

1998

Throwing some weight around: women and fatness in the contemporary, post-colonial societies of Australia, Canada and New New Zealand

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Throwing Some Weight Around: Women and Fatness in the
Contemporary, Post-colonial Societies of Australia, Canada and
New Zealand

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements for completion of a

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Antoinette Holm, BA (Hons)

English Studies Programme

1998

Declaration

I hereby certify that this thesis is the result of my own original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to another University or similar institution.

Antoinette Holm

Acknowledgments

This is a piece of work that would not have been completed without the support and assistance of many, many people. I thank you all unreservedly.

A special thanks go to my two supervisors, Associate Professor Dorothy Jones and Dr. Gerry Turcotte who have provided invaluable guidance and exercised great patience.

My grandmothers, Ella-May and Joyce, mother Annette, and sister Sonya are the inspiration for this work, and it is to them that I dedicate it.

Without the tireless faith of all the members of my family this work would never have been completed. Rod, Annette, and Sonya especially have proved wonderful, invigorating conversationalist and unwavering supporters.

Finally I need to mention two very special people who lived this thesis along with me. My partner Erik's companionship, expertise and commitment has been a great influence on my own intellectual journey, and I have greatly benefited from his practical and generous assistance. The presence of my son, Oliver, has helped me keep my feet on the ground and given me great joy. Thank to you all.

Abstract

Body size is intrinsic to contemporary Western femininity. Disciplines of health and beauty not only shape the female body but define the limits of the form. Body size and eating is a topic that touches on the lives of most women in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. In this thesis I explore the parameters of the fat body, problematise popular notions of fatness, and look at the way in which body size is fundamental to the social construction of femininity in the post colonial, contemporary societies of Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

This thesis is not about obesity or about medically-defined excess, it is about cultural ideas of fatness, and the way in which fatness is inscribed upon forms in excess of the “docile body”. I am interested in the way in which fatness intersects with docility, the institutionally-desired disciplined body of idealised (and reduced) femininity, and the ramifications for both fat and docile bodies.

The body addressed in this thesis is a textual one. Literature is a means by which to illuminate the discursive practices of society, and by contextualising literature within historical and cultural debates, it becomes possible to see the way in which the body at the centre of a text is constructed and positioned with regard to a number of competing discourses. It is also possible to identify the ways in which the feminine body is marked by, and negotiates, the processes of cultural inscription. The visual image, also, is a powerful medium through which socio-cultural images are reflected and challenged, and so I include a discussion of film within the thesis. In the following seven chapters selected films and novels from Australia, Canada and New Zealand are positioned within cultural, political and national contexts that impact upon the meanings of fatness.

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Preface

In this thesis I go in search of the fat lady, a gargantuan figure of mythical proportions. But I do not search for her in myths of the past, rather I look for her in the contemporary post-colonial societies of New Zealand, Australia and Canada. The fat lady can be found behind the contemporary images of slender, refined beauty that modern women are encouraged to emulate. She can also be found in non-mainstream, “non-white”, mad, “ethnic” figures that together shadow the idealised form.

In societies where considerable effort is invested in, and emphasis put upon, the purging of fat, the fat lady is the nightmare possibility of lack of control, visibly enacted as rolls of flesh. The fat lady is more than this, however. She becomes fat through the relationship between class, race, ethnicity and nationalism. She becomes fat through ideas of excess that determine “normal” femininity in the context of patriarchy. She becomes fat by being more than political discourses can incorporate.

In the following thesis I problematise popular and medical discourses of fatness, and provide a discussion upon theories of bodily inscription and how they can facilitate an investigation of female fatness. I then look at different expressions of fat bodies, widening the notion of fatness to incorporate a range of excessive female forms. The fat lady within this thesis comes in many shapes and sizes, and has a range of volitions and desires. Although she remains marginalised by discourses of contemporary femininity that have no room for her size, she nevertheless refuses containment of docile femininity.