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Closer. Fatness, desire, and seeing as touching.

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Abstract:

Thinking through the concept of “seeing as touching” as articulated in the work of Laura Marks, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and queer filmmaker Barbara Hammer, this article uses a research-creation approach involving somatic and visual prompts to explore questions around intimacy, visuality, touch, and distance. Building on the concepts of desirability hierarchies and economies of care, it investigates connections between fatphobia and feelings of desire and disgust, highlighting the complex role that sensations can play in reproducing and reinforcing normative body standards and white supremacist power structures. The article includes still photographs from a video-based exploration of a fat “haptic visuality” and suggests a connection between the generative ambiguity such an approach to making images can allow for and the inherent transgressive potential of fat embodiment.

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Pre-pandemic, in a dance class. We are doing a warm-up exercise that I've started calling “putting my skin on”: running my hands all over my body, waking up my surface, reminding myself where I begin and where I end. When my hands glide over the bumpy backs of my thighs, it's like I'm shining a flashlight on them while the rest of the room is suddenly plunged into darkness. Every dimple thrown into stark relief, hypervisible. I feel a rush of shame. I keep going. I tell myself: “I get to have a skin.” And, as happens every time, when I have stopped running my hands over my skin, it feels more alive than only a few minutes before, and more porous: a boundary, but a connection, too.

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DESIRABILITY POLITICS AND ECONOMIES OF CARE

In "Romantic Love is Killing Us," (2018) Caleb Luna writes about fatness, desire, and the harmful effects of what they call "economies of care." Culturally, contemporary western societies are fixated on romantic partnership as the primary form of intimate connection where, ideally, all of our needs for affection and care are supposed to be met. With the exception of parent-child relationships, these romantic relationships are privileged over other forms of kinship. Luna writes: "The security to count on someone to take care of me when I'm sick. To care for me in a crisis. To share sadness and joy with me. This care does not *have* to be reserved, but we seem to have culturally agreed to distribute it selectively, and only to those we are in romantic partnerships with" (para. 4).

This cultural practice of reserving care, as Luna further points out, is fuelled by a normalized capitalist scarcity mindset and is tied to "neoliberal victim-blaming" (2018). In a capitalist, neoliberal framework that fundamentally relies on the idea of personal responsibility, fat bodies in particular are not only widely regarded as "unproductive, ineffective, and unprofitable" (Harjunen 2017), but are also considered solely accountable for whatever disadvantages their non-normative bodies and the narratives that are attached to them may put them at – be these disadvantages structural, material, or interpersonal.

Treating care as just another limited commodity has grave consequences, "[p]articularly for those (...) who have bodies, positions, subjectivities that people have been conditioned to see and are complicit in seeing as unloveable" (Luna 2018, para. 5). Those at the bottom of desire hierarchies are not only more likely to be lonely, but are also rendered vulnerable by how people let sexual capital influence who they invest time and care in. This adds to and intersects with other pressures exerted by forms of structural oppression like racism, transphobia, and ableism.

Starting from Luna's observations, I use this article to think about intimacy, seeing, and touching and how these relate to fatness. For this, I lean on Allyson Mitchell's (2018) model of a "hybrid analytic reflection and art piece" (147) and follow a series of observations and experiments involving touch, movement, and screens as I consider fatness' relationship to care, desire, the visual, and the haptic. I think about the concept of "seeing as touching" as articulated in the work of Laura Marks, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Barbara Hammer, and what role fatness can play in the questioning of boundaries in favor of generative ambiguity. Borrowing strategies both from Marks' (2000) "haptic visuality" (162) and from fat aesthetics, my emphasis is less on a linear narrative and more on a layering of images, on getting close and exploring textures, on gathering and letting things spill over.

LAYERS AND INTERSECTIONS OF OPPRESSION

In recent years, an increasing amount of scholarship has investigated the connections between

fatphobia, beauty standards demanding thinness, and racist ideology (Farrell 2011; Friedman et al. 2020; Strings 2019). Sabrina Strings (2019) traces fatphobia back to the confluence of racist stereotypes and Christian ideals of frugality and control: “Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked fatness to “greedy” Africans. And religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly. (...) In the United States, fatness became stigmatized as both black and sinful” (4). Emily Lind (2020) even suggests that all fat bodies fail to live up to the standards of a white supremacist ideal: “[F]at white subjects perform white civility poorly, because they are read as failing at thin aspiration” (190).

But being fat alone doesn't automatically lead to an unacceptable subjectivity in the hierarchy of "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 2013, 4). The images and meanings projected onto fat bodies differ vastly depending on the other layers of identity they carry – particularly along the lines of race and gender (Bergman 2009; Fahs 2018; Mollow 2017) – as do the effects of those narratives: “[R]acialized discourses about body size are often used to diminish the importance of antiblack violence by blaming deaths and injuries of fat African Americans on their size (...). [F]atphobia buttresses tropes of black bodies as excessively powerful and dangerous” (Mollow 2017, 106).

In a system that devalues people according to how much their bodies stray from the white supremacist ideal, the desirability politics that Luna criticizes reproduce and reinforce these hierarchies. The same racist and ableist discourses that violently deny some people the right to be perceived as fully human also deny them the right to have desires and be desired.

As I explore the connections between fatness and desire in this text, I know that they are bound up in these violent structures; I also know that I am writing from a position of privilege (being white, cis, abled, and middle-class) where these structures harm me in some ways, but effectively benefit me in others. I hope that looking at fatness, desire, and visibility in the ways I propose can be a part of an effort to counter the effects of these dehumanizing structures – effects that are, as I write this, exacerbated by a devastating global health crisis.

SINGLEDOM IN A PANDEMIC

Early during the coronavirus pandemic, I noticed – primarily through social media – how queer communities very quickly built mutual aid networks, supplying isolating immunocompromised people with essential items. While that effort was extremely heartening to witness, these networks can't provide much of the intimate care Luna addresses, including sustained emotional support.

And another trend emerged on my feed: monogamy. People retreated into their smallest bubbles, sacrificing in-person contact with friends and non-primary partners to quarantine with their primary romantic partner. For those without a partner, this meant either having to find friends willing to exclusively bubble with them or taking on the continuous labor of reaching out to people

and of renegotiating safety protocols over and over again.

PRESSURE FOR EVERYBODY

“A fat-hating society asks fearfully, “Do I look fat?”(...) [I]n a fat-hating society everyone is fat” (Wann 2009, XV). Weight stigma leads to discrimination of fat people in a host of ways, including employment and housing discrimination, inadequate treatment by medical professionals, street harassment, and physical violence (Wann 2009, XIX). And while the specifics may not be common knowledge, the fact that fat people are treated badly is: Fahs' (2018) research on "dreaded" bodies concludes that it is the fear of punishment – of the social repercussions – for having a not normatively attractive body that drives the need for thinness, more so than the wish for an "ideal" body (239). To avoid being treated badly in western society, it is imperative to not become fat. No matter someone's position in the hierarchy of desire, they are constantly forced to think about how they look – how they *feel* doesn't determine their status and is therefore asked much more rarely.

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Get in front of a mirror. Or don't. Close your eyes. Instead of looking at your exterior, sense into your body. Travel through every part of it, as patiently and methodically as if trying to check the entire surface of your skin. What sensations are there? Is there tension, a faint buzz, a desire? What do you want?

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DESIRE, SOMATICS, ORIENTATION

Somatic therapy helped me understand that my feelings aren't just "in my head", but connected to my sensations, happening in my body; that those sensations are real and provide me with information about myself. This realization changed my relationship to my body as fundamentally as figuring out that I was queer did. And in both cases, getting there took me a while.

Growing up, I could tell that I didn't conform to what was considered desirable. Of course, I didn't question who had decided what constituted “desirable” and why I should conform to it but instead just thought about how to finally change my body enough to be admitted to the club. And there is another issue with identifying my desire. Living in a fat body, I am constantly told that what I want, what I think my body is telling me, is wrong. It's an experience I share with many fat people. As Jules Pashall (2018) puts it in their essay on fatness and somatics:

I was taught to distrust my fat body. Starting from a time before my memories begin, the most important thing for me to do was become less fat. When I felt hungry, people told me

I was not actually hungry, so I was not allowed to eat. When I wanted to rest, people told me I should not be tired, so I was shamed into movement. These external controls convinced me that what I felt was wrong, so I learned how to deny my feelings and to live outside of my body. (71)

Under capitalism, desires are constantly manipulated to produce more eager consumers. Capitalism shapes people's relationship to desire itself, alienating them from their bodies and telling them that they need to build a subjectivity by acquiring the "right" things. But the desires of my fat body haven't just been manipulated: I've learned that they are dangerous, excessive, corrosive. If left unchecked, so I've been taught, my desires will kill me – be it by inevitably destroying my health or by causing social rejection and exclusion. In the cultural narrative, fat bodies are time bombs, bound to eventually destroy themselves and damage "the very (moral) fabric of society" (Murray 2008,15) in the process.

So it's no surprise that I had barely any access to my desires – it felt like those weren't even my questions to ask. I may have known there was a place called queerness, and it had always looked interesting, but it didn't really matter, because I didn't even think of myself as being on the same map. In the body I was in, desire wasn't for me.

But desire matters: it is a compass. Who and what I am drawn to and oriented towards affects my actions and thereby the world around me. Even if I don't get what I want, even if my desires later change, I need a place to start from – something other than the rules and models given to me. "[T]he choice of one's object of desire makes a difference to other things that we do. (...) [O]ther things "stick" when we orientate ourselves toward objects, especially if such orientations do not follow the family or social line." (Ahmed 2008, 100).

What happens when so many people are excluded from feeling like what they want is even relevant? Without being able to reconnect with the knowledge that our bodies already hold, we are left to choose only based on the ideas offered to us, to replicate choices that have been made over and over before, and to thereby affirm the structures we live in:

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then (...) we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. (Lorde 1984, 58)

HEGEMONY OF THE VISUAL

Western culture and knowledge systems are ocularcentric. Language is rife with signs of seeing being equated with knowing, often with an implication of things being uncomplicated: in English,

something obvious is “plain to see”; the German translation is *offensichtlich* – openly visible. Of course, this simplifying approach to knowledge acquisition is unhelpful when things aren't “openly visible” (as in a viral pandemic, for example). But the idea that knowledge can be gained through looking alone also has a long, colonialist tradition: “[E]thnographic photography and film have objectified non-Western cultures and made a spectacle of them; they have reduced cultures to their visual appearance; and they have used vision as part of a general will to knowledge of the other as a means to power” (Marks 2000, 133).

In a still-Cartesian worldview that separates mind and body, western knowledge systems privilege the head over the body. Both are, respectively, associated with the rational and the irrational, the educated and the primitive. In this colonialist view, the head rules over the body in the same way that the west dominates the rest of the world. The eyes, of course, are in the head.

ACTIVE LOOKING

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) proposes that staring, firstly, is an expression of curiosity: “Stares are urgent efforts to make the unknown known, to render legible something that seems at first glance incomprehensible. In this way, staring becomes a starrer's quest to know and a staree's opportunity to be known” (15). For fat people however, this “opportunity” is rarely afforded: “As members of Western society, we presume we know the histories of all fat bodies, particularly those of fat women; we believe we know their desires (which must be out of control) and their will (which must be weak)” (Murray 2008, 154). With this narrative already in place, there is no need for an individual's story. The fat person being stared at is reduced to a specimen, a screen to project an endless re-run of prejudices on.

Staring, I believe, mainly serves another purpose here: to create distance; to establish a hierarchy of subject to object, of me and other. This separating stare is adjacent to Garland-Thomson's concept of the dominating stare, but I would argue that it goes beyond it and that it is often interpreted as an expression of a visceral sensation: disgust.

GUT REACTIONS

“As a gut reaction, disgust is an attempt to render oneself distinct from that which disgusts – disgust is that embodied practice of cringing, backing away, highlighting one's separation from an object” (Meagher 2003, 33). Analyzing critics' reactions to artist Jenny Saville's paintings of fat women, Michelle Meagher (2003) suggests that “there is something valuable in retaining and interrogating our immediate and seemingly unambivalent reactions of disgust” (23). Reactions like disgust – spontaneous sensations triggered by something outside of us, but felt in the body, viscerally – are commonly interpreted as jolts of embodied knowledge, telling us what's good for us and what isn't. In truth, Meagher argues, these feelings are often just expressions of an

internalized “system of cultural ideas” (2003, 25).

Meagher (2003) further points out that the impulse to distance oneself that disgust causes is triggered by feelings of subjectivity itself being under threat:

Subjects affirm their singularity and independence by aggressively establishing and patrolling boundaries between self and other, subject and object, the “me” and the “not me.” (...) Kristeva’s theory of abjection points out that such boundaries are fundamentally insecure. It is this insecurity that distinguishes the object from the abject. If the object is “not me,” the abject is “not not me.” (33)

It is this – the “not not me”, the danger of “that could be me” – which sets reactions to fatness apart from those to most other embodiments of “otherness”. Narratives about fatness overwhelmingly revolve around behavior, maintaining that anybody can technically become fat at any point, but only if they “let” it happen – meaning their fatness is attributed to their actions (not, for example, fate). Fatness is seen as a moral failure, making it imperative to distance oneself from it.

Disgust demands distance, desire wants closeness. Both sensations are perceived as “natural” and visceral, while often being expressions of and playing a part in actively reproducing culturally agreed-upon structures of power and belonging. And both sensations are often evoked by seeing and are controlled through looks, placing them in a particular relationship with the visual.

FILM, VISION, AND DISTANCE

Film is a medium dominated by vision. It also has a terrible track record regarding its treatment of fat (and indeed, all non-normative) bodies. Representation of fat characters in narrative film remains abysmal, not to mention reality TV’s obsession with and exploitation of fat bodies as spectacles (Farrell 2011, 119).

Watching bodies on film is a negotiation of distance and recognition – the distance of unilaterally gazing at another person, made two-dimensional by the camera and screen, and recognition of the experience of having a body, however much the body on screen may differ from mine. And while marginalized positionalities make both necessary and possible an “oppositional” critical gaze rather than one that simply reproduces patriarchal power dynamics (hooks 2015, 116), the gaze still enables a feeling of separation.

Classical, illusionistic narrative film uses bodies as signs that allow for human complexity to be folded into legible narratives, and it uses the viewers’ ability and need to remember, categorize, and connect to do so: the efficient, smooth transmission of a story relies on the audience reading the clues and understanding the limited amount of information given. These simplified, known narratives can only reproduce stories we already know – we *recognize* what we’re already familiar

with, rather than processing something new. When narrative film works in this way, it reaffirms the status quo and re-enforces normativity. To overcome this effect, it's not only necessary to tell different stories and show different bodies on screen – the medium itself needs to be used differently.

Laura Marks (2000) considers two different kinds of visuality in perceiving film, optical and haptic: “Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze” (162). Marks (2000) suggests that by invoking other senses and memories of haptic sensations, film can invite a different kind of encounter with bodies on screen: “The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative “ (163), “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (162).

SEEING AS TOUCHING

“Dyketactics” (1974) is a 4-minute short film, shot on 16mm color film, brimming with naked women's bodies. Experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer called it her “lesbian commercial” (2010, 91). It is an extremely tactile film: “Every frame in the film has an image of touching. Touch precedes sight in ontological human development and the connection of the two was an important aesthetic principle in my early films. The audience feels in their bodies what they see on the screen” (94). The first half of the film is also entirely composed of overlays of more than one image at once. Faces and bodies seemingly glide over each other. They fade in and out, they suddenly appear and disappear, jumping and skipping, like the women themselves, frolicking in the sunshine. Watching this, intellectually, I know: these bodies are not in the same space, but it *feels* as though they are touching. The distance between them has collapsed, and with it some of the distance between me and them, between seeing and touching.

The haptic quality of the images – the closeness, the sunlight on skin, the constant movement, the layering of the images – doesn't so much withhold a narrative as it proclaims: narrative is not important here. These bodies are important, the way they touch, the way they are. Instead of constructing a story to get that point across, I am invited into the touch, to witness the touch, and to touch with my own eyes.

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Let one part of your body touch another part of your body. If possible, let skin move against skin. Experiment with different speeds, different amounts of pressure. Try out different body parts. Let your attention go back and forth between the sensation of touching and that of being touched, between your touched self and your touching self.

The observation that we are always also being touched when we touch – and vice versa – is central to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "world that is fundamentally intersubjective, and ambiguous" (Murray 2008, 138). "Merleau-Ponty (...) challenges the notion that the body is separate from the mind, that our bodies exist only as objects amongst other objects. Rather, it is in and through our bodies that we rise towards a world, and that we have a world" (147). There is no distant standpoint from which to contemplate the essence of things – we are always involved, always subject and object at the same time.

In his last essay, Merleau-Ponty (1968) extends this observation and the resulting claim of reversibility from touching to seeing, intertwining the two senses: "There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible" (251). But what does this mean for the need for distance and the ability to negotiate closeness? If seeing *is* touching, what happens to an individual's boundaries?

FATNESS TRANSGRESSES

In her podcast "Maintenance Phase," (Gordon and Hobbes 2020) author Aubrey Gordon recounts an experience of street harassment. She is walking down the street on a hot day, wearing a sleeveless dress, when a stranger in a café loudly – and without being prompted in any way other than by her walking by – says in her direction: "Nobody wants to see that" (48:33). It's an act of aggression. But for the heckler, the provocation lies in Gordon's failure to cover her fat body sufficiently so as not to expose him to the sight of it. This is a common attitude towards bodies that are deemed "unsightly," which in some instances has even been coded into law.

"Ugly laws" were part of the public codes of many U.S. cities for much of the 20th century. One such law stated: "Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or *disgusting object*, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view (...)" (quoted in Garland-Thomson 2009, 72, emphasis mine).

The "disgusting object," the person in the "aberrant" body, is considered responsible for keeping out of sight so as to not cause a disturbance. Being visible alone is already seen as an invasion of space – much as if it were non-consensual touch. And in the case of fat bodies, this seems to suggest that they are so out of control, so sprawling, that they are able to cross the distance between themselves and the person looking at them, between looking and touching.

Fat bodies transgress boundaries and categories. They fail to correctly perform normative gender roles (Bergman 2009; White 2020). They disturb temporality by always being projected into

a (thinner) future and never quite existing fully in the present (Kent 2001; Harjunen 2009). They even seem to undermine the reliability of physical states, inspiring descriptions of dripping, oozing, and pooling (Apostolidou 2014; Murray 2008) which suggest that, in the cultural imaginary, fat bodies are less solid than thin bodies and are thus more prone to spontaneous liquefaction. And, of course, fat bodies are paradoxes in themselves, always simultaneously too much and not enough.

This transgressing of categories can be unsettling, as uncertainty often is. It can cause strong, even violent reactions to these feelings. I won't suggest that these feelings aren't real – I am adamant that a relationship of trust with one's own body is essential to navigating sensations with integrity. What I *do* suggest is to pay attention to those sensations and to acknowledge them. And to then ask: Does what I desire or reject maybe line up a little too neatly with the power structures I am surrounded by?

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I am looking at Laura Aguilar's (2006) photograph "Grounded 111", past the naked back of her seated fat body at the boulder she is facing. It is large and round, with a coarse surface. Just looking at the boulder, I already feel the surface of my skin coming to life. My body feels round, heavy, grounded. Eyes still on the surface of the boulder, I start running my hands over my body. Any roughness on my skin, I feel it as the roughness of the boulder. It feels nice, satisfying. I tried running my hands over my skin just the other day, got stuck at every little bump, had to stop and examine, judge. Now my hands are gliding over my body, fingers stretched wide, drinking in all of the textures as just that – textures, not defects. Thighs and butt feel most satisfying, and the irregular, bumpy parts are the best. I feel myself twisting and bending, pushing out towards my hands to be an even bigger, better boulder.

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A visuality of touch and closeness diverts attention away from normative objectifying narratives toward materiality, toward the messiness of bodies. It is always too much, too close, too fleshy – just like fat bodies. Fat bodies and the reactions they provoke allow experiences of how entangled vision and touch are, they challenge the gaze's distance. In their ambiguity, fat bodies take up and make space.

Questioning boundaries – between subject and object, between senses; questioning what comes from within and what comes from the outside; not getting any definitive answers – it's unsettling. But something that has been unsettled becomes mobile again, can find new ground. Irritation defamiliarizes, it encourages to look closely, to take in what is in front of us, instead of only activating internalized narratives. Instead of for judgement, looks can be used to caress, to look out for one another. For all of the ways in which our relationship to visuality is tied up with how we enforce normativity and preserve existing power structures – it might be a good place to chip away at those structures.

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Get a video recording device and start recording. Now move in front of the camera, move the camera. Or don't, do what feels interesting. Maybe you'll want to watch yourself while recording, maybe you won't want to watch the screen, or the video, ever. Maybe you'll want to later edit it, maybe layer it. To watch your body move over your own body, your skin over your skin. Notice your sensations. How is your body reacting to the movements, to the images? With time, are things shifting?



Figure 1. Layered zoom stills, 2020. All images by the author.

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