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Simulacra Of The (un)real: Reading Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle As A Feminist Text Of Bodily Resistance

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SIMULACRA OF THE (UN)REAL: READING MARGARET ATWOOD'S *LADY
ORACLE* AS A FEMINIST TEXT OF BODILY RESISTANCE

A Thesis Presented

by

Kimberly Michelle Dean

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The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

This thesis project is centered on the female body, specifically body image, in relation to Western, cultural images of women. This is a problem that has been around, essentially, since the beginning of Western art. While different scholars argue whether or not this problem has become worse, it is nonetheless problematic that we are still, in 2018, fighting patriarchy's control of our bodies via body image. Grounding my project in Susan Bordo's 1993 text *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, this thesis explores Bordo's argument that the female body is culturally produced through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra. Reading Bordo via Baudrillard allows us to explore this age-old problem at a new angle, giving us new reasons that explain why we are still stuck in patriarchy's chains.

Through this lens, I demonstrate how and why Third-wave feminist activism (I focus specifically on the Body Positive Movement) is failing in their attempts to reclaim the female body: the issue lies within Third-wave activism's desire to portray othered bodies as beautiful and desirable. This becomes problematic in the era of simulacra: abject bodies do not resemble the (un)real ideal so they become "unreal" in the eyes of society. This attempt to represent abject bodies (obese, racialized, trans, disabled) as beautiful results in stigmatization and disgust towards said bodies, and thus the Body Positive Movement leaves out abject bodies because these abject bodies cannot be seen as beautiful in a society that deems them unreal. I argue that in order to reclaim the female body, we must first reclaim the mind side of the mind/body dualism before we can successfully reclaim our bodies.

To demonstrate how this is possible, I use Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* as a case study that not only shows how the female body is culturally produced in the era of simulacra, but also allows us to see how reclaiming the mind side of the binary does allow the protagonist, Joan, to reclaim her past and body as her own, without shame. It is through fiction that reality is represented, and I conclude my thesis with my own personal anecdotes, showing how resistance via fiction can transcend into real life and point to a new, hopeful future.

DEDICATION

For all women: our bodily reclamations have been long overdue.

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INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir, in the opening of book two of her groundbreaking, feminist text *The Second Sex*, proclaims that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283). This idea of “becoming” a woman has been explored by many feminist theorists throughout the decades, and this exploration of woman is a complex one. What seems most interesting, though, is how, even today, women cannot escape the pressures that come along with one facet that helps constitute us: our bodies. It is no secret that Western ideology has focused women with the body (read: negative) side of the mind/body dualism with men being associated with the mind (read: positive). Elizabeth Grosz, a well-known, psychoanalytic feminist, writes that “the body has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason” (5). The foundation of Western ideology is built on patriarchy, and in a society where women are considered the “lesser” of the two sexes, the body becomes the easier site of control, whereas the mind is more complex and more difficult to contain. The mind is also allotted more freedom than the body; thoughts and ideas are privileged over physical acts that are tied to embodiment. The process of becoming woman is tied up in patriarchal control of the female body, so this process of becoming “woman” is actually the process of becoming what patriarchy defines and envisions woman to be.

This patriarchal “ideal” woman has shifted over time. For example, the ideal woman once reflected the stereotypical 1950s housewife as demonstrated in Figure 1: a

woman, dressed modestly and usually in an apron to symbolize her domestic status, with hair and makeup done to near perfection to highlight her feminine, physical qualities. While advertisements existed with images of women similar to the image provided, the 1950s ideal woman was idealized, not solely for her body, but for what she represented: domesticity, femininity, docility. She wears these qualities on her body via her clothing and through the tasks she is



Figure 1: 1950's Housewife

performing, but her body is not immediately on display for the male gaze. The 1950s housewife was, arguably, the most recent version of the nineteenth century “angel in the house.” Feminist activists have fought these patriarchal depictions of the “angel in the house”—a concept most popular in the nineteenth century which describes the idealized housewife and mother. For instance, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar tackle the issue of the angel in the house in their 1979 groundbreaking text *The Madwoman in the Attic*, showing how confining woman to such a limited space can only result in her own demise. Feminists have also gained much ground on women’s sexual liberation, take Luce Irigaray’s 1985 text, *The Sex Which is not One*, which thoroughly analyzes female sexuality against the psychoanalytic lens created by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Gilbert, Gubar, and Irigaray show that great strides have been made towards female liberation, but this is not to say that women are completely free of patriarchal control in today’s society. Instead, this control has merely re-centered itself on a medium that has existed for centuries: in 2018, we are still fighting cultural images of the female body for

the male gaze, images that “represent” a farcical reality and push Western beauty ideals onto women across the globe.

Women once became “woman,” or at least close to it, when they fulfilled the ideal housewife role. And while the qualities of domesticity, femininity, and docility are still favored in women today, the female ideal has moved away from these seemingly abstract qualities and has been placed directly back onto the female body. Now, in 2018, women can only become “woman” when they obtain the idealized female body that is on display, constantly, within our Western, consumer culture. This problem associated with the female body and Western beauty ideals, though, is not relatively new; the infamous phrase, “thin ideal,” has been around for decades, infamously popularized around the time supermodel Twiggy became a popular sensation in the U.S.¹ Feminist scholars have been discussing, and attempting to theorize a solution to, the female body and body image problems as early as, say, the beginning of Western art, pre-A.D. But let us focus on feminist attempts within the past few decades: for example, the 1970s show Helene Cixous famously calling women to action, to write our bodies, every inch and aspect of them. This call was meant to liberate women by accepting their bodies instead of being ashamed of them. The 1990s also saw a prolific spark in feminist theory on the body; for instance, Gail Weiss theorizes that “embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of the embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other humans and nonhumans” (5). In other words,

¹ I do not mean to suggest Twiggy started the phrase “thin ideal” but she very much embodied it, and her endorsement of thinness helped cement it as a trend in our Western culture.

Weiss argues how our embodied existences are shaped and formed by our interactions with the world around us.

This idea of embodiment as determined by culture is key to other scholarly discussions as well. Specifically, Elizabeth Grosz argues that “in opposition to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed” (23-24). The history of the terms essentialism, biologism, and naturalism within feminism have stressed that women and men, biologically, have intrinsically different dispositions, but feminism in the nineties began moving towards this idea of our bodies being culturally produced. Grosz, writing this in 1994, echoes the argument pioneered by Susan Bordo in 1993. For Bordo, female bodies are cultural productions—that is, they are the result of images as representations produced within our culture. However, Bordo does clarify that “we are not all exposed to ‘the same cultural environment.’ What we are all exposed to, rather are homogenizing and normalizing images and ideologies concerning ‘femininity’ and female beauty” (62). With this commentary as well as her discussion on how U.S. television changed the perception of female body image in Fiji, it seems as though Bordo suggests, in 1993, that Westernized ideas of beauty and the ideal female body had begun to become widespread, branching out beyond the North American continent and into cultures seemingly unattached from the West. Now, in 2018, with technology a global phenomenon, specifically social media accounts like Instagram where images are at the center of the application, we are all familiar with consumer cultural images and representations that seek to control women’s bodies by showing them what ideal women should look like. For these feminist theorists, the female body is a

product of the culture around them. More specifically, it is a product of Western culture; this distinction is important to note due to how Western beauty ideals for women have now spread across the globe, affecting women of all countries.

Bordo's contribution to feminist theories on the body is an important one. Unlike Weiss and Grosz, Bordo's discussion is not rooted in psychoanalytic discourse. Her conversation is centered on the effect of culture on women, and focuses solely on the depiction of the female body in cultural images and discusses eating disorders, direct results of said images. But what has been of most interest to me is, when I'm discussing Bordo and her overall argument with other colleagues, how her claims seem to be easily dismissed as obvious. It is as though everyone knows that the female body is a product of culture. Even Bordo discusses this problem of "knowing:" she discusses how, yes, we do "know" that these images are virtually photoshopped, creating impossible bodies to obtain and that plastic surgery alters the body to try and attempt to fit into an ideal look, but "knowing" is not that simple (xxvii). Yes, my colleagues, as well as others, may find Bordo's argument to be obvious, but it is still concerning that we still have not come any closer to solving the problem of the female body in our culture. Oversimplifying Bordo's claims, I argue, is keeping us from seeing how complex her argument truly is.

In order to understand the depth of its complexities, this thesis project seeks to revisit Bordo's argument of the female body as a cultural production in its relation to Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and simulation. Understanding Bordo via Baudrillard allows us to reopen the conversation surrounding the problems of the female body and the effect cultural images have on us. It is not enough to understand the female

body as merely a cultural product; rather, it is necessary for us to see how the female body is culturally produced in a society determined by simulacra. The cultural images that surround us not only create unattainable beauty ideals and goals, these images are also simulacra of the (un)real. To say these images simulate the (un)real is to demonstrate how they feign to reflect real, female bodies, but since simulacra have no historical precedent, they are merely representing the unreal under the guise of being “real.”

With female body image and psychological disorders surrounding the body still prevalent in society, revisiting Bordo’s claim in context with Baudrillard’s theories is as important as ever. Baudrillard’s and Bordo’s ideas complement each other—Bordo argues that female bodies are cultural productions, and if we live in a culture of simulations, it is clear why so many women suffer from eating and bodily disorders: they are chasing a reality that is *unreal*. The pairing of these two theories works to create an understanding of why we find ourselves entrapped within this society of consumerism and cultural images which dominate almost every aspect of our lives. And it is through this that we can finally understand why previously offered solutions and feminist bodily activism are still not working. Susie Orbach tells women to “open your eyes wide enough to see yourself, who you are. Imagine being more you than you are, rather than more somebody else” (201). She continues, stating that “until you accept the way you look now, you won’t be able to change” (202). This solution is not only overly simplified, it is also ignorant to just how complex body image is in the era of simulacra. My project will discuss outright how women are not only chasing (un)real ideals, but are also incapable

of viewing their bodies as real. Women cannot “accept the way [they] look” if the images pervading culture tell them that the way they look is wrong, illegitimate.

Solutions similar to Orbach’s cannot be successful in the era of simulacra due to women’s complicated existence in an (un)real world. But other solutions and attempts manifested in the movement of Third-wave Feminism, a movement believed to have begun in the early 1990s, have also proven to be no match against simulacra. Grosz argues that “what needs to be changed are attitudes, beliefs, and values rather than the body itself” (17), attitudes and beliefs that reflect the body as a “two-dimensional continuum” (22). Similarly, Weiss claims that “what is required above all are corporeal solutions, new body images, and new ways of imagining bodies whose very diversity resists univocal or definitions” (86). Here we can see Grosz and Weiss arguing for different forms of intersectionality, a term theorized in 1989 that has evolved since and has become a major tenet of Third-wave Feminism.

Originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality focuses on emphasizing differences between various marginalized groups, not to divide them, but to show how this “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). The problem with feminism that adheres to identity politics, for Crenshaw, is that these practices “expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling” (1242). She stresses compounding identities that are also intersecting forms of oppression; using her example, we should not ignore how women of color are doubly marginalized but rather dissect each marginalized identity as

different and unique to the formation of identities. Our differences are unique to our individualities, and instead of seeing them as dividing factors, we should see them as formative in our multiple identities that, at points, intersect with one another, giving us grounding to unite in solidarity.

The idea of intersectionality is, seemingly, promising in our attempts to reclaim the female body. But with Third-wave body positive movements² rising in the early nineties, we are left to wonder why we are left in the same bodily predicament that we were in during the 1970s with Cixous and Orbach. Why is it that we live in a time period where feminism preaches inclusivity, and yet we not only still struggle to find representations of women who have “abject” bodies but also have the abjection of some bodies in general?³ Some scholars such, as Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff, even argue that “beauty pressures have intensified” in 2017, the year they published their anthology of feminist essay on “aesthetic labour” (26). I am not looking to make the argument that we are worse off now than we were a few decades ago, but it is important to see how, even with the rise of Third-wave Feminism and the ideology of intersectionality, the problems surrounding the female body and body image are much more complex than we originally thought. While looking at the prevalence of eating disorders, James I. Hudson et al. state that:

² These movements developed in the early nineties and focus on trying to combat the infamous “thin ideal” trend by creating a body-loving culture in a society that seemingly only loves thin, beautiful bodies that reflect Western beauty ideals.

³ Using Victoria Boynton’s established definition in her essay “The Sex-cited Body in Margaret Atwood,” abject bodies are defined as being “outside heterosexual norms—‘unsightly’ and thus uncited” (Boynton 54).

our study provides support for the common impression that the incidence of bulimia nervosa has increased significantly in the second half of the twentieth century (Kendler et al 1991; Hoek and van Hoek 2003), and it provides the first data showing a similar trend for binge eating disorder. Nevertheless, there are some data suggesting that the incidence of bulimia nervosa may be leveling off in recent years (Currin et al 2005). Whether the incidence of anorexia nervosa has increased over time is unclear and subject to debate. (353)⁴

While anorexia nervosa does not have sufficient data to claim its rise, decline, or leveling off, the fact that other disorders such as bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder are either still rising or remaining the same today demonstrates how we are no closer to solving this problem than we were in the time of Grosz, Weiss, and Bordo.

It is clear that our fight to reclaim our bodies is not working, and, as this thesis project will demonstrate, our attempts at resistance are not working because we are living in the era of simulacra. Cultural images existed long before Bordo's groundbreaking argument (depictions of the female body have existed, essentially, since the beginning of Western art), but in our world of simulacra, these images have no historical grounding to fall back on. These images have existed prior to postmodernism, the era Baudrillard is theorizing in, but it is through Baudrillard's vocabulary that we can understand these images as simulacra. Feminist activist movements like the Body Positive Movement (established circa 1996) find resistance in their attempts to portray abject bodies as

⁴ I do want to note that this study is eleven years old, having been published in 2007, but it has been difficult to find other studies with information on the rise and/or decline of eating disorders over time.

beautiful and desirable. Not only is this method reflective of “old patterns of representation,” it also is attempting to make abject bodies beautiful in a society that does not, and cannot, see abject bodies as real and legitimate.⁵ This is where the Body Positive Movement begins to lack inclusivity: showing abject bodies as beautiful and desirable results in resistance and reactions such as stigma and disgust, reactions that been normalized and seemingly expected in 2018. Through this, the movement shows selectivity in which bodies they represent, a complex problem I explore throughout the first chapter.

Exploring the complexity of the female body in the era of simulacra allows us to pinpoint why, exactly, we cannot move beyond the same patriarchal problems we have been experiencing for centuries. But this leaves us with a new problem to consider: if current attempts of resistance are failing due to the above problems, we are left to wonder whether there can ever be a successful form of resistance in the era of simulacra. Baudrillard would, of course, argue that there cannot be. For him, simulacra have made reality ahistorical, and because of this, we cannot reclaim what was once real. However, I argue that there is a form of resistance that has the potential to be successful; for this form of resistance to work, though, we must move backward rather than continuing into the same wall. Instead of focusing on solely reclaiming the body, we must first reclaim the mind side of the mind/body binary, a side that has been denied to women throughout history. Our bodies are treated as ahistorical within postmodernism because cultural images have not only defined society, but they have also defined our own individual

⁵ From Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight*; I discuss this more in-depth in Chapter One.

identities, identities that begin and grow within the mind. You cannot have one without completely annihilating the other. As Grosz argues, “to reduce either the mind to the body or the body to the mind is to leave their interaction unexplained, explained away, impossible” (7). Being denied claim to the mind has kept women under patriarchy’s control—we have been denied female agency, and our personhoods have failed to manifest themselves due to the fact that we are solely identified with our bodies.

This theorized form of resistance may seem impossible in the era of simulacra. However, if we move away from real life situations and into the realm of fiction, we can see how this form of resistance not only can be successful, but also how it has been at the tip of our fingers for decades in Margaret Atwood’s 1979 novel *Lady Oracle*. My thesis project is organized as such to build to this suggested form of resistance:

Chapter One outlines the connection between Susan Bordo’s and Jean Baudrillard’s theories. After establishing how Bordo’s original argument is more complex than we initially thought, the chapter will then move into how Third-wave feminist activism, born within the era of simulacra, is failing to overcome these cultural images. Discussions on lack of inclusivity as well as stigma and disgust will bring to light many of the key problems faced and why they are still problems due to the effect of simulacra. This chapter seeks to establish what is deemed “real” and unreal in the era of simulacra. Once this knowledge is established, we can begin to theorize successful forms of resistance against patriarchal bodily control. By the end, I will begin my initial, theoretical solution to our bodily problems by suggesting that is through reclaiming the mind side of the binary that we can eventually move to reclaim our bodies.

Chapter Two will focus on Atwood's *Lady Oracle* as not only a case study but also as a means of resistance that has gone overlooked. I will use the theories established in my first chapter as a lens to read the novel, and after showing how the novel emphasizes the key points outlined in the first chapter, I will then demonstrate how the novel successfully liberates the protagonist through my suggested solution. Fiction can be a useful tool for viewing the world around us, and although the novel has a touch of magical realism, the problems faced throughout reflect that which real life women face every day.

My thesis project will have a concluding chapter that discusses a personal anecdote. The conclusion will work to emphasize how fictional problems extend into the real world. However, even though my anecdote acknowledges the very real problems of simulacra and the female body, it also seeks to look forward to a new, hopeful future.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FEMALE BODY IN THE ERA OF SIMULACRA

Susan Bordo's 1993 groundbreaking text *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, offered, for its time, a new theory of the female body and female body image. More specifically, Bordo argues that the female body is a product of culture: the images that dominate society and represent the ideal female body become desired by women and, in turn, they police their bodies in attempts to obtain this ideal. This theory hardly seems groundbreaking today—feminists have been fighting sexist depictions of women in the media, before *and* after Bordo's work. From celebrities like Jennifer Lawrence calling out *Flare* magazine for photoshopping an image so that she looked thinner to scholars like Roxanne Gay writing a memoir about her fat body, women from various spheres are working to combat patriarchy's control of the female body.⁶ Feminist activists have created relatively new movements such as the Body Positive Movement and the Love Your Body discourse that seek to help women love their bodies in a society that tells them they shouldn't unless they look like the women in consumer images. Scholars such as Bordo and Susie Orbach have established that women suffer from bodily and mental disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and body dysmorphia at a higher rate than men. What is of most concern is that these bodily disorders are still prevalent within women despite active feminist resistance. In the era of Third-wave Feminism and intersectionality, these images and their effect on women's bodies have not changed much and one can't help but wonder why.

⁶ Gay, Roxanne. *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. Harper, 2017.

This chapter will explore the problems of cultural images of the female body. I will show how these images result in women policing their bodies to fit a patriarchal “ideal” of the female body that is neither real nor natural. Through this demonstration of the dangers of these images, I will, using Jean Baudrillard’s concepts of simulation and simulacra, argue that these cultural images are actually simulacra of the (un)real; in other words, we are trying to obtain an ideal that merely pretends to exist but does not and never has. Simulacra destroy what is actually “real,” leaving behind no trace of a once present reality. It is because of simulacra that women are chasing body ideals that are not obtainable because they are not real, nor do they bear any historical reality. By adding Baudrillard to the conversation, I will grapple with the question of why it has been so difficult for feminism and feminists to move beyond the problems of female body representation, a problem that has existed for centuries. This discussion will then move into my analysis of why Third-wave Feminism’s ideas of intersectionality have failed to reach body positive movements and why psychological disorders surrounding the body are still so prevalent in women. It is important that we revisit Bordo’s work through the lens of Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra; through this lens, the possibility of feminism to finally move beyond the obstacles created by patriarchy and finally obtain female, bodily agency manifests itself.

The Female Body as a Product of Simulacra: Reading Bordo via Baudrillard

Bordo's argument that the female body is culturally produced is more complicated than it is given credit for. Her argument tends to get oversimplified, explained away as something we all already know in 2018. In order to understand her argument's complexities, we must first understand Baudrillard's ideas of simulations and simulacra and his take on postmodernism. Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* gives readers a new way to view the postmodern world. Ironically, he tells us that we are not *really* viewing the postmodern world. The images and representations we encounter daily are actually simulacra of the real. For Baudrillard, "to simulate is to feign what one doesn't have" (3); he continues his theory, noting that "simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). Unpacking both of these quotes, we can see that simulacra, for Baudrillard, are the artifacts in society that "represent" reality, but these artifacts have no historical precedent; they only *pretend* to represent what is and has been real. So, for Baudrillard, the images we encounter within our consumer society are images that only pretend to represent reality.

However, Baudrillard's concept of simulacra goes further and is much more complex. Simulacra not only feign to be real; they also destroy reality, making it "*now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real*" (Baudrillard 21; original emphasis). Essentially, simulacra are copies of copies of copies that have murdered any trace of what was once real. Simulacra have feigned to represent reality for so long that what was once real can no longer be returned to or known. This idea is also emphasized in the work of Peggy Phelan. She states that "a believable image is the product of a

negotiation with an unverifiable real” (1). Although writing largely within psychoanalytic discourse, here Phelan is not referring to the Lacanian Real, but rather the real as argued by Baudrillard. Our realities are constructed through images that have no real, historical grounding due to the fact that simulacra are masks and murderers of reality: they disguise and murder reality, simulating an (un)real. The catch is, though, we cannot lift these masks to find reality, for if we were to try, we would find nothing behind them. We are, according to Baudrillard, living in a “precession of simulacra” where reality does not exist and can no longer be rediscovered because simulacra have destroyed all of its historical grounding.

Baudrillard’s concept of simulation and simulacra, while an important facet of postmodern theory, has been largely overlooked in feminist discourse, especially feminist discourse on the body. This could be due to Baudrillard’s bad reputation with feminism, as he has been known for criticizing the movement and promoting his idea of the “feminine.” A. Keith Goshorn discusses this problem, writing that Baudrillard “has long staked his claim on the inevitable superiority of the *object* over the subject, and we soon learn that he is quite serious in contending that women’s former (for him, successful, because *artifice*-ial) role as sexual object was far preferable to any subjective strategies they have since devised for their advancement” (273; original emphasis). As we can see here, Baudrillard’s concepts of what the ‘feminine’ should be is problematic in its archaic, misogynistic nature. He is known to value woman as object over woman as subject, the very issue scholars like Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and others have fought to dismantle. Bordo is one of the few feminist scholars who briefly

discusses Baudrillard. She writes that, yes, we do “know” that these cultural images of the female body are virtually photoshopped, creating impossible bodies to obtain, and we “know” that plastic surgery alters the body to try to fit into an ideal look, but “knowing” is not that simple. Instead, “in the era of the ‘hyperreal’ (as Baudrillard calls it), such ‘knowledge’ is as faded and frayed as the old map in the Borges tale, unable to cast a shadow of doubt over the dazzling, compelling, authoritative images themselves” (104). We may recognize that photoshop and cosmetic surgery are altering what we conceive as “real,” but that does not change the power these images have on us. These simulacra are all women have of what our bodies should look like, and even if they are not reality, they still dominate and control our lives. This is because simulacra have destroyed the real, so even if we are aware that the representations of women’s bodies have been virtually altered to showcase an unnatural body, we have no reality to fall back on, and we are in a place where we can no longer reach the reality that existed before simulacra.

But the idea of living in a world of simulacra where reality and what is real can no longer be known helps feminist theory in understanding cultural images of the female body. Bordo explores how images in consumer culture have impacted the way we perceive and construct other women’s bodies as well as our own. These images, or representations of what the female body should like, “homogenize” and “these homogenized images normalize—that is, they function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, ‘disciplines’, and ‘corrects’ itself” (Bordo 24-25). And because these images become the normalized image of what the female body should look like, they replace our lived-in bodies as what is deemed real. Simulacra have seemingly

destroyed the original female body by normalizing the (un)real, and as women walk and live in their physical bodies, this lack of knowing the (un)reality these images produce results in the intense policing of the female body by men and women alike as well as various psychological disorders and anxieties tied to the female body.

The complexity that Baudrillard brings to the discussion adds a new layer to consider: although we walk and live in our physical bodies every day, simulacra have caused us to view our own bodies as unreal. Bordo states that “these images are teaching us how to see” (xviii); we are being taught to see that our bodies are not “real” if they do not reflect the (un)real ideal. Our bodies, arguably, may be the one, tangible medium that connects us to what is real, but simulacra have destroyed our access to and knowledge of reality. In turn, eating and bodily disorders that pervade women’s lives are results of women’s desire to have (un)real bodies: we want the bodies we see in cultural images without knowing that body does not exist. Our embodied existences become shaped via simulacra, and because simulacra are farcical realities, women must perform *unnatural* measures on their bodies in order to obtain, or get close to obtaining, the (un)real ideal female body as portrayed through cultural images. We turn to different, and extreme, means to shape our bodies to reflect the false reality around us.

What is portrayed as real and natural is, in fact, impossible to achieve through natural measures. Baudrillard argues that our image-dependent culture is why simulacra exist, and because of this, “there is no ‘natural’ body” (Bordo 142). The bodies of women in photoshopped images are not real—they are contoured and altered to fit a female ideal, but because these images are so prevalent in society, they “teach us how to see” as well

as mask our perception of what the real body is. As Bordo notes, “it is the created image that has the hold on to our most vibrant, immediate sense of what is, of what matters, of what we must pursue for ourselves” (104). We only know ourselves through these simulations of the real, and because simulations of the real “mask the absence of a profound reality” (Baudrillard 6), we chase these body ideals because they are the only representations of the real we have, no matter that those images are not real. This is what is holding feminism from moving beyond the power of cultural images: we are fighting simulacra without having a sense of reality to ground ourselves in. Our physical bodies that we live in every day may be the one medium we have that could possibly bring back the reality destroyed by simulation, but our embodied existences have been marred by simulacra teaching us to view the bodies we have as unreal. Copies of once, real female bodies have made the female body today inauthentic: we are walking around in culturally decided bodies. We fight our real, biological bodies because they do not reflect the images we see in society.

Eating Disorders and Cosmetic Surgery: Resistance or Results of Simulacra?

Eating and bodily disorders become the results of the fights against our own bodies. Feminist scholars have theorized such eating disorders as anorexia and binge eating disorder as ways women rebel against patriarchal control. Bordo writes that “the obese and anorectic are therefore disturbing partly because they embody resistance to cultural norms” (203). This implication of eating disorders as resistance is not unfounded:

eating disorders tend to be colored by the desire to obtain control over our bodies. Susie Orbach also echoes this idea of resistance through eating disorders: “Fat is not about lack of self-control or lack of will power. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength... It is a response to the inequality of the sexes” (23). She continues, stating that “For many women, compulsive eating and being fat have become one way to avoid being marked or seen as the ideal woman” (Orbach 25). Eating disorders as forms of resistance, in past theory, makes sense—the act of overeating or the refusal to eat are, seemingly, choices women can make to control how their bodies look. But this argument was made by feminist scholars who saw these images as mere cultural tools of control, not simulacra of the (un)real. In a world where (un)real female bodies are considered the norm, it is time to change how we should theorize eating disorders. Eating disorders are not forms of resistance, but instead they are the result of woman’s fight against her own body. In the era of simulacra, eating disorders become ways to either attempt obtain this idealized body (which is not possible) or a way to cope (through excessive or inadequate eating) with the idea that the bodies we walk in every day are not “real.” Instead of being forms of resistance, eating disorders become another means of control for patriarchy; fighting our bodies only serves to increase patriarchy’s control over us.

This may be one reason why eating disorders within the female population have remained a constant problem. Luna Dolezal puts it quite simply: the “real” expectations women have for their bodies are “unreal” (108). Eating disorders manifest themselves within this vicious cycle of chasing a reality that does not exist: women turn to unnatural measures (starving our bodies or overfeeding them) when they are showed that the bodies

they have are not real via cultural images of the (un)real female body. Baudrillard states that simulacra are “murderers of the real” (5); with reality murdered, eating disorders are no longer attempts to regain control but rather attempts to become a reality that does not exist and never has in the postmodern world. This is why eating disorders, in the era of simulacra, should not and cannot be seen as means of resisting cultural norms.

Baudrillard allows for new, possible theories of eating disorders, such as the one I have put forth, theories that help the conversation grow in new directions and offer up new mediums of resistance and rebellion against patriarchy.

Forms of resistance should not result in damaging or hurting oneself. Fighting against patriarchy should not result in fighting your own body, neglecting it in ways that, over time, will eventually force it shut down on itself. Both anorexia nervosa and binge eating disorder are wins for patriarchy: women either try to obtain the “thin ideal” that is “based on illusory ideals” (Dolezal 108) or they eat themselves into a body that is so stigmatized by society that they are soon treated as illegitimate, and, in the words of Amy Ferrell, “primitive.” Ferrell, in her explanation, writes that, throughout our white, Western history, “a fat body, then, was a primitive body, lower on the scale of civilization and highly sexual” (68). And while this idea has changed over time, fat bodies are seen to be uncontrollable and uncivilized due to the inability to prevent excessive eating. Whichever disorder comes to fruition, patriarchy still wins as the female body is weakened and kept under control by simulacra.

Eating disorders are the most commonly discussed result of female body image issues, but another patriarchal practice is also of concern: cosmetic surgery, a topic that

has been growing in a number of contemporary feminist discussions, specifically feminism in the age of neoliberalism. Cosmetic surgery is a popular practice that women turn to for surgical procedures to “fix” their bodies. Dolezal discusses, in-depth, cosmetic surgery’s history and growth in popularity:

It is only very recently that elective cosmetic surgery has entered the mainstream as a routine and socially acceptable way to alter appearance. In the 1950s, for example, aesthetic plastic surgery was a largely marginal and unknown medical practice. Just a few decades later, it is a recognized medical specialty, not to mention a highly lucrative multi-billion dollar global industry. While cosmetic surgery initially targeted salient and visible aspects of the body such as the nose, breasts and belly, modern techniques catalogue an astonishing number of procedures... including face-lifts, thigh-lifts, buttock implants, liposuction... among many others.

(125)

As Dolezal shows, our collective outlook on cosmetic surgery has changed over time as the practice itself has grown within the public eye, and it seems she is suggesting that it may be partly due to how the surgeries have expanded beyond visible deformities. From straightening out the curve in your nose to making your breasts one cup size larger, cosmetic surgery allows women to alter their bodies to closely resemble an ideal, (un)real body. This is not to say that women in the 1950s were not turning to cosmetic surgery as women in 2018 are—rather, it appears Dolezal is noting that the practice was not as widespread as it is now. What is interesting, though, is how these popular, cosmetic

surgeries are often mocked in society while simultaneously still being pushed onto women. Women get these surgeries to fix what society deems bodily deformities, but they also face backlash due to the fact that they could not obtain the (un)real ideal through natural measures. This does not stop the pressures to turn to cosmetic surgery, though, because even though there is possible backlash, the pressures to obtain the (un)real ideal still weigh heavily on women thus keeping it a popular practice. Breast augmentation was the most popular cosmetic surgery in 2016, with “290,467 procedures performed, up 4 percent from 2015”.⁷ This is not shocking considering that Donald Trump stated in a 2005 interview with Howard Stern that “A person who was flat-chested is very hard to be a 10, Okay?”, only to be elected as president of the United States of America in 2016, his voters aware of his sexist remarks⁸. While Trump has received much backlash from his sexist comments and has met a great amount of resistance, it speaks volumes that millions of people in the U.S. were fine with electing a man who blatantly believes in and spreads patriarchal beauty ideals of women. These standards are so engrained in society that men no longer have to be ashamed of publicly admitting they prefer women with large breasts. Women rushing to their plastic surgeon to fit these beauty standards has steadily increased over time, showing that, in today’s society, we have not progressed much in liberating women from these controlling ideals and images. I am not arguing that Trump is the cause of breast augmentation being the most popular surgery in 2016, but he is most definitely a symptom of the larger problem: that cosmetic

⁷ Data retrieved from www.plasticsurgery.org

⁸ For the full transcript of this interview, visit <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-interview-howard-stern-show-december-7-2005>

surgery is accepted and viewed as natural despite the shame inherent in the failure to naturally embody the (un)real ideal.

The problem with this notion of the “natural” body is that the body is not “natural” until it has been surgically modified, an unnatural practice. Even with this, society still reacts negatively to women who surgically alter their bodies. Within her larger discussion of physical disability, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson discusses cosmetic surgery and its implications. She states that plastic surgery advocates make “women’s unmodified bodies as unnatural and abnormal, while casting surgically altered bodies as normal and natural” (27). This is because “extraordinary bodies are seen as deviations to be standardized” (Garland-Thomson 79). For Garland-Thomson, extraordinary bodies mean freakish or disabled bodies, but the concept still applies: if it is not the (un)real ideal, it must be altered to reflect the images around us. Bordo does say that there is no natural body, and this is due to simulacra of the real: women do not have representations of real bodies to look to, so they medically alter their bodies in order to obtain an unnatural body. Dolezal’s discussion of cosmetic surgery within her larger conversation on body shame helps show her readers how, through the practice of cosmetic surgery, “the body is *literally* shaped by shame” (123; original emphasis). This shame is a result of women seeing their own bodies as unreal and seeing (un)real images as real. Cosmetic surgery is now seen as something that is natural—something will “smooth” out the irregularities of our bodies, putting us one step closer to achieving the “perfect” body.

What once was the (un)real ideal in Western countries (the U.S., the U.K.) has become a problem across different countries and cultures. Western beauty ideals have

migrated around the globe and are impossible to escape. The problem of simulacra is a global one, as seen through Bordo's initial discussion of how the introduction of television drastically changed body image standards within the Fijian culture in 1991 (xvi), so the "perfect" body is only perfect if it reflects westernized ideals. And we can see that cosmetic surgery reflects this ideology: Dolezal notes that ethnic cosmetic surgery adheres to a white, Western beauty ideal (134). In her discussion about singer/songwriter Cher, Bordo asks an important question: "Does anyone in this culture have his or her nose reshaped to look more 'African' or 'Jewish'?" (25). She follows this question up with Cher's own personal, cosmetic surgeries, stating that "Cher is typical here; her various surgeries have gradually replaced a strong, decidedly (if indeterminately) 'ethnic' look with a much more symmetrical, delicate, Anglo-Saxon version of beauty" (Bordo 25). Women across the globe are not merely trying to "fix" their bodies—they are trying to replicate the simulations around them, simulations developed through western patriarchy.

It is through cosmetic surgery that the word "control" arises once again, but it is questionable if women can have control in the era of simulacra. Cosmetic surgery is portrayed, by surgeons and the media, as a means that gives women more power and control over their bodies, a portrayal that is similar to how scholars like Orbach argued eating disorders as forms of resistance. Bordo points this out in 1993, noting how the rhetoric leads women to believe they can "'choose' their own bodies" (247). This rhetoric has remained constant, as advertisements for cosmetic procedures seem to put the choice into the hands of the women rather than what it really is: a penetration of "the body

through invasive surgical practices” (Dolezal 123-24). With this language dominating society, it is not surprising that women get a sense of power from their “choice” to move forward with cosmetic surgery. Not only do the procedures show a financial privilege that separates them from other, “primitive” women, they also get them one step closer to obtaining the ideal body that western society simulates. However, just like the problem with eating disorders, women have to surgically alter their biological bodies through unnatural means in order to fit into these idealized images of women.

With cosmetic surgery come possible risks: infection, your body rejecting the foreign material that has replaced your natural substance, and, rarely, death. As I have argued, if eating disorders cannot be modes of resistance because they result in damaging the body, cosmetic surgery also cannot be a form of resistance. Unlike eating disorders, no feminist scholars are arguing that cosmetic surgery is a form of resistance. This is interesting—the rhetoric around eating disorders as resistance is similar to the patriarchal rhetoric of cosmetic surgery as a form of power and control. It is important that we, feminists, realize this and begin to theorize both eating disorders and cosmetic surgery in the same light. The penetration of one’s skin through unnatural procedures only serves to remove bodily agency as this “choice” stems from the lack of female agency within a patriarchal society, while eating disorders work to slowly destroy one’s body and health. Yes, with resistance come certain risks; however, these risks tend to manifest themselves through an attacker (in this case, it would be patriarchy). But with eating disorders and cosmetic surgery, the attacker is woman against her own body. Woman is not defeating

patriarchy by starving herself or “fixing” her body; rather, she is fulfilling the patriarchal desire for the perfect body.

Contemporary forms of Resistance and the Problem of Beauty in the Era of Simulacra

Attempts to decrease the number of women who have eating disorders and seek out cosmetic surgery have grown in many present-day feminist movements such as the Body Positive Movement and the Love Your Body discourse. These contemporary forms of resistance attempt to reclaim the female body, in all of its shapes, sizes, and colors, in a positive light rather than the negative one that women are so used to encountering. Attempts of reclamation of the body side of the mind/body dualism are not new—Helene Cixous speaks directly to women, calling them to action: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (880). Cixous makes this call in 1975, but this fight has existed long before Cixous and long after her; many feminist scholars have given their own suggestions as to how we can fix the problems of female body representations and body image issues. However, most suggestions tend to be vague and give readers no plan of action. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that “what needs to be changed are attitudes, beliefs, and values rather than the body itself” (17); Gail Weiss echoes this sentiment, stating that “what is required above all are corporeal solutions, new body images and new ways of imagining bodies whose very diversity resists univocal labels or definitions” (86). But neither Grosz nor Weiss go beyond claiming what we now consider to be obvious, and they didn’t need to. In 1994 (Grosz) and 1998 (Weiss), these ideas were revolutionary in

terms of moving feminist scholarship towards liberating the female body. This is what we have known since the 1990's, and the addition of Baudrillard helps not only in making this scholarship clearer, but also in helping to theorize a new form of resistance left out by feminists such as Grosz and Weiss.

Means of reclamation have differed across the past few decades, especially with the rise of intersectionality (overlapping social and oppressed identities) in Third-wave Feminism. The idea of intersectionality and its initial focus on race has now branched out to other social identities such as trans, ageing/aged, and sexual orientation, working to show how these marginal identities may differ between groups but are still all connected via their marginality.⁹ The incorporation of intersectionality as a main tenet of Third-wave feminism is, seemingly, the perfect solution to both Grosz' and Weiss' arguments on how to fix the problems of female body representation and body image. It calls for the diversity that Second-wave feminism lacked and was critiqued for, but as the feminist movements developed out of Third-wave feminism seek to make women love their bodies again, they have proven to be no match against simulations of the (un)real and, as a result, inherently fail to be completely intersectional. These images are so powerful and controlling that the attempts at resistance, as demonstrated through the Body Positive Movement's call for women to love their bodies, especially when they don't fit western beauty standards, fail to be wholly inclusive. This failure is due to the fact that the Body Positive Movement (along with other forms of resistance) "almost always display[s] a complicated and bewitching tangle of new possibilities and old patterns of

⁹ See introduction, pp. 7-8.

representations” (Bordo 131). What Bordo fails to discuss, though, is how activist groups are specifically falling into the trap of representing all female bodies as beautiful and desirable, even grassroots movements that have yet to be coopted by capitalism. In other words, these groups want society to see abject bodies as beautiful like the ideal (un)real female body. Focusing solely on the Body Positive Movement, we can see how Third-wave feminists are still portraying “abject” bodies—bodies that are “outside heterosexual norms” (Boynton 54)—in a positive light by doing what we have all become familiar with in our patriarchal, capitalist society: representing them as beautiful, desirable, and overly sexual.

This representation can be seen in one of the Body Positive Movement’s earlier



Figure 2: Dove's 2004 "Real Beauty" Campaign Ad

campaigns: a 2004

Dove “Real Beauty Campaign” ad.

Figure 2 shows the image used by Dove in their

advertisement, and

this image includes women of various sizes as well as various races. But where are the women whose stomachs are not flat? Where are the older women, women whose skin, due to age, is no longer smooth and tight? Women with disabled bodies? Transgender bodies? The ad itself takes a step against conventional beauty by adding some women of different races, but it lacks inclusivity in totality. Even women with ambiguously raced

bodies are limited; I would argue that there are women of (maybe) three different races and ethnicities, and they are used as the sole representative of their “groups.” The women are also all dressed in undergarments: while it is not sexy lingerie, they all bear smooth, glowing skin free of cellulite and wrinkles, stomachs that don’t stick out, and they all exude an air of confident sexiness as they are happy, laughing, not ashamed of their bodies that are on display for the male gaze. Dove has come a long way since this 2004 ad by being more inclusive with who they represent as “real beauty” as they’ve begun to include advertisements that include aging/aged women.¹⁰ But even today, body positive progress is still marred by the desire to portray women as beautiful rather than as human, and it is this portrayal that inherently prevents the Body Positive Movement from being completely intersectional. Take Figure 3 for example: *Sports Illustrated* chose plus-size model Ashley Graham as the cover of their 2016 swimsuit issue. Graham, an avid Body Positive activist, stated that she ““proved to [them] that, yes, people want to see a woman [her] size”” (qtd. in Stern). And she isn’t wrong—people



Figure 3: Ashley Graham as *Sports Illustrated*’s Swimsuit Cover

want to see a woman [her] size”” (qtd. in Stern). And she isn’t wrong—people want to see a woman her size, but only if she’s posed in such a way that her breasts are the focal point of the shoot, and her body is arched in a way that shows flawless, cellulite-free curves with a face glowing under a professional make-up job. Graham’s

¹⁰ I will discuss later how the representation of older women in advertisements is still, on the whole, problematic.

body is portrayed as desirable, and while, yes, she may not be conventionally skinny, her body is still overly sexualized, putting beauty before her personhood.

Ashley Graham's magazine cover only serves to emphasize, as Bordo discusses, the "social mythology" in contemporary culture that suggests our society "is a body-loving, repressive era" (15). Graham proclaims to love her body, but she has a body that is, in different ways, desirable unlike the obese, abject female body where stomachs are not flat and stretch marks are very real or the abject aging/aged body where wrinkles and age spots take over once smooth and youthful skin. We are in an era of illusion—ads, magazine covers, and TV commercials claim they are body positive by including women who appear to be outside conventional standards, but even the bodies they present, such as Graham's, still have to be attractive enough in order to sell, to make profit. This is because of the impact simulacra has had on us as a society. "Real" bodies can only be "real" if they are bodies to be desired, so the Body Positive Movement has become stuck in this push to deem all female bodies as beautiful rather than pushing for personhood over beauty. Lindsay King Miller addresses this issue of "beauty," claiming that "today's body positivity has gotten stuck trying to 'fix' beauty from the inside rather than moving beyond it... we're fighting to push the margins of beauty an inch in any direction, while reifying the concept itself" (21). For Miller, these movements focus too much on beauty, making women with abject bodies be seen as beautiful, both bodily and through personality, but the concept of beauty is problematic across the board.

The rhetoric of bodily beauty as a means of reclaiming the female body is also seen in Third-wave Body Positive grassroots movements. Various Instagram accounts,

such as @bodypositivemovement, that promote body positivity have also been coopted by the idea that bodies should be represented as beautiful if they are to be accepted and reclaimed. On January 8, 2015, this account posted a photo of women with real, abject bodies, incorporating the very inclusivity I critiqued Dove and *Sports Illustrated* for lacking. But over the faces of these women is a large, black box that reads “Every body is beautiful.” Even Body Positive accounts that do not blatantly attempt to work within our capitalist structure have fallen victim to the idea that women are only legitimate if we tell them they have a beautiful body.

This problem transcends what we see in popular culture and social media: even some feminist scholars argue for beauty over personhood. For example, Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin make the case for, essentially, “bringing sexy back”; they “propose a revisionist notion of sexiness that treats people not merely as sex objects, but as sexual subjects” (300). According to Lintott and Irvin, “directing sexualized attention toward someone seen as a full, embodied person rather than a mere body, with an aim of respectfulness, is not, in general, a particularly problematic form of interpersonal engagement” (311). *But it is*. The act of sexualizing women in the era of simulacra naturally turns women into sexual objects: women as sexual subjects is not possible when we are still stuck on reclaiming all female bodies as beautiful and desirable. Women cannot become sexy subjects when our bodies are still the center focus of feminist attempts at reclamations. They qualify their argument by adding that there should be an “aim of respectfulness” but does respect not immediately dissipate when you turn a woman into a sexual subject rather than a human? The Body Positive Movement, as well

as feminist, academic scholarship, has failed to move beyond the constraints of beauty and over-sexualization, and as a result, two themes have manifested in reaction to “object” bodies: stigmatization and disgust.

Stigma and Disgust: The Result of Representing Object Bodies as Beautiful

Racialized, disabled, aging, transgender, and fat bodies all become victims of stigma and disgust since their bodies are not considered “real” within western standards of the ideal female body. Cultural images as simulacra are the underlying cause of this: these images simulate a false reality and in turn, create disgust and stigma against all body types outside of the Western norm. Stigmatizing object bodies is a way patriarchy keeps the female body under control, but it is largely a result of simulacra. To understand stigma and the female body, I will work with Luna Dolezal’s definition: “Stigma arises when an individual’s bodily identity within a social group does not correspond to normative expectations of the attributes that the individual should possess” (88). And, of course, these “normative expectations of attributes” are created through our cultural simulacra of the (un)real. As Dolezal continues her discussion of stigma, she brings up a point of interest—object bodies being stigmatized is *necessary* to differentiate normal from abnormal bodies (88; my emphasis). In other words, being stigmatized is *necessary* to differentiate *real* from *unreal* bodies. Weiss echoes this idea, noting that the normalized body image “can only arise on the basis of bodily distortions” (97). Dolezal and Weiss may not use the language I do in terms of simulation and simulacra, but their

ideas speak to the problems of the female body and simulacra. Because simulacra simulate the (un)real female body, stigma has manifested as a result of these false realities, and, in turn, has made it impossible to represent abject bodies as desirable or beautiful, thus preventing intersectional inclusivity from fully penetrating the Body Positive Movement.

To demonstrate the effect stigma as a result of simulacra has had on women with abject bodies, I will focus on ageing/aged, disabled, and transgender bodies. This stigma on ageing and aged bodies in Western culture has had a profound impact on older women's body image. Sara M. Hofmeier et al., conducted a study with women aged fifty and older to see how their age influenced their body image in the U.S. They found that because "middle and old age are generally seen as a period of decline in Western society, a problem with particular relevance for women due to Western society's long history of placing value on physical appearance, youth, and thinness," (Hofmeier et al. 4) many of these older subjects were shown to have "body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms, and extreme weight control methods" (Hofmeier et al. 3). Hofmeier et al. state that, with these results, it appears that "body dissatisfaction appears to be fairly stable across age" (3-4). The psychological, body disorders that Bordo discusses throughout *Unbearable Weight* are not just limited to women considered "young." Patriarchal images of "ideal" bodies are hard on women of all bodies, but, I suggest, they are especially hard on older women whose bodies, because of biology, cannot conform to the youth that patriarchy desires. Through this lack of being able to conform, aged and ageing bodies are not considered legitimate within Western society.

One is hard-pressed to find older women in cultural advertisements or positive cultural images in general. Take, for instance, television advertisements, specifically Olay’s ad for their Regenerist Micro-Sculpting cream. In the ad, we see an attractive young woman waiting around while the commercial voice over says “Feel like you’re growing older waiting to look younger?” The cream itself is marketed as an “anti-aging” cream, a cream that is targeting ageing women but still uses a young woman in the advertisement.¹¹ Here we see that ageing women are excluded from advertisements of products targeting them. But while you may have to dig deep to find them, more cultural representations of seemingly ageing/aged bodies do exist: they are represented amongst sexual themes. Advertisements for Viagra tend to be the biggest culprit of this. Not only are ageing women used in advertisements of a product for men, they are also placed in the position seen in the corresponding image. One online article written by Gabriella Paiella is even titled “Why Does Every Woman in a Viagra Ad Pose Like This?” The pose is suggestively sexual as each woman is lying on a bed, chest forward, face eager. Arguably, the woman depicted in Figure 4 is maybe in her late 30s/early 40s—she is



Figure 4: Viagra Advertisement

“aging” but is not “aged.” Since the audience is men around the ages 55-75, this woman

¹¹ To view the full commercial, visit the following link: <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/7djz/olay-regenerist-micro-sculpting-cream-growing-older>.

is meant to represent an age-appropriate partner while still being seemingly young enough to be desired by men in denial of their own aging/aged bodies. Bordo discusses this paradox of aging in the preface of the tenth anniversary edition of *Unbearable Weight*: “‘Aging beautifully’ used to mean wearing one’s years with style, confidence, and vitality. Today, it means not appearing to age at all” (xxiv).

The representation of ageing women’s bodies is either completely nonexistent or sexualized. Even the “aging” bodies on display for oversexualization are, debatably, not even aging but rather still display an air of youth as they lack wrinkles and age spots, markers of an aging body. I am not arguing that Olay or Viagra advertisements are products of the Body Positive Movement, but the lack of an attempt to counteract these ageist depictions is apparent. The Body Positive Movement has its problems with lack of inclusivity, and this is due to their body positive strategies. The focus on portraying all bodies as beautiful rather than as human prevents the movement from including certain abject bodies, in this case aging and/or aged bodies. Because aging and aged bodies are deemed illegitimate and/or portrayed overly sexual to accommodate ageing men (specifically, the audience of men that would use Viagra), the movement cannot portray them in the desirable way that they do with other bodies (such as with Ashley Graham’s curvaceous body).

Transgendered bodies face a similar battle (although there are key differences) that aged or ageing bodies do. The Body Positive Movement fails to include trans women in their movement, too, because trans bodies are difficult to portray as beautiful and sexual in society. The difference, I believe, rests in identity: aged women’s bodies are not

connected to sex because of possible infertility, but they are still recognized as “legitimate” women (whatever that means) by culture at large even if their bodies are considered illegitimate. But trans women’s bodies are not connected to sex because of exactly this: trans women’s bodies are not seen as authentic, women’s bodies (even though there really isn’t a real, authentic female body). Trans women still have to fight the battle to have their bodies seen as *real*. Their goal is to be in the body they identify with, that makes them feel complete as *humans*, and even in this they may or may not be sexualized for others. However, with this battle still ongoing, trans bodies portrayed as beautiful face many obstacles. In fact, in *Body Aesthetics*, edited by Sherri Irvin, there is no chapter in the book that discuss the aesthetics of trans bodies and the book was published in 2016. I acknowledge this could be due to limited space or limited contributors, but I believe this lack is revealing of where trans bodies stand in our society today in 2018 as the essay collection was published only two years ago.

Trans bodies are heavily stigmatized because of their position within the male/female binary. Jay Prosser discusses this positioning, noting that the trans body in transition (transsexual body) is a body that fits neither side of the male/female binary, but is actually existing between the two. And it is through this lack of existence within the male/female binary that allows current body positive movements to leave out trans bodies in their body positive goals. However, trans women have not been left completely out of cultural representations; attempts to portray trans women as beautiful and sexually desirable have been made by outlets believing their stories and images were feminist. For example, Caitlyn Jenner (previously known as Bruce Jenner) came out as a transgender

woman in 2014. After her big reveal, Jenner posed for the cover of *Vanity Fair*, shown in Figure 5, strutting her new, womanly body. But Jenner is dressed in a very provocative manner: she wears a white corset with just the right amount of cleavage showing, and her hair and makeup are done to perfection. Judith Timson, writer for the *Toronto Star*, speaks up in a tone of outrage: “I think it’s messed up. Most 65-year-old women I know, many of whom not only look fabulous, but do interesting, powerful, vibrant things with their lives, would not feel comfortable or even be interested in conforming to this airbrushed pin-up version of femininity” (“Caitlyn Conforms”). Timson’s comment, seemingly, deflects anti-trans bias onto anti-aging bias, but it is hard to tell, from the commentary, whether Timson is stigmatizing Jenner’s body due the fact that is aged or because it is a trans body (or even both). I do not mean to argue that Jenner was wrong to portray her body in this way, but with bold moves comes harsh backlash. The media (both news and social) took off with this photoshoot, reading Jenner’s body through the lens of stigma, creating backlash from multiple outlets as we can see above with Judith Timson’s seemingly ageist and transphobic commentary¹². While she received support from various groups, she was also bombarded with social media backlash with various users claiming Jenner is not a “real woman.” A Facebook post of a



Figure 5: Caitlyn Jenner's *Vanity Fair* Cover

¹² Fox News, debatably, had the worst reaction to Jenner’s photoshoot. They mocked Jenner on air while also refusing to use her preferred gender pronouns.

woman berating Jenner for receiving an award for courage went viral; the author signed it “Sincerely, a real woman” (Thomson). The stigma surrounding trans bodies has helped create the idea that they are not real or legitimate bodies, and as a result, the attempt to portray Jenner as beautiful ended in harsh backlash and the fight to remove her bodily agency. The woman’s Facebook post was undoubtedly an act of transphobia, and if Third-wave feminism wants to live up to its tenet of intersectionality, feminist critique and anti-transphobic critique are complicit in this fight.

Stigmatization allows society to differentiate between real and unreal bodies, and it is through this that disabled bodies become stigmatized. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in her discussion of disabled bodies, writes that “disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance” (6). Disabled bodies fall under the “unreal” side of the real/unreal binary. For Garland-Thomson, “extraordinary bodies are seen as deviations to be standardized” (79), but this standardization cannot be manifested through portraying disabled bodies as beautiful or desirable. Since they are “unreal,” they cannot be desired. Tobin Siebers discusses how “nondisabled bodies” when “encountering disabled bodies experience emotions of pleasure, pain, revulsion, or terror” (142). Extraordinary bodies produce extraordinary reactions, none of which are normative desire. Siebers goes on to state that “the disabled body summons emotional responses that disrupt the aesthetics of the [disabled body] performance... The disabled body... represents for nondisabled society a spectacle itself” (144). In other words, the disabled body is a “show” for a society controlled by simulacra, a show that that is uncomfortable to watch, a deviation from what is deemed “reality.” Disabled bodies are denied agency; they exist merely to

be gazed upon by those who fit under the “normal” (read: real) side of the binary. Individuals with disabled bodies cannot be desired: they exist merely as a spectacle for those with nondisabled bodies. Simulacra have informed “the identity and fate of people with extraordinary bodies” (Garland-Thomson 15), and this fate is that those with disabled bodies have been, largely, left out of the Body Positive Movement and cultural representations in general as they are only spectacles, not bodies to be desired, a concept inherently problematic as the movement places worth on desirability.

This discussion of stigma theory as a result of simulacra’s effect on abject bodies allows us to see why contemporary, feminist resistance movements such as the Body Positivity Movement are still failing to be totally inclusive and move beyond body image issues. Garland-Thomson writes that “Finally, stigma theory reminds us that the problems we confront are not disability, ethnicity, race, class, homosexuality, or gender; they are the inequalities, negative attitudes, misrepresentations, and institutional practices that result from the process of stigmatization” (32). The simulacra that have invaded our society are the cause of stigmatization and delegitimization of abject bodies. We may know that stigma against abject bodies has grown because of patriarchal practices and ideals of what the ideal female body should look like, and the power of simulacra aids individuals in the stigmatization of othered bodies. It definitely has not stopped feminist movements from falling into the trap of putting bodily beauty over a woman’s humanity in contemporary representations of women. But stigmatization is not the only problem that has arisen due to feminist movements trying to portray othered bodies as beautiful. The feeling of disgust has become a common reaction from individuals in society when

they encounter bodies deemed “unreal.” Breanne Fahs writes that “when people feel disgust, they create moral judgments rather than rational cognitions” (84); this is due the fact that “disgust shapes ideas about the self... and other” (85).

Disgust as a reaction to abject bodies is seen throughout this discussion. Society scoffed at Caitlyn Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* cover, reacting with hostility and disgust at her attempt to gain agency, not just as a woman, but as a *beautiful* woman. Encountering disabled bodies results in reactions such as revulsion or terror, as noted by Siebers above. For Fahs, it is fatness that causes the most the most disgust within people. Fahs conducted a study in 2014 where twenty women of various different backgrounds were interviewed about their bodies. What Fahs found was that “the notion of the body as unpleasant, foreign, disgusting, and unacceptable” occurred “when fat appeared frequently in women’s narratives” (89). The women were, at one point, told to imagine gaining one hundred pounds; the idea of gaining weight elicited more disgust, more horror (Fahs 90). The disgust felt towards fatness is a result of stigmatization within the era of simulacra. As Amy Ferrell pointed out, fatness has been a “motif used to identify ‘inferior bodies’” (8), and this stigma has caused women to react with disgust towards fat bodies. While she does discuss fat shame and fat stigma, Ferrell falls into the trap that feminism finds itself stuck in: Ferrell argues that we should reclaim the fat, female body as beautiful (151).

However, fat bodies cannot be reclaimed as beautiful when the Body Positive Movement chooses “fat” women like Ashley Graham with flat stomachs and smooth skin rather than women whose stomachs actually stick out, whose skin is actually bumpy with

cellulite. And, most importantly, these bodies should not be reclaimed as beautiful—doing so only undermines our subjectivity as individual women with distinct personhoods. Understanding stigmatization in a simulated society shows us how reclaiming abject bodies as beautiful can result in disgusted reactions. If the idea of gaining weight elicits disgust, in-person encounters most likely also elicit the same reaction. A. W. Eaton discusses this idea of disgust as a reaction towards seeing fat bodies: “our collective taste in the direction of aversion to fat bodies, rendering fat repulsive in the eyes of most, is an important part of the debasement, stigmatization, marginalization, and subordination of fat people” (44). By collective taste, Eaton is referring to society’s collective view of fat as negative, and, to use Eaton’s terminology, distasteful. But this discussion shows how, as a society, fat bodies are met with disgust when in our line of sight, and it is through disgust that fat bodies are deemed inferior and illegitimate. But disgust is not limited to just bodies; Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* cover shows that disgust occurs in reaction to all abject bodies.

It is this feeling of disgust towards abject bodies that that prevents a female solidarity in the fight to reclaim the female body. Fahs discusses this problem after reviewing the results of her study:

Specifically, disgust becomes a regulatory, politicised emotion that dictates specific rules and scripts about bodies and body practices. Notably, disgust also seemed to erase or obscure women’s shared experiences with other women; rather than fighting back as a feminist collective or imagining the body as a site of rebellion, most women in this

study constructed their bodies as singular, individualistic, and as something they alone needed to regulate and control in order to conform to societal expectations. (92)

This is important to note because if it is disgust that is preventing female solidarity, which, in turn, is preventing women reclaiming their bodies from the grips of patriarchy, then we must stop attempting to reclaim abject bodies as beautiful. Disgust is a result of this idea that bodies can be reclaimed if we can reclaim them as beautiful like the (un)real ideal female body. As A. W. Eaton noted, the collective distaste for fat bodies results in disgusted reaction; portraying abject bodies as beautiful only serves to amplify this reaction. We are living in the era of simulacra, and with cultural images simulating the (un)real, abject female bodies cannot be portrayed as beautiful because they have been stigmatized into a state of illegitimacy and thus produce feelings of disgust and terror when looked upon. The Body Positive Movement must move away from the desire to represent all female bodies as beautiful and desirable and move toward, or maybe back to, reclaiming the mind side of the mind/body binary.

We cannot reclaim our true selves if we don't move beyond just bodily discourse. The mind/body dualism shouldn't be discussed as separate entities but rather as two, dependent, defining aspects of our lives—we need the mind in order to reclaim our bodies. Historically, the mind has been privileged over the body in Western thought; it tends to be referred to as the “positive” side of the binary—the body the “negative” side. Recalling Jay Prosser and his discussion on the transsexual body in transition, we can see how reclaiming the mind before the body makes sense. Not only does Prosser bring the

new idea of the body as in-between genders, he also adds onto the idea that our true selves are trapped by the body. Prosser writes that the “skin is the key interface between self and other, between the biological, the psychic, and the social” (65). Our interactions with others and the world, or even with our own psychical selves, are done so through the skin. And Prosser argues that our true selves are always trapped within our skin (68). Prosser shows that a body in transition also breaks the mind/body binary—how can he fit the body if he is in-between bodies and how can he fit the mind if this inbetweenness causes him to be trapped in his skin? We are released from the confines of our skin when we allow our true personhoods to shine without any relation to our bodily existences. And while Prosser is talking about the transsexual body in transition, his arguments are applicable to bodily discourse across the board.

The reclamation of the mind is how we can reclaim the female body in the era of simulacra. Reclaiming the mind allows for feminist movements to prioritize women’s personhood and humanity over their bodies. As of now, focusing on reclaiming the body prioritizes the body over the human inhabiting said body, and this is why the body becomes so defining of ourselves and thus dictating what (who) is real and what (who) is not. More importantly, reclaiming all bodies as beautiful is detrimental to feminism’s progress in fighting simulacra. In the era of simulacra, the female body is only legitimate if it is the (un)real ideal. All female bodies are legitimate, but because the images around us simulate a false reality, women’s humanity and personhoods become trapped in bodies they see as unreal. In this chapter, I have discussed how Bordo’s idea that the female body is culturally produced is true but incomplete. The female body is culturally

produced, but it is produced in a culture where simulacra have produced a reality with no historical precedent, a farcical reality. For Baudrillard, these cultural images have marred reality to the point that what was once actual reality can never be obtained.

But this is where I diverge from Baudrillard: I believe we can move out of the era of simulacra by moving towards liberating women through the reclamation of the mind side of the mind/body dualism. This reclamation is important because the two sides are not mutually exclusive—you cannot have one without the other. In doing this, we can make every woman legitimate by prioritizing her humanity over her body, and once this is achieved, we can inhabit our bodies as our true selves instead of defining who we are based off of how our bodies “should” look. In the chapter that follows, I will use Margaret Atwood’s 1976 novel *Lady Oracle* both as a case study that shows how adding Baudrillard’s ideas of simulation and simulacra helps us understand why the female body is still so heavily controlled and to demonstrate how the form of resistance of reclaiming the mind before the body can be successful in the liberation of women and the female body. Because fiction itself is a representation of reality, we can see how simulation affects those in the fictional world, and, moving back into the world around us, also demonstrates a form of resistance that has existed for decades but has gone overlooked.

CHAPTER TWO: RECLAIMING THE FEMALE BODY VIA ATWOOD'S *LADY*

ORACLE

In Baudrillard's postmodern worldview, we can never get back to what was once reality because simulacra have destroyed reality to the point that they only simulate the (un)real: a real that does not exist and never has but pretends it does. This nihilistic belief system makes sense with Baudrillard's theories, but to succumb to this is to deny women bodily agency, the chance to take back control of our bodies as determined by who we are as humans rather than by culture. Women learn at a very early age that we are so defined by our bodies, and so we learn to see our own bodies as unreal and unnatural because they do not reflect the cultural images that we are all familiar with. In turn, we then learn to see ourselves and others as unreal women, our bodies policed and controlled by patriarchal expectations. But I suggest that reclaiming the female body *is* possible, that the female body can be reclaimed as ours and that we can regain authentic control over our bodies, control that is not marred by simulacra. In order to do this, we must move backwards: we need to reclaim the mind side of the binary, the side that has been denied to women throughout Western ideology and legitimize women as thoughtful individuals with distinct personhoods. Doing this will, in turn, allow women to move into reclaiming their bodies. The mind and the body are not mutually exclusive—you cannot have one without the other. Establishing ourselves as humans with distinct personhoods will allow us to move back into our bodies as ourselves and not as women that society deems as “real” and “ideal.”

To show that this form of resistance is possible, a concrete example is needed. This chapter will look at Margaret Atwood's 1976 novel *Lady Oracle* as a case study for how simulacra affect women's embodied experiences; in turn, this examination will demonstrate how resistance is possible through the reclamation of the mind, first, and then the body. As the first chapter discussed, feminist movements are still wrapped up in trying to portray all bodies as beautiful, trying to force a society dominated by simulacra to view all bodies as real when reality has been destroyed and is seemingly unattainable. But if we move away from the, for lack of a better term, real world and into the world of fiction, we can see how this form of resistance can be successful and lead women to reclaiming their personhoods as well as their bodies.¹³ The mind and the body are not mutually exclusive, and treating them as such is why feminism has yet to move beyond the problems with the female body and body image.¹⁴ While Atwood's novel is a little over four decades old, it is important that if we are moving backwards to reclaim the mind, we must also move back in time in the world of fiction because this is where possible resistance lies. Current feminist writings, fictional and academic, are too marred by simulacra and Third-wave feminism's coopted methods for there to be room for successful resistance. *Lady Oracle* gives us a form of resistance that is not outdated, but has definitely gone overlooked.

Many feminist scholars, Sofia Sanchez-Grant being one example, have argued that the novel demonstrates resistance to beauty standards as the main character, Joan,

¹³ To be "real" today is to be (un)real, the term discussed throughout the first chapter.

¹⁴ This is not to argue that feminists have not attempted to reclaim the mind side of the mind/body dualism. However, as demonstrated through the first chapter, Third-wave body positive activists tend to focus on displaying the female body as beautiful no matter what, ignoring the woman within the body.

binge eats in order to defy her mother. For scholars like Sanchez-Grant, building off of the argument made by Susie Orbach, binge eating in the novel becomes subversive and an act of resistance. And while Joan does eat to defy her mother's desires for Joan to be thin and beautiful, the cause and result of said binging becomes much more complex as the novel progresses. This complexity begins with Joan's mother and goes back as far as Joan's birth. From the beginning it becomes clear that Joan's personhood has no historical reality. She is named after Joan Crawford, whose real name wasn't even that. It was Lucille Leseuer. Joan is named after someone who technically doesn't even exist—she is named after an ideal persona who pretends to be real while masking a profound (un)reality (Atwood 38-39). It becomes clear through the background of Joan's name that Joan's mother is a perpetrator of patriarchal simulacra, but it is also important to discuss how her mother is also victim of these patriarchal images. Joan's mother serves to push Western beauty ideals as created through simulacra onto her daughter, but as we see in Joan's flashbacks, her mother, too, cannot escape the power of simulacra and its effects on women and their bodies.

While Joan does not completely know why her mother named her after Joan Crawford, one thing is clear for Joan and the readers: "Joan Crawford was thin. I [Joan Foster] was not" (Atwood 39). And Joan believed her fatness to be "one of the many things for which [her] mother never quite forgave [her]" (Atwood 39). This is probably one of the many reasons Joan and her mother had a toxic relationship, but there is more to this that goes beyond Joan's weight. I would argue that Joan's mother cannot forgive Joan because she did not become the beautiful, ideal woman that Joan's mother, herself,

could also never obtain while alive. During one of Joan's flashbacks to her child, we get a scene of Joan's mother sitting to put on her makeup:

“Sit there quietly, Joan, and *watch Mother put on her face*,” she'd say on the good days... Some of the things she did seemed to be painful; for instance, she would cover the space between her eyebrows with what look like brown glue, which she heated in a little pot, then tear it off, leaving a red patch... She often frowned at herself, shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied... Instead of making her happier, these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as *if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate*. (Atwood 62-63; my emphasis)

Here we see Joan's mother attempting to replicate ideal beauty (specifically through her face). But she is trying to change her face to mirror simulacra, so she can never truly replicate ideal beauty since the ideal female body is merely (un)real. This becomes evident through Atwood's diction: Joan's mother is “putting on her face” only to be disappointed in her inability to “capture or duplicate” the “fleeting image” she envisions for herself. Simulacra is at play in the novel: she must put on a new face because she does not see her own as “real” only to be saddened by the fact that the (un)real ideal image she wants to mirror is not possible to obtain. Because she cannot obtain this (un)real ideal, she names Joan after Joan Crawford in hopes that Joan can become the ideal woman that she could not be. In fact, Joan becomes, in a sense, her mother's personal project: she wants to create Joan as the ideal woman as valued by society. As the novel progresses,

we see not only how Joan does not embody the thin ideal, but also how she fights her mother every step of the way, a fight that eventually leads to later problems in her adult life.

This fight, arguably, begins after Joan's ballet recital at the age of seven. This recital is one of the earliest scenes Joan recalls for us, and it seems to have been the most formative of her adult identity. In the recital, Joan was initially supposed to be a butterfly, but "the problem was fairly simple: in the short, pink skirt, with [her] waist, arms and legs exposed, [she] was grotesque" (Atwood 42). Because she is overweight, her dance teacher decides to make her a mothball instead of a butterfly, a choice that leaves Joan in the background surrounded by pretty children in butterfly costumes. This decision ultimately ends in Joan's humiliation and personal embarrassment, molding her own psyche, for she states that "the worst thing was that [she] still didn't quite understand why this was being done to [her], this humiliation disguised as privilege" (Atwood 46). And it is this humiliation that sparks Joan's binge eating as a form of rebellion against her mother and everything she stands for. Let me be clear, though, that Joan's teen rebellion against her mother is not equivalent to a bodily form of resistance against the larger, patriarchal problem. It is important to remember that Joan's past as an obese child is narrated by Joan as an adult—word choices like "grotesque" come from Joan in the present as an "adult, an anxious, prudish adult" (Atwood 42). Joan, as an adult, never looks back on her past body with any sense of love or respect. For Joan, even though she does consciously rebel, she never considers her past, fat body as "real;" rather, she looks back to her body as an obscene blob, "a huge featureless blur" (Atwood 78). And while

she found some sort of pleasure in her rebellion against her mother, her existence was only defined by that—she was not an individual with her own, unique personality but rather an individual simultaneously denied agency by the outside world and herself. Her rebellion was not only damaging to her body, but as the novel shows, it was damaging to Joan’s psyche later on as an adult.

Joan loses her agency in her war with her mother. Because simulacra teach women to see abject bodies as unreal, Joan’s mother could not love her child with an illegitimate body. And it is through this lack of love that Joan turns to binge eating as a means of coping. Joan’s rebellion causes her body to remain uncited within the world—to remain a blur, “less noticeable”, looking the same as any other fat woman in society (Atwood 78). Instead of being “real” they are considered blurs, blobs, blimps. For the world, they are unwelcome extra space in a world where simulacra dominate and only project thin bodies. And, eventually, Joan’s own sense of existence and reality gets lost in her binging. Joan in the present seems to be aware of how her rebellion against her mother was more hurtful than helpful. She admits that “I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn’t really there, I was an accident” (Atwood 74). Binging allows Joan’s body to expand, to take up more space and legitimize her existence. But even this existence she’s attempting to establish by eating more still doesn’t make her feel as though she’s a legitimate human. Instead, Joan still feels like an “accident”, as though she was never meant to exist in the first place. She eats more as an attempt to reestablish herself as real, as a human who exists with a real body, but it is

through this binging that she removes her own legitimacy because her expanding body cannot be seen as real by herself and the world around her.

Engulfed by her desire to defeat her mother's attempts to control and mold Joan's body into a thin, ideal one, Joan forgets that "it was only in relation to [her] mother that [she] derived morose pleasure from [her] weight" (Atwood 70). The disgust her mother exhibits towards Joan's fat body only serves to please Joan: each breakdown as result of seeing Joan's grotesque body only emphasizes Joan's victory at resisting her mother's control. But this pleasure does not extend beyond her mother. When it comes to everyone else, Joan realizes that "strangers were different, they saw [her] obesity as an unfortunate handicap... rather than the refutation, the victory it was... in relation to everyone else, including [her] father, it made [her] miserable" (Atwood 70). This is why Joan's rebellion against her mother is not a bodily form of resistance against patriarchy: the "control" she believes to have over her mother is an illusion. The small victories she has against her mother do not help in combatting the larger, societal problems tied to the female body. She eats more to fight her mother rather than dealing with her deep-rooted traumas that are results of their troubled relationship.¹⁵

In the era of simulacra, abject bodies become stigmatized into illegitimacy, and while it is clear that this stigmatization is happening to Joan with her mother, it is also happening in others around her. Joan's body is seen as an "unfortunate handicap" and a "disgusting failure of will" (Atwood 86) by those in society. Boynton discusses how "in order to be deciphered as desirable, bodies must be read according to the conventions of

¹⁵ This gets reconciled at the end of the novel, which I will discuss later in the chapter.

the particular locale they inhabit” (59). She centers her discussion on the idea that the foreign men in the novel find Joan’s body desirable because they are of different cultures. Simulacra now affects everyone across the globe, and even if the novel lacks this recognition, Atwood is still ahead of her time. Boynton’s essay is problematic because it generalizes and others “foreign” men without acknowledging Western beauty ideals exist everywhere now. Joan’s stigmatized body largely turns into a site of disgust for those who encounter her (un)real body with the exception of the “foreign” men, but this can be explained by the time period where Western beauty ideals had yet to reach other cultures on a global scale. The disgust demonstrated by others is reflective of our larger society and, in reference to Breanne Fahs’ study on “gross” bodies, how people, specifically women, react with disgust to the idea of getting fat.

The abject body, specifically in the case of this novel, the obese body, faces the same stigmatization that forces all abject bodies (trans, ageing/aged, racialized) together as illegitimate. Adult Joan also plays into this stigma as she, too, cannot escape the grips of simulacra; she recalls that “[she] was quite fat... and all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two. Also, fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they’re less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away... I must’ve appeared as a huge featureless blur” (Atwood 78). Here we can see Joan’s mentality, as an adult, is reflective of the collective distaste towards fat bodies. She also discusses how her “huge featureless blur” of a body caused people “distress” upon seeing her. This demonstrates how disgust is a direct result of stigmatizing abject bodies because “nobody regarded being fat as a misfortune; it was viewed simply as a disgusting failure of will” (Atwood

86). What is of utmost interest and importance, though, is how, after losing all of her “excess” weight, Joan transforms into a woman with a seemingly “real” body and, in turn, begins to view abject bodies as illegitimate. She admits that “the sight of a fat person on the street, which used to inspire fellow feeling, [she] now found revolting” (Atwood 119). This transformation is important because it demonstrates how, even though she, too, was once fat, simulacra have manipulated her way of seeing to the point that she can only feel disgust towards fat bodies rather than solidarity with them. It is interesting how Joan only assumes the collective, societal norms of disgust toward the abject body after she loses her excess weight. As an obese child/teen, Joan admits to feeling a sense of solidarity with other abject bodies, a feeling that appears to be nonexistent now, in her adult years. Fahs noted that disgust was the one factor that seems to prevent women from being in solidarity with one another, and even in works of fiction this appears to hold true.

Experiencing stigma and disgust does not inherently create a lifelong bond with other abject bodies, as demonstrated through Joan’s newly developed disgust towards fat bodies as a thin person. In the era of simulacra, it is only natural that Joan develops disgust towards fat bodies after her weight loss: as a woman with an abject body, she was taught to see herself as a “featureless blur” so becoming a woman with a “real” body does not mean her way of seeing has changed. This newly discovered disgust towards fat bodies only serves to explain why Joan, narrating as an adult, reflects on her past body as grotesque and obscene. In fact, her disgust with fat bodies and fatness in general made it to where she “couldn’t say ‘fat’; [she] used that word about [herself] only in [her] head”

(Atwood 205). Her rebellion against her mother resulted in long-term problems for herself; these problems are not health related, but rather they manifest themselves through the disgust and shame Joan now feels towards her past body. And it is through this disgust and shame that Joan decides to erase her past completely. For Joan, she believed that “[she] had the right shape, but [she] had the wrong past” (Atwood 139). Her past as an obese child made her an illegitimate person because her body was deemed unreal by herself and those around her. In order to be a seemingly legitimate woman in her new body, she must erase her past so that the new people in her life do not write her off as unreal as she was before.¹⁶

This erasure of her past begins after she meets Arthur, the man she finds herself enamored with and eventually marries. Throughout the novel, Arthur never learns of Joan’s true personhood nor her history, something Joan doesn’t realize or completely address herself until the end of the novel. She focuses so much on keeping her past erased and hidden from Arthur, even going as far as creating a false identity for her childhood self in pictures: “What lies I told him, and it wasn’t just in self-defense: already I’d devised an entire spurious past for this shadow on a piece of paper, this woman of no discernible age who stood squinting at the camera, holding a cone of pink spun sugar, her face puffed and empty as a mongoloid idiot’s: my own shucked-off body” (Atwood 88). No longer does Joan want to rebel against patriarchy—instead she becomes a patriarchal pawn, othering her own past body, becoming thin, and writing costume gothics, books that, as Arthur puts it, are “worse than trash, for... they exploit the masses, corrupt by

¹⁶ Even “thin” women are, technically, not legitimate in the era of simulacra, but in a society with collective disgust towards abject bodies, being thin is as close to legitimate as women can get.

distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted” (Atwood 31). It is also important to keep in mind that even Arthur, a man who proclaims to be for women’s rights and anti-patriarchal expectations for women, still demonstrates misogyny. This makes sense knowing that Joan is still trapped by patriarchal simulacra, and marrying a self-proclaimed leftist cannot help her escape the chains wrapped so tightly around her. Arthur has certain expectations for Joan, such as cooking meals: “But though he criticized my cooking, he always ate it, and *he resented its absence*” (Atwood 209; my emphasis). And Arthur spends much of his time trying to mold Joan into the woman he wants her to be. Given, she willingly attempts to change to fit his ideal version of her: “For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be” (Atwood 210). Just as simulacra murder a profound reality (Baudrillard 5), murder any idea of any history of a previous reality, Joan attempts to murder her past life as well. She further removes any attachment to an existing personhood; after being named after an actress who doesn’t technically exist, she also writes her costume gothics under a fake name, as well. Since she is writing books that adhere to current simulacra of women, it only makes sense that she mask any sort of past reality of herself, too.

Joan constructs her body and her life to reflect patriarchal ideals and not her “wrong” past. Bordo writes that “what remains the constant element throughout historical variations is the construction of the body as something apart from the true self” (5). Joan’s personhood is masked by her body throughout the entirety of the novel: as a child and as an adult, her life and actions are determined by her body. As a child she focuses her energy on rebelling against her mother, her identity shadowed in the process. As an

adult, her identity is completely erased and becomes a farcical reality constructed for her new body and life as a result of the disgust and shame she feels towards her old body. Joan's shame of her past and her body is an important facet to the construction of Joan's adult psyche. Disgust is clearly an important factor that prevents women from being in solidarity with one another, as demonstrated through Joan's transformation, but it also appears that shame prevents women from being in solidarity, too.

Luna Dolezal focuses her discussion on body shame; for Dolezal, there are two types of shame: acute and chronic. Acute body shame occurs as a constant of social interaction while chronic body shame is an ongoing aspect of one's appearance (Dolezal 8-10). Applying this discussion to the novel, we can see how Joan moved from acute body shame to chronic: as an obese child, she only felt shame when interacting with strangers in social settings. But as an adult Joan is constantly anxious that others will discover her hidden past, and she can't quite escape her former fat body even after losing the weight. Joan believed that "[she] had the right shape, but [she] had the wrong past" (Atwood 139), thus making her feel the need to remake her past for others, but it is clear that even having the "right shape" isn't good enough in the era of simulacra. She admits that "when [she] looks at [herself] in the mirror, [she] didn't see what Arthur saw. The outline of [her] former body still surrounded [her], like a mist, like a phantom moon" (Atwood 213). Her old body manifests itself via multiple mediums throughout the novel, one instance being when Joan encounters Marlene, a woman she knew from her childhood. As an adult, she focuses on the fact that Marlene "was still a lot thinner than [she] was" (Atwood 228). Joan's fear eventually turns into shame as we see that Joan

“knew what would happen: [Marlene] would have a smile of indulgence for her former self, and [Joan] would be overcome with shame” because Joan, herself, was not thin as a child whereas Marlene was (Atwood 228-29). It is this knowing that instills anxiety within Joan: Marlene is the past that Joan does not, and cannot, confront even when she is in direct contact with it. She cannot escape her former body and the disgust and shame she experiences manifest themselves in her decision to erase her past, a decision that proves to be a failure. Her former body haunts her while her husband and new friends are ignorant of it, and it is this haunting and shame that drives her to the decision of faking her own death.

Instead of coming clean about her past, instead of reclaiming her past identity as a woman with a fat body, Joan decides that her only way out of her past for good is to fake her own death and seclude herself from the world. The novel actually begins after Joan's fake death stunt, and the story progresses towards this moment, so we can see through this framed narrative that this decision is crucial in Joan's own personal growth towards reclaiming her identity and body. Her plan manifests itself through Joan convincing herself that Arthur has found out about all of the secrets she has kept from him: her former self and her affairs. This supposed realization brings about another: “Every man [she'd] ever been involved with, [she] realized, had had two selves” (Atwood 292-93). This is not much different from her own life. Joan is Joan Foster, named after Joan Crawford, and eventually becomes Louisa K. Delcourt, the penname for her costume gothics; in other words, Joan does not have one, singular self but rather multiple selves, all of whom are creations to fit into a certain category of woman. When Marlene's

fortune cookie says “*It is often best to be oneself,*” Joan asks herself “But which one, which one?” (Atwood 230). Joan’s multiple identities have prevented her from being truly authentic with anyone she is close with, and she now is fearing Arthur, too, has been hiding other sides of himself.

Although Joan does not know if it is Arthur who is sending her anonymous letters, she still becomes afraid of him and decides that she “would have to die” rather than come clean about everything (Atwood 293). She enlists the help of Sam (a friend she met through Arthur) and Marlene, telling them that the CIA is after her for blowing up the Peace Bridge. They articulately plan Joan’s fake death scene: she will “fall” off the sailboat into Lake Ontario, swim off to shore as Marlene and Sam pretend to try and save her from drowning, and will jump on a plane and fly to Terremoto where she will begin anew, her old lives erased. But even though her faked death seemingly works, Joan muses to herself in her new “life:” “Now I knew why the dead came back to watch over the living: the Other Side was boring. There was no one to talk to and nothing to do” (Atwood 309). It seemed easier to “kill” herself than to confess her past to everyone she knew, but even with that weight lifted off her shoulders, Joan finds that “killing” oneself is much lonelier than living. She admits that she “pretended to die so [she] could live, so [she] could have another life” (Atwood 315). But prior to her “death” Joan lived multiple lives, had multiple identities shaped to please those around her. She never really “lived” before her fake death: she molded herself to fit the ideal person for whoever she was around, and even though this is what led to her choice to “die,” Joan is still left unhappy

and unfulfilled. She is unable to “live” after her “death” because she still has yet to confront her true identity.

This unhappiness stems from Joan’s inability to accept her past life. Simply faking her death does not also kill off the past she has been trying to ignore for years: it is still very much alive just as she is. While faking her own death shows the depth of Joan’s shame towards her old body, this choice actually helps Joan in her own reclamation of herself and her body. Being alone in Terremoto allows Joan to confront the past that she had been stifling for so long. Both of Joan’s demons, her body and her mother, come back to life, fleetingly, at the end of the novel. The first demon to reappear is Joan’s old body:

Below me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I’d buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself out, like a huge blind mole, slowly and painfully shambling up the hill to the balcony... a creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine and which must have gone somewhere... It was the Fat Lady. She rose into the air and descended on me as I lay stretched out in the chair... then she settled and I was absorbed into her. Within my former body, I gasped for air. Disguised, concealed, white fur choking my nose and mouth. Obliterated. (Atwood 321)

Atwood seems to be playing around with magical realism in her novel, and this scene comes across as a dream (Joan does discuss closing her eyes to clear her mind) without there being concrete, textual evidence to say it is a dream. This allows room for

interpretation that this moment is actually happening. The body she tries to kill off her entire adult life literally comes back to life to suffocate Joan, to make her absorb her old self that she neglected for so long. Joan has to “gasp for air” when she becomes one with her old body again; her body is not only coming back to life but also forcing Joan to feel the suffocation it felt, “obliterating” all of the lives Joan created in order to hide her old identity. It is only when Joan escapes her life of lies is she able to confront the truth, and it is through this confrontation that Joan slowly begins to reclaim herself.

Her reclamation, though, is not finalized by “absorbing” her old body alone. No, Joan must also confront her mother. Her mother’s astral body makes one last appearance to Joan at the end of the novel. It is this final experience that Joan realizes her mother “never really let go of [Joan] because [Joan] had never really let her [mother] go” (Atwood 330). The patriarchal chains that stayed attached to Joan throughout the novel were locked to Joan by her mother, and as Joan admits, she was never really able to escape them. But what is most important is that Joan, although admitting to loving her mother, states that “My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time to stop trying” (Atwood 330). This realization is important to Joan’s growth: her entire adult life, thus far, has been spent trying to make her mother (though dead) happy as well as the people around her (Arthur, the Royal Porcupine), but in doing so, her personhood was absorbed into the dark “vortexes” that were her mother and those she could not be “real” with. This is what simulacra do: we feel as though we are not “real” in a society that glorifies women who fit into Western beauty standards, so we recreate ourselves to please those around us so

that we may be deemed real and legitimate although the only real that we seek to obtain is the (un)real. But as we can see here, Joan is slowly realizing in her seclusion that she can never make those around her happy, that trying may be a waste of effort and life. Faking her own death would not help Joan regain her personhood, would never help her truly “live,” but this choice acts as a catalyst for Joan’s personal reclamation, a reclamation that does not become complete until her interaction with the reporter at the end of the novel.

Joan’s existence is mostly defined by her lack of existing—her lack of confronting her history, her reality, and it is this lack that she must confront at the end. What was supposed to be Joan’s accidental death evolves into a suspected suicide which ultimately turns into a murder investigation, Sam and Marlene being the prime suspects. She discovers this after her confrontations with her old body and her mother, so upon learning this information, Joan thinks to herself that she “should have stayed where [she] was and faced reality” (Atwood 338). We can see her growth here; her realization serves to show readers that Joan is slowly escaping from the chains of simulacra. Her faked death fails not merely in practice alone, but also in Joan’s attempt to escape her old lives for good. Her reclamation becomes complete when a reporter trying to get information regarding Joan’s “murder” finds her in Terremoto. Their initial encounter is a rocky one, as Joan hits him over the head with a bottle, knocking him out cold, but the reporter eventually serves as a foil for Joan to regain her personhood. His role as a reporter is also not a coincidence: as a reporter, his job is to uncover the “truth” and he does just that. Joan, while visiting the reporter, says:

I talked too much, of course, but I was feeling nervous. I guess it will make a pretty weird story, once he's written it; and the odd thing is that I didn't tell any lies. Well, not very many. Some of the names and a few other things, but nothing major. I suppose I could have gotten out of it. I could have said I had amnesia or something... Or I could have escaped; he wouldn't have been able to trace me. I'm surprised I didn't do that, since I've always been terrified of being found out. But somehow I couldn't just run off and leave him all alone in the hospital with no one to talk to.

(Atwood 345)

After living her whole life running away from her past, hiding it from everyone around, Joan is now able to confess everything to the reporter. She is not afraid of him uncovering her past now that she has confronted it herself, and she tells him her story willingly even though she's "always been terrified of being found out." After confessing everything to reporter, Joan eventually feels that "he's the only person who knows anything about [her]" (Atwood 346). The reporter knows Joan for who she is as a person who is not directly defined by her body. Confessing her story allows Joan to fully reclaim her body by first reclaiming her individualism, her personhood. Her reclamation begins with her confrontations with her body and her mother. This allows her to not be afraid of who she is and who she was as a person, that these aspects of her life helped form her identity and that hiding them would only hide her true self. Through this, Joan is finally capable of telling her true history in its entirety.

Joan's adult life was once centered around her body: being thin and making sure no one knew that she used to be fat. And it is through this that her real personhood was overshadowed and nearly obliterated. She never had an identity of her own, since her personhood only reflected what the people around her wanted it to reflect; she was controlled by her body and its place in society. Once disgusting and illegitimate, her body eventually became "real" in the era of simulacra, but that was just it: she was only "real" when she was thin no matter that she was also an individual human with her own personality and identity. Sofia Sanchez-Grant writes that "Theoretically, by erasing the body, women can evade patriarchal control" (81). While Sanchez-Grant adheres to the problematic argument made by Orbach on eating disorders as resistance, this statement is of interest in this discussion. She qualifies this by saying "theoretically" because, for obvious reasons, this cannot be achieved in real life. Atwood demonstrates this inability through her fiction; we see that erasing the body does not free women from patriarchy's chains. What does free women from the chains of patriarchy and simulacra, though, is the movement back to reclaiming the mind side of the mind/body dualism.

This reclamation, in turn, allows for the possibility for women to reclaim their bodies. Joan demonstrates this at the end of the novel: she confronts all of the factors that were formative of her "shucked-off" identity. She no longer has to pretend to be someone she is not—she is able to be herself without shame and without fear. Instead of being solely defined by her body, she is able to define herself through her personhood and this definition allows her to live life personhood first, body second rather than vice versa. Many of the choices Joan made in response to her bodily shame become reversed once

she reveals her true personhood: she admits that Arthur “loved [her] under false pretenses, so [she] shouldn’t feel too rejected when he stops” and she decides that she “won’t write any more Costume Gothics” admitting they “were bad for [her]” (Atwood 345). These choices only further serve to emphasize her growth through her bodily reclamation. Because the mind and the body are not mutually exclusive, it is important for women to reclaim both. Since women have never been associated with the mind side of the binary, only the body, fighting to solely reclaim the body ends in defeat. We must establish ourselves as women, as humans with individual personhoods. Far too long have we been defined through our bodies alone, and Joan’s personal reclamation can serve as a form of resistance that has gone overlooked by current feminist body positive movements.

Baudrillard believes that simulacra have murdered reality to the point that we can no longer return to what was once real. But I diverge from Baudrillard at this point: I believe that it is possible that we *can* return to reality by liberating women through the reclamation of the mind and then the body. Our bodies become seen as illegitimate and unnatural through encountering simulacra and the social constructions that have developed out of chasing the ideal (un)real. A legitimate female body, at this point in time, does not exist, technically, because the ideal body portrayed through simulacra does not exist. But this projection of the (un)real keeps patriarchy’s grasp on us tight; Boynton emphasizes this, noting that “the female body, as a site of oppression, has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women” (Boynton 78). Simulacra serve to change the way we perceive reality and thus the way we perceive and police the female body. This control prevents women from liberation if women choose to focus

solely on liberating the female body. If we have never been legitimately associated with the mind, we can never legitimately own our bodies without first becoming real through the mind. Third-wave feminist movements today are too focused on reclaiming the female body as beautiful that they largely fail to be intersectional as they attempt to combat patriarchy. The reclamation of abject bodies as beautiful is merely met with stigma and disgust, for society cannot see abject bodies as real.

Many feminist activists in the present are skipping over the woman inside the body and only focus solely on the body. I would not suggest that feminist movements are deliberately trying to cover up women's individual personhoods, but their attempts at reclaiming the female body become coopted in society and inherently obscure individual identities. As many current feminist theorists are discussing, "we are living in the image factory" (Elias et al. 38) in the age of neoliberalism (read: the era of simulacra) and this factory has made it to where feminist movements "use techniques they claim to reject: makeup and photoshop" (Elias et al. 32). Advertisements of women with seemingly abject bodies are still airbrushed to remove hints of cellulite and stretch marks¹⁷. But when feminists focus solely on the female body, they are left with few options of resistance: they must show abject bodies through images in order to fight patriarchal, ideal bodies. These images must be presented in a way that does not create disgust in their viewers, so makeup *is* used, photoshop *is* used, and the chosen women with "abject" bodies are, in fact, women with bodies deemed real and desirable. Ashley Graham might not be a size two, but her body is read as desirable in the images she is represented in.

¹⁷ If we remember the discussion of Ashley Graham's swimsuit cover on Sports Illustrated, we see that her skin has been touched up so that her cellulite and stretch marks are no longer visible.

She is a woman with a beautiful body, so it is easy for movements like the Body Positive Movement to use her as an example. But women with obese, transgender, or aging (just to name a few) bodies become left out and tenets like intersectionality become blurred. Feminism cannot win this war against simulacra by playing the same game because feminist images merely become coopted to reflect the “reality” created by simulacra.

Simulacra obtains their power through images and prioritizing the female body over the female in the body. Feminism, in its fight to reclaim the body, should not fight fire with fire but rather fight fire with water. We should not fight these patriarchal images with more images but rather with writing, with texts. We should not focus on the female body but rather the woman in the body. Helene Cixous, as discussed in Chapter One, calls for women to write: “woman must write woman” (877). This writing of woman, though, is focused on women writing the bodies. We see this as Cixous tells women to “write your self. Your body must be heard” (880). While there are some problems with Cixous’ argument (such as placing the focus of women’s liberation on the body), her sentiment here should be reconsidered. Woman must write woman, but this writing should not be focused on woman’s body but rather woman herself. Let us write women for who they are as humans. Let us write women’s personhoods, showcasing their identities and personalities instead of showcasing their bodies.

Our society is pervaded by cultural images, but simulacra are powerful because we allow them to be. We choose images over text, but we must move back to writing, back to text. *Lady Oracle* may be a work of fiction, but it serves as a mode of resistance both through the theoretical discourse it is working with as well as through the fact that it

is a piece of written work. The influence of patriarchy extends beyond images alone and into ideologies: certain women may mold their identities to reflect what patriarchy wants (such as how Joan's identities were formed to please Arthur), but this is where female solidarity comes into play. We must write women for who they are, without judgment, without assumptions. To assume a woman who has traditional values only has them because of the influence of patriarchy is to deny that woman agency. It also serves to alienate her. Let each woman come to life through text regardless of ideologies. Let us unearth the stories of all women, allowing not only our discovery of our fellow women but also personal discovery. It is through this, I believe, that the liberation of women is possible. We are humans first, bodies second, and never are the two mutually exclusive nor should they ever be treated as such.

CONCLUSION

In the Fall of 2017, I continued teaching ENGS 001: Written Expression at the University of Vermont as a graduate teaching assistant. This was my third semester teaching, and I noticed I felt more at ease being in front of my first-year students, this time teaching two sections instead of one. Prior to the beginning of this semester, I had spent all summer working out and eating healthy, and, as a result, I lost a total of thirty pounds. At times, I attributed my newly found confidence to my weight loss, but it was more complex than I originally thought. Before, I found myself nervous at the thought of standing in front of twenty-two students, but I was at ease in front of forty-four new faces, and I couldn't just chalk this relaxed nature up to losing weight. I can admit that before my weight loss, I was afraid of my students judging me based on my body size. Would they be repulsed by me? Would they consider me illegitimate as not only a woman, but also as a fat woman? After losing my initial weight, I worried less about being a "huge featureless blob".¹⁸ By the end of the semester I had lost another twenty-four pounds, totaling fifty-four altogether, and not only did I teach my absolute best, I also formed great relationships with many of my students.

I couldn't simply attribute my confidence to losing weight considering that my weight loss journey began as a result of confronting my binge eating disorder. I ate to fill the voids of past traumas that I sought to forget and also to become invisible. Eating more meant I could wear larger clothing and hide myself as much as possible. However, teaching put me in the spot light, it made me visible, and I realized that I couldn't hide

¹⁸ This is how Atwood's Joan sees herself; see Chapter Two for more context.

from my students. This realization not only helped initiate my weight loss (which was a result of me changing my unhealthy behaviors), but it also allowed me to become more comfortable in my identity as a real, human woman versus the illegitimate entity that I internalized in association with my body. This idea of hiding ourselves behind our bodies is reflected everywhere. As Chapter One discussed, binge eating disorder is not a form of resistance, it is merely a reaction to simulacra—we eat more to cope with the idea that that we don't have "legitimate" bodies, that we are, in fact, blurs in society. This is how Joan lived her life throughout *Lady Oracle*, and, unlike myself, she wasn't put in the spot light the way teaching put me under the scrutiny of my students. This lack of visibility resulted in Joan's desire to change her past life, and her past identity so that she could begin living a life in her newly legitimate body.

But, as we see in Chapter Two, Joan's personhood comes to life when she becomes visible under the scrutiny of the reporter at the end. She can no longer hide her past or herself, and it is through her confrontation with the reporter, a person whose sole purpose is to uncover the "truth," that she is able to truly live and have an identity. This idea of visibility may seem contradictory, since the female body endures "hyper-visibility" (Dolezal 105). But abject bodies, in the era of simulacra, are hardly merely visible in society—they are not considered real or legitimate and thus people would rather look away from them or see them as blurs. If we are to read Dolezal's term "hyper-visibility" as we read Baudrillard's "hyper-reality" then this idea of abject bodies as blurs makes sense: they are so scrutinized in society that they are beyond the visible (into the invisible) and, as a result, beyond reality (into the unreal). For Joan and myself, we

became visible once we could no longer hide ourselves from the world. Our experiences differ, but our results are the same: my personhood was so tied up in my body that I lost my sense of who I was, but being under the eyes of my students pushed me to confront my body, which was grounded in my past. My past is so formative in my identity, and in turn, I was able to reclaim my body. I have attempted to lose weight numerous times throughout my life (and failed every single time), but these attempts were rooted in my desire to be thin. It was not until I finally accepted my past, a past rooted in a toxic relationship with my mother (like that of Joan's) who consistently reminded me of my excessive body, a body which began to expand after the early death of my father when I was sixteen, and who I am as a person that I succeeded in my reclamation.

The same semester that I finally succeeded in reclaiming my body is the same semester I encountered a student with a story eerily similar to that of Joan's. In ENGS 001, the first essay my students write is a social narrative. The social narrative essentially focuses on ourselves in conflict with a chosen community we are a part of; the conflicts faced allude to larger problems that are greater than ourselves. One of my students in the Fall 2017 semester wrote a social narrative about how, as a ten-year old child, she was obese, and how her parents would cry about that fact. What is most important to note, though, is how my student came up to me after class to tell me she did not do the peer review given in class that day (although she feigned to have done it for the duration of the class). She explained to me that her narrative was very personal, and while she was okay with me reading it (I assume because I was the one grading it in the end), she did not want to share her story with others. At the time, I was still undergoing my own personal

reclamation, and I did not know how to navigate this situation. I was struck with a mixture of emotions, mostly sadness that she was too ashamed of her past to share it with her fellow classmates and anger at the fact that she, too, was so defined by stigma and shame that she felt that she could not reveal her past body.

This thesis project came to life before I met my student, but I believe her story is what helped me turn it into what is now: an attempt to help women find the liberation we so deserve. I wish I could go back to that day and speak more directly to the shame my student felt about her past body, to tell her she need not be ashamed. I'm not sure where my student is now or if she has been able to reclaim herself and her body, but at times I think of her, and I hope she has found herself as Joan and I have. I hope her personhood shines beyond her prior bodily constraints and that she is, now, truly living.

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