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Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa as Expressions of Shame in a Post-Feminist

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Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa as Expressions of Shame in a Post-Feminist

by

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Abstract

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are disorders historically more prevalent in women than in men. These present potentially deadly disorders continue to trend in women in a western post-millennial context and need to be addressed critically. This work documents the epistemic development of shame in women and the effects of shame on women. This thesis contends shame plays an integral role in women's development and the taking up of anorexia or bulimia in women. Further, this thesis contends the women in this western social context are likely to ignore the dangers of anorexia and bulimia as a function of anti-critical post-feminism and consumerist neoliberal values.

Introduction

Anorexia nervosa is the willful malnutrition of the body. Anorexia is diagnosed when individuals fall below 15% in body fat (considering weight, height, and age¹. Bulimia is characterized by a cycle of bingeing and purging. The extent to which individuals purge and purging methods vary. However, for a diagnosis of bulimia an individual must experience episodes of bingeing and a method of purging. Most individuals self-induce vomiting, others exercise excessively or misuse laxatives². Individuals with bulimia are not generally overweight but may have normal range BMI.

Studies of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa tend to focus on quantitative, biological, or medical research methodology. The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associate Disorders aggregated data of studies ranging from 2007 through 2016 (particularly relating to women's eating disorders in the United States)³. While these statistics need to be updated, they represent women's experiences in a relatively recent time period. According to these studies 30 million Americans suffer from eating disorders of any type. .9% of American women experience anorexia nervosa and 1.5% of American women experience bulimia nervosa in their lifetime⁴. 1 in 5 anorectic women suicide. Nearly 1 in 10 bulimic patients have associated substance abuse

¹ Keel, Pamela K, and Laurie McCormick. "Diagnosis, Assessment and Treatment Planning for Anorexia Nervosa." *The Treatment of Eating Disorders: A Clinical Handbook*, Guilford Publications, 2009, pp. 3–27

² Crow, Scott J, and Beth Brandenburg. "Diagnosis, Assessment, and Treatment Planning for Bulimia Nervosa." *The Treatment of Eating Disorders: A Clinical Handbook*, Guilford Publications, 2009, pp. 28–43

³ National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associate Disorders. "Eating Disorder Statistics ." *National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders*, anad.org/education-and-awareness/about-eating-disorders/eating-disorders-statistics/.

⁴ *Ibid*, *National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders*

problems-mostly frequently alcoholism⁵. These statistics stress genetics, environment, and “personality traits”. Genetic factors determine the taking up of an eating disorder in between “50 and 80%” of cases⁶.

I treat this data as significant indication of eating disorders as cultural problems. However, I argue against the isolation of study from cultural context. Similarly, the treatment of anorexia and bulimia typically focuses on medical and psychological methodology. The medical approach treats the sufferer’s body. Describing the bodily harm caused by disordered eating serves to illustrate the scope of the medical approach and emphasize the importance of addressing eating disorders.

Anorexia and bulimia present real threats to the body. Rylander et al. (2017) succinctly described possible complications of anorexia nervosa:

“Well-described medical complications of [anorexia nervosa] include abnormalities of electrolytes, glucose, hematologic parameters, cardiac structure and function, skin integrity, gastrointestinal motility, liver function, cognitive function, bone density, reproductive function, thermoregulation, vision, dentition, and musculoskeletal strength”⁷ (Rylander et al 2017)

Bulimics similarly face somatic trouble. Because of violent, traumatic cycles of bingeing and purging, somatic effects of bulimia are intense and nearly innumerable. Mehler (2011)⁸ extensively details the various complications stratified against the types of bulimia. The most concerning complications include bone marrow dysfunction, kidney and liver dysfunction, esophageal rupture, hypoglycemia, hypokalemia, cardiac structural and functional abnormality,

⁵ Ibid

⁶ *National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders*

⁷ Melanie Rylander, John T. Brinton, Allison L. Sabel, Philip S. Mehler & Jennifer L. Gaudiani (2017) A comparison of the metabolic complications and hospital course of severe anorexia nervosa by binge-purge and restricting subtypes, *Eating Disorders*, 25:4, 345-357, DOI: 10.1080/10640266.2016.1269555

⁸ Mehler, PS. “. Medical Complications of Bulimia Nervosa and Their Treatments. .” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 44, no. 2 (March 2011): 95–104.

gastrointestinal immobility (other numerous gastrointestinal complications), hypovolemia, dental erosion (Mehler 2011)⁹. The medicalized approach attempts to treat these (and other) somatic ills through hospitalization, refeeding, vitamin replenishment, and intensive long-term monitoring through outpatient care.¹⁰ While the medical approach has its place within recovery, treatment is burdensome in time and money. Additionally, the medicalized approach itself cannot treat the underlying causes of anorexia or bulimia. Usually, the medical approach is offered in conjunction with the psychologicistic approach.

The psychologicistic approach considers the origin of the disorder cognitive pathology and the bodily harm as symptomatic. Anorectics often experience depression, anhedonia, confusion, fatigue, alexithymia, etc. Anorectics are described as placing undue investment in the body's shape and size¹¹. There is high co-morbidity between anorexia and obsessive-compulsive disorder, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and phobic disorders.¹² Similarly bulimics present with an "undue" obsession with bodily shape and size and high comorbidity with anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, impulse control, addiction, and phobias¹³. These elements of the anorectic or bulimic condition are usually considered cognitive abnormalities rooted in genetic predisposition. Treatment can involve long-term residential care, outpatient care, cognitive behavioral therapy, group therapy, and psychiatric medication. Both the medical and psychologicistic approaches involve extensive time commitment and financial (for both patients and medical structures) burden which are often prohibitive.¹⁴

⁹ Mehler, *Medical Complications of Bulimia Nervosa*, 2011

¹⁰ Crow S. and Brandenburg B. "Diagnosis, Assessment, and Treatment Planning for Bulimia Nervosa.", 28-43

¹¹ Keel P. and McCormick L. "Diagnosis, Assessment and Treatment Planning for Anorexia Nervosa.", 3-27.

¹² Ibid, 4

¹³ Ibid, 28

¹⁴ Crow, S. The Economics of Eating Disorder Treatment. *Curr Psychiatry Rep* 16, 454 (2014).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-014-0454-z>

My question however is: to what extent do sociopolitical factors affect these disorders? I do not argue the medicalized and psychologistic approaches have no place in the study or treatment of anorexia and/or bulimia; but rather I argue anorexia and bulimia begin with inherited genetic factors *and* inherited socio-political structures. The scientific and psychologistic studies of these disorders need to be supplemented with and grounded in socio-political contexts.

The medicalized and psychologistic approaches to study and treatment miss the point¹⁵. There is an economic and sociopolitical investment in ignoring eating disorders as anything *other* than individual psychological pathologies. Ruth Berman argued the history of Western science ultimately serves to subordinate women and reproduce the ideology and dominance of a “ruling caste”^{16,17}. I apply her argument to a modern context: Western, American, patriarchal, and neoliberal-consumerist culture. The new “ruling caste” I consider broadly as neoliberal political and economic ideologies which suppress critique (specifically here post-feminist¹⁸ messaging as an arm of neoliberalism).¹⁹

¹⁵ “For women, who are subject to such controls more profoundly and, historically, more ubiquitously than men, the focus on pathology (unless embedded in a political analysis) diverts recognition from a central of the reproduction of gender” (186) Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Univ. of California Press, 2013

¹⁶ “These sciences and derivative technologies [create] the tools to further intensify social control over women’s body and her reproductive capacity” (Berman 225). Berman, Ruth. “From Aristotle’s Dualism to Materialist Dialectics: Feminist Transformation of Science and Society.” *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, edited by Alison M Jaggar and Susan R Bordo, pp. 224–255.

¹⁷ Similarly, Susan Bordo noted in *Unbearable Weight: ‘The bourgeois tyranny of slenderness’* (as Kim Chernin has called it) had begun its ascendancy (particularly over women) and with it the development of numerous technologies[...]aimed at a purely physical transformation.” (Bordo 186). Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Univ. of California Press, 2013

¹⁸ Post-feminism is the “[...]appropriation of feminist thought in service of profit[...]” (359) Golombisky, Kim. “Closing Arguments: A Feminist Education for Advertising Students.” *Feminists, Feminisms, and Advertising: Some Restrictions Apply*, Lexington Books, pp. 337–368.

¹⁹ Neoliberalism relies upon a social condition of “[...]competition, inequality, market ‘discipline’, public austerity, and ‘law and order’[...]”(X) Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Beacon Press, 2014.

The anorectic or bulimic woman is not misinterpreting her world nor how much she is valued by her world. This cultural sickness grooms women to invest heavily in their appearance and devalue the self. I study the socio-political situation of modern American, middle class women in a post-structuralist analysis. I then apply post-structuralist elements to psychoanalytical processes of development and individuation.

In this introduction I need to define the role of performativity in identity. Judith Butler analyzes types of personal performativity; I use Butler's basic accounts of performativity and punishment in the context of anorexia and bulimia. Judith Butler's work with gender and performativity in *Bodies that Matter*²⁰ is integral in arguing against strict mind/body dualism. The scientific understanding of anorexia and bulimia tends to remove or isolate the mind from the body. Butler argued the physical facticity of the body 1) ambiguously indicates essential differences between peoples and therefore 2) the lived body is an integrated being always intertwined with a *cultural* reality²¹. In her first section, Butler recognizes tensions between constructivism, agency, and facticity. This is important for my argument. Women's construction of their bodies are directed by cultural realities, but I also acknowledge the importance of personal agency in assenting to those directives.

Anorectic and bulimic women assent to these directives to a far greater degree in exerting agency over the body. This is consistent with ambiguity in agency, facticity, and constructivism. The sociopolitical context of any lived body heavily influences its performance and orientation toward a correct or acceptable identity. Butler's work argues directly against the isolated genetic or related psychologistic approaches. While the psychologistic approach attempts to understand

²⁰ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York and London: Routledge A Taylor and Francis Group, 1993

²¹“Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.”Butler *Bodies the Matter*, 7

an individual's specific experience Butler notes constraints of sex, gender, and performance have bearing on the self-concept. I contend femininity is required of womanhood. In the constructivist view, self-identifying as fully female comes with the social corollary of achieving femininity.

The performance of an identity is transmitted socially and repeated²² at the risk of punishment. Risk of social punishment first serves to orient individuals toward certain identity (ambivalently related to the facticity of the body). Safety from social punishment necessitates the internalization and the adoption of a safe performed identity. We self-prohibit, preemptively self-shame, to limit the possibilities of our behavior.²³

The type of shame my analysis uses differs in some respects from prevailing definitions of shame. John Rawls' definition is a common touchstone for defining shame²⁴. Rawls makes a distinction between "natural" and "moral" shames. Natural shame is "[...] aroused by blemishes in our person or by acts or attributes indicative thereby".²⁵ Natural shame is an inability to cultivate and display those (excellences) social goods which contribute to human flourishing. This inability injures the self-esteem, communicates an inner defect, and alienates the individual.²⁶ Therefore, for Rawls, natural shame is affective, social, and episodic. Natural shame can be- but is not always- moralized when individuals ascribe moral value to those excellences.

²² "...a performative is that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names" The performative is citational which is significant to my argument. I reiterate that the feminine performance strives toward a mystical schema of the feminine body inextricably attached for many women to their self-concept. Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 13.

²³ When the threat of punishment wielded by that prohibition is too great, it may be that we desire someone who will keep us from ever seeing the desire for which we are punishable, and in attaching ourselves to that person, it may be that we effectively punish ourselves in advance and, indeed, generate desire in and through and for that self-punishment." Ibid 100

²⁴ Rawls, John. "Self-Respect, Excellences, and Shame." In *A Theory of Justice*, 386–92. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1972.

²⁵ Rawls "Self-Respect, Excellences, and Shame". 390

²⁶ Ibid, 388-389

The virtues of those excellences are attached to an individual's character rather than the goods themselves in moral shame.²⁷

Gabriele Taylor diverges from Rawls' interpretation.²⁸ Taylor suggests all forms of shame are at base moral judgments.²⁹ She notes a moral judgment can be personal; in that way, while some sources of shame may seem beyond the scope of morality, there is a moralized personal source.³⁰ This standard and shame in failure are internalized. This standard is not always equivalent to others' standards of behavior.³¹ Importantly, the extent to which one commits to a social standard may also relate to a personal moral standard of behavior.

Yet according to Taylor all forms of shame can be reduced to the same basic judgment: "[...] he is a lesser person than he should be, for an in some way better person would not find himself in a position where he can be seen as he is or may be seen".³² Taylor agrees with Rawls in some respects. Taylor's analysis of Rawls develops the feeling of shame as generally episodic; both agree these affective episodes of shame are most often associated with social relations. For Rawls and Taylor, individuals orient themselves within groups. Groups influence an individual's moral beliefs, aspirations, and social and personal expectations. Where Rawls seems to use self-esteem and self-respect interchangeably, Taylor finds an important distinction regarding shame. Self-respect is integral to understanding the central role of self-respect in sociality and shame. Shame is reliant upon an existent sense of self-respect.³³ Because a person's social situation decides "[...] what is due to him and from him [...]" self-respecting members of a group attempt

²⁷ Rawls "Self-Respect, Excellences, and Shame". 390

²⁸ Taylor, Gabriele. "Shame, Integrity, and Self-Respect." In *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotion of Self-Assessment*, 157–76. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

²⁹ Taylor "Shame, Integrity, and Self-Respect" 158

³⁰ *Ibid*, 158

³¹ *Ibid*, 158-159

³² *Ibid*, 158

³³ *Ibid*, 161

to fulfill those expectations and protect themselves from alienation.³⁴ When these attempts are “frustrated” the individual experiences shame.³⁵ A frustrated attempt endangers an individual’s membership to a group and an individual’s self-concept. Therefore, shame is episodic (as Rawls submits too). Yet, feeling shame suggests an individual wants to reorient back to the goals and expectations of the group. Shame produces behavior. I do not argue against these points and I find this line of thinking stands to develop the type of shame I use throughout this thesis. This striving represents an effort to regain social regard and a personal identity. I find these attempts also work to alleviate social and internalized judgment or punishment (that self-punishing reflected in Butler’s argument of performativity).

As a pertinent example of this argument for my thesis, women continually strive toward an elusive, imagined, and (as I will discuss later) moralized standard of the female body. Any evidence of the body as divergent from this standard constitutes a frustration of the goal and creates occasion for shame.

By Taylor’s definition, if a woman strives toward a social standard of comportment (assuming she has a sense of self-respect) she will feel shame when her efforts are frustrated. As these attempts are in vain, the striving is continually frustrated and continually resultant in shame. The tension between striving and frustration creates persistent shame in this feminine context. Part of this definition of shame is consistent with Sandra Bartky’s definition of shame through attunement.³⁶ Bartky’s definition describes a kind of ever-present shame specific to women.

³⁴ Taylor “Shame, Integrity, and Self-Respect” 160

³⁵ *Ibid*, 160

³⁶ Bartky, Sandra L. “Shame and Gender.” In *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, 83–98. New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 1990.

Whereas Taylor and Rawls suggest shame is directional and episodic, Bartky's definition deals less with direction, episode, and affect; more so this definition is a woman's phenomenal attunement³⁷ to shame- situating women as already inadequate. My understanding of shame will incorporate the striving vs frustrated, performative dynamic and the situatedness of women in shame. I call this integrative approach specific to this female experience feminine shame.

This performative identity (femininity) is always comparative, always competitive, always reproductive, always aspirational, always fictional, always empty, always lack, always lesser. The feminine identity is both a confrontation with shame and productive of shame³⁸. Anorexia and bulimia internalize the elements of feminine performance to a greater degree. Acts of continual monitoring and punishment apparent in eating disorders constitute attempts to reorient the subject with the self-respecting member of the group and thereby alleviate feminine shame.

My first two sections look at elements of modern western cultural groups which orient women toward shame. First, I employ Sandra Bartky's³⁹ definition of women's phenomenological attunement to assert women experience their environment through shame. Here I argue women continually greet social situations in the assumption of diminished status. Further, I argue women experience their bodies as inherently shameful supplementing the Bartky with the work of Iris Marion Young⁴⁰. In this section I will connect feminine attunement, the affect of shame, and the feminine body in space.

³⁷ Attunement "[...]refers to the finding *that* one is situated in a world and to that particular *how* of the situation; this finding can only occur insofar as the *Dasein* has moods, feelings, or humours [...]" Bartky "Shame and Gender" 83

³⁸ "A source of this shame and disgust according to Beauvoir, is a reluctance to assume the feminine status the girl knows is subordinate." Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. (100)

³⁹ *Ibid*, 85

⁴⁰ Iris Marion Young *On Female Body Experience*, 2009

Section 2 begins by tracing the epistemic tradition of mind/body (and importantly the related masculinity/femininity dualism) which situates the “female” body as always lesser. I will use Susan Bordo’s work⁴¹ to this end. These dualisms press upon the individual body. The individual’s assumption of feminine identity is the creation of a doubled and constraining subjective experience. I then apply these dualisms to visual language and psychoanalytic development. The first two sections define phenomenological attunement toward oneself in everyday social contexts and the development of feminine subjective experience. In each section, I describe how anorexia and bulimia are thereby representations of shame.

My final section addresses the socio-political context: American neoliberalism, post-feminism⁴² relating to the vulnerability of feminine shame; by extension the vulnerability of the anorectic or bulimic woman. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are not rare problems of isolated individual women; rather, these women suffer shame as a crisis of confused, contradictory feminism. This crisis is a tension between academic critical feminism and ubiquitous neoliberal, post-feminism. Here I will more deeply define the terms neoliberalism, post-feminism, critical feminism, the paradox of choice, and abjection. Additionally, in section 3 I closely analyze specific habits of anorectic and bulimic women to exemplify how these behaviors interact with consumerist culture and constitution of the self. I will pull in Renata Salecl⁴³ to describe the paradox of choice in reference to the anorectic’s situation. I turn again to a psychoanalytic method to describe the bulimic cycle using Julia Kristeva’s *The Powers of*

⁴¹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 2013.

⁴² Golombisky “Closing Arguments: A Feminist Education for Advertising Students.”

⁴³ Salecl, Renata. “Success and Failure: How Hypercapitalism Relies upon People's Sense of Inadequacy.” In *On Anxiety*, 30–42. New York and London: Routledge Talyor and Francis Group, 2004.

*Horror*⁴⁴ (this psychoanalytic analysis will be grounded in modern neoliberalism again using Renata Salecl and Susan Bordo).

This introduction would be incomplete without addressing a central issue of eating disorders and feminism. Are eating disorders inherently bad? While the answer may seem an obvious yes, for some there are viable opposing claims. How can we critique eating disorders as feminists if some women find mastery or pleasure in their anorexia or bulimia? How can we critique eating disorders as symptomatic of dysfunctional culture if some women define their eating disorders as cultural critique or protest? Anorectic or bulimic women may define their eating disorders as self-assertion or rebelliously “empowering”.

The definition and act of empowerment in popular feminist discourse⁴⁵ sits in direct contrast with a critical and liberating sense of empowerment. Popular feminism posits⁴⁶, where more obvious forms of patriarchal domination necessitated overtly political collective action, the everyday slights toward modern women can be dealt with through behaviors of self-love.⁴⁷ Popular feminist discourse generally defines empowerment as any pleasurable or reaffirming act. Empowerment here is often tied to choice, the body, and post-feminist consumerism. “Self-care”, the decision not to wear a bra, or the decision to exercise could all be considered political and

⁴⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. European Perspectives Series, 1980.

⁴⁵ "Simply assessing empowerment outcomes by people 'living the lives they want' does not challenge social structures that perpetuate dominance and subordination." (110) McLaren, Margaret A. *Womens Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁴⁶ In Angela McRobbie's article "Post-feminism and Popular Culture, I find simultaneously a definition and critique of popular feminism: "It would be far too simplistic to trace a pattern in media [of] popular feminism[...]We would need a more developed conceptual schema to account for a simultaneous feminisation of popular media with this accumulation of ambivalent fearful responses. We would certainly need to signal the full enfranchisement of women in the west, of all ages as audiences, active consumers of media and the many products it promotes, and by virtue of education, earning power, and consumer identity a sizeable block of target market. We would also need to theorise female achievement predicated not on feminism but on 'female individualism'" McRobbie, Angela. "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (February 17, 2007): 255–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937>.

⁴⁷ Angela McRobbie noted young women today are distanced from the reality of women's traditional roles. The struggles of first and second wave feminism were overt; whereas now the issues are nuanced. Ibid Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" 255

empowering. Using the popular feminist definition of empowerment⁴⁸, one could conclude eating disorders are effectively simply women's choices. Popular feminism also forefronts women's testimony. If a woman expresses her eating disorder is an empowering experience feminism cannot and should not critically question her testimony⁴⁹. This sense of empowerment therefore reifies connections between uncritical popular feminism and domination. Individual acts and attitudes toward oneself are treated as testimonial, fully conscious, legitimate, political acts of subversion.

This mode of "feminism" is deeply flawed. All feminisms must amplify women's voices; yet the recent wholesale capitulation of feminist critical capacity only serves a hegemonic end. Eating disorders are a particularly difficult site of tension between popular and critical feminisms for just this reason. Eating disorders expose a dangerous friction between popular feminism (relatedly post-feminism) and critical feminism. While performance of femininity is often benign, (although Sandra Bartky would argue to the contrary⁵⁰) eating disorders present real threats to the body. Women die from these disorders. Women cognitively suffer for years. Women suffer financially. Eating disorders are therefore by their nature damaging. The *violent* performativity of eating disorders as acts struggling toward femininity demand critical interrogation.

⁴⁸ The meaning of more effective meaning of empowerment is challenging and complex. This definition of empowerment attempts to fully liberate the subject from domination by questioning women's actions as possibly coerced by institutional structures and antiquated preferences. Using the complicated and subversive empowerment we can analyze how eating disorders limit women's agency and perpetuate subordinating systemic structures of performative femininity. McLaren, *Womens' Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice*, 110

⁴⁹ McRobbie's work notes that this new type of feminist ideology ironically reiterates those expectations of female behavior second and third wave feminists fought against. Forefronting testimony silences critique as "[...] the new female subject is[...]called upon to be silent, withhold critique" McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" 260

⁵⁰ Sandra Bartky analyzed the simplest acts of feminine performance. The micro-physics of performativity lends itself to domination. The masterful performance becomes a deceptively pleasurable mask. Individuals no longer simply enjoy the domination of performance but redefine the self as the performance. Bartky, "Modernization of Patriarchal Power." 1990

However, it is beyond the scope of this effort to arbitrate between right and wrong concerning eating disorders. Critically analyzing behaviors does not necessarily condemn intentionality. Additionally, I want to avoid condemning anorectic or bulimic women as *wrong* or *bad* personally. Rather, because many choices are products of cultural contexts, the real moralizing critique I offer is aimed directly at the cultural pressures individual women face. This thesis is a reassertion of critical feminist consciousness raising in an age of popular feminist disengagement.⁵¹

⁵¹ “The process of consciousness raising involves not simply becoming conscious of unhappiness but also achieving (with others) better ways of understanding happiness” (87) Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Shame as disclosive phenomenon and comportment

Sandra Bartky takes a phenomenological approach to gendered shame. Emotions are disclosive, immediate and non-linguistic judgements which tell individuals about their world and their situation within their world. One becomes aware of the self as socially situated through attunement. Emotion (and mood) situates an individual within their world and in turn to constitute a sense of self. That recognition of the self as female is also a recognition of the self as lesser⁵². Bartky provided a concise definition of phenomenal attunement and shame

“Shame can be characterized in preliminary ways as a species of psychic distress occasioned by a self or a state of the self apprehended as inferior, defective or in some way diminished”.⁵³

Young’s assertions and Bartky’s definition allow for an analysis of shame in comportment; this specific method of comportment as derived from attunement and recognition of the self as female.

The human body is a biological, evolutionary material yet is socially situated within a given culture. Bodies coexisting within a given culture responding to the same structures, stimuli, and preferences generally express in similar ways. Therefore, we can make judgements about an individual’s internal world through comportment and gesture (further as I assert later, the body’s shape is also indicative of internal experience). How is shame generally communicated in gesture? Shame is displayed by drawing inward: averting the eyes, downward gaze, and/or

⁵² Young *On Female Body Experience* 359

⁵³ Bartky, “Shame and Gender”, 85

shoulders drawn inward⁵⁴. There are similarities between the women's bodily comportment and typical affective states of shame which contrast with male comportment.⁵⁵ The patterns of bodily movement are also consistent with the anorectic or bulimic woman's attempts to shrink in space. How do women generally move and make use of space? Iris Marion Young analyzed movement to conclude women often move their bodies in hesitancy or deference and feel their bodies as cumbersome.⁵⁶ Young found usual movement of the body results from the phenomenological situatedness of women rather than an essential gendered quality. The body moves in a controlled, limited, specific fashion; the body is careful not to "[...] reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in her direction of intention".⁵⁷

This hesitancy toward gross movements of the body suggests the feminine experience of space is unique. Space is experienced in deference, as off-limits, or even constricting:

"The space that is physically available to the feminine body is frequently of greater radius than the space she uses and inhabits"⁵⁸

Additionally, women tend to feel their bodies as encumbering or as *obstacle*. As feminine comportment dictates a specific set of hesitant or deferential movement, confident and effective movement of the body is not possible. Clumsy, weak, limited movements result from the attempt to exist in and interact with space whilst performing femininity. Furthermore women "[...]lack trust in [their] bodies to carry out [their] aims" and "[...] feel as though [they] must have attention directed upon [their] bodies[...]" rather than an intention.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid, Bartky 89

⁵⁵ "Women are situated differently than men within the ensemble of social relations." Bartky makes clear however, that men do experience shame however women's shame is socially encouraged, constant, and reproductive. Bartky. "Shame and Gender" 85

⁵⁶ Ibid, 83

⁵⁷ "Women tend not to open their bodies to their everyday movements but tend to sit, stand, and walk with their limbs close around them". Young "Throwing Like a Girl" 33

⁵⁸ Ibid 40

⁵⁹ Ibid 34

The eating disordered woman's experience of space is an extreme example of the feminine experience of space. The disordered woman considers in this way, physically taking up *more* space with the body actually enters the off-limits space around her. Taking up space is unfeminine. The anorectic or bulimic woman attempts to shrink herself within this enclosure of available space. I contend anorectic or bulimic women attempt to overcome the physical obstacle of the body by limiting its placement in space. While the attempts to limit bodily movement and physically reduce the size of the body are methods to subvert the shameful nature of the female body; limiting the body's movement and the body's physical size both recognize the female body as shameful by its nature.

Confrontation of the self through internalized shame, as lesser creates an immediate bodily affect of shame. Following this logic, anorectic and bulimic women their sense of feminine shame through disownership of space, physical shrinking of the body, and attempts at mediating shameful interaction by constructing the body in a diminutive manner. The principles of hesitancy, deference, and obstacle inherent in women's movements are indicative of internalized shame through attunement and produce a type of affective shame. The eating disordered woman fully internalizes the body as shameful; she purposefully or unconsciously gestures, moves, and constructs her body within the parameters of this shame.⁶⁰

⁶⁰The degree to which disordered behaviors are fully intentional or conscious is a psychological concern. The psychological approach is still relevant. Elements of cognitive disturbance inherent in eating disorders do not negate my point. I argue the origin of the underlying logic of the cognitive disturbance lies in the cultural situation.

Epistemic history, the male gaze, and shame

While there are many ways a person may recognize the self as lesser, there is a specific and insidious history of understanding womanhood as lesser. Therefore, feminine shame has a specific historical origin outside of the individual. Mind/Body dualism is “[...] a practical metaphysics to be deployed and socially embedded in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the psychological construction of the self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture, advertisements[...]” .⁶¹ First, women learn to treat themselves as object. Additionally, women learn the female body is legible differently *and* lesser from the male.⁶²

Masculine/feminine dualism closely tracks mind/body dualism. Ways of understanding and organizing goods, objects, things, concepts, and moralizing are permeated with the masculine/feminine duality. This duality which inherently limits the activity, agency, behavior, experience of the feminine.⁶³ Masculine/feminine dualism of this type, represents an inherited sociocultural agreement on the correct form of each gender. Iris Marion Young describes how this “practical metaphysics” affects feminine subjectivity and the bodily passivity of women. Young’s psychoanalytic approach⁶⁴ can be read as the individual’s response to the masculine/feminine ideology in the process of individuation.

⁶¹ Bordo “Unbearable Weight”13-14

⁶² Erving Goffman dissected print advertising as a reflection of wider gendered tropes of appearance. Women convey a message with their clothing (and therefore their image). The degree to which they internally identify with their appearance as indicative of character is questionable; yet, I find the result is the same. Women craft their appearance *purposefully*. Goffman, Erving. *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.

⁶³ Ibid 11-12

⁶⁴ Young, “Throwing Like a Girl” 2009

Young calls the privileging of the masculine coded phenomena in the creation of linguistic or symbolic meaning in our external reality “the phallogratic order”.⁶⁵ In determining how to perceive and organize the world, our language (mental yet communicable structures of symbolic meaning applied to external reality) upholds and reproduces the masculine/feminine duality in favor of the masculine to construct a phallogratic order. As one becomes aware of their world organized in this duality, one becomes aware of the self as situated within that duality.

The masculine/feminine duality permeates the self-concept. The construction of the self begins in the (mistaken) recognition of the self as a "totalized motor unity", a viewable one thing distinct from other things⁶⁶- or in other terms *viewable*. For men, the phallogratic order of meaning aligns male subjectivity and the self-concept (looking is male, subjectivity is male, I am male, order is maintained). Men find an affirmation of the self through the distinction between self and other.⁶⁷

For women, the phallogratic order disrupts the smooth alignment of self and subjectivity. The prerequisite for subjectivity is maleness, therefore all that is not masculine- the feminine-is object (Young 2009)³. Again, the subjective experience is dualistic characterizing masculinity as mind, agency, activity, production, ability, rationality, and humanity; whereas femininity is characterized as body, passivity, receptiveness, incapacity, irrationality, animality.⁶⁸

Women have no way of defining the self where it is not located in an order of masculine meaning; therefore, the way of looking is masculine and the object (the body) is feminine. Treating the self as a feminine object drains the self of inner complexity necessary for the project of full subjectivity and for the full usage of the individual's body and faculties. This method of

⁶⁵ Young, "Throwing like a Girl" 65

⁶⁶ Young "Throwing Like A Girl" 65

⁶⁷ Ibid 65

⁶⁸ Bordo, Susan. Unbearable Weight 11-12

viewing the self creates a self-concept which is always indebted to maleness and reiterated through a distanced gaze ("women are only lack, the other which shores up the phallic subject, the object that gives power and unified identity to men's looking").⁶⁹

Again, Sandra Bartky's conception of shame is congruent with Iris Marion Young's psychoanalytic approach. Bartky begins her discussion by suggesting that one becomes ashamed in the face of the other and recognizing that one has an object-character which to another is readable, simple, and discrete. The male gaze precludes women from affirming the self without internalizing and co-opting a double concept of the self (one being male, the other lack). In that way, experience of the subjective is already limited as a woman. Women are primed to surveil and evaluate the self especially on visual terms.

"Men survey women before treating them. Consequently, how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some sort of control over this process, women must contain and interiorize it"⁷⁰

The performance of femininity (to control social relations as Berger noted) begins with the construction of the body. Further the social standards of femininity are culturally produced, and visual culture situates women as object, femininity is generally disinterested in a woman's inner emotional or cognitive world. All bodies are incapable of completely expressing all elements of the subjective experience; yet, women are primed to forefront their object character. Women invest heavily in appearance to exert social control. The social performance of femininity is therefore primarily appearance based. As the female body's appearance is integral to her social success, I can apply Sandra Bartky's definition of shame. Bartky claims shame

⁶⁹ Ibid 65

⁷⁰ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972.(46)

arises as one recognizes they have failed to meet the standards of their social station. The feminine social standard is foremost appearance based. The feminine body has a *preferred* figure. Western visual culture holds that a woman can cultivate power by presenting in this preferred figure.⁷¹ This preferred figure makes the woman appealing to men. A woman therefore can cultivate power by *becoming* appealing to men. Disciplining the body's hunger and engaging in exercise (mostly cardiac to burn calories) to shrink the body works toward this end (86-87)⁷². Smallness stands as relief, flattery of masculine strength. Constructing the body is an attempt to achieve social control and avoid shame. Yet these attempts are frustrated.

But because the preferred figure is aspirational, unachievable, and fluid- located on some ever-receding horizon as Sarah Ahmed would say: Who best approximates the feminine ideal? Who best controls their body? The performance of femininity becomes a competition for control. *A body which better approximates the ideal feminine form than my own gives me further evidence of my inadequacy.* Women evaluate themselves against the asymptotic feminine ideal and survey others for relative successes or failures. Therefore, monitoring is a continual process of internal critique and evaluation of the self-relative to others.

Yes, an individual has freedom to craft the body.⁷³ But, Young and Bartky claim increasingly women are coerced in their abilities to make choices about their bodies.⁷⁴ In this competitive atmosphere, material benefits of social regard- *and* in defense of the self-concept as a self-respecting feminine woman- are a zero-sum game of appearance: a cold war of female bodies in public. Therefore the “ontological freedom to construct herself in relations to the

⁷¹ Berger *Ways of Seeing*

⁷² Bartky “Modernization of Patriarchal Power” 86-87

⁷³ Young “Throwing Like A Girl” 18

⁷⁴ “Femininity as spectacle is something in which virtually every woman is required to participate” Bartky “Modernization of Patriarchal Power” 73

facticity of the body” has become an ironic ontological freedom to construct herself in relation not to her own body, but to others.⁷⁵ This is the true pathology. The anorectic or bulimic woman simply incorporates this cultural logic to a greater degree.⁷⁶ Anorectic or bulimic women play to win.

It could be argued the preceding sections outline the how women have been structurally subordinated through the course of Western culture; and therefore, the scope is too broad- this effort reduces women’s subordination to a singular emotion or way of being. I do not argue these subordinating elements of Western culture *only* produce feminine shame rather shame is one product of structural subordination. Further the relationship between the historical structural subordination of women and shame is necessary to establish. Establishing the connection bolsters the claims of my third section. In this final section I argue neoliberal, post-feminist economic and political reality predate upon women’s predisposition to treat the self as shameful: feminine shame.

⁷⁵ Ibid 18

⁷⁶ Again, individuals’ personal moralized standards can vary widely. I find that because femininity is an activity in which every woman is compelled to engage, a woman’s basic moral standard will relate in some way with performative femininity. Not every woman will take up an eating disorder. However, connection between competition, self-monitoring, performance, and eating disorder is not completely illogical.

How does neoliberalism and post-feminism interact with anorexia and bulimia?

The previous sections assert femininity is foremost a product of the self-concept constituted through the male gaze, the experience of the self as inherently lesser, and the conception of the self as inherently shameful.⁷⁷ This section evaluates eating disorders as an illusion of choice. I find anorexia and bulimia can be responses to post-feminism, neoliberal, consumerist culture. The choice to construct the body and the taking up of eating disorders are methods of mastering shame, of managing shame, and preyed upon and perpetuated through neoliberal, post-feminist messaging.

Post-feminism is the co-optation of feminist thought and language for neoliberal purposes namely search for profit.^{78,79} Post-feminist methods and attitudes are largely products of neoliberal values and messaging. Neoliberal messaging mystifies “race, gender, and sexual inequalities [...] dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial” Today the most private site of liberal responsibility is the individual: “[...] neoliberals have promoted private competition, self-esteem, and independence as the roots of personal responsibility”⁸⁰. This rhetoric covertly moves resources upward and therefore undercuts clear mandate to question messaging and act collectively. Neoliberalism creates a social world wherein individual behavior detached from structural hegemonic origin. When behaviors and choices are detached from political origins social inequalities become the failing of one’s *moral* character. Personal success is the

⁷⁷ “Shame is manifest in a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy” Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 85

⁷⁸ Duggan *Twilight of Equality?* X

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Duggan *Twilight of Equality* XIV

responsibility of the individual; by extension you have no one to blame but yourself for your failure. Thereby, critique of social structure is suppressed⁸¹.

Whereas critical feminism interrogates structures of political and economic domination especially toward women, post-feminism is complicit in the movement of resources upward especially targeting women. Post-feminist messaging mixes neoliberal ideology with bodily standards in advertising. I offer Ethan et al (2016) as representative of this argument. Ethan et al 2016 researched the editorial and advertising content in popular women's health and fitness magazines. The study found magazines' editorial features often presented accurate information about health and fitness; however, advertisements offered shaky weight-loss and dieting products and claims. The top three topics of editorial content were: exercising planning, dieting/food choice, and burning calories. These topics are factually necessary for a healthy lifestyle and the maintenance of healthy weight. Yet the advertising content showed most frequently: products (fat burners/blocker, weight-loss pills, appetite suppressants, etc.) and themes (achievement, before/after, happiness, etc.). Researchers concluded that the claims of the advertising information undermined the neutrality of the factual health and fitness editorials. The magazines' factual content read as justification for bogus or extreme weight-loss methods. This research also noted "Women who are motivated by appearance are more likely to engage in unhealthy weight-loss behavior" (Ethan et al 2016). Further, there is a positive correlation between interaction with weight loss-oriented content and disordered eating behaviors in adolescent girls.

Where editorials were not simply factual, they focused on healthy weight loss, weight loss to feel satisfied with one's appearance, weight loss to please oneself, weight loss for health reasons, etc. The connection between these "empowered" editorial themes and the dubious

⁸¹ Ibid 3

claims of the advertisements reiterates the tension between popular and critical feminism. The editorial focus echoed the simple concept of empowerment (empowerment as assertive choice, pleasurable, and often bodily). Because this simple definition of empowerment is individualized, unquestionable, and presented as a bodily striving choice it is consistent with popular feminist messaging; therefore, it is easily co-opted for post-feminist intent. Here the dieting advertising industry plays upon the otherwise neutral factual information to promote products.

Empowerment becomes is a neoliberal, post-feminist commodity to be bought and sold rather than a subversive tool.

Whereas generally neoliberal success is defined economically, post-feminist messaging often suggests women's success is also bodily. Yet, empowerment through the body is always read as directive toward a specific bodily standard. In Ethan et al. (2016) editorials did not explicitly attach health and fitness discourse to appearing attractive or attempting to reach some sort of feminine physical standard (editorial themes like "eating healthy" and "exercise plan"). However, commercial content of the magazines reiterated the cultural bodily standards women have already internalized. Even though some editorial content seemed disinterested in standards of physical appearance the advertising elements in this media presented contrasting pressure. Further, the historical precedent of the correct form of the female body mandates that women read even the seemingly benign health and fitness editorial content as directive toward a correct form of the body. Physical standards of the body are inculcated in the female experience of all bodily related media.

The studies of advertising and health/fitness magazines show a positive correlation between engagement in health/fitness media and advertising and eating disordered behavior. How can engagement with health and fitness media lead to disordered eating behavior? The

epistemic history of the preferred feminine form as slender is attuned, unconscious, and internalized. Engagement with this material, no matter the explicit message simply reifies the connection between eating and exercising behaviors and a correct feminine body. The correct feminine form is aspirational at best, in earnest the form is unachievable. The focus of femininity *becomes* the striving- the monitoring of the body, controlling eating, and exercising continually. Working toward the ultimate performance of femininity involves a sense of mastery and the related behaviors attach themselves to the identity.

Post-feminist messaging in media and advertising directly employ the sense of mastery and pleasure the anorectic or bulimic woman experiences in *controlling* the body. Continual engagement with this messaging triggers the disordered behaviors. Women are oriented with reproductive inertia toward the damaging choices. Mastery of the body through eating disorder is the most striking example of the contentious intersection of mastery, pleasure, and *choice* as damaging.

Neoliberalism relies upon choice or the *illusion* of choice to properly function. Neoliberalism acts upon individual behaviors. Subjects of neoliberal culture are faced with endless, countless choice⁸² both significant and miniscule but all of which provoke anxiety. Individuals' choices create vulnerability.⁸³ One attempts to make ideal choices which create high regard with others- or at least avoid condemnation.⁸⁴ Choices are complex personal attempts to synthesize what one wants- which could be unknown- with what one believes they *should* want (what others will positively regard). Choice includes loss; there is an effort to optimize outcome. Post-feminist consumer culture affects women's behavior. Anorectic consumption reflects post-

⁸² Salecl, *On Anxiety* 2004

⁸³ Ibid 33

⁸⁴ Ibid 37

feminist directives and the paradox of choice on which neoliberalism relies. I look at choice paradox and “safe foods”.

Analyzing safe foods will help connect the paradox of choice, the mandate to consume, and the anorectic’s situation. A simple google search of “safe foods anorexia” displays as top results numerous posts on the forum myproana.com. Myproana is a well-known and controversial⁸⁵ forum host (pro-ana meaning pro-anorexia). Myproana has adopted the acronym MPA to conceal the pro-anorexia (now pro-eating disorder in general) element of the forum. The forum is a space where sufferers share know-how and frustrations without judgment. Every “MPA” screen notes in an “About” comment “MPA is a site dedicated to the support or recovery of those suffering from eating disorders or body dysmorphic disorders. Please be sensitive to this fact when creating an account and contributing to the board”. Yet forum users are often not in recovery nor are they attempting to recover

I perused numerous threads titled variations of “Safe food” “List your safe foods” “Safe food advice”. One 2016 thread⁸⁶ demonstrated trends of ritualization and dissemination of anorectic know-how. The original poster noted the important elements of safe foods: low calorie and voluminous (a lot of food to create a longer eating process and greater full sensation). Posts answering the question included many similarities: branded diet drinks (one comment “Oh my, how Coke Zero gets me through the day” punctuated with a heart eyes emoji), energy drinks, low calorie alcohols, raw vegetables and fruits, oatmeal, popcorn, protein bars, dry low calorie breads, dry toast, etc. Another thread from 2017⁸⁷ titled “SAFE FOODS” discussed in greater

⁸⁵Unnatural-Bones. “List Your 'Safe Foods' - Anorexia Discussions.” *Forums and Community*, Myproana.com, 15 Dec. 2016, www.myproana.com/index.php/topic/1012281-list-your-safe-foods/.

⁸⁶ Unnatural-Bones. “List Your 'Safe Foods'”

⁸⁷ Guest ...Eerie... *. “--SAFE FOODS LIST-- - Anorexia Discussions.” *Forums and Community*, Myproana.com, 1 Feb. 2017, www.myproana.com/index.php/topic/1226034-safe-foods-list/.

detail safe foods used by members of MPA. Original poster asked for advice on more safe foods “ENLIGHTEN ME I’M CURIOUS” again punctuated with an emoji. The posts largely mirrored those of the other thread (low calorie foods, avoidance of calorie dense foods, diet sodas, diet energy drinks, supplements, diet pills, laxatives, vitamins notably). Some posts were incredibly organized, categorizing the safe foods like fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, condiments. Some posters took the time to include the weight and calorie content of each food. One poster even subcategorized the different types of apples with weight and calorie content. Another poster posed heart-breaking questions: “Is coffee a food? Is tea a food?”. These threads show anorectics hold foremost the control of food intake: all other choices are predicated upon the anorectic’s ability to ingest her “safe” foods.

What do these threads tell us about post-feminism? Post-feminism and popular feminism are ideologically related. Without popular feminism post-feminist co-optation of feminist language in advertising would be critically analyzed. Popular feminism however forefronts women’s testimony. If women express enjoyment or pleasure in their behavior, popular feminism holds their utterances should go unquestioned. These threads make obvious the advertising elements of post-feminism. The mediated directive to diet provides implicitly involves the desired result and provides a method of attaining that result. The need for a thin body eliminates innumerable other options. Anorectic women are presented with the “empowering” choice of constructing the body through dieting and related dieting commodities. Neoliberalism and post-feminism present numerous foods, drinks, and supplements, women can use to reduce. Items consumed and methods of consumption are determined through neoliberal paradox of choice. Further, their attitudes toward the behaviors must go unquestioned per popular feminism. In that way, the choice to engage with health and fitness related content

despite the possibly damaging outcomes and the choices to intake dieting products must go unquestioned.

Further, the eating disordered woman isolates herself so as not to attract condemnation. She has no choice but to conceal her eating habits as she believes others will judge her negatively for those habits. Why does she regiment and ritualize her eating and how exactly does she make choices? Ritualization and fixation are attempts to optimize choice. She considers, in example opportunity to eat something new in an unknown environment under sub-optimal conditions (i.e. in front of others). What if she does not like the new food? What if she likes it *too* much? She considers the discomfort she will feel in consuming something unsafe as well as the resultant anxiety of lacking control. She then weighs this choice against the safety of her comfortable and controlled eating regimen which she believes will secure femininity *and* maintain positive favor from others (thus reaffirming her femininity to herself). In short, she attempts to create parity between control and satisfaction.

These rigid and ritualized behaviors isolate anorectic women. They refuse to be seen eating. They use specific methods to control the process of eating; they thoroughly wrench the most pleasure out of their miniscule intake. Being so, the choices which construct the body are illusionary and socially determined. These safe food “choices” and intake methodologies serve to craft the feminine body. This feminine body is again always drained of internal subjective experience always lesser, always lack in the face of the masculine body. Therefore, the taking up of eating disorders as a personal neoliberal, post-feminist expression of choice and orientation toward success, is expression of feminine shame.

The anorectic direction toward dieting and opposition to fear of choice is a performance in shame. Further, isolation is a method of alleviating the shameful performance of anorexia and controlling the possibility of a shamefully unfeminine appearance.

Post-feminist messaging co-opts female testimony and pro-women content to neoliberal ends. Not only are individuals the site of personal and continual improvement but the female body is a salient symbol of that improvement. Post-feminist oriented health and fitness messaging as well as dieting rhetoric and advertising all contribute to promote consumption of certain goods over others (and certain methods of consumption over others); as well as, reduction of the body and reduction of the self. In these threads women have mastered their bodies with the greatest minutia and share know-how. The self is treated as object to be monitored through quantity and emptied of internal subjectivity.⁸⁸

Behaviors relating to draining and isolation are also present in the bulimic cycle: bingeing and physical purging. I will use two approaches to situate the bulimic in modern consumerist, post-feminist contexts. First, I will apply Julia Kristeva's⁸⁹ psychoanalytic approach to the process of individuation. Then I will use Susan Bordo's cultural analysis as the post-feminist framework. Kristeva's psychoanalytic work is integral to understanding the process of constituting the self, the relationship between the self and bodily boundaries, disgust, and shame. Bordo's work is integral in understanding constraints of neoliberalism, the body as a social message, social shame, choice, and impulse.

⁸⁸ Many posters closed their remarks not with a signature (presumably automatically added to each comment they post as a feature of their myproana profile) not their names but relevant information like starting weight, current weight, goals weight, height, BMI. While the gender of all posters is unclear, it is evident that most of the posters were women. One poster remarked "This is a great thread" pointing to the perverse sharing of know-how..

⁸⁹ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 1982

Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* presents the abject as stimuli which threaten to disintegrate bodily borders. The abject can be a physical thing, a concept, or an act. The abject lays outside the self yet does not necessarily support a full constitution to the self and is confoundingly both self and other⁹⁰. Confrontation with the abject jeopardizes the symbolic order wherein an individual has situated their self-concept. The result is a rejecting action against the abject (for my purposes a disgusting stimulus). Additionally, the recognition of that stimulus creates a *jouissance*: judgment and an attraction continually toward that disgusting stimulus. The ambiguous and attractive *jouissance*⁹¹ recognizes the abject as dangerously and fascinatingly present (or possible) somewhere in the self. Attraction to the stimulus is undeniable. It gives occasion to enjoy something in *jouissance*. This attraction gives occasion to judge one's attraction and obsession with the abject too much.

The abject can be an act which is socially unacceptable. Types of socially unacceptable behavior present moments of judgment and shame before others. Individuals adopt and internalize the mores or norms which define acceptable behavior in their cultural context. In this way they are ashamed of their drive toward the disgusting- consequently they shame themselves. This flow from confrontation and shame, to abjection is recurrent.⁹² Therefore, individuals police the physical boundaries *and* protect self-concept repeatedly. Pushing away the many forms of abject stimulus, refusing to tolerate the ambivalence of the abject, refusing to incorporate the stimulus in the self-concept, refusing to assimilate the stimulus into the body, etc. are all ordering

⁹⁰ "What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous." The self can see an object character in the abject yet cannot completely constitute the self through recognizing the abject as entirely other. In this way, there is something of the abject which is existent in the self. Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 1

⁹¹ "[...] abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning[...]" Ibid, 10

⁹² "Yet from its place of banishment the abject does not cease challenging the master." Ibid, 2

assertions. Abjection defines the *not me*. Additionally, abjection is a process of individuation. Abjection defines *me*.

The bulimic cycle of bingeing and purging is abjection to a physical thing and an abject act. The cycle of shame in confrontation with disgust and jouissance is internalized- and possibly socialized. Kristeva mentions characteristics of substances which almost universally elicit the disgust response. The appearance or smell of a food can elicit a disgust response.⁹³ The bulimic deems food itself to be abject or disgusting- but also as living organism intrinsically, biologically attractive. *Food is disgusting and threatening as such*. The act of purging produces material which fits the disgusting criteria. Because the body produces the disgusting⁹⁴ and unviable material the self is presented with disgust as an undeniable fact of inhabiting a body and the possibility of the self as unviable.⁹⁵ The abject products of purging exacerbate judgement and shame. For the bulimic food, bingeing, purging, *and* the products of purging are abject, disgusting, shameful. Again, there is a thread in the bulimic cycle connecting the disgusting and the shameful.

The personal character of abjection is coupled with a more explicitly social judgment. Bingeing attacks the bodily boundary and the identificatory boundary. Abjection also relates to social implications of female gluttony. Kristeva contends the mother is the initial location of a pre-individuated subject's narcissistic desire.⁹⁶ The process of individuation begins when the subject becomes aware the Mother is not simply a mechanism of desire fulfillment. Thereby a

⁹³ "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection." Ibid, Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror 2*

⁹⁴ Ibid 69

⁹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young connect menstrual blood, "failed production", and disgust. Both ejections reject a teleological purpose: menstruation (the failed production of a baby) food (failed nourishment) (There is a difference between the "failed production" of a baby in menstruation and the failed nourishment in purging; yet, these stimuli symbolize the perversion of teleological purpose. The disgust responses to waste, stimuli content, and emission are exacerbated similarly in menstruation and in purging. Young continues to develop this argument to consider women are uniquely situated to feel themselves as abject and shameful through menstruation and socio-political status. Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 102

⁹⁶ Ibid,6

woman's gluttony is a confrontation with the inciting trauma of individuation; it is especially threatening and disgusting. Binging is a shameful social performance before the self.

The role of the mother is additionally very social. Like Kristeva, Kate Manne analyzes the relationship between motherhood and giving. In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*⁹⁷ Manne itemizes normalized and expected female behaviors of giving: among other things women are obliged to give “[...] attention, affection, admiration, empathy, sex, and children [...]”.⁹⁸ Accordingly, women's gluttony is acutely wrong. Gluttony egregiously enacts desire *for* something. Acting on desire for something amounts to taking. Additionally, they are aware gluttony denies the social function, the telos, of womanhood as mother and as giving. Acting on any desire as a woman is already inherently egregious. Acting on desire through gluttony threatens membership to the group and the self-concept. Thereby the shame in binging is an attack on the social identity as a feminine woman. Purging is an attempt to rebuild the feminine body and resurrect womanhood in the self. Purging gives. Therefore, incorporation of the “disgusting” thing in a “disgusting” manner requires a physical response to police the bodily boundary- to remove, to extricate, to de-assimilate, to define the *not me*. Further removal of the not me in the purge response reconstitutes the me (“I spit myself out”).⁹⁹

There is a path through and to shame in the bulimic cycle: disgust, jouissance, shame. A woman's gluttony is especially repulsive as it defies social functions of and psychosocial elements of femininity. The complexity of femininity, gluttony, and shame supports my use of feminine shame; as feminine shame is a specifically female experience of personal and social

⁹⁷ Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁹⁸ Manne, *Down Girl*, 130

⁹⁹ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 3

shaming. These acts point to the constancy of feminine shame and reproductive nature of feminine shame.

Julia Kristeva and Susan Bordo comment on how the body is a social representation and thus consciously constructed to avoid condemnation from the others and the self. Bordo and Kristeva both address the relationship between the physical body and identity. Where Kristeva takes a psychoanalytic analysis to individuation, Bordo takes socio-economic approach to modern bodies and morality. The following pages will address individuation as a microcosm of the body in situation. I will use Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*¹⁰⁰ specifically the chapter *Reading the Slender Body*. This work dissects the moralized coding of women's bodies.

The process of defining the self begins with a declaration of identity through abjection. However, this developmental process is not isolated in *early* development. Defining the self is a continual process.¹⁰¹ Defining the self does not happen in a social vacuum. Defining the self is an exponential and fractal function of choice. What choices align with my self-concept? What choices both align with my self-concept and keep me in positive (or at least neutral) regard with others? Simply, how *should* this identity perform? Bordo's analysis of Western visual, consumer culture exemplifies how individuals make choices to reaffirm their self-concept and strive to perform a "correct" identity. Judith Butler's definition of performative identity¹⁰² is socially constituted through facticity and embodiment. The body has an object-character which others assess and influence. Individuals naturally and unconsciously assess how others treat them and thereby adopt an identity. Social influences could be considered directives, or pressures, orienting bodies toward certain modes of being. So, how are eating disordered women socially

¹⁰⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Reading the Slender Body*, 2003

¹⁰¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror 2*

¹⁰² Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 1994

influenced or oriented? What are the benefits- for women- of constructing a feminine body? Are there consequences for women who do not construct femininity?

Thin and toned - especially female- bodies and fat bodies communicate diametrically opposed meanings. These meanings are indicative of differing socio-economic positioning and requisite morality. Post-feminist messaging often suggests women's success not only economic but also bodily. The thin toned body represents the optimistic projection of the self in upward mobility. Those who consume correct goods are economically successful. Economic success the most persistent, depoliticized standard of both happiness and success in western, post-millennium culture. In a neoliberal setting, economic success is suggestive of persistence and moral goodness.¹⁰³ Moral success is consumptive. While this broad outline is helpful, the neoliberal, post-feminist body is a complex symbol which deserves greater explication.

Subjects of neoliberal consumerism are presented with an abundance of choice (or at least the illusion of abundance *and* choice). The thin body represents a choice and ability to diet. The choice to diet represents the *option* of dieting.¹⁰⁴ The option of dieting communicates the financial option to consume (usually higher priced) foods/goods and the option to abstain from abundance. Those who consume in moderation are naturally presented with more *to* consume (whereas many must consume what is available). Abstinence as an economic option, points to the ability to interact with consumer culture "correctly". Exercise is another choice. The toned body requires exercise- exercise in the correct way especially for women. The option to exercise is costly in time and money. The thin body *is* an economic project which communicates a

¹⁰³ "[...] neoliberalism is a kind of secular faith. It's priests were elected by no-one, and accountable to only the global elites whose interests are promoted by its policies... neoliberal policies [are] presented as neutral [...]with the underlying capitalist power politics and cultural values obscured." Duggan, *Twilight of Inequality*, XVIII

¹⁰⁴ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 192

willingness to conduct oneself appropriately, discipline oneself, and commitment to treating the self as a project.¹⁰⁵

Exercise can be uncomfortable. The decision to exercise is a decision to construct the body and to exert the will over the body. Exercise for women negates the epistemic associations between femininity and: weakness, baseness, irrationality, and passivity. Women mediate the shame of their socially lesser positioning (or at least attempt to do so as individuals) by choosing to exercise and construct the body. Opposition to the epistemic history of women's bodies as weaker or irrational is still a recognition of that inherently shameful bodily concept and (more so an active assent to that bodily concept). Consuming expensive goods and engaging in expensive exercise codifies the moral and socio-economic symbolism of the body. The women's thin and toned bodies are a morally good, rational, and successful. The thin body is a moral commodity.

These thin and toned women are not selfish nor gluttonous. The thin toned body is read as controlled; rational, resistant to indulgence, impulse, and need. The thin body represents vigor, diligence, and persistence. The toned body has well defined and monitored boundaries. The thin body is therefore both pure and a symbolic triumph of mind over body as well as will over nature and animalism.¹⁰⁶ (Notice the similar moral coding between the masculine, mind, and thin body).

The fat body is largely read as contrast. Just as the feminine is defined as lack of or contrast to the masculine, the fat (or even simply untoned body) communicates all the socio-economic opposites of the thin toned body. There are institutional, material reasons for the

¹⁰⁵ “[...]the firm, developed body has become a symbol of the correct *attitude*; it means one ‘cares’ about oneself and appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to ‘shape your life.’” Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 195

¹⁰⁶ “[...]the body itself is dominantly imagined in the West as belonging to the ‘nature’ side of the nature/culture duality, the *more* body one has had the more uncultured and uncivilized one has been expected to be.” Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 195

correlation between higher rates of obesity and impoverished communities. The impoverished have limited options and oft times must consume cheaper, unhealthier foods. Additionally, impoverished persons have limited time and money to exercise especially in the “correct” way. The inability to exercise and construct the *correct* body rejects the social pressure of feminine performance. The statistic connection between poverty and the fat body exacerbates the negative moral messaging of the body. The neoliberal mystification of an economic and political correlation actively affects fat *and* impoverished individuals.

All individuals under neoliberalism are assumed to begin on a level playing field.¹⁰⁷ Subjects of neoliberalism must simply take initiative to work hard in order to be economically successful. Assuming this is so nullifies political critique of economic inequality. Here, the fat body is an economic product read as a decision. The fat body is unwilling to (or even wholly disinterested in) upward socio-economic mobility. Fatness is in many cases implicitly redefined as the decision to fail; therefore, the fat body reads as moral failure.

If we assume all individuals can equally access neoliberal abundance, the fat body is easily swayed in the face of abundance. The fat body is read as lazy, animal, irrational, uncontrolled, and lacking *impulse* control. The fat body holds a subject who relates to pleasure and leisure incorrectly. The fat body is a fat identity which becomes abject. Anorectic or bulimic women believe they must attempt to construct the perfect feminine form to reject this possible vision of themselves as socio-economically unsuccessful and the morally bereft.

Further, if we remember the feminine actor is phenomenally influenced by the epistemic preferred female form and the male gaze as a subjective experience, there is an even greater pull

¹⁰⁷ “Inequalities are routinely assigned to ‘private life’, understood as ‘natural’ and bracketed away from consideration in the ‘public’ life of the state” Duggan, *Twilight of Equality?*,5

toward this specific form. Shaping oneself into the preferred female form recognizes women's status as socially lesser and agrees to represent that lesser status through the body. This body allows women to cultivate material power by becoming appealing to men- by flattering his dominant opposition. The correct socio-economic and moral body is consistent with the correct female form. Women shape themselves to belong as neoliberal, post-feminist actors by appearing slender and feminine.

These are the stakes for women situated within a neoliberal Western culture. Anorectic and bulimic women take differing approaches to constructing the correct body. The anorectic woman denies all choice in commitment to the body toward femininity and morality; further she attempts to interrupt and control feminine shame in her abdication of choice. The anorectic woman is fearfully stunted in the face of abundance and makes the comfortable choices toward hunger¹⁰⁸. The bulimic meanwhile attempts to construct and perform within the moral body *whilst* following the mandate to consume¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁸ Anorexia can thus be seen as an extreme development of the capacity for self denial and repression of desire” Bordo *Unbearable Weight*, 201

¹⁰⁹ “Bulimia embodies the unstable double bind of consumer capitalism” Ibid 201

Conclusion

I find health and fitness messaging has turned to press strength training as important for women. This shift is not inconsistent with my thesis. The new body is still diminutive as a most basic characteristic. This body is incredibly toned. This body is encouraged to be small, reduce, diet, and workout. Additionally, I find a great proliferation of mechanisms to treat the body as a machine- scientifically quantifiable and subject to control. Again, this represents the economic option to engage in such practices and thus the “correct attitude” toward oneself.¹¹⁰

Men also experience anorexia and bulimia; men also experience social pressure to change the shape and size of their bodies. Does this weigh against the success of my argument? I find otherwise. First, the incidence of these disorders in men is far lower than incidence in women. Statistically greater numbers of women with anorexia and bulimia suggest the disorders are largely problems of the female body-in-situation.

The thin body is not worn the same on a man; the attached cultural meaning is quite different. First consider that reduction of one’s body, specifically fat, is not the main motivating factor for male dieting and exercising.¹¹¹ The male body serves to reflect his dominance. The male body is to be physically large and toned; he communicates strength and control through his body by cultivating mass. Women communicate control and internal strength through self-denial. Further the obligation for men to change their shape in any way, pales in comparison to

¹¹⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 195

¹¹¹ Women workout “with a different aim in mind and in quite a different spirit than men... there are classes of exercises meant for women alone, these designed to firm or reduce the body” Bartky, *Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, 67

American cultural representations of female dieting specifically for reduction. Femaleness has a historical meaning constituted through being lesser; whereas, the male body is dominant outright. Male subjects are too influenced by the paradox of choice and neoliberal messaging, but this paper investigates women's experiences of these cultural elements and therefore uses a feminist approach to social influence on the body. Because femininity is inextricably attached to appearance, personal, moral, and economic success as a woman is apparent through her body. I contend men's bodies *can be* indicative of internal goodness, strength, and control but a man's outward appearance generally does not detract from his *moral* character, whereas women's bodies are always indicators of personal goodness, strength and control. Where women are read, men are given the benefit of the doubt.

In sum, post-feminism affects women specifically as an extension of neoliberalism. The ideological shift from an understanding of economics as a political function to personal moral responsibility tracks as follows: (1) economic changes have no basis in political changes¹¹² (2) economic success is a personal responsibility¹¹³ (3) taking on the responsibility of economic success is a moral and good act (4) economic success is the ultimate goal of the morally good neoliberal subject. Personal *moral* success is therein defined by one's ability to buy- to consume. Moral success as an economic function must be communicated through economic means (consumption). Consumption is moralized. Methods of consumption are read on the body. Women's personal moral identity through economic success is most readily communicated in the striving process of construction. The construction of the correct, feminine body exhibits the correct orientation toward social life and what is considered the ultimate neoliberal goal. In Sara

¹¹² Duggan, *Twilight of Equality?* XIII

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 14

Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*¹¹⁴ Ahmed considers happiness is a powerful modern convention¹¹⁵: an affective state¹¹⁶ and a goal.¹¹⁷ In many ways, the moralized and social orientation toward the goal of happiness is attained through economic means in neoliberal culture. If I claim socio-economic and epistemic preferences affect women- and by extension eating disorders are expressions of those preferences- I must also argue that these moralizing preferences are generally influential.

For an individual woman, becoming a member of the happy assembly means buying the right things to look the right way. Happiness is an affective state, a valuable historical concept, and a modern goal. Happiness as an affective state allows for social easing and belonging. Affective unease and disinterest in the goal of happiness result in discomfort and alienation. Yet, how can I claim women with eating disorders want to engage in social happiness anorexia and bulimia present with negative psychological affect such depression, anxiety, alexithymia, anhedonia, etc.? The affective state of happiness is often deferred in striving toward the goals of belonging and happiness.¹¹⁸ In Ahmed's work, happiness as a goal is symbolized as a horizon: "We inherit our horizons".¹¹⁹ The horizon of happiness has a "promissory nature".¹²⁰ We are promised not only an affective, positive state in the future but also belonging throughout.

I find that constructing the body as feminine, as small, is a striving toward social easing and a correct horizon of happiness. In these ways anorexia and bulimia represent assent to the female status as correctly lesser. *I will belong as a feminine performer, I will be happy, if I*

¹¹⁴ Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

¹¹⁵ "We could describe happiness quite simply as a convention. What is a convention? The word convention comes for the verb to convene. To convene is to assemble to gather. A convention is a point around which we gather. To follow a convention is to gather in the right way, to be assembled." Ibid, 64

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 42-43

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 38

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 33

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 59

¹²⁰ Ibid, 38

construct myself in the ways my world tells me to. Anorexia and bulimia are salient examples of feminine shame; this shame is phenomenal and affective. This type of shame continually reorients women to the social goods- to the correct forms of consumption and happiness. If I agree that my body does not meet the standards of full subjectivity (relatedly personhood), and if I agree that my body is base, if my world treats me as if it is, and if my world directs me toward forms of individual responsibility and consumption which facilitate my existence in shame, I am very likely to acquiesce.

The personal construction of the female body is just one way of orienting oneself correctly (or incorrectly) within a group. One's political beliefs can also create cohesion or alienation. Ever-increasingly, being a feminist (in the popular sense) member of the happy assembly means buying the right things to look the right whilst biting your tongue.¹²¹ Feminists who are critical of conventional happiness *and* of other women in the post-millennium era face the risk of group alienation on two fronts. Women who claim to be happy, in whatever circumstances they may be, should be believed. Critique of any kind indicates dissatisfaction. Critique is a negative, unhappy affect.¹²² "Happy" women are affectively comfortable in the assembly. Therefore, it is *unnecessary* to question these women. Further, it is inappropriate to disregard a woman's testimony. The neoliberal depoliticization of personal behavior and the centrality of testimony in popular feminist make critique nearly impossible. Consciousness raising must now come with a disclaimer. In the neoliberal atmosphere critique of behavior and personal testimony will amount to a condemnation of character. *I am not calling you a liar nor am I calling you a bad person.* The feminist effort of consciousness raising is an attempt toward

¹²¹ McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture", 260

¹²² "To revitalize the critique of happiness is to be willing to be proximate to unhappiness" Ibid, 87

collectivity. Today, the effort of consciousness raising can come off as more condemnatory and alienating than ever.

Participating in the conversation is still very necessary; doing otherwise would be treating the project of feminism as complete. Anorexia and bulimia, as heavily gendered and deadly illnesses, reveal the incompleteness of feminism. Anorexia and bulimia symbolize the rift between popular feminism and critical feminism. These disorders are not neutral, yet it could be said suffering women claim agency or contentment in their experience of the disorders. What are we as feminists to do? Are these women's lives worth reassessing our approach to feminism?

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