the first is that in using this word, “fantasy,” we are not examining and politicizing something “merely” dreamt up. These are not, in other words, “merely representations,” to cite Gilman: “they alter how men relate to their own (male) bodies and to the bodies of others” (Gilman x). The image of *muscularity* as flawless and privileged masculinity—of *prowess* or hardness embodied—is an “imaginary morphology” in Butler's terms: it is a regulatory ideal which, in as real a way as we can imagine, *gives form* to the gendered body by means of “identificatory projections;” or, phrased differently and more pertinently, by compelling citation of muscularity in performance as the dominant imperative in becoming male

(Butler 13, 17). Hegemonic masculinity effectively *materializes* the body by means of the exemplar. For this thesis, and for this section of the thesis in particular, the central task is engaging what Butler calls “the problematic of morphogenesis” in male embodiment (Butler 17), the psychic and political implications of materializing male bodies according to our continually collapsing and inalterably fugitive fantasy of the ideal male body.

The second thing we would find useful to keep in mind is that the fantasy of ideal male embodiment is very much a form of performativity which necessitates “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 2). Indeed, normative body size, *mesomorphism* in men, “takes hold to the extent that it is ‘cited’” as ideal; but, in Butler’s words, “it also derives its power through the citations it compels” (Butler 13). Translated into the language of this project, Butler’s comments help us to underscore the degree to which compulsory mesomorphism requires successive citation, repeated efforts to model the body after the representation of the exemplar, in order to sustain an interpellative influence over the daily rituals of individual male bodies.¹⁴ Stephen Whitehead writes that these imperialistic ideals of masculine performance—the will to thwart the opponent, to galvanize the body against the other—are only reiterated with great effort, they can only be sustained by protracted

¹⁴ Butler: “How precisely are we to understand the ritualized repetition by which such norms produce and stabilize not only the effects of gender but the materiality of sex? And can this repetition, this rearticulation, also constitute the occasion for a critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms?” (Butler x). Can an understanding that these norms require continuous rearticulation offer us the opportunity to renegotiate their power over life?

exertion, “if at all” (Whitehead 191). Men are incited to attempt citation of extant ideals of masculine embodiment and self-expression in order that they will repeatedly fail. For structural reasons *achievement* is precluded from the project of embodiment. At this point, though, it is important that I point out that I do not here dispute the persistence of an unfailing concentration of political and economic authority, of all sorts of capital in the male establishment. Indeed, as Brod tells us, one of the most important challenges for men’s studies has been to proceed in such a way that we articulate and demonstrate that the goal is certainly not, in examining the ways in which masculinities are injuriously disciplined and some put in a position of alterity, to suggest that ours are foreclosures or privations comparable to those endured then and now by women. This is the peculiar usefulness of Cohen’s “ec-centric” as a designation for those men other-ed within hegemonic masculinity, but who, being nonetheless located within this “institution,” retain a certain kind of social privilege over and above those located without. For these reasons Calvin Thomas insists quite reasonably that the primary goal of men’s studies ought to be to investigate the ways in which masculine performances impinge on the lives of women.

In a sense, my project—even where it does not do so explicitly, when it is principally concerned with intra-gender foreclosure, for example—is very concerned with the impacts of the embodiment of masculinity on women. To identify that there is always a discrepancy, virtually unresolvable, between men's “bodies and dominant discourses of

masculinity” (Whitehead 191), and to suggest that this discrepancy is the source of extraordinary, and extraordinarily bottled-up unease, is to begin to theorize the psychic motivations for hegemonic masculinity’s pernicious tendency towards “splitting/projection,” as Jefferson calls it. So, to continue, what interests Whitehead is not just that men constitutively, almost *habitually* fail to “chisel” out of their bodies through ritual reiteration an image of “strength” which aligns with regulatory examples of impeccable masculinity/muscularity, of exemplary prowess or even *omnipotence*, but that masculine subjectivity is *defined* precisely by the violence of embodiment, by the recurrent defeat encoded in and ensured by the subject's attempt at compliance.

We will discuss this critical issue of what Foucault calls “the asymptotic movement” in more detail later. For now I would restate that the reason it is critical to recuperate the fat male as abject, as *revolting*, is that, being already distortedly invalidated—in certain contexts even unintelligible—he is denied the capacity to approximate compliance with the mesomorphic imperative. When introduced into a normative representational matrix—when positioned, that is, *vis-a-vis* these iconic fantasies about the male body whose purpose it is, we realize, to ensure the docility of an unending self-correction—the “alternative” fat male stands to destabilize and contaminate, in ways that need to be more fully examined, the containment strategies of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, the fat male is useful as an example of a body resiliently *unfixed* within systems of projecting signification onto the contours of the

body. He is also a useful example of fatphobia's illogical excesses, the meanings which fail to find adequate support or subtending from medical discourse and which must strain adaptively to assert and reassert aesthetic valuations of the fat body, relying on the force of continuous reiteration to constitute a body canon which excludes and contains the unsightly "overweight."

The body failed within a homosocial hierarchy of bodies is not, is never cleanly or conclusively marginalized, as its production functions as what Butler calls a "founding repudiation," or "constitutive outside" for the force of normativity. To understand the uses of deploying "hardness" as regulatory ideal, as the norm by which the subject appraises his body as male—to gain, that is, a firmer grasp on the meaning of hardness—it will be necessary to carry an understanding of the uses for splitting off, for spitting on, its opposite. Butler's comments on the uses of abjection suggest to us that the hegemonic/nonhegemonic or normative/abnormal binary is by no means as stable as we might suppose. The side of the binary marked "normative" is in many ways *dependent* on the abject and unthinkable body to define the limits of its own intelligibility.

Bob Connell's figures of normative masculinity, the exemplars (figures in our culture industry like young Marlon Brando, Steve McQueen, Brad Pitt, Russell Crowe, and that reappearing image of the tireless boxer), are produced and reproduced in order to incite those people "who do not conform to an absurdly restrictive concept of ideal weight" to mobilize self-discipline in the interest or service of aligning with the "image of

the body beautiful... an ideological construct” in Richard Klein's irksomely conspiratorial but usually cogent language, “conceived by a vast industry in order to sell its services and move its products” (quoted in LeBesco 35).¹⁵ We have a good idea of who these exemplars are, but our picture of what they “do”—of what the purpose of the nation-state’s creation of iconic male bodies might be—is, in spite of the elucidating comments of theorists like Bordo, still unclear. What is it that the exemplar is supposed to, or is required to do? What makes them, or made them, exemplary? Why is it that the more these figures come to exemplify what it means to be male, the more the projected persona they possess (or are allotted) breaks down and collapses, its contradictions becoming more and more apparent? And why is it that we fetishize failure in those instances where it is most marked? That is, why are there so many narratives, for example, of the boxer's body—a figure for masculine embodiment said by Jefferson to be the “supreme emblem” of prowess (Jefferson 84)—which represent that body's “tragic” distension?

We relish these examples of boxers who “fall apart” by becoming fat, by coming out of congruence with exemplary masculinity. Why is it that we demand such narratives of struggle with normativity, this trajectory of collapse, where the body “begins” (in the public mind) as a thing impossibly compliant with compulsory mesomorphism, to

¹⁵ There is a way in which this conspiratorial rhetoric too simplistically assumes and, in a sense, reifies the existence of an oppressor which we are to grant the grammatical position of subject. The archaic assumption of an oppressing being (the sovereign), by its impertinent simplicity, might actually be said to re-mystify the operations of power and operates, itself, in inadvertent “collusion” with this imagined force.

become anomalous at the point of final yield to softening? Consider, for example, Sylvester Stallone and (again) the late Marlon Brando, men whose celebrity was solidified in the portrayal of hardbodied prize fighters—Stallone in *Rocky* (1976), and Brando in *On the Waterfront* (1954). Brando's spectacular(ized) foreclosure, his public distension, has been rehearsed over and over in various forms of popular media. Stallone's transition from exemplar to abject has been less reported because it was less sustained. When Stallone was enlisted as part of the ensemble cast of the "gritty" 1997 film *CopLand*, he appeared as a man embodied anomalously as "over-weight." The 40 pounds heavier-than-normal Stallone assumes the central role of "Freddy Heflin" in the film, an over-the-hill small town Sheriff whose hearing loss and trademark "fat guy" amiability make him ineffectual as an officer. Celebrity media *delighted* at this unpredicted performance from an actor whose characters (we remember going into *CopLand*) were normally confined to the performative parameters attendant to having and exhibiting an unachievably huge and chiselled frame (see, in particular, *Rambo 2* and *Rocky IV*... yikes!).¹⁶

There is also George Foreman, a man represented as *ferociously* muscular in the 1996 documentary *When We Were Kings*, but who became the "cuddly" fat boxing commentator and, more famously, the gluttonous spokesman for a certain "grilling

¹⁶ Brad Pitt would seem to be today, after his performances in *Fight Club* (1999) and *Snatch* (2000), the quintessential image of the exemplary boxing male in Western film. To be sure, were Pitt to gain a significant amount of weight for a role—an event that is unlikely to occur until much later in his career—Richard DeCordova's extrafilmic discourses (media sources like *People* magazine and *Entertainment Tonight*, as well as all of their ancillary iterations) would jump all over the story.

machine.” There is Martin Scorsese’s brilliant *Raging Bull* (1980), which features, of course, Robert DeNiro as the self-destructive middleweight Jake LaMotta. One of the most interesting things about Scorsese’s adaptation of LaMotta’s autobiography is that, while the camera lingers fetishistically in the final act over a middle-aged LaMotta’s languid corpulence, the film insists that it is the rage immanent in the rigid body of LaMotta in his “prime,” his normative masculine identity when young, which destroys and isolates the man. (The hopeless anomaly of fatness and the social avoidance that accompanies it seem to be figured in Scorsese’s film as the physical and psychic consequences of heedlessly pursuing alignment with our fantasy about the male body.) The correlation between muscularity and the isolation of the muscular body from others is not incidental; it is a relationship built into the mesomorphic imperative. Jefferson notes that other theorists have suggested a “close fit between ‘the manic building of ramparts of muscles’” (a truly perfect phrase) and the “fragile self boundaries and deep ambivalence toward intimacy” we are shown again and again in popular representations of masculinity (Jefferson 92). This characteristic contiguity of muscularity and seclusion is certainly true of DeNiro’s LaMotta.

George Hersey’s *Evolution of Allure*, which I mentioned earlier in this section, details one of the most significant and curious reinforcements of the relationship between mesomorphic “ramparts of muscles” and a certain garrison mentality, or tendency toward “splitting/projection” in Jefferson. Hersey locates the contemporary roots of this

conflation in William Sheldon's *The Varieties of Human Physique: An Introduction to Constitutional Psychology* (1940), the book which coined our morphological categories of "ectomorph," "mesomorph," and "endomorph." Sheldon's study, which was limited "to white males of European background" (and yet applied so broadly), describes the perfect mesomorphic male, his "172" somatotypic model of masculinity¹⁷, as profoundly "claustrophobic" and as having a certain allergy towards intimacy (Hersey 93). Sheldon sees *claustrophobia* as the offshoot of the ideal male's will to dominate and control space itself, the consequence, as it were, of a sort of annexing spatial restlessness. It is figured as an *heroic* quality. Indeed, Sheldon declares that because of his characteristic inflexibility and his stalwart hyperkinesis, the mesomorph¹⁸ is, in fact, "the most heroic of the three types" (quoted in Hersey 93). What purpose does the fiction of "heroism" serve in male embodiment? Sheldon deploys the notion without a second thought—but what are we to do with it?

¹⁷ Sheldon devises this mathematical system of morphological classification he names "somatotyping," where the male body is measured against the three body types to determine what fraction of each category that body exhibits. (For example, the body of, let's say, Stallone in *Rambo 2* demonstrates very little endomorphism, he has next to no visible body fat, so we give him a "1" in that category; he is highly muscular, so he gets a "7" in the privileged middle category; and his angular features earn him a "2" for ectomorphism.) The somatotype is, in a sense, Sheldon's concession that the three types of bodies he outlines are too reductionist. It is also his attempt to ensure, by lessening their rigidity, that these persistently reductive types will be used.

¹⁸ I use "mesomorph" rather than "mesomorphic body" in order to underline that Sheldon's fantasy (reified by the presentation of celebrity mesomorphs as exemplars) is not merely a structural taxonomy of body shape, but an attempt to inscribe such shapes with qualities of temperament, etc.; to delineate the mesomorph as an identity or even as a (sub)species.

Before we engage the politics of “heroism,” it is important to note that it is an attribute excluded in *The Varieties of Human Physique* from the constitution of the *endomorph*. Sheldon writes that the fatter male is “the most primitive” and certainly the least “heroic” of the three subspecies of men, “since his body is constructed around the most ancient forms of the evolutionary scale of animals—reptilian and lower.” Sheldon continues by saying that the fat male body is dominated by “the digestive system and organs for food assimilation.” (quoted in Hersey 93) We see a surprising recurrence of this peculiar conflation of male corpulence and those organisms of less advanced consciousness. That the fat male body is a figure “dominated” ingloriously by its biological functions, or that it is somehow more closely related to organisms of a lower evolutionary order are, of course, preposterous claims impossible to corroborate. But proof is virtually irrelevant here. Sheldon does not endeavour to produce “new” fact; his study sets out to fashion an expressly hierarchized taxonomy of body morphology which depends on established assumptions about the meaning of the body's contours within an already existent body canon.

To re-engage with the question of heroism—“hardness” is not a quality allotted to the male body because of the deliberate effort to become beautiful (hegemonic masculinity rejects this model of hardness because it is figured as a too-feminine deference to the gaze of the other), but a quality allotted to the male body which *risks itself in performance*. What is heroism if not the body's accreditation for putting itself at

risk? And what figure is more pervasively afforded this attribute, heroism, than the professional athlete, postmodern culture's stand in for the patriotic "warrior"? It is precisely their exemplary disregard for the hazards involved in the spectacular activities they perform that, as Jefferson puts it, answers "the sports journalists' insistent question: how are these men different?" (Jefferson 81). Players who "play through the pain," who persist in spite of injury, are figures deified for their disregard with greatest enthusiasm.¹⁹ Heroism in masculine performativity lies, then, in an almost mechanistically oblivious tenacity, a total disregard for the un contemplated consequences of competition.

This, however, does little to historicize hardness, to clarify what has made the exemplar exemplary. It would seem that hardness as regulatory ideal originated, for what Michael Kimmel calls the modern "male establishment," in the rise of industrial capitalism. This was a period during which men, inserted into the machinery of production, were made to aspire, in competition for their very subjectivity, to mirror that machinery of production. Indeed, Michael Kimmel notes that for Henry George, a late nineteenth-century social scientist, the mechanization of industry was "absolutely injurious" to the men who populated the factories (Kimmel 139) The industrial panopticon interpellates the labourer to assume the qualities of steel, induces workers to

¹⁹ Jefferson's preferred example is Muhammed Ali, the preeminent icon in the "supreme," or most exemplary sport for the demonstration of an ideal masculinity. Jefferson writes that "it was not until [Ali] demonstrated that he also had 'heart,' that he could soak up punishment as well as dish it out, as he had to in his punishing battles with Joe Frazier as an older, slower, less skilful boxer, that his true greatness as a fighter was secured (even as it probably cost him his health)" (Jefferson 83).

steel themselves in preservation of their bodies against the pain of prolonged labour, an act of risking the safety of the body in performance. It is in this way that “power,” or prowess, is violently interiorized—the basis, as Kaufman states, for “a contradictory relationship to that power” (Kaufman 146). What Kaufman means to underline for us is the striking contradiction we observe in the fact that men are mandated by a force not their own to demonstrate their supposedly autonomous will to control space, to stoically sustain injury and to build of their bodies, strictly by means of injury, something that approximates the figure of William Sheldon's “172.”

A kind of *fear* necessarily accompanies the project of male embodiment.

Understandably, we struggle to suppress our anxiety at having to pursue an ideal of masculinity/muscularity that includes as its founding indicia sustained trauma and the imminent failure to “make the grade.” Gardiner explains the violent stakes of masculinity's ambivalent mandate with reference to a specifically American strain of profeminist masculinity studies:

Profeminist men argued that men should support feminism because most are harmed by idealizing the characteristics of socially powerful men and by defining the masculine in opposition to women and subordinate men, especially homosexuals and men of color (Connell, *Masculinities*; Kimmel, *Manhood*). All men were harmed by this 'hegemonic masculinity,' they claimed, because it narrowed their options, forced them into confining roles, dampened their emotions, inhibited their relationships with other men... imposed sexual and gender conformity, distorted their self-perceptions... and doomed them to continual and humiliating fear of failure to live up to the masculinity mark. (Gardiner 5)

Remarkably, men are required to dissimulate any sense that they occupy a contradictory relationship to the “power” perceived and purported to embody masculinity. The suppression of the *fear* that attends inevitable failure to “live up to the masculinity mark” is imperative for the subject to live up to that mark, because that fear is an affective response “inconsistent with dominant masculinities” (Kaufman 149). In other words, masculinization causes the paranoid fear of emasculation, an anxiety over the subject's failure to match up with a certain always inaccessible norm. This phobia, being itself incompatible with masculine subject formation, is responsible for a sort of incremental anxiety and the pernicious defence mechanisms which, as Jefferson explains, we evolve against that anxiety. I wonder, though, if by short-circuiting these defences we might reveal the ways in which the incompatible anxiety and the affective violence of male embodiment, when actually engaged with, pose certain perturbations to hegemonic masculinity. In fact, one wonders if there is a way in which the latent *hypocrisy* of the male establishment's ambivalent hegemonic mandate signals the kind of rupture that Butler discusses in *Bodies That Matter*—a crisis of ideologic rupture generated in cases where the “disciplining intention of the law” is found to signify “in excess of any intended referent” (Butler 122). There are representations of the fat male body which suggest (even if it requires a degree of critical labour to elicit that suggestion) that in that body's unruly inconsistency and hopelessly feminized anomaly we may locate an experience of male embodiment which brings the critical hypocrisy I have described above to light.

PART TWO

**2A. Fat Men Out Of Bounds:
Case Studies in Anomalous Public Masculinity**

I will defer to the conclusion of this thesis an explicit engagement with the question of crisis or juridical “rupture.” But I do not defer the issue completely. My focus for this section of the project will be on masculinities contoured as “fat,” but contoured, unaccountably, from within what Richard DeCordova calls the “star system:” the industry responsible for sedimenting regulatory ideals of body morphology by reproducing the “created icons” which arouse in us so much “admiration, envy, [and] desire.” The two male celebrity bodies I will be reading as exemplary cases in the “trajectory” of public fat masculinities are Marlon Brando and porn star Ron Jeremy.

Susan Bordo presents her useful book on “the male body” as a tentative set of observations structured according to the principle that there are, in spite of the uncontainable plurality of masculinities, two social spheres for men, private and public. While the thesis to this point could be said to maintain a certain preoccupation with the position and psychology of “private” masculinities, this section is concerned specifically with *public masculinities*, those male bodies produced as commodities and deployed in the service of an historically locatable hegemonic mandate. That said, the final move of this section will be to begin to return to the *private* by theorizing, 1. the potential of audience modes of reception/consumption—or in other words the ways in which the

public masculinity is privately decoded; and 2. the increasingly consequential activities of a masculinity driven to “privacy” or, more precisely, to the perimeter (“ec-centric”). I will make this return by and through an examination of gay “bear” culture—a counterculture which, in spite of the compulsive foreclosure of its members, has developed modes of audience reception which deliberately transgress against normative containments of corpulence. The bears are interesting and useful as an interstitial group of men who have modelled subversively emotive capacities for intimacy, for something Elizabeth A. Kelly and Kate Kane call “permeability,” and a sensitivity which, we find, strengthens rather than softens them. They are interesting also as a collection of fat men who have started to talk their way out of overlegibility.

2B. Brando’s Body/Fetishizing Collapse

Grobel: So you think the fascination in someone like yourself is fleeting?

Brando: There’s a tendency for people to mythologize everybody, evil or good. While history is happening it’s being mythologized.... Most people want those fantasies of those who are worthy of our hate... and those who are worthy of our idolatry. Whether it’s Farrah Fawcett or somebody else, it doesn’t make a difference. They’re easily replaceable units, pick ‘em out like a card file.

-Lawrence Grobel, *Conversations With Brando*, 55

In this section I consider the question of star power—the socio-cultural status of the star as exemplar, or embodiment of perfect prowess—through what might be termed the *celebrity trajectory* of Marlon Brando. I am interested in the tale woven of Brando's stardom as “tragic:” a story of an allegedly misspent creative power. The “trajectory” of Brando's fame may be plotted along a variety of continua—all as troubling as they are

compelling: machismo to desexualization; animal energy to abject enervation; rawness to overdetermination; genius to grotesquerie; “author” to spectacularized *mise en scène*.

Brando, towards the end of his life, was no longer famous for his acting, though he remained a famous actor. That he was no longer famous for his acting is evidenced by the types of representations of Brando’s body provided to the public: stories of his attendance at Michael Jackson's thirteenth-anniversary celebration which concentrate on his corpulent paralysis, reviews such as Roger Ebert's assessment of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* which focus exclusively on the obtrusive feature of Brando's “ghastly” girth (but which do so in a manner which disguises abjectification under the veil of innocently identifying “bloated” acting), and late night comedy programs such as *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* which incessantly exploited Brando as a ridiculous figure whose weight, in the case of O’Brien’s program, was imagined to cause him to plummet through the floor in footage from his 2001 film *The Score* doctored for comic effect. (The statement that Brando was less famous for his acting than for his fatness, of course, only temporarily sidesteps an interesting question we find in the work of Richard DeCordova, Richard Dyer and others of whether the actor's fame is ever constituted principally by his or her acting.) Brando was famous during this time for *having* acted, for having a body intensely in alignment with compulsory mesomorphism; but Brando’s body received attention at the end of his life primarily for his being famously obese. It was Brando's fat f(r)ame that

perpetuated his celebrity—that is to say, the figure of a misspent Marlon Brando preserved a residual stardom by means of the fetishizability of his abject corpulence.

In the authoritative history of Marlon Brando's career—Peter Manso's *Brando, The Biography*—there is the sense that the disconcerting “tragedy” of Brando’s star trajectory is the actor’s foolish refusal to be contained, even after his transgressive body warranted it. Manso nearly seems to expect (and to, in certain passages, pursue) a certain remorse from “late” Brando, remorse for “squandering” his rare talent, his uniquely ideal masculine embodiment, and for becoming unsightly without acquiescence to being unseen. Take, for example, Manso’s Prologue: a carefully described scene of the aging actor sitting on a witness stand in defence of his son. The nature of the crime and the boy's guilt or innocence are not issues which concern Manso at this very early stage of weaving Brando as a celebrity text. What concerns the biographer is the gravity, the severity (indeed, the fetishizability) of Brando's *physical presence*: a man who had been a “previously powerful, charismatic figure” had become “the embodiment of regret and depression” in Manso's account, sitting sideways on a witness stand in order to accommodate his obese frame (Manso xii). Manso’s focus on the superficial becomes increasingly obvious, as does his tendency to transform “difference into etiology” in frame-ing Brando’s body—he declares that “the myth that had lingered in the American consciousness was shattered, replaced by this saddening persona: Marlon Brando, his

weight in excess of three-hundred pounds, a confused and weary man burdened by guilt and self-reproach” (Manso xii).

“Marlon Brando” is here referred to expressly as a “myth.” One is reminded of Dyer’s claim that the signification connoted by the utterance of names like “Brando,” “DeNiro,” “J-Lo” (or “Derrida” for that matter) remains the greatest of fame’s structuring illusions (quoted in Bingham 8). What fascinates me most, however, is the connection Manso makes between the “shattering” of this cultural illusion of Marlon Brando (as though it were ever something approximately corporeal) and the actor’s weight increase, between the narrative of Brando’s charisma and the body of the actor. Manso’s summary frames the actor’s story as a movement from a state of grace, of irresistible sexuality and privilege to one of disgrace and abject physical burden. When Manso informs his reader that Brando “had squandered his energy, even his identity and inner core”—giving the sense that the actor has been bankrupted, emptied of the currency of masculine prowess—we may either read it as an earnest retelling of a significant decline in artistry and sheer authorial potential for which Brando is to be held responsible, or we can read Manso (keeping in mind that he is by no means the only biographer and certainly not the only cultural commentator to frame Brando in this manner) as implicated in a reconfiguring of “Brando” as a shattered star text, evacuated of exemplarity.

I argue that the rupturing of the “text” of Marlon Brando, the imminent “collapse” of his body, is ensured by what Karen Alexander calls “the incapacities of that system:”

the tendency of the system which manufactures and sustains star identity categories to limit intractably, in compliance with a particular regulatory ideal, the parameters for acceptable being and practice within these categories (Alexander 13). What is made clear in Manso's identification of this celebrity disintegration is the absurdly stringent character of the criteria at work in celebrity discourses, and, in this case, celebrity discourses of the male film star. We must implicate the hazardously exclusivist structure of celebrity discourse in the foreclosing of Brando's subjecthood.

It was impossible for “late” Brando²⁰ (before he became the late Brando) to retain or recuperate any real celebrity influence because of a nostalgic physical referentiality which inevitably constituted him as a pathologized endomorphic metonym, an object mutation of a previously “young and hard” film star (Bush 83). Though it appears as though in mourning Brando’s body the culture which fetishistically foreclosed it has revoked this impossibility, and permitted the recuperation of the myth of Brando as “heroic” (heroic, of course, in the politicized and interrogated sense articulated above). It is crucial, I think, that we understand that the early formation of sexuality which is “suited” to Brando—that is to say, a formation not so much proper to him, but rather tailored to or sewn for him—is imbricated with a narrative of social rebellion, of obstinate self-celebratory marginality. Graham McCann's book, *Rebel Males*, provides a picture of

²⁰ I find it remarkable that we can speak so dichotomously of people like Brando, and Elvis Presley for that matter; that we can cleave these identities across a documented trajectory into a healthy, exemplarily muscular self and an unhealthy, unsightly nonself.

“early” Brando as appearing profoundly “unsettling” (McCann 79); likewise Bob Thomas, at the outset of his *Marlon: Portrait of the Rebel as an Artist*, notes that with Brando “the same qualities that lent fascination also proved disturbing to a great many people” (Thomas 1-2). Moreover, in Lawrence Grobel's now famous *Conversations With Brando* we read that the virile young stud “burst into our consciousness wearing a torn T-shirt, mumbling, growling, scowling, screaming” (Grobel 6). It’s almost *breathhtaking* to read these accounts. In them Brando is constructed as more animal than human, and thus more masculine than we will likely ever be. And it is from this performative animality, this overpowering—though entirely *projected*—willfulness, that the seed for a mythology of “Marlon Brando” as hyperheterosexual antihero is produced and reproduced.

Joan Mellen's *Big Bad Wolves* (1977), a text which deals with masculinity in American cinema, aids in the reproduction of this mythology through its author’s discussion of Brando’s 1953 film *The Wild One*. Mellen explains that the preeminent goal of Brando's Johnny is to avoid being “mired in domesticity.” “[F]ortunately,” Mellen tells us, Johnny manages to repudiate what she calls a “stultifying 'straight' society” (Mellen 207). What interests me here is that Brando can only be celebrated as an heroic male rebel within acceptable parameters of Western masculine rebelliousness. Rebellion within the star system must be carefully managed if it is to be represented. That said, not only is fatness *illicit* here, it is, as in Sheldon, an *inconceivable* characteristic of the

hegemonically authorized “countercultural” figure of the American male exemplar.

In a manner reminiscent of Manso, Grobel speaks conspicuously about how the early mesomorphic rebel Brando “passed into myth” as a figure of “raw power” who “talked through his body” (Grobel 6). McCann registers an identical impression in his study, outlining how Brando's most extraordinary “instrument” was his body, a “bridled and instantly ready” vehicle of activity and virility (McCann 89). Like our current Pitt, or other figures like the hip-hop world’s “50 Cent,” (or if the issue were female exemplarity, like Halle Berry or a young Esther Williams) one could readily make the argument that Brando seemed persistently to be conceived of in the public mind as “nothing but body.”²¹

It is this inculcation of agency (and in particular countercultural agency) and “power” in performance as the condition for embodying masculinity which quickens the proceeding section of this paper. McCann provides the following caption for an iconic photo of Brando as Stanley Kowalski: “*Masculinity as make-up: the surly expression is supplemented with the distinctly unrealistic pumped-up muscles*” (McCann 86). A quality

²¹ The interesting difference between male and female exemplarity is that for the sculpted male actor, sexuality is a requisite of authorial control, of material command onscreen; whereas for the female actor, sex appeal is frequently represented as (but is never exclusively) a source of cinematographic submission. Indeed, when Dyer emphasizes the social importance of the figure of the “individual” in the West, and the exemplary “emancipated” (to use Pierre Bourdieu's term) character of the celebrity in this framework, the formulation is firmly and expressly gendered. Certainly Dyer's point is well-taken on the nature of the star as “a unique, continuous personality that is nonetheless produced by, and reproduces, cultural standards of race, class, and gender” (quoted in Bingham 15); but it is interesting to consider why audiences and celebrity theorists are induced to make tacit assumptions regarding the conflation of individualism and masculinity.

immanent in the hyperbolic character of early Brando's impossibly animal masculinity has impelled his biographers and critics (perhaps a bit too hastily) to assert that the actor succeeded in parodically deconstructing masculinity as “an act,” or as always already scripted (Bingham 9) while willfully, even savagely performing a version of archetypal masculinity which was ferociously unassailable. Brando needed to be brutally subtle in conveying his point when performing in *Streetcar* and *On the Waterfront*; he needed to encrypt and belie the insecurity in his machismo because, as McCann informs us in one startling passage, “anything in [classic stars'] personalities which undermined the straightforwardly virile image [of masculinity]... was repressed or 'corrected' ['contained'] by the studios” (McCann 8).

There is this sense in much of the writing on Brando that, being a “method” actor, he was a man who had complete power over the masculine guise he appropriated in his performances. This sort of performative reflexivity is truly remarkable (if we can say that this encrypted gender insecurity is a quality Brando, in fact, achieved, rather than one which the authors of his life have invented in revision) as it aligns, of course, with Butler's fundamental identification of gender as a performed set of social protocols. “Acting males” like Jack Nicholson, Clint Eastwood, and earlier Montgomery Clift and James Dean function as a means of stabilizing a conception of masculine subjectivity in the midst of estimable and unyielding historical contestation of what it means to be a man. The exemplar, to echo a claim made in Part One, is crucially useful to hegemonic

masculinity's task of materializing male bodies (in citation of a norm reified by these stabilizing monuments of hardness). These actors have, particularly during periods in which masculinity is felt to be an identity "in crisis," performed this function of sedimenting an historical version of gender identity. What Brando manages, according to Mellen, is to allow a reading of his body, an interpretation of the "traditional toughness and tightlipped invulnerability" he embodies as "defense mechanisms" or emotional fortifications rather than as "emblems of masculinity" (Mellen 199).

To return to the subject of the *fetishizability* of Brando's older "exploded" frame, I submit the following question: why did Brando make the choice, when asked, to downplay or dissimulate the artistic or personal/psychic consequences of his fatness? Should we read it as a serious or as a facetious implementation of "toughness" as a determined survival measure? That is, how and why did the larger Brando perform this reticent male "invulnerability" which critics read the actor's early performances as bringing into question? And, of course, most crucially: what are the effects of this performance? Brando comments in Grobel's interviews that the types of discourses on celebrity which construct and deconstruct star identities simply do not interest him, and that he therefore chooses not to participate in them. He in fact makes this criticism very neatly, conveying a discerning picture of the relationship between star and star press:

I know if you want to schlock it up a little the chances are the interview is going to be more successful because people are going to read it, it's going to be a little more provocative and down the line—get your finger under the *real* Marlon

Brando, what he really thinks and all that. But I'm not going to lay myself at the feet of the American public and invite them into my soul. My soul is a private place. And I have some resentment of the fact that I live in a system where you have to do that....It's not absorbing or meaningful or significant, it doesn't have anything to do much with our lives. It's dog food conversation. (Grobel 46)

While Brando's disavowing characterization of celebrity discourse as “dog food conversation,” as insipid, unabsorbing trash is in certain ways persuasive, it is also problematic. To what extent can the refusal to engage with discourses which contain and objectify the corpulent body be considered an engaged resistance against these representational strategies? Does Brando's refusal represent an example of acting revoltingly or an act of self-suppression? The suppression, as I have argued, of the psychic symptoms of hegemonic masculinity's ambivalent mandate constitutes a *perpetuation* of the “tyranny” of compulsive and compulsory foreclosure. In other words, Brando's affected disregard for the popular foreclosure of his gender identity in accordance with his physical expansion might be construed as an insularization against, rather than a contestation of a Western homosocial hierarchy's denigrating/“ecentricizing” materialization of the fat male body. When he was manipulated, in whatever manner, into discussing the effects of his fatness, when forced to confront the incapacities of this “dog food” discourse, of the system of celebrity construction and collapse, Brando—as in the deposition he gave at his son's murder trial—appeared to have *enormous difficulty* finding a means of articulating it in a manner appropriate to any existing discourses associated with him. While he usually did so flippantly, by making

comments like, “I’d rather they just portray me as a fat slob and a hoot, and just leave it at that” (Kaftan online), Brando is recorded as saying at his son’s trial: “I don’t know. I have never been a drunk, although I have drunk in my life. It just jumps over me, and [I] never abused any kind of substance. It may be food, I guess, but that will appear in the papers” (Manso xii). Taking into account, of course, the tremendous emotional distress Brando must be under here, I denote a certain resignation and a kind of disorientation in the rhetoric of this testimony which I account for by identifying the difficulty of situating oneself (as a star body once famous for being flawlessly masculine) within an incapacious system inclined towards one’s abjection.

It is important that we pause here to consider Brando’s abovementioned “resentment” in more detail. Can we really conclude that Brando’s reliance on reticence, his “tightlipped toughness” is a form of hypocritical self-oppression through denying the public his self-expression? Brando seems rather aware in the above passage of the fact that the very imperative to divulge the secrets of, as examples, one’s sexuality and the psychological effects of one’s incongruent body morphology, is informed by the historical development of a system of public confession which the celebrity industry is wholly dependent upon for its production of cultural meaning.

It is clear, by this point, that what intrigues me most about the narrativizing of the older Marlon Brando as a squandered, swollen version of his former self, is the sense that the star must in some manner resist the pull of disintegration which the confessionalistic

star system necessarily entails. In Thomas' *Portrait* of Brando, the author quotes a *Playboy* article which goes as far as to say that Brando's celebrity trajectory typifies "the American myth on the fate of the creative person" (Thomas 2). Brando can nevertheless be accredited with displaying considerable initiative in resisting this fate. He became, as Robert B. Ray points out, the model for post-1967 "new stars" by adopting a "mannered, campy style as a defense against conventional material" (quoted in Bingham 8). But there is a real risk in acting adaptively and parodically within systems of celebrity production. McCann tells us, in one of the most provocative passages from his study, that "Brando's career prompts one to consider whether such fluidity of selfhood is also the destruction of selfhood" (McCann 119).

Severe transformation in the trajectory of a star spells a contradiction of the wholly unrealistic principles of stardom. Change tends not to be tenable within the system that markets exemplarity. For celebrity theorist John Ellis, there is "always a temptation to think of a 'star image' as some kind of fixed repertory of fixed meanings." But it should seem obvious that the "fluidity" of selfhood is an inevitable principle of experience. People age. They get softer. While the system which manufactures celebrity works to sustain a stable/coherent image of the star (predominantly by extrafilmic means), it must always struggle to regulate and efface the necessary inconsistency of the celebrity subjectivity which acts as an object for consumption itself and a kind of technology for organizing the production of culture. Ellis is correct to emphasize that the consistency of

the star image “becomes fraught with contradictions as the star ages.” The star image is always an “incoherent” image: it is constituted by discursive fragments which never completely cohere at the site of the celebrated body. (quoted in Bingham 15-16)

Why is this relevant to Brando's celebrity trajectory? Brando's career was, of course, spectacularly turbulent, being characterized by an almost incomparable transformation. If inconsistency of image is the “death” of stardom, the body of later Brando—which forced us to interpret the morphology of one who once exemplified muscularity, and to produce the means by which to see the formerly hypersexualized (but now distended) body as still, if only tentatively, male—must surely be regarded as one mourned before and recuperated only after his death. And yet how could he have remained famous in spite of his incoherent corpulence? In my account, Brando was preserved in a contemporary context as a tenuously intelligible/valorizable celebrity by means of his integration into a subsystem of celebrity discourse which *exploits* the fat male subject as the inexhaustibly fetishizable, grotesque brunt of the joke. While it's possible, as Huff suggests, to imagine a subversive Bakhtinian laughter that “throws the negative representation of corpulence defiantly back into the face of the society that created it” (Huff 50), it does not seem plausible to effect or elicit this type of laughter within a system of Western celebrity predicated on the strict, static inhabitation of valorized zones of livability. While actors such as John Candy, Chris Farley and John

Belushi got huge laughs, that laughter was innocuous in the sense that it celebrated its author only as an impotent self-parody, a subject whose selfhood was already squandered.

In the April 25th 2002 *Rolling Stone* article quoted from above, the journalist Kaftan asks Brando if he thinks he is a good liar. “Oh Jesus,” Brando replies, “I’m fabulous at it” (Kaftan online). The man was notorious, in spite of his overlegible body, for being impossible to read. I wonder here how difficult he is to *write*. I’m curious also if there is a constructive, positive protection against abjectification within the confessional, disintegrative system of celebrity to be found in the type of playful yet dangerous underscoring of *incoherence* which Brando performs throughout his career. Brando knew he had to be made subject of *dog food conversation*, but he also appeared to know that by participating in the manufacturing and performing of fictions about himself—performances that usually involved the disparagement of those systems which produced his celebrity—he could resist shattering and squandering the soul of the *real* Marlon Brando, whoever we might take that to have been.

2C. Celebrity of the Subintelligible: Reading Ron Jeremy

How vigorous or vigilant is the regulation of the “field of position-takings,” in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, that comprises the celebrity culture industry (Bourdieu 34)? How do we account for the fact that the celebrity industry, the industry whose responsibility it is to disseminate the commodity of exemplarity, appears to brook

continuous and flagrant divergence from its racial, sexual and spatial boundaries of valorizable bodily experience? How is it that, within an economy of bodies which purveys impossible exemplarity, the ubiquitous anti-exemplar or abject, in certain cases, can succeed in gaining and retaining an oddly *extravalorized* claim to celebrity subjectivity in spite of his or her occupation of zones of bodily experience deemed uninhabitable to others? The containment strategies enacted by the celebrity industry on anomalous bodies like that of legendary porn star Ron Jeremy appear wholly inconsistent. These strategies cannot be said to be particularly “vigilant” because we witness the insistent presence of celebrities like Jeremy—celebrities whose celebration is inexplicable, but who are celebrated/consumed in spite of their incongruity. One wonders, however, if there is a way in which the vigilance of containment is enacted precisely (and perplexingly) through the *incorporation* of anomalous bodies; and whether the necessity of this industry of exemplarity to represent abjectionable bodies in order to define its identificatory limits of intelligibility is the reason for the insistent presence of bodies like Jeremy's. This section will negotiate the uses of celebrity subintelligibility in augmentation of Bourdieu's curious claim regarding the circuit of identification between celebrity subject and audience, a circuit centred, according to Bourdieu, on the commodification of the experience of “emancipation” (Bourdieu 37). Is it possible that the anomalous celebrity, the star freak or freak star, is intended as an example of a bodily being who has somehow circumvented the injuriously interpellative force of the regulatory ideal? Does the freak star represent a

condition of “emancipation” which, once gleaned, implies to the consumer of celebrity the (fictive) promise that the frustration immanent in what Foucault terms “the asymptotic movement” will be discontinued (Foucault 227)? But if we are operating under the assumption that the popular perpetuation of the anomalous celebrity somehow *serves* the vigilance of containment, what is it about this promise of emancipation that helps to sustain the asymptotic movement? Or is it possible that the anomalously celebratable body is an example of the disciplining intention of the law, the field of possible position-takings signifying in excess of its established parameters?

Ron Jeremy has become, since the “porn renaissance” of the mid- to late-1970s, the best-known male porn star in North America. Starring in over one thousand films in his career and having an unyielding interest in self-publicity, the “hedgehog,” as he is (for his bearish hirsuteness) nicknamed, is uncannily ubiquitous. Emily Shelton works at length in her argument concerning Jeremy to account for the queer celebrity of her rather weighty subject. Shelton’s account of male celebrity bodies is particularly interesting because she must cope with an industry (heterosexual porn) supposedly structured to *efface* the male agent from the spectacle by channeling the viewer’s gaze inexorably to the female body. It is an article most interesting as a negotiation of the visibility of the gross male. Shelton contends that “pornography has a far more complex relationship to displeasure than is commonly acknowledged” (Shelton 121). Shelton bases much of her argument on the assertion that, Jeremy’s body being “flamboyantly undesirable” (Shelton

118), we must presume that the porn industry maintains a determined *interest* in incorporating the “irrefutably” undesirable, in sexing the revolting body. Jeremy’s career is an example of a position-taking founded on the contradictory psychic principles of abjection. He is famous as being subintelligibly embodied, embodied in other words, in such a way that the expected disavowal of the collapsed anti-exemplar is accompanied by peculiar, and peculiarly popular avowal, or formation of the irresistibility of that bodily being’s seductive anomaly.

Jeremy’s stardom, Shelton argues, prevails over others in the industry because of the boundary-blurring benignity by which he mediates the spheres of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture; and because of his capacity to secure what Shelton describes as a profoundly homosocial star-audience dynamic: “he is there to make male viewers comfortable with the fact that they are looking at other men (and, more specifically, their penises) and that they may even *want* to be looking at them more than they are willing to admit” (Shelton 131). Shelton also makes sure to at least gesture to the more obvious fantasy of Jeremy’s celebrity (she is paraphrasing publisher of *Screw* magazine Al Goldstein here): that he “would never have gotten laid if producers had not paid women to have sex with him” (Shelton 116).

Certain questions need to be raised regarding these claims: if we assume that these are the conditions for Jeremy’s position-taking, the realization of his lucrative ubiquitousness (specifically the condition of positioning oneself as a site for the working

out of the incapacities of hegemonic masculinity, or as the brunt of a certain palliative laughter) are there any *constructive* possibilities in the liminal or marginal star's performance within the public sphere? If so, how do we articulate these possibilities? Should we speak of the persistence of the subintelligible celebrity body as occurring in spite or in support of containment? In excess or in preservation of the asymptotic movement? The contestation of the discursive laws of stasis and coherence within the star system embodied in the "freak star" (the unaccountably ubiquitous star: Jeremy) could certainly be taken to represent a rupture of the asymptotic movement as a "simple performative."

Does the success of the freak star signal the instability of the industry of exemplarity? That is to say, if the celebrity of fluidity and incongruity can so readily and prevalently achieve and maintain *unequaled* star status, should we conclude that the hypocrisy of a celebrity economy dependent on coherence and compliance must necessarily be made subject to discursive rupture? The spectacle of abjection is "authorized" or at least permitted a controlled dissemination insofar as the destabilizing potency of that subversion is inoculated by its relegation to a containable site and undermined by regarding that site (porn) as socially marginal. But most importantly, the opportunity the carnival of anomalous celebrity holds for the system it is sanctioned by is the renewal of that system, the capacitating of that system to persist in a manner which does not require "arms, physical violence, material constraints" (Foucault 155).

Hegemonic masculinity, which relies on the function of the exemplar to effectively materialize the male body, avoids the counterhegemonic anxiety of rupture; it circumvents the inevitable contestations of its recurrently injurious mandate by accommodating and thus inoculating the abject.

As a counterpoint to my discussion of Jeremy's body, I will discuss David Yuan's account of the star trajectory of Michael Jackson, who Yuan calls "the agent of his own 'enfreakment'" (Yuan 369). Public consumers of celebrity are fascinated by the spectacle of Jackson as an example of one who has "done things" to himself, who has undergone self-reconfiguration. Yuan's article reads the body of Joseph Merrick, the "Elephant Man," alongside Jackson's abjection. "With Merrick it is assumed that his freakishness is purely an accident of nature, completely beyond his control or his encouragement;" this contrasting depiction of enfreakment "absolves" Merrick by discounting all responsibility for his undermining of the structures of intelligibility (Yuan 369). It is interesting to consider how this obtains in the case of the fat star (Brando, Elvis Presley, Jeremy). Jeremy's case is in some ways anomalous even within the discourse on alternative masculinities. He does not quite fit as an enfreaked star who requires absolution. He requires none because he is constituted as proper-to-celebrate outside of discourses that would not read him as compliant or congruent. Jeremy's corpulence instead "marks" him positively (that is, lucratively) as notably anomalous. But the fat masculine celebrity more generally, if we can make this claim, *is* held responsible for his abjection (though, in a

manner typically less pernicious in a number of ways than specific types of fat feminine celebrity) because fatness is understood as a subject-marking trait over which we are (mistakenly) perceived to have sober and self-denying control.

Imperative to Yuan's study is an understanding of “how Jackson manipulates his own enfreakment (his efforts to encourage or subvert abjection) and how *the audience and its culture participate in the construction* [emphasis added]” (Yuan 370). This gesture to audience reception is crucially relevant to Shelton's work on Jeremy as a celebrity whose (ab)errant morphology conflicts with pornography's alleged investment in William Sheldon's “172” hard bodies. Why, as Shelton asks, would the industry “invest so deeply in a product as blatantly 'unsexy' as Ron Jeremy”(Shelton 120)? Shelton articulates Jeremy as a “neutered” corpulent comedian within a discourse which should, logically, reject him. So why doesn't it? It would appear that the reason is the relatively “unobstructed” or disencoded character of reception in porn, in which spectators are permitted to move within a confidential, anonymous, nonconfessional space. Shelton illustrates the unregulated nature of porn's consumption after listing a group of porn films: she notes that all of them “dwell on the erotics of the discomfiting, the unappetizing, the rough edge of titillation. While these films may appear to be addressing their viewers' specific predilections with unambivalent directness, most adult video stores tend to group all of their straight titles together in no discernible order, not even alphabetical” (Shelton 123-124). This is an effort, on Shelton's part, to illustrate not just the industry's tireless

and indiscriminate production of every form of fucking, but also the oddly unstandardized nature of the industry. While preference is genre in porn, virtually no preference needs requires legitimation, and so the technology of organizing porn is, according to Shelton, minimal if it is even present.

Moreover, porn employs only a very small publicity industry for its perpetuation. Consider, for example, that the foundation for Jeremy's early celebrity, aside from his crucially useful corpulence, was his unusual proficiency at auto-fellatio. (Shelton points out, quite provocatively, that a man fellating himself is, of course, still a homosexual pairing, though an acrobatically narcissistic one.) Jeremy's showmanship (a kind of onanistic theatre he can no longer perform because of his dilating girth) does not find an audience as un-mediatedly or pervasively as Michael Jackson's. I refer, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, to the "immediacy" of the audience relation to either figure's showmanship in order to identify the profoundly mediated nature of Jeremy's celebrity: most are not sure why they know about him, but they know him nonetheless.

Jeremy accomplishes Jackson's task of subverting extant celebrity subject positions without critically offending, and does so without any effort or the semblance of agency on his part. Is it that his is a cultural industry in which the field of possible position-takings not just permits, but encourages the anomalous body's appropriation of a *central* place within this field, in order that it might, as an "emancipated" feature of that field, productively renegotiate its material possibilities? Jeremy's position of safe,

neutered subintelligibility, of being neutrally or neutralizably “grotesque,” is enviable, in the sense that, instead of the threat of punishment by disidentification, Jeremy has everything to gain as a subintelligible. But, problematically, Jeremy's “flamboyantly undesirable” (Shelton 118) body renders vulnerable Horkheimer and Adorno's cultural industry thesis (extrapolated to take into account celebrity subjectivities as products) by successfully defying standardization. We might ask, however, to what extent the industry produces such anomalies, establishes the places where their motility possesses currency, in order to renew itself in a manner that inoculatively accommodates them.

2D. Expanding Between Two Worlds: Bear Culture and Queer Spaces for Radical Re-figuration

What is a Bear?

Bearness becomes a way of seeing yourself, a discovery of the way to view yourself, that makes it possible to see your body as desirable and gay at the same time.

-David Bergman, *Bears on Bears* (40)

Fat is not only a bear's issue; it is a queer issue.

-Laurence Brown, *The Bear Book II* (44)

Last year two of TV's most popular sitcom's, *Will & Grace* and *The Simpsons*, made reference to a kind of queer masculinity that, until the 1970's, had no self-conscious existence in any discourse. In an episode which aired originally on January 6th 2003, “Jack,” *Will & Grace*'s caricatural embodiment of the stereotypically “flaming” gay

temperament, remarks to his shrill supporting counterpart “Karen” that he would “like to spend a few unsupervised hours rummaging through [her] closet” as much as a “gay bear” enjoys “anonymous sex in the woods.” In Season 14’s “Three Gays of the Condo,” Waylon Smithers, *The Simpsons*’s not-so-ambiguously gay sycophant, runs into the series’ heroic patriarch, Homer Simpson in a markedly San Franciscan neighbourhood. The two share a few awkward words as Smithers silently considers the consequences of being out-ed at their mutual workplace, Springfield’s Nuclear Power Plant, just as a streetcar full of men arrive to ask the shaken assistant: “Hey Waylon, who’s the bear?”

We will begin our discussion of gay bear subculture predictably, by starting where most other commentators on bear culture begin: the very question posed to Smithers: who, or what is a bear? Ron Jackson Suresha, at the outset of the introduction for his recent *Bears on Bears*, poses the question of whether his own bearish physical attributes alone—his abundant body hair, large-frame, physical maturity—constitute or authorize him as part of this burgeoning subculture. The impetus for the question is symptomatic of a broader confusion about who or what a bear really is; and, moreover, about whether or not such a thing as a “bear movement” exists. Suresha’s question is particularly difficult to answer because it articulates a desire to count as part of a classification currently under construction in popular and subcultural discourses. “Bear,” I would argue, is a queer subjectivity written and spoken into being as this thesis is written, sedimented by reiterative performance in popular culture, as in the examples given above, and passages

where critics like Ron Suresha and Les Wright, editor of the two seminal *Bear Books*, deliberate on whether or not their bodies and their political agendas signify as bear.

So, *what is a bear?* It is the theoretical-political hallucination of a queer collective imagined as composed by akin eroticized materializations of the (usually corpulent) male body. To speak of it as a “hallucination,” however, is not, of course, to evacuate its subversive potential, but only to underscore the degree to which it is chiefly and *productively* spectral, or—as a gesture to bear culture’s primary means of communication and self-dissemination, the Internet—virtual: a thing which is being thought and written in ways that haunt both gay and straight mainstreams of representing and codifying masculinity.

As Suresha explains, he and other writers have spent whole books, alongside many other bear writers, “dancing around that question” of what is mobilized around the marker “bear,” and who can be said to be involved (Suresha xv). And that’s the best that seems possible at the current moment for bear culture: a circumlocutive “dance” which approximates a meaning or which augments the indicia of bearishness. Indeed, Suresha explains that his compulsion to produce *Bears on Bears*, this collection of “voices and views,” was motivated by the “desire to root out the meaning buried underneath the shrubbery of the subculture” (Suresha xvii). There is, as I say, something intriguingly spectral and valuably oblique or unformed about bear culture for those involved.

Nonetheless, one thing seems a safe assertion: even if there is a shortage of cohesion or

common political agenda to be located within a bear “movement,” *bear* is a portentous sexual identity category—if only because speaking bear subjects and spectators are intent on figuring out exactly the meaning buried in this collective, and rooting out the reasons why they are involved in it. Suresha relates, for example, his sense that there is “something greater than the sum of the many limited parts of Bear life” to be found in available anthologies of bear experience (Suresha xv). The intention of this part of my project is to generate a meaningful synthesis of the traces which constitute this still embryonic subculture; and it is also my intention to emphasize the complex benefits of resistantly occupying and *preserving* a diasporic, always-under-construction space for bear “re-figuration:” a refugee sexuality, perpetually in a kind of “ruins,” or space for the re-valuation of a softer (and hairier) version of maleness foreclosed by two worlds, gay and straight.

Les Wright, in his interview with Suresha for *Bears on Bears*, asks where one might locate a bear community; he asks, further, if these men are “destined to be a community in diaspora, floating somewhere between major urban area Bearclubs, rural outposts, and the Internet” (quoted in Suresha 114). There is the sense, if idealistic, that the (inadvertently) political principles of a refugee beardom might house subversive political consequences for renegotiating dominant conceptions of “normal” desire (for a particular size or shape of body, a certain sex, a certain age, a certain quantity and arrangement of body hair, etc). There is, indeed, the sense that bear, as a sexually

diasporic convergence of variously abjectionable forms of desiring and pleasure, might carry a certain incendiary queer energy *vis-à-vis* (and, significantly, *between and against*) the forces of mainstream gay culture (what pioneering bear journalist Jack Fritscher terms the “gaystream”) as well as, of course, a more prevalent heterosexist cultural matrix. In addition to a diverse array of texts by authors who identify as bear, I will be engaging Jerry Mosher’s work on “refiguring fat men on television” in order to explore the ways in which a bearish masculine morphologic alternative grew out of a timely rejection of what is, no doubt too crudely, referred to as the “twink” or very svelte model of gay male beauty. Moreover, after Jefferson’s findings on the embodiment of masculinity, I will weigh the transgressive possibilities which “bearotic” and “slash” fiction—forms of narrativization engaged with at length by Mosher and bear author Thomas McCann—open up against heteronormative conceptions of the male body.

Mosher states that men “thin by straight standards” may in fact be seen as “fat in gay culture,” where the model of perfect masculine materiality is the lithe, hyper-ectomorphic body (Mosher 186). For this reason many gay men, upon coming out, undergo a rigorous project of dieting—Les Wright admits himself, in his second *Bear Book*, to dieting to the point of anorexia before discovering the San Franciscan bear community (Wright 2). Fat men, it seems, are caught between a rock and a hard place. The reductive “hard-boiled” heteronormative ideal of “toughness” is attended, on the opposite flank, by the ironically “homonormative” ideal of extreme ectomorphism. The

question then becomes: where within available discourses of culture does the fat gay man locate a space for the reassuring pleasure of self-identification? For Mosher, the expanding visibility of bear culture provides a challenge “not only [to] heterosexist containment of male homosocial desire but more specifically [to] gay male culture’s privileging of the ‘twink’” (Mosher 186). The sense here is that sizist prejudice must be interrogated and struggled against first in the immediate speech community within which the repudiated subjectivity is founded (and jettisoned). But even before the bear can make this move, he must have a sense he is a bear, that there is something called “bear” that he speaks for and with the support of. This requires shared discourse, a shared history where that history is the product precisely of the retroactive need to have such a history.

Bear Tracks

Tracing the paths and tracking the paw prints of “bear icons” and formative events in the history of bear is perhaps the central enterprise of those involved in this subculture. The archaeology of a fat, hairy erotics is felt to be crucial for a group relegated to virtuality and still seeking space for its self-presentation/preservation. Les Wright, who in addition to his work on the *Bear Books*, is also the curator of the online Bear History Project (www.bearhistory.com), is perhaps the best resource for recreating the course of Bear history. Wright gives us certain dates and places where the event of bear’s entry into the discursive life of culture might be located. Jack Fritscher, author of the Prologue to

Wright's *Bear Book II*, has some interesting things to say on this point as well: he writes of how "ideas and concepts required the invention of a new vocabulary to describe categories and subcategories inside the love that so long had dared not speak its name" (Fritscher xlii). He is describing, of course, the playful but profoundly constitutive "exercise [of] creating words... to describe what had never been written or even spoken before" (Fritscher xlii). What does it mean to set out expressly to coin terms? What are the performative implications of this practice? For Fritscher it is necessary that an archaeological undertaking of tracking the queer trajectory of bear be properly augmented by the invention of a discourse "for this analytic history" (Fritscher xlii)—if only as a means of providing those in search of a "bear movement" a body of material to cite or speak in support of.

Wright tells us that there were, in fact, three "trajectories" for bear expansion which all originated in San Francisco: "the underground press, private sex parties, and the newly emergent medium of electronic communications" (Wright online). It was into the world of the second "trajectory" that Wright immersed himself in the early 1980s, vanishing into "the apolitical maelstrom of the bars-bathhouse-disco-drug subculture" as soon as he discovered it (Wright 2). If the subculture was simply to remain one of an "apolitical maelstrom" of sexual conquest, one unaccompanied by a policy and practice of self-representation—that is, if bear culture had been content to remain out of the light of the gaystream or hetero- mainstream—there would be nothing to discuss here. But, that

said, it is important to underline that it is within an apolitical climate, a social environment uninterested in and, in fact, *allergic to* the mandate to disclose, to enter discourse, that the “pre-bear” movement flourished. This once invisible community has, thankfully (considering the important perturbations it has to level at the compulsively foreclosing forces of hegemonic masculinity), swelled into a culture contiguous to the popular because of an increased interest in collecting and disseminating information about itself. And, indeed, despite Fritscher’s wonderment at the fact that, despite bear culture’s originary anti-disclosure position, “any tangible history of early bear culture exists at all” (Fritscher xxxv), such a history does exist.

One wonders if it was precisely this allergy to media exposure that permitted bear culture—a community displaced by gay and straight streams of representation—to develop a resistantly unified and more or less unique and elusively spectral self-conception. One also apprehensively wonders if the currently increasing exposure of this subculture to the mainstream might spell the jeopardization of a certain boundedness or productive dissociation from the mainstream. Bears have, as I mentioned, chosen as the form and forum for their self-exposure the web, and one can think of few spaces to better avoid the potentially disintegrative implications of intensive mainstream or gaystream attention, while concurrently gaining a certain gratifyingly self-identifying and compensatory “exposure” or disclosure. Fritscher tells us that bear webpages “have become the new gay magazines of grassroots identity and desire;” the virtual queer space

of the Net offers bears the opportunity to produce “do-it-yourself photo layouts, fantasy fiction, true confession” (Fritscher xliii) and build the means for discovering ways to view themselves as, remembering David Bergman’s comments above, “desirable and gay at the same time.”

The problem with the Internet as discourse is that, even though it is a global medium, it is not one particularly impactful in a broader social sense; its effects on the “mainstream,” gay or straight, are (arguably) ancillary to more broadly disseminative forms of media: television, film, popular magazines, etc..²² And so the project of bear history carefully documents the first appearance of “Bear” in more influential forms of corporate media. Wright informs us that the first article on a new “Bear” phenomenon, the article which, for him, marked the inception of the *BHP* or Bear History Project, was published in 1990 in the *Seattle Gay News*, and “reprinted in an edited version in *Drummer* magazine shortly thereafter” (Wright online). In 1995 Wright’s *BHP* gained a considerable boost with the pivotal national dissemination of the first serious coverage of the bear phenomenon in *Frontiers*, a major gay publication. The magazine featured, on its cover, bear icon Mack McQuade in a frolicsome red Santa suit.

Fritscher offers an interesting perspective to this discourse on archival archaeology, suggesting that the proliferation of personal webpages is, in some sense,

²² As Suresha tells us in his introduction, despite the undismissibly impressive number of men who identify as Bear across the globe (an estimated half-million), “the fact remains that most people just don’t know about them” (Suresha xviii).

damaging to the imperative sense of common history shared by a Bear community, insofar as “many of the authors write about the personal moment they woke up in midbearstream and discovered ‘bearness’” (Fritscher xxxiv).²³ The authors of these pages, Fritscher insists, refuse to “remember [that] what they’re discovering was produced previously by someone else, upstream, working out universal male archetypes in writing, drawing, photography, and video” (Fritscher xxxiv). There appear to be two discourses running athwart one another in this passage. The fissure, in my reading, occurs between Fritscher’s overt demand for a more rigorous cultivation of queer historicism in treating the meaning of “bear,” and his equally overt reliance on vexingly universalist language. The author speaks unflinchingly to “universal” or essentialistically ahistorical “male archetypes.” But what is interesting is that the *constructedness* of these “universal” models of the male body and temperament is not effaced, but strenuously underscored. That is, Fritscher is describing—with, I would suggest, intentionally inelegant rhetoric²⁴—how the “production” of such “archetypes” of masculinity occurred by means of *a history of performative reiteration and selective self-representation*.

²³ This diatribe against a sort of narcissistic relationship with bear subculture is itself a narcissistic one: Fritscher wants to make it clear that it is the pioneering work that *he has done* which is ignored in the discursive explosion of personal, autobiographically anecdotal webpages on awakenings into bear.

²⁴ Fritscher outlines, early in his Prologue, the choices of rhetoric available to him: “I can write channelling the ‘bear voice’... or I can write as a university professor with a PhD in literature and criticism, channelling the academic voice of the ‘discursive entropy of blah blah’” (Fritscher xxiii). Fritscher will permit me the use of the latter voice, I should hope, in considering the strengths and shortcomings of his argument.

An apt illustration of the bombastic Fritscher's own contribution to the construction of a "universal" masculine ideal is the author's near-deification of bear legend Paul Garrion, a mid-twentieth-century American model, as "the muscular, very upholstered archetype of bear... from whom all later bears descend" (Fritscher xxxi). Fritscher's intention is to provide to an array of people, in order to be an arrayed people, the historical event of a subject who embodies the spirit and constitution of bear. A man from which all later members "descend," Garrion is interesting because he becomes representative of a certain version of "natural masculinity." Fritscher fetishistically describes Garrion as "the Colt prototype... quiet but extremely powerful. He works outdoors, lives simply... is very rugged... a loner who shuns parties and is happier on his motorcycle." "If it's masculinity that turns you on," Fritscher almost orgasmically concludes, then Garrion "has it in spades" (Fritscher xxxi).

While this is a crucial exercise in male subculture-formation (the identification of a model masculinity), it also demonstrates an unfortunate tendency of beardom to revert to essentialist notions of hegemonic masculinity appropriated from commodified forms of heteronormative media discourse. It is not incidental or inconsequential that Fritscher's celebratory pronouncement of Garrion's archetypality is so precisely congruent with hard ideals of American maleness. Garrion is strangely Brando-like: reticent, but capable of a certain physical expression of prowess when the situation arises. He is "rugged," and attached to open spaces, a loner. Fritscher continues his formative exaltation of Garrion by

making the vexing claim that he “was virtually the first gay man to *look like a man*,” that he was “a human rebuttal to the straight stereotype of *powerless effeminacy* [emphasis added]” (Fritscher xxxii). This is a passage replete with problems. But let’s first look at the conditions for and, carefully, the positive effects of its composition. Fritscher is in a very particular position of, like race theorist Kubina Mercer, being able to undercut some of principles of early queer politics which were, and in some ways continue to be, prejudicial and exclusionary. And so Fritscher recounts the gaystream’s quizzical response to the emergence of bear: “*Is that hairy, six-foot-three-inch, 250-pound bearded hippie man over there... gay?*” (Fritscher xxxii). I say this not to excuse, but in order to contextualize the author’s otherwise contemptibly vindictive foreclosure of ‘twink’ effeminacy.

While it is targeted at inappropriately feminizing discourses on the gay male body, and mobilized against the disavowal of fat male bodies in a contemporary homosocial matrix, we must identify and interrogate Fritscher’s patent and insidious subscription to a certain psychoanalytical notion of essentialist gender binarisms. The subversiveness of the “rebuttal” in this instance is wholly compromised by Fritscher’s narrow championing of Garrior’s “victory” over stereotypes of the “invert”—a victory achieved by acting and looking “like a man,” rather than the other (explicitly foreclosed) side of the all-too-limiting gender binary. In a very real way Fritscher’s comments complicitly *execute* or secure the foreclosure of “powerless” effete men, effectively enervating the potency of

that form of drag which seeks to undermine the unquestionable, delusionally “archetypal” power of the masculine individual as “rugged loner” who succeeds by will in compelling all of the social body to acquiesce to his (always already interpellated) romantic individuality.

Impossibly, Fritscher’s “god” of masculinity accounts for every discursive principle of male “hardness.” This kind of essentialism, though, is as constitutive as it is fictive; the bear movement has, from its origins in 1970s San Francisco, been compelled by an often too-virulent repudiation of an effete version of gay (un)masculinity. What Fritscher terms the “homomasculinization” of the gay male body is crucial in forming a means of re-subjection within a heterosexual matrix. What I’m suggesting, nonetheless, is that the persistent interpellation into such essentialist binarisms ought to be seen as anti-bear, as there is a particularly valuable awareness within bear of the drag quality of performing certain “natural” configurations of masculinity—including the normative configuration of an ideal size. In other words, Fritscher far from exhausts the meanings of bearish performance: Michael Bronski, in his discussion with Suresha and Bergman, opens up some relevant complications of this use of essentialism. Bronski explains that at its foundation bear is a rejection of an *urban history*, and an embrace of the “natural over the unnatural” (quoted in Suresha 40). This turn, however, is accompanied by a crucial re-turn. This “naturalness,” the archetype of a rugged life in the wilderness, etc. is a narrative imagined by a group of urbanites who never intended to de-

urbanize themselves. The *hallucination* of ruggedness, the way we never were, is key to understanding bear culture, a collective “urban fantasy about what a world in the wild would be like,” in Bergman’s words. The fact of this disconnect between the hallucination and reality of home makes bears oxymoronic for Bronski: “they are displaced people creating a subculture in hostile territory” (quoted in Suresha 40).

Cybearspaces and Subversive Receptions

Not to be facetiously simplistic, one response to the hostility of place is, of course, retreat. But as I’ve shown, one of the remarkable things about bear subculture is its resoluteness. A retreat for a bear is a particularly aggressive retreat, and the hostility of the streams, hetero- and homonormative, that bear culture has found itself in relation to is brooked by means of a “retreat” most often to cyberspace, a medium which is at once global and local, and which houses—partly in its relative lack of legislative control—the potential for a radical queer politics.

For bear theorist Alex G. Papadopoulos, the bear web infrastructure “constitutes a symbolic ‘homeland’ with its own identity, its citizens, its customs and rituals” (Papadopoulos 159). Bears would be an exemplary text in the study that is to be written on virtual citizenship, or how forms of subjecthood are built and sustained on the spectralistic plain of cyberspace. What I am interested in here, though, is the at least slightly more “tangible” case of the “customs and rituals” of cybearspace to which

Papadopoulos speaks. Bears use the web mostly, it would seem, for the purposes of pornography. But it is a certain type of “bearotica” that animates this part of my project: a genre generally titled “slash.” Slash fiction is a form of fan-written narrativization which appropriates TV personalities and reimagines them as part of a scene of same-sex eroticism. This form of cultural reception, as Mosher tells us, “frequently arouses controversy among [heterosexual] fans and television producers, some of whom argue for maintaining characters’ sexual orientation as given in the narrative” (Mosher 185). Fat-admiring bear men hunt the airwaves in the interest of “poaching” particularly captivating celebrity bears as objects of a rousing kind of consumption. Once bear web-authors locate these figures, they take advantage of the network’s strategic suppression, the containment of fat male’s sexuality in order to re-present these men (*Cheers*’s “Norm,” *Roseanne*’s “Dan,” *The Drew Carey Show*’s... “Drew Carey”), to queer them as “icons of fat desire that validate chub or bear culture” and as viable for erotic fantasy. In this case, then, cybearotica exposes the ways in which suppressive strategies of “containment,” which build fat male subjectivities for the exploitative purpose of sanitized and desexualized entertainment, deconstruct themselves: dilating the potential for erotic identification with these abjectionable figures precisely in attempting to eliminate such potential.

Care Bears

Thomas McCann has found that, remarkably, one of the chief features of written bear pornography is an emphasis on tenderness and the nurture of cuddling. This does not, of course, represent the limit of sexual expression in this fiction. McCann observes three chief uses of the term “bear” in bearotica: “the cuddly and comfortable: ‘the big Teddy bear came over;’” to the “nondescriptive, but understood,” the assumed: “He waved at the bear on the porch;” to the use of the term in scenes of erotic exchange: “you big fuckin’ bear, how I’d like to ride you for a few hours and take care of that fat dick of yours” (McCann 307). The use I am most interested in here is the first. McCann elaborates further on the interesting tendency of bearotica’s interest in scenes of sensual lingering over the body and particularly “feminine” expressions of “tenderness both leading into, and as part of, the sex scene itself” (McCann 311). For McCann, this tendency to encode bear desire as in some sense nurturing is “indicative of some form of gentleness and male bonding” salient among bears. Laurence Brown performs an analogous quasi-trans maternalization of the bear body when he observes that the “two particular features of the sensual male form which are especially relevant to our analysis of fat-attraction.... are: (a) *the breasts and nipples of desire* and (b) *the sensuous belly of pregnancy*” (Brown 50). This remarkable maternalizing of the bear body is certainly a representation which the Bersanian Fritscher would be impatient with, but there is something more subversive in these commentaries than one might think upon a superficial reading.

Bearotica, the means by which bears come to see themselves as attractive and gay at the same time, offers, I would suggest, not just a means of discovering a way to view oneself as desirable within competing discourses of disavowal for fat male sexuality, but also provides an alternative to the destructive regulatory ideal of hardness or garrisoned invulnerability that we have located in heteromascularity. The bear, as Elizabeth Kelly and Kate Kane point out, “embodies comfort, security, and safety” (Kelly 334), while the traditional model of hetero- masculinity is one of risk, suffering, competition and dominance. As Bob Connell succinctly puts it: “What it means to be masculine is, quite literally, to embody force, to embody competence” (Connell 27). Bear bodies are perceived to fail on both counts. It is “nurturance” which, to Kelly and Kane, appears most pronounced in the practices as well as the “iconographic public [re]presentations of bears” (Kelly 340). Bear fiction contains this ethic of nurturance in spite of the hegemonic mandate to embody force; the bear’s body is represented as “permeable, his boundaries fluid enough to permit the exchange of both semen and affection” (Kelly 340), rather than as a rampart of muscles—an embodiment of fortifying the stolid self from the world.

Jefferson claims that resistance against the expressly disintegrative force of “splitting” can only be overcome by achieving an impossibly quasi-mechanistic congruence of mental and physical invulnerability. One needs literally to steel oneself in order to escape the experience of masculinity as lack, or as constituted by a perpetual series of attempts and failures to comply with a masculinist hegemonic mandate. The

punishing ideal of compulsory mesomorphism can only be circumvented in Jefferson by total, infeasible coercion/complicity, the transformation of one's body in accordance with this ideal. But reading Mosher through Jefferson brings into focus the hopeful potentiality immanent in this paper's first epigraph: producing a space in which abjected men can be viable subjects and objects of pleasure, but also comfortably "tender" and capable of nurturing rather than eviscerating the other.

Conclusions?

Conclusions about a text as polysemous and motile as bear culture can only, one imagines, be tentative. The problem bear culture has principally engaged with in its 30-year history is the problem of what Brown terms "body fascism" (Brown 54): the inability of contemporary popular and gaystream culture to tolerate, let alone conceive of more than a rigidly thin spectrum of eroticizable forms for physical beauty. Though it is something of a generalization, the chief models available have been heteronormative mesomorphism and a homonormative ectomorphism: two versions of what Bergman calls "sculptural dehumanized beauty" (quoted in Suresha 35)—regulatory ideals designed, for the purposes of docilization, to be virtually unachievable by everyday men.

Towards the close of his conference with Suresha and Bergman, Michael Bronski, in an uncharacteristically positive mode, states that he is "glad that in this increasingly mandated world of sexual and body conformity, Bears have created a new and approved

way for gay men to look” (quoted in Suresha 49). If we can speak of bear as a “real” movement, it is a movement interested first in renegotiating the aesthetics of the body (which, we have insisted, is *de facto* a political act) in contemporary industries of representation.

I would, in closing, underscore the implications of “the resignification of fat in cyberspace,” as LeBesco terms it (LeBesco 98). What is the significance of a subculture expressly straddling a virtual local-global nexus? The Internet has become, for bears, the space in which marginalization is converted into something more volatile and meaningful. While it remains a marginalization, it has been transformed into a periphery which also holds the capacity for radical refiguration, for exposing a hegemonic centre to what Alex G. Papadopolous calls “technological havoc” (Papadopoulos 155). But does the cyber-globalization of a diasporic sexual identity permit greater or weaker counterhegemonic self-representation? If discourse operates, as Foucault explains, at the local level, what kinds of subversion—of models and practices of maleness as well as of body morphology—become possible when a body marked as unintelligible at that local level is pushed to the volatile social margin? What happens when that body generates at the margin a virtual space that operates simultaneously across a multitude of local sites? What happens, put more briefly, when the abject goes global?

PART THREE

3A. Signifying in Excess

The ideal point of penalty today would be an indefinite discipline: an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, a judgment that would at the same time be the constitution of a file that was never closed, the calculated leniency of a penalty that would be interlaced with the ruthless curiosity of an examination, a procedure that would be at the same time *the permanent measure of a gap in relation to an inaccessible norm and the asymptotic movement that strives to meet in infinity* [my emphasis].

-Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (227)

The law might not only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation.... Here the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law. Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent.

-Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (122)

At the close of Part One I began to describe the ways in which that “power” felt to exemplify and consolidate male experience, and imagined ideally to be embodied in the image of “ramparts of muscles,” finds ways of collapsing upon itself by causing affective distress in subjects induced to interiorize this “power”—that form of distress being at odds with dominant discursive frames for masculinity, and in this way the basis for a troublingly contradictory relationship with male “power.” This concluding foray into the theoretical possibilities of thinking corpulent masculinity is conceived of less as a recapitulation of these and other claims made to this point in the thesis than as an appropriation of questions asked and inferences drawn into a negotiation of one of the

more prominent strains in masculinity studies: the question of crisis. It is a line of debate akin, of course (if only for our purposes) to the recuperation and examination of “alternative masculinities,” insofar as alternative masculinities are presupposed as the “occasion and index,” to recall Butler’s phrase, “for a consequential disobedience” (Butler 122) of what we have called the pan-injurious hegemonic mandate of masculinization.

A curiously productive “impasse” has been reached in a part of masculinity studies at this issue of what we are to do with the alleged “crisis” of Western masculinity. Certain theorists (Judith Gardiner, Stephen Whitehead, Michael Kimmel and a growing number of others) have endeavoured to complicate the discourse on crisis, questioning and politicizing the motives behind its deployment. I intend for this final section to accomplish two things: 1. to theorize why or according to which interests the current state of gender emergency is declared/deployed; and 2. to augment the complication of critical discourses on crisis by establishing a dialogic connection between the two above epigraphs: meaning specifically, between the issue of crisis as Butler articulates it (that is, of “rupture”), and what Foucault terms the asymptotic movement, a concept which has informed the whole of the thesis to this point. In accomplishing these tasks I hope to arrive at a space in which “that which escapes or exceeds the norm” (but is not precisely jettisoned cleanly from the centre)—the ec-centric fat male body—has been demarcated as a site at which the violence of embodiment, the injurious psychic effects of size-ing up the body, has come into stark focus, and come out of undisputed stability/security. In

other words, a space at which “a potentially productive crisis” (Butler 10) may be staged, and we may carry on the profeminist project of “dismantling [hegemonic] masculinity” (Kimmel 153).

The Asymptotic Movement

The asymptotic movement is Foucault’s answer to his question of what the subject risks in making him or herself an object of discourse. It is the thing which makes social control possible. The notion of an investigation, of a “case” that is always open is crucial here: a self-surveillant self-fashioning (in accordance with, in the case of this project, muscularity) that is asymptotic. The imposition of an ideal operates to ensure the impossibility of compliance, and in this way secures the subject in a state of disclosing submission. Campos’s inflammatory book *The Obesity Myth* makes certain claims that help to clarify the relation of the asymptotic movement to the specific question of male corpulence: Campos states that according to BMI, or Body Mass Index standards, supreme postmodern exemplar Brad Pitt is actually over-weight, and George Clooney is *obese*. Gilman notes something similar: he explains that while every society seems to have had an interest in documenting obesity, the manner of and criteria for establishing who is of average size and who over-weight is almost entirely unstandardized over time. This would mean that, hypothetically, interested groups could devise the idea for something called BMI tables, and policy makers could, for whatever reason, potentially

adjust the devised norm to ensure that it was always only approximable, sustaining a crisis of fatness by regulating the stringency of morphological/physiological norms. It is the contention of Campos's book that this is precisely what has taken place in the West.

Jefferson insists that our induced aspiration to glean a "developed body" ought to be "read symbolically as a 'metaphor of perfection'" (Jefferson 80). The cathexis of male embodiment is informed by the unendable pursuit of a certain version of power/hardness (unendable, of course, because the distance between performative attempt and cited norm is irrevocably fixed). This mode of subjection can only be understood as an addiction to addiction, or to lack. And yet it would appear satisfying enough to men (assuming that they are not men designated "other" or incongruent within the homosocial hierarchy in which they are locally situated) that they are interpellated into this inconspicuously injurious and affectively stunting gauntlet of attempt-and-fail without the presence of any real dissent. So why no rupture? Kaufman suggests that there is a way in which the injunction to build of the body ramparts of muscles and the concurrent injunction to build around one's heart, as it were, the means of circumventing emotional connection—that there is a way in which these injunctions (as well as the competitive mandate to thwart rather than accept the other) serves to "preserve patriarchy," or to stave off immanent crisis tendencies in hegemonic masculinity by isolating men from one another.

Jefferson makes a similar claim in positing that masculine "hardness" might be thought of as predicated on the "absence of thought" (Jefferson 81). If this is the case,

what is at stake in revaluing the male body, in recuperating/revalorizing softness and interrogating regulatory ideals of rigidity and stolidity is the potential for critical and ethical/empathetic thought in men. It is safe to say that to encourage the absence of thought is to encourage, of course, the docility of compliance. In this sense, Naomi Wolf's contention that the "cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience" certainly also obtains (though not, admittedly, with equal aptness) in the regime of male body production, and its mostly pernicious mesomorphic imperative (Wolf 187). Our (impossible) fantasies about the male body, fantasies we are incited to captivation by in spite or because of their entailed privations, are very much deployed in accordance with an "obsession" about obedience, docility—the irony being that it is a docility manifested in the coercion to behave "forcefully."

To bring Foucault more closely into dialogue with Butler on this issue, the "disciplining intention of the law" is, for Foucault, to sustain the docilizing frustration of the asymptotic movement in the subject—to maintain, in other words, the permanent measure of a gap between bodily performance and the regulatory ideal. But in what ways does Foucault's asymptotic movement *exceed* its function as this sort of "simple performative" and produce more than that which it has designated or materialized? More specifically: how, in describing and deploying exemplarity, does the asymptotic movement operate as more than just the means by which a regime of body production

institutes a certain formation of bodily experience as model, ensuring the subject's interiorization of that model and desirous comparison of his or her body to established created icons? Does it operate in a way conducive to or productive of rupture?

The Question of Crisis

While I by no means pretend to have in hand a simple solution to the complications of the “impasse” described at the head of this section, for this conclusion I intend to inquire of the preceding parts of the thesis what the functions and effects of gender crisis could be for gross and other anomalously embodied men. But before we assume that we know what we mean when we say “crisis” in this context, we would do well to historicize the matter in order to bring into high relief the distinguishing marks of this crisis or, to be more precise, these *crises* we have at hand. (I pluralize the term in order to underscore the fact that “the contemporary ‘crisis of masculinity,’” as Gardiner shrewdly observes, is “both a rationalization for the drive to maintain patriarchal entitlement and a sign of many men’s legitimate search for new forms of vulnerability, responsibility, intimacy, and maturity” (Gardiner 14).) Since I have concerned myself, in this project, mostly with specifically American containments of corpulence, the “crises of masculinity,” plural, to which I speak here—the ways in which masculinity is conceived of as being in a state of emergency requiring desperate measures of reclamation and defense, and a state of emergency which is, from our perspective, also in certain ways

advantageous to the subversive articulation of “ec-centric” men (and, through the circuit of profeminist rupture, advantageous to all men)—this putative state of emergency ought to be contextualized historically with reference to a particularly American moment of the male establishment’s identity crisis.

Like Kimmel, Stephen Whitehead wonders if the deployment of crisis, the invention of a crisis of masculinity is ever executed for reasons other than a reaction to the male establishment’s being put into a state of political or economic emergency. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century in the United States, men were, in the words of Mary S. Hartman, “jolted by changes in the economic and social order” which caused them to feel as though their superordinate position in the heterosexist gender binary “and their supposedly ‘natural’ male roles” were rooted less in biology than an ideological model of gendered power which required incessant reaffirmation to maintain a claim to unquestionable legitimacy (Hartman 13).

The development of a sense of emergency in the American male establishment during this period was not incidentally coextensive with antiurbanist sentiment. An allergy to the industrial city was voiced as a repudiation motivated in large part by an acute sense of vulnerability, as the city was imagined to encourage “idleness,” and to pose a kind of threat to properly masculine identity formation because of its radical difference from the kinetic principles of the frontier. In contrast to this nostalgic frontier model of seeing and reacting to the world, of male “heroism,” the urban model of masculinity

during the birth of the industrial city was conceived of as representing “civilization, confinement, and female efforts to domesticate the world.” Again we see this sense that masculinity as an “establishment” is something prone to imagine that conspiracies of (usually feminine) assaillment threaten it. But what we also see in the casting of the city as “cultural villain” is the strategic employment and deployment of *gender nostalgia*. In Gardiner’s account, masculinity is fundamentally this type of “nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp” (Gardiner 10). The vocabulary of the male establishment, its self-representational praxis, tends to be informed by what Coontz calls the hallucination of “the way we never were” (quoted in Gardiner 14), an always fugitive nostalgia which, Gardiner suggests, places hegemonic masculinity firmly in a petrified psychic condition of anxiety. The past, as Gardiner puts it, “advances” from the present at a consistently unreachable distance in order to ensure that even the most desperate attempts at backward-citing compliance are at once doomed and addicted to failure.

The pronouncement of a *crisis* of masculinity is, of course, always complicit with this use of nostalgia. The myth, then, of masculinity, for Gardiner, is that “effacing new forms [of male performance] can restore a natural, original male grounding” (Gardiner 10). Hence the tendency of normative masculinities to split off from themselves characteristics deemed unmasculine (“effeteness,” softness/intimacy, etc.) and to project

those consternating characteristics onto the body of the overlegible other in/of hegemonic masculinity, or onto those bodies unintelligibly/overlegibly outside it. The contemporary crisis of masculinity, represented aptly if confusedly by the 1999 film *Fight Club*, is one which aims primarily to deface and efface images of softness in men. For *Fight Club* it is the spectre of “Robert Paulsen” who haunts the male establishment. Bob, played by legendary singer Meat Loaf, is a corpulent man who, as Edward Norton’s introductory voice-over narration informs us, has “bitch tits” as a result of his treatment for testicular cancer (Fincher). The screen time allotted to Meat Loaf’s self-consciously gross Paulsen, at whom the film’s stars express a bodily repulsion at almost any time he is on screen with them, might only be accounted for by noting the director Fincher’s clear interest in fetishizing the experience of displeasure. Bob is the only corpulent masculinity to be found in the film, and is vehemently foreclosed as too old and too fat to gain admittance to the central characters’ underground gang. After he is begrudgingly let in, the film shows little hesitation in expending him.

Kimmel observes that a certain confusion about “what it means to be a ‘real man,’” and the general sense that “masculinity is in crisis” have become commonplace (Kimmel 121). *Fight Club* is the most popular recent example of a narrative that deals with (and certainly *exploits*) this sense of “commonplace” identificatory vulnerability in men. The central character(s) “IKEA Boy” (Edward Norton) and exemplary male “Tyler Durden” (Brad Pitt) decry the fact that they are a generation of men “raised by [their]

mothers” and bemoan their fate as emasculated consumers. “We’re the middle children of history,” says Durden: we have “no purpose or place.... no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War’s a spiritual war. Our Great Depression is our lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won’t. We’re slowly learning that fact. And we are very, very pissed off” (Fincher). Pitt’s beguiling monologue actually poses an interesting enough question regarding the male subject’s education in the promise of certain patriarchal dividends. But whatever rhetorical force the monologue might have is undermined surely by the fact that it is one delivered by a movie god! One commissioned over and over to perform iterations of masculine prowess which, like virtually all of his precursor Tom Cruise’s roles, are modeled as necessarily unachievable. We wonder, then, whether or not questions like those raised in Pitt’s monologue, considering the manner and origin of their utterance, are actually conducive to, or inoculative of rupture.

In addition to the domesticating threat posed by the city (a domestication expressed in *Fight Club* by the “IKEA nesting instinct”), Kimmel also points us to the ways in which the exposure of the male establishment’s imminent instability during unsettling changes to the American social order in the early nineteenth-century was reacted against by a manic return assault, exactly along the lines of Jefferson’s “splitting/projection,” leveled at “effete European bankers and the frighteningly ‘primitive’ Native American population” during the later nineteenth-century (Kimmel

138). American masculinity for modernity is predicated, then, on the marginalization of certain versions of male embodiment foreclosed as unintelligible, and/or unsightly. But it was against “the female establishment” that American masculinity principally took aim. Kimmel offers a summary of three responses to the crisis of American masculinity, all of which speak to, in one way or another, intergender conflict. He explains that the first major response to the modern gender crisis was “a considerable antifeminist backlash,” one which inculpated women for patriarchy’s instability, for the imagined identificatory disenfranchisement of men. The agenda of this group did not have to be disguised. Their express purpose was, of course, the (in no way restitutive) reestablishment of male privilege or dominance—this, of course, even before privilege or dominance had actually been subverted. The second response, which Kimmel calls a “promale backlash,” was, as he reconstructs it, similar to the first: it sought to reassert traditionally masculine modes of performance (not unlike certain strains of bear representation), but harboured distinctly less vitriol for the “New Woman.” The third response, however, one small but perseverant, was issued from a group of profeminist men who, in search of a differently articulated future for men and women, *adopted* the critical framework and developing conditions for subversion found in feminism. Now, while most of these men retained an entrenched belief in a heteronormative gender binary, they argued progressively that increased “feminization” of men could mitigate “the dangers of compulsive masculinity” (Kimmel 150).

So, while the deployment of crisis was—and, as Kimmel explains, currently is—most often a vigorous response to “gender confusion” and a defense against “serious challenges to inherited configurations,” we might ask if there is also the real possibility in gender crisis of initiating a rupture of the disciplining intention of a particular historically located gender regime. Though theorists such as Connell and King-Kok Cheung pose the possibility of taking advantage of the contemporary narrative of a masculinity crisis to produce a set of consequences that “exceed and confound” the normative/disciplinary intention of the law (spilling over in the form of “transgressive” or ec-centric bodies) the question we must ask is: how do we in this way take advantage of a kind of crisis deployed chiefly, one might even say exclusively in support of a patriarchal agenda? If crisis is a thing devised primarily as “a rationalization for the drive to maintain patriarchal entitlement,” and if it is used in the self-protection of hegemonic masculinity, for the purpose of *circumventing* rupture, won’t any gesture to the potentiality of refiguration immanent in such a crisis be, in some sense, wasted? Or is there another way to figure the critical actions of this small but consequential contingent of men who abstained from taking recourse to “crisis” to reaffirm definitively outmoded gender relations, but embraced and cultivated politico-economically effected rupture as a means by which the project of masculine embodiment might be forced into radical rearticulation? Is the case of the profeminist masculinity movement’s reimagining of crisis in terms distinct from the need to recapture patriarchal entitlement not, in fact, even more significant because it

stands as an example of a politics of rearticulating one's subjection which is directly disobedient of a hegemonic mandate (to think of one's gender as under attack) acutely stronger and more urgent in its incitation than usual (because under distress)?

But how does this apply to corpulent masculinity? In Gardiner's words, the popular discussion of *crisis* "demands attention and action while remaining vague about the alleged problem, who is troubled by it, and who stands to benefit either from its incitement or its resolution" (Gardiner 14) The discourse on gender crisis occludes and neglects what we might, carefully, call the *politics* of crisis: a reconsideration of those things which mobilize or motivate the writing of crisis. If, as we might conjecture, the crisis of masculinity is a certain type of spectral hallucination deployed for expedient ends and on very particular terms, what are the material consequences of declaring/staging a crisis of masculinity around certain alternative masculinities that are not as often spoken about, ones that, as I've said, require recuperation as abject for the purposes of politicization (that is, alternative masculinities that are not necessarily black, not necessarily Jewish or Asian American and not a specific conception of the "effete" queer man, to name a few major ones)? These alternative masculinities occupy a focal position in contemporary critical dialogues on the transgressive or nonhegemonic, and as such are consciously implicated or invoked in pronouncing gender in a crisis of coherence. But those "subaltern patriarchs" or ec-centric bodies that are marginalized in ways not yet spoken about, and in ways that are not total perhaps *because* not spoken about, stand to

both benefit and be injured by existing as bodies within a tending-toward-crisis matrix of masculinities. To not be invoked as part of a crisis of masculinity—a kind of emergency, we have said, which is deployed for specific ends by an anxiously hierarchized homosocial hierarchy, a male establishment that stands to benefit from the renewal of its power over bodies through declaring such a gender emergency—means that fat men, not often spoken of as part of this emergency, may be amenable to the construction of a productive kind of destabilization, a troubling of masculinity that appropriates for the purposes of rupture the expedient, self-serving rhetoric of crisis.

And certainly the “feminization” of masculinity (even if too simplistically dependent on a binaristic understanding of gender performance), the softening of the primary injunction for a man to “toughen up,” is palliative to the denigrating interpellation of fat men. But what, we might wonder, do we lose when the fat male body is incorporated/validated as part of a hegemonic matrix of authorized bodies? Something of the queerness of this subjectivity *vis-à-vis* normative culture wanes in potency. Because, as this project has argued throughout, the contemporary fat male body, recuperated as abjected, houses the capacity for “a consequential disobedience.” Indeed, we find at the site of the contemporary corpulent male’s body, in the characteristic inconsistency of his gender identification, the example of a negotiation with the conditions of an inapproximable intelligibility/normality which, in Connell’s words, “cannot be sustained,” and which, being (exposed as) unsustainable, tends to render the

norm cited, muscularity, unstable or in question. It is the threat of rupture, then, the threat of the corpulent frame's impending implosion of certain morphological norms—its flagrant occupation of a position in excess of the asymptotic movement—which necessitates the urgent injunction for the fat body to cohere, and correct itself: to shift it from reproachably “ghastly,” to intelligibly/containably gendered.

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