

Temple Tracts: Issue 3, Volume 3

Religion and the Politics of Flesh

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Contents

Introduction.....	5
Constructivist Theologies and Philosophies.....	7
Mainstream Christianity and the Politics of Human Flesh.....	9
Re-synthesising and Refiguring the Politics of Human Flesh.....	16
Engaging with the Future.....	21
For Reflection.....	25
References.....	26

Introduction

The contemporary landscape of the politics of human flesh is marked by the play of diverse, complex and turbulent political forces. Within this landscape, human fat or adipose tissue is frequently figured as destructive, as auguring an impending crisis. For example, John Pugh MP noted in the House of Commons: “May I invite Ministers to comment on the recent statement by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges that the Government’s anti-obesity strategy is ‘failing to have a significant impact’ and that there is a ‘huge crisis waiting to happen.’” Further, the BBC's Health Editor Hugh Pym uses the figure of a 'ticking time bomb' when reporting on the Health and Social Care Information Centre's Report: *The Health and Care of Young People*. The Report warns that a quarter to one third of young people are now clinically defined as obese. Adipose tissue is thus portrayed as an insidious, advancing menace, affects neatly captured by Dr Colin Michie, of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, who spoke of "this cohort of enormous children, if not obese children, coming through to adulthood, we are facing an enormous problem." For others, the crisis is upon us and is existential. For example, in a Commons debate, Maggie Throup MP stated: “I make no apologies for talking about obesity again in this chamber because, alongside terrorism and antimicrobial resistance I feel that obesity poses a major threat to our nation.” Adipose is thus elided with biological invasion, religiously inflected destructive forces and national apocalypse.

Yet arguably a more substantial crisis exists, elements of which persistently leak and sometimes erupt out of the seals of this surface order. For example, significant numbers of children, some as young as three, report unhappiness with their body image, they talk of bullying, which variously manifests in feelings of shame, alienation from their bodies and even self hate. The Department of Health estimates that around four million people suffer with eating disorders which damage bodies and can be fatal. These disorders disproportionately affect people who experience further forms of social oppression such as women and LGBT communities. Thus, deeply corrosive forces or energies are also scoured into this landscape.

Affects such as rage and refusal also run through this landscape, which affective intensities often emanate from the cracks sealed over by crisis discourses and are ignited by the paradoxes, tensions and frozen potentialities which are crystallised in the seals of those

cracks. For example, theorists and activists of the body have rigorously contested the grounds and so validity of the seal of the BMI (Body Mass Index) as a legislator of 'ideal bodies.' Challenges to the body norms of the diet and pharma industries have also become significant frontiers of challenges and have been propagated and amplified through digital media. There are also examples of the loosening of normative seals by bodies which refuse, such as the range of activities undertaken by the Fat Activist movement. Beth Ditto's energetic, joyous embrace of the ascetic of nakedness, challenging societal boundaries and norms such as the notion that bodies defined as over-enfleshed are aesthetically offensive and should be kept covered. Related work has engendered the production of new flows and forms of disruptive energies, which contribute to undermining and challenging the rigidities of received logical, aesthetic, ascetic and political orders of normative enfleshment.

This brief sketch of just some of the highly diverse, tendential dynamics which characterise the political landscape of the politics of body flesh, arguably signal and invoke important theological questions and matters of concern. For example, do theological, religious and related images of thought and praxis play a role in texturing this landscape? For all bodies, i.e. religious, adipose tissue, political movements and so on, in what ways are the forms and capacities of these bodies composed? And as Adkins and Hinlicky ask, drawing on Spinoza, 'what can these bodies do?' Do these various dynamics contribute to human and indeed non-human growth, creativity and flourishing or otherwise? And what might this infer for a politics of flesh for the future?

The sections which follow will explore these and related questions. Section one provides a very brief overview of some of the key entailments of the hybrid form of constructivist theologies and philosophies which form a resource pool for the lens and mode of engagement used here. Section two forms a first exploratory cut into and engagement with the landscape of the politics of human body flesh. The role of some mainstream forms of Christianity and some of its complements, i.e. mainstream economic, political and cultural dynamics in the composition and capacities of normative and non-normative bodies are explored. Section three attempts to explore some of the dynamics which are and could be implicated in refiguring human flesh positively. It is suggested that different images of thought and praxis, including theological and religious images, can contribute to producing different worlds. Section four provides some very brief reflections around what this discussion might infer for

both thinking about and engaging with the landscape of the politics of human flesh for the future.

Constructivist Theologies and Philosophies

As the L'Oréal advert says, 'here comes the science bit' – if the underpinnings of the approach adopted here are not of interest, the themes are illustrated in practical forms later, so do move onto the next section if you wish. The reflections below highlight some themes drawn from complementary forms of constructivist theologies and philosophies which are used experimentally as an approach to generating questions and a lens through which to explore some features of the politics of human flesh.

This approach understands all being in terms of immanence, intensities and process. This means that all beings are enfolded in the being and becoming of other beings; or as Adkins and Hinlicky put it, we are enwebbed – "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body" (Corinthians 12:7). Embracing these principles does not mean rejecting the notion of transcendence, rather a refigured form of transcendence is viewed as a crucial dimension of this approach. The notions of genesis and creation are also central and are understood in terms of "beginning-in-process, an un-originated and endless process of becoming" (Keller: xvii). Further, genesis or creation involves processes of folding and unfolding, using mechanisms such as syntheses to form or fold and indeed refold the intensities or forces which comprise both inorganic and organic life, including the fabric of our bodies. There are many forms of syntheses and they have both actual and virtual or transcendental dimensions. Syntheses are ways in which some of the theologians and philosophers in this field express the ways in which the inevitable asymmetries of processural forces are aligned and configured as they are folded. Syntheses inevitably form seals as they involve the creation and so illumination of specific bodies from an array of many different potential forces. Seals thus mark the site of the formation of specific, actual bodies; they are also seals in that they also mark the site of displaced, potential forces and embodiments which they obscure.

That syntheses and seals mark both the fore fronting and displacement of different forms of forces and bodies is important. This is because syntheses mark the differential distributions

and alignments of forces across broader fields of forces, for example, those political forces found in the landscape of the politics of enfleshment. Syntheses also mark the composition of varying degrees of stability and instability, arrest and flux, capacities and potentials, i.e. varying forms of expression as in/stability of energies or forces and in turn bodies. For some theologians, for example Crockett, these notions of energies or intensities constitute a vital theological ground. The divine is conceived as both the divine and also as integral to these processes of mutually implicated foldings of energies or forces. It is important to note that, when viewed through this lens, all bodies and their becomings, including health promotion posters and adipose cells, are composed of configured arrays of productive, expressive forces (Bennett, 2010). These points are crucial with respect to the issue of change.

Change when viewed through this lens is not about the simple linear iteration and reiteration of forces and bodies, rather change invariably involves non-linear, composite processes of re-figuration. So, actual bodies, say, human, institutional, economic, political or micro-biological (e.g. adipose cells) are compositions, i.e. they comprise an array of variously configured and un/stable syntheses and so change will be differentiated. Further, the varying forms of in/stability of bodies, means that with respect to change some of them are very stable, robust and often develop very powerful energetic capacities and developmental tendencies over time, especially if they develop, say, strong connective and coupled syntheses with other bodies. A good example here would be neo-liberal capitalism and its notions of the 'ideal body' making strong connections with notions of the 'ideal body' in many other areas such as medicine or the media. The converse is also the case, i.e. some bodies, for example, bodies positioned as fat, or Fat Activist organisations can be positioned such that they are denied capacities, potentials and connections and so their developmental tendencies can be more fragmentary, fragile, transitory and their energies can be more prone to dissipation. This can be and often is the case where they are figured as dissonant with dominant bodies and thus conjoined with them through exclusive syntheses. Examples of this form of synthesis would be the boundaries and distinctions created by common binaries or dualisms such as mind/body, fat/thin, secular/sacred and so on.

Many bodies comprise a mixture of syntheses, i.e. both strong and fragile synthetic forms and capacities and so change potentials. In such situations, change can be disparate or tendential, but not firmly predictable. Further, some bodies, such as the media, political, policy or

religious institutions can operate as propagators and amplifiers of political forces and so create new connections in the form of resonances or dissonances. They can also modulate or act as dampeners upon change too. Given that these syntheses exist in complex permutations and change is non-linear, sometimes unexpected changes can be generated. Thus many economic, political, social and cultural changes seem to come 'out of the blue' – we experience tipping points, the basis of which are often hard to grasp. We can undergo unexpected, yet significant social, political or economic transitions and so on, as happened during the financial crisis; these forms of change also happen at a local level too. These vibrant processes of genesis or creation as synthetic folding and refolding thus entail complex and differing forms of energies and potentials which are expressed in the form of dynamic rhythms and flows rather than simple lines of development or change.

In summary, this approach infers the centrality of process, change and creativity. Creativity can be both positive or malevolent and thus the way in which these processes are conceived here are aesthetically, ethically and politically inflected too. This complexifies the notion of bodily flourishing. This way of thinking about the composition and re-composition of bodies doesn't provide us with the regularised, prescriptive forms of givens or grounds as do many images of thought and praxis, for example, the representationalist style of thought as found within Neoliberalism, Rational Choice and which has also dominated some forms of mainstream Christianity for so long. Rather, this approach opens into and evokes a whole series of interesting questions, for example, how are bodies composed? What can and do bodies do? And what might be possible now and for the future? Whilst this outline of the experimental approach adopted here just highlights some key themes, I hope that it provides some sense of some of the approach which has been used to help generate the reflections in the sections which follow.

Mainstream Christianity and the Politics of Human Flesh

So which forms of forces, syntheses and seals characterise many mainstream forms of Christian thought and praxis? And what are some of the consequences of theologies and religion figured in this way for the conditions of real experience and flourishing of bodies? In response to these questions, this section creates a series of engagements with the contemporary landscape of the politics of human flesh and shares some reflections. However,

in an age of purported decline and some argue crisis, a prior question insists, does Christianity still matter, does it form a meaningful focus?

Christianity has continuing significance and in many ways. These include the coupling of divine energies implicated in the ongoing emergence of life (Crockett). Christianity also remains a vital spiritual, intellectual and bodily lodestone, compass and inspiration for many. In addition, Christianity saturated and in turn was inflected by a range of resonant images of thought and praxis which developed through the classical period, the middle ages and the Enlightenment. Theological commentators such as Spencer and Isherwood highlight both the historical and continuing resonance of Christian intellectual resource pools, for example, in liberal Western humanisms, language, culture and imagery such as the normative, lean, muscular, upright conception of the body. Christianity has thus become integrally enwebbed with a wide range of what are often conventionally viewed as mainstream secular images of thought and praxis: economic, political, cultural, institutional, linguistic and emotional which are framed and referred to generically here, as 'representationalist images of thought and praxis.' Representationalist images of thought and praxis are animated by a range of techniques and conventions. For example, the embrace of: discrete forms of transcendentalism, foundationalism, dualisms, hierarchical orders, the execution of judgements with reference to (often Christian inflected) normativities, rules and protocols which are both projected and experienced as 'good sense.' These conventions are further animated through processes such as crafting resemblances and forming representations through analogy and identities which entail the formation of boundaries, incorporation and displacements. These are often expressed in gendered, sexualised and body-normative forms which rest upon synthetic displacements and exteriorisations of what is construed as different.

This matters enormously for bodies figured as non-normative and particularly so for bodies which are positioned as fat, because representationalist ideal body figurations are constantly synthesised, propagated and amplified through a wide range of institutions. These range from the passive syntheses of our habits through to contemporary propagation and amplification of nationalist discourses and media representations of ideal male and female bodies, such that they form highly stable, powerful, tendential and hence insistent developmental dynamics. In all of these ways and beyond, arguably Christianity remains both highly

significant and pluripotent, although like whiteness or heteronormativity, often remains invisibilised and so unremarked. It is worth noting that these representationalist edifices are also etched with fertile potentials through seams of indeterminacy and the forms in which their specificities are sealed are replete with tensions and paradoxes. This means that mainstream Christian and Christian inflected institutions can be and indeed often are remade, often in surprising and innovative ways. Nevertheless, arguably the orthodoxies sketched above remain ascendant and are often the most powerful religious and religiously inflected potentials which shape contemporary conditions of real experience. So in what ways might these mainstream images of Christian thought and praxis continue to be relevant to the broader landscape of the politics of enfleshed bodies? Our first in a series of engagements with this political terrain will explore some of the implications and effects of mainstream, representationalist ideas of discrete forms of transcendence for bodies which are positioned as fat.

Mainstream Christian images of God are often framed in the form of a discrete, transcendent, originary form of genesis and power and so formed through an exclusive synthesis, power is thus effectively exercised by fiat. As noted above, through the permeation of Christian influence, this image has contributed towards resourcing and acting as a support for an extensively applied figure of concentrated power and authority, for example in the legal, medical and allied professions. Indeed, this image of power has been serially propagated and stitched into the social fabric in such a wide variety of ways that arguably it has become institutionalised and formed as a synthetic web of norms, which variously yet resonantly shape vital sinews of the political landscape. Thus today, we have transcendent notions of 'the economy' or 'markets', the discrete, transcendent, constitutive individual of neoliberalism, transcendent notions of the 'ideal human body' of pharma and slimming industries and a range of very similar images which are widely propagated as common sense. All of these images are coupled with Christian inflected, Western linear notions of progress, which afford stability and help to further lock in the normative and developmental tendencies of these images. Further stability is assured through the synthetic displacement of their corollaries: flabby, failing economies, oversized indigent benefit claimants, comedic chubs and what Patricia Hill Collins speaks of as devalued, gendered, often liberally enfleshed images of Black bodies. All of which are construed as systematically disruptive, corrosive and

so hostile forms of fluidity and flux which must be contained or displaced. Extensive cultural and digital propagation and amplification animates these tendencies further; 'ideal bodies' and their corollaries haunt the imagination, harry the conscience and fuel fat-shaming, discrimination and hate speech.

These images are highly depoliticising, effectively decoupling genetic and political expression from everybody except a minority who are positioned such that they can make claim to and occupy desired transcendentalised positions. Paradoxically, representations of say the transcendental 'ideal body' are then constituted as markers which everybody, people, institutions, etc., should aim to craft and curate the form of their own and othered bodies. However, the exclusive synthesis which is operating here effectively creates an insurmountable seal and thus tensions. That is, whilst the ideal body is embodied with the lure of synthetic desire, it is formed as an exclusive synthesis and so is effectively unattainable. As pathways for attainment are effectively closed, each step towards the goals of 'ideal body' are simply markers along the pathway of futility. Compound seals are also created in that these unattainable imperatives are embedded in a context, which as noted above, is populated by a multiplicity of similarly insistent forms of transcendentalised images of bodies, power and desires. This image of thought and praxis certainly does not foster conditions under which all bodies can flourish across the full spectrum of their potential forms of becoming and bodies which are positioned as fat in particular.

Further techniques of mainstream, representationalist images of thought and praxis, which include many mainstream forms of Christianity, are binaries or dualisms, which can also take the form of exclusive syntheses, for example, the distinctions of divine/profane, transcendence/materiality, spirit/flesh and fat/slim. Exclusive forms of syntheses between the flesh and spirit have been recurrently signalled through time: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ... that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6), and "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are opposed to one another" (Galatians 5:17). This opposition of flesh/spirit has resonated through the ages, percolating widely through the social fabric – and yet with a twist. That is, the genetic locus of people positioned as excessively enfleshed is often subsumed within the concept of flesh; hence common references such as 'he's a real super-chub' or euphemistic parody 'she's a jolly woman'. In

contrast, the genetic locus of those with bodies defined as slim or normative, are frequently expressed in terms of mind or spirit: 'she has a brilliant personality', 'his wit is incisive' – thus creating clear differential forms of genetic capacities and potentials. Key effects include the fracturing and undermining of the integrity of the enwebbed, embodied and spiritual genetic nature of bodies. A disconnect is effectively created between the genetic potentials of the embodied soul as the germinal life and thus a key creative potential of the subject, and the creative cognitive genetic capacities of the subject as integrally entwined loci of geneses. In turn, what is also implicated, is a serial shattering of the various connective forms of geneses and syntheses between people positioned as fat and the intellectualist and linguistic emphases of broader social processes which both generates and feeds experiences of devaluation, exclusion and social isolation. Hence, these representationalist images of thought and praxis, including many mainstream forms of Christian thought and praxis, certainly do not foster conditions in which all bodies can flourish across the full spectrum of their potentials, and in particular for people whose bodies are positioned as fat. Arguably, this mode of de-animation is further convoluted through the execution of another manoeuvre, which brings us to our next engagement.

A further form of resonant and amplifying syntheses with clear yet not exclusive roots in mainstream forms of Christianity, is the de-animation of flesh: "I am the same as you in God's sight; I too am a piece of clay..." (Job 33:6), a theme reiterated in the highly influential work of Descartes who also viewed the human body as inert clay. This figuration of flesh as genetically inert is recurrently synthesised, propagated and amplified. For example, Karl Lagerfeld's contention that 'round women should not be seen on the catwalk' is one amongst many similar examples, which not only de-animates but invisibilises bodies too. Further consolidating and amplifying resonances are widely evident. Viewed as lacking motivation and passive, people positioned as overly enfleshed are more likely to face marginalisation or exclusion at every stage of our Protestant inflected employment processes. In health policy, people are precluded from life-enhancing procedures on the basis of the contestable, simplistic conflation of the volume of adipose with degrees of passivity and risk. Parents of children who are positioned as obese are also framed as passive or indolent. From the poor law through to contemporary benefits policies, tropes such as 'sitting around all day on their fat idle backsides' resonate through political and common parlance. This dynamic extends to

communal bodies and publics too, for example, Edwina Currie has opined that in general "northerners die of ignorance and chips." In contrast, normatively positioned bodies are endowed with many active potentials and thus afforded vibrant, generative forms of carnation. Forms of exceptionalism such as "she might be fat but she is a lovely person" arguably effectively function to consolidate these rules. Such dynamics can contribute to cultivating a sense of lack of legitimacy in speaking and even to be seen for bodies positioned as fat – hardly conducive to the genetic flourishing of all bodies.

Viewed through the lens used here, this representationalist body technics of 'locked in' de-animation of the flesh has further implications. For example, framing and positioning bodies as fat, as lifeless matter which can only be afforded form and animated externally, comprises a strategy of affectively freezing these bodies. It effectively denies permission and nullifies affects such as love, joy, passion, anger and crucially anger and political refusal. This makes connections to the points raised above, i.e. relations between bodies positioned as fat and the broader polity, are also genetically framed in terms of exclusive syntheses, which also exteriorises these bodies from the polity. In taking serially yet connected fractured forms, these images of bodies serve to compound and amplify disconnects created between human, communal and institutional bodies. Arguably this contributes to fracturing and dissipating political potentials for human expression and flourishing across a range of bodies, undermines any notion of common humanity and in turn, profoundly diminishes the boundaries of human finitude, in particular for those positioned as excessively enfleshed. As such, further foundations are laid and resources provided for affects such as a sense of loss of personal integrity, self-devaluation, self-hate, social alienation and yet also political frustration and anger which further debilitate yet paradoxically can also animate bodies positioned as fat. It is already clear that physiologically demarcated forms of aesthetics, ethics and politics are produced by these representationalist images of thought and praxis, which point resonates with and so brings us to our next engagement.

In opening we noted how adipose tissue is frequently viewed and used as a malevolent form and figuration of crisis and decline of the aesthetic and ascetic fabric of the national body. Similar figures of malevolent flesh have long been mobilised in Christianity, i.e. "...those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority" (Peter 2:10). Not only corrupt but also "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery,

idolatry and sorcery; hatred, discord, jealousy, and rage; rivalries, divisions, factions..." (Galatians 5:19). Nationalism is frequently figured in terms of a binary exteriorisation of both racialised and fat bodies as figures of malevolent aesthetic and ascetic incursion of the body politic. In turn, people who are positioned as racialised and fat are both muted and so excluded from broader Western and nationalist conceptions of progress, perfectibility of the national body and its genetically integral constituent bodies thus forming further connective, exclusive syntheses. Such constructions are also culturally reinforced which resonate strongly. For example, contemporary lifestyle program often centre Black 'bodily failures' such as 'The 40 Stone Woman', deliver 'saviour spectacle' framed around the transformation of the aesthetically grotesque. Pharma, surgical interventions and slimming regimes echo and so reinforce this rhythm of adipose tissue as an alien, aesthetic incursory malevolence which needs to be excised.

Commentators have highlighted the negatively aestheticised, racialised, gendered and classed media figurations of larger bodies. For example, Channel 4's 'Benefits Street' was critiqued for its pathological portrayal of the bodies and eating habits of larger benefit claimants and generating and propagating affects such as mockery and disgust. Again, bodies positioned as excessively enfleshed, are viewed as both aesthetically reviled, malevolent and ethically culpable at the same time as they are framed as inert, thus creating profound tensions. Paradoxically, such constructions are framed in the context of a serial, malevolent rupturing and preclusion of active choices by industrial food production and in particular in relation to global dimensions of production, the violation of food through incorporation into mediums such as financial derivatives markets, food immiseration, poverty and inequality, which are often firmly sealed and so go unquestioned. All of these dynamics provide further fuel for processes such as fat-phobic forms of domestic violence, school bullying, fat shaming and trolling. Their affective complements are variously expressed, for example: feelings of social alienation, desires to become socially invisible, avoidance of public spaces, self disgust, anorexia, punitive diet regimes and invasive, often life risking surgeries. They also fuel political disaffection and anger. All of the dynamics outlined above are entirely antithetical to the affirmation of and the flourishing of all bodies. The issue of dieting takes to our final, brief engagement with the themes of redemption and salvation.

The discussion above signals a highly political and exclusory form of aesthetics and ethics; as Keller notes, Western dominology sanctions “anything dark, profound, or fluid with a revolting chaos, an evil to be mastered, a nothing to be ignored.” Affirming this dominant aesthetic and ethical ordering of embodiment and flesh, medical, pharma and slimming regimes, offer elaborate complementary menus of technical, ascetic modes of sanction, redemption and salvation for aesthetically and ascetically dissident bodies. For example, Hannah Bacon's insightful research on the narratives and practices of Slimming Programmes, highlights the way in which they deploy a variety of mainstream Christian concepts and figures to do so. The use of the term 'Syn' to designate forbidden or restricted foods, the mobilisation of individualist, disciplinary, order oriented ascetic body technics and rituals such as public confession, categories and hierarchies of performance, virtue and grace underwritten by 'The Word' of supervisory handbooks. Each feature resonates with the longstanding, mainstream Christian notion that the disciplined body is closer to a muscular, upright conception of God and a lean, invariably white Christ. These commercial and complementary medical technics have a number of effects. For example, they further lock in, institutionalise and amplify the various tensions outlined above, in particular, the unattainable, transcendental 'ideal body.' Are such regimes effectively incarnations of the punitive futilities of the treadmill of hell? Is it inevitable that such complements will emerge as dimensions of what has effectively become a secular religion of the transcendental 'ideal body'? They are certainly not conducive to bodily or spiritual flourishing. However, rather than remain upon and further dissect the machinations of this treadmill, which there is extensive scope for, we will close this part of our reflections, shift focus and explore some examples of the potential insights and resources that could be generated through the experimental lens adopted here.

Re-synthesising and Refiguring the Politics of Human Flesh

Using a constructivist approach which draws on resources and themes from the work of theologians such as Isherwood, Crockett, Bacon, Keller, Adkins and Hinlicky, and Fat Activists and intellectuals such as Cooper, we have explored and illuminated just some of the ways in which bodies are crafted under the rubric of representational images of thought and praxis. It was suggested that this image tended to render bodies and, in turn, the dynamics of the landscape of the politics of flesh conflicted and often calcified. Arguably in some respects

representationalism is inevitable, thus it is crucial that we continually raise questions around how this image acts and what this image does. Similar questions raised in relation to representationalist approaches are also relevant here. That is, what has and could this experimental approach infer for identifying and achieving possibilities for positive conditions of real experience and so the flourishing of all bodies? How might representationalist images of thought and practices be differentiated and re-synthesised? In exploring possibilities, let's start with the issue of genesis at a micro-biological level and explore whether it might be possible to differentiate, re-synthesise and so enable the re-figuration of one of the key anchors of representationalist renderings of the landscape of the politics of flesh – adipose tissue, or human fat.

Remember that under the rubric of the representationalist image of thought, fat is paradoxically figured as both malevolent, corrosive matter which needs to be excised and also as inert, entropic matter. However, when we briefly outlined our experimental lens, it was signalled that from this perspective all matter needs to be considered as expressive and so creative and interdependently so. Arguably, this lens thus has the potential not only to illuminate but also to differentiate, re-synthesise and so refigure adipose tissue as the potential "treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7) of representationalist figurations of fat. As the Adiposity Project suggests, and a constructivist approach would concur, adipose tissue can be refigured and positively affirmed as an absolutely vital part of the creative flow of energies which animate both bodies and also the dynamics of the political landscape of human flesh. Such an approach also gestures towards a new aesthetics, ethics and politics of adipose.

From the perspective adopted here, the synthetic seals of representationalist figurations of human adipose tissue can be prised open when confronted with the conditions of real experience of human and companion species for whom adipose is vital. For example, white adipose (fat storing cells) is dynamically pluripotent, it can transform into brown adipose tissue (fat burning cells) in response to body needs. Indeed, these pluripotent potentialities of adipose tissue have been used in stem cell research for the re-generation of other body tissues. Adipose is also synthesised to form part of the body's system of fat, yet can also function as a form of endocrine system in secreting factors that activate fat and carbohydrate metabolism. Further, adipose tissue is an integral part of a broader, complex system of the

synthesis of food and its conversion to a form of energy which it then stores as fat, vital for the viability and the vitality of living organisms. Adipose is thus genetically plastic, vital and dynamic.

It was argued above that a constructivist perspective gestures towards a relational and so distributed conception of genesis and creation, and adipose tissue exhibits this vibrant transversal form of genesis. For example, adipose is not just a store of energy, but also of vitamins and minerals, forming a vital reserve of nutrients, for us, for not yet conceived and unborn children; adipose is thus distributed temporally and bodily. Adipose's genetic qualities are also intimately enmeshed with its environs. For example, it contributes to protecting us from the threats posed by consuming sugar-laden and highly processed foods by differentiating potentially toxic levels of sugar into fat. Brown adipose is also highly sensitive to its environment, i.e. when it is cold, it initiates a process known as thermogenesis, whereby fat is burned in response to changes in temperature in the environment to produce heat and so keep us warm and protect our internal organs. Adipose is also synthetically coupled with a whole host of other processes within its ecology such as farming, marketing and cultural eating patterns. Adipose thus has sense, sensibility and transversal genetic relations with a range of factors in its ecology. Adipose tissues are thus involved in vital life-giving, differentiating, synthetic and morphological processes, dynamics which are just as relevant at the micro-biological level as they are at every other level of being, and provide us with a lovely illustration of Keller's distributed conception of genesis. Each adipose cell existentially insists as a tiny, differentiating, synthesising, soul; they are complex, agile actors and arguably larger bodies are a beautiful testament to the sheer genetic and synthetic artistry of those agile actors.

We have thus moved from representational images of adipose tissue as inert or malevolent, to a positive re-synthesis, which affirms the sophisticated, vital generative meshwork of adipose across the body with intimate connections to its milieu. Affirmation can also be found in resonant scriptural readings too. For example, food is positively figured as "the fat of the land" (Genesis 45:18); fat is affirmed as valued and ethically charged food: "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready" (Nehemiah 8:10). Adipose is also used to affirm creaturely and divine relations, it is "a food offering to the Lord" (Exodus 29:22-25). Using this experimental approach, adipose emerges as dynamic

and vital, it supports a different aesthetics and ascetics of adipose, in enfolding our bodies with the beautiful, nourishing qualities of its life-giving mattering – without which we would die. This experimental approach can thus make a contribution to affirming a positive 'place' for adipose and, in turn, infers a new aesthetics and indeed affirmative ethics of care and respect for the politics of body flesh. It would be and indeed has been possible to do this with other key dimensions of the landscape of the politics of flesh, including bodies such as food. However, further issues raised by human bodies which are positioned as fat is that they are often occluded and increasingly demand to be re-synthesised in visible forms.

Historically, fleshy bodies have been visible and venerated. For example, the figure of Mary Magdalene in Titian and Rubens' work is voluptuous, her adipose affirmed and celebrated. There is no tension between faith and adipose here; she not only has a generous body, but her flesh also voices a sensorial spirituality; her adipose speaks. Yet there has been a strong tendency within representationalism for this celebratory depiction of fleshy bodies to be re-synthesised and sealed over, i.e. occluded and used to figure deviance or sin. However, arguably visible and animate figurations of larger bodies are increasingly pushing through those seals, refusing occlusion and as such, enjoying something of a renaissance. For example, in the vibrantly political, adipose rich art work of Fernando Botero and the humorous warmth and playfulness channelled through adipose in work by artists such as Beryl Cook. Celebratory and evocative photographic imagery of larger bodies has also burgeoned, for example 'The Full Body Project' by Leonard Nimoy, the queer, fat positive work of Shoog McDaniel whose focal theme is "the concept (...) that our bodies are vast and beautiful and like an ocean, they're filled with diversity" and the Adipositivity Project. These examples comprise different ways that adipose has been used as a resistive lever, to open up, illuminate and differentiate the parched, cracked skin of representational, 'common sense' notions of the 'ideal body' through articulating and demanding a visible, affirmative place for bodies commonly positioned as fat. However, arguably, emergence, illumination and so visibility whilst crucial are insufficient. Bodies positioned as fat insist on differentiating and re-synthesising representationalism further, as bodies which reflect and speak.

Representational images of thought and praxis often render bodies, in particular larger female, LGBT and Black bodies as silent; to speak is effectively heretical. However, the synthetic seals associated with this silencing have been variously prised open, re-synthesised

and resistively voiced through the work of a wide range of differentiators of such figurations of bodies. For example, fitness instructor Rosalyn Mays says in a video "I understand that I am overweight, I understand that I am Black, I understand that I'm female. I am in the fitness industry full time, which is anything but overweight, Black and Female. But guess what, I'm here ... I'm really good at what I do ... and I'm an excellent role model!" Mays thus not only insists on right of presence and voice for Black female bodies, but also insists upon the differentiation of the aesthetics and ethics of professionalism, proficiency and role models through forging disruptive connective syntheses. Jessamyn Stanley, yoga teacher and blogger notes "When I was [first] photographing myself, I would look at the pictures and think, oh, my belly is there and it's fat (...) But over time, I realised that I'm really strong to be able to hold these poses. My belly is there, and I'm still strong." Jessamyn thus also differentiates and re-synthesises core conventions of representational thought and praxis. Embodiment theorist Lisa Blackman highlights that both somatic and spiritual expression have also been systematically precluded from representational images of the body and need to be embraced. The theological and embodiment blogger Nicole Morgan voices a response to this point, drawing on scriptural resources to affirm both her body and her voice. Each of these writers thus affirm presence, place and voice, they "Speak these things, and exhort and rebuke with all authority" insisting that "no one despise you" for speaking (Titus 2:15). Processes which have been extended further, with a Spinozean inflexion. For example, a model participating in the 'Adipositivity Project' observed "I try to spend less time thinking about my body itself, and more time thinking about what my body can do, what it does for me every day. And it can do a lot, and I see a lot more than a body." From the perspective of the approach adopted here, the Fat Activism movement and beyond, there is indeed a need to see and hear more than a body, bodies are inherently relational and political.

The approach adopted here embraces a constructivist figure of politics and ethics which embraces contestation, affirmative relations and different understandings of notions such as 'community' and 'publics'. For example, Isherwood forges a critical relation with and politically differentiates the exclusive and exclusory synthesis which underwrites the transcendentalised image of the 'ideal body.' She states that it is an artifice: decontextualised, posed, artificially lit, photo-shopped, airbrushed and grounded in an aesthetic of an unattainable normativity and undesirable undernourishment. Isherwood argues for inclusivist

notions of bodies and publics which can embrace a full spectrum of ensouled, desiring and expressive forms of bodily enfleshment. Crucial forms of technics implicated in the rendering of the 'ideal body' have also been challenged such as the grounds and boundaries of the BMI, which are mobilised by interested parties in order to demarcate and police ideal and non-ideal bodies. Black feminists have also contested powerfully political, representationalist forms of racialisation expressed in liberally enfolded, often erotic forms, which are deployed to curate larger Black bodies as objects of sexual consumption and 'other publics'. Black bodies are re-synthesised as relational, political subjects who vibrantly contest thus invoking flows of energies formed and expressed through alternative political subjectivities and political praxes. Activists have also forged critical relations with and refigured the transcendental, bounded neo-liberal subject, sacralised capitalist notions of transcendent markets and pharma's ideal thin body. For example, Cooper provides a range of examples of alternative forums and participatory models for exchange based on criteria such as affirmation, openness and responsiveness. Markets and their role in creating an obesogenic environment have also been critiqued, energies which have been propagated and amplified and so contributed to forcing the issue onto political and policy agendas, for example through challenging the presence of global fast food brands in schools, advertising and beyond.

Taken together, these examples help to illustrate just some of the ways in which bodies positioned as fat are and can be expressed in forms which are open, desiring, political and which gesture towards different conceptions of community and publics. They have mobilised different forms of aesthetics, ethics, politics and spirituality which are much more conducive to the flourishing of all bodies. However, whilst these reflections are vital they are also insufficient. The experimental approach adopted here also insists that any form of politics must always be conceived as situated and owned. The final section shares some brief reflections around some of the potential implications of these notions of situatedness and ownership for a politics of the flesh and politics more broadly.

Engaging with the Future

So what might our reflections infer in terms of contributions towards a revitalisation of a politics of flesh? It might seem tempting to reject outright all forms of representationalism, such as liberal pluralism and toleration and some forms of identity politics as inextricably tied

to representationalism. However, there are problems with adopting such an approach, not least in that this would be to assume that these are discrete, fully coherent approaches, which they are not and cannot be. To assume such a distinction would also be simply to replicate the binary, either/or political approach of mainstream representationalism. Further, it has been argued that all forms of syntheses, even creative positive forms are asymmetrical, partial and there will always be seals which are haunted by obscured losses and the ghosts of different, potential worlds which have the potential to be animated. Thus constructivist thinkers counsel that we always have to embrace fluidity, paradoxes and indeterminacy; arguably many people of The Book are already sensitised to such an orientation, and so potentially well fitted for a journey into such futures. Representationalist and constructivist approaches will inevitably inhabit the same political spaces, as indicated in constructivist thinkers' insistence that our bodies and in turn our politics are enfolded, they are implicated in each other and we explicate our creations relationally. Thus inevitably, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together" (Corinthians 12:26). This means that our critiques and contestations need to be strategic, challenging and creative, during what can be painfully slow, often uphill journeys given the profound embeddedness, entrenched power and as noted earlier the inevitability of representation in some form.

Constructivist thinkers insist that the politics of the flesh is situated and thus will vary over place and time and hence will look different today compared to previous decades, and will look different in the USA to what it looks like in the UK, Europe, or in my town, your village or city. Theologian Robin Gill makes a complementary point in arguing for a theo-ethics which is situated and so contextual. There is thus no blueprint for a coherent aesthetics, ethics and politics of the flesh; rather a situated, mobile and principled calculus is inferred and needs to be owned. A calculus which involves principles such as: openness, raising questions, illumination, problematisation, disruption, differentiation, re-synthesis and propagation. Such an approach also infers an embrace and pursuit of less authoritarian, wilder, queerer aesthetics. What follows are just a few examples of what this might look like in practical terms.

Some interventions can be situated in formal legal or policy contexts. For example, in response to lobbying in 2014 the European Court of Justice ruled that discrimination against

people positioned as fat could be considered under the rubric of legal provisions for disability discrimination. This was subsequently put into effect in a Northern Ireland Tribunal where the reflexive, jurisprudential nature of tribunals, helped to tease open the seals and re-synthesise categories which characterise legal discourse. Of course, this is by no means ideal, but arguably signals that small steps towards different ways of being and relating are possible and which of course will remain open to further contestation.

There are a wide range of further contexts with potentials for proactive re-syntheses. Charlotte Cooper's work offers a range of fabulous examples here, for example activist protests at the Olympics, initiatives such as 'The Chubsters' which marry themes of fun, ebullience, radical questioning and challenges. A constructivist politics of the flesh can be situated in fields such as leisure and can be playful and provocative. For example, comedian Mike Williams' account of a dialogue with a member of his audience:

"You're fat"

"Yes ma'am"

"Don't you know your body is God's Temple?"

"Yes mam, and God has built a mega-church! "

Within a situated mode of politics, we too need to be creative, we need to assess and engage with the real conditions of our temporal and contextual circumstances – one size doesn't fit all in this form of politics. This approach is centrally about taking ownership through raising questions and mobilising relationally where we are located. At the same time, this approach insists upon the distributed nature of political issues and formations and that latent forms of emergent worlds as potentials are dissipated through the polity as are impediments to them. Hence, a wide angle lens is needed, and questions can and should be addressed to a range of features of the political landscape of flesh, including: the economy, political processes, cultural formations, legal edifices, policy programmes and the structures, institutions and practices of the Church as they are locally iterated, to name just a few. In turn, ideally this will be a collective, exploratory and experimental undertaking and learning process, although just what 'collective' means, will of course vary according to the issue and its situatedness. It could involve initiating a debate event, which centres a platform for speakers from the body positivity, Health at Any Size or Fat Activism movements. It could involve providing facilities and support for young people to produce a zine or exploring

possibilities for a speaker to visit local schools and colleges. It might comprise a dialogue with leads of local fitness classes about reframing the purpose of their work in terms other than weight loss, or a dialogue with local health policy makers along the same lines. We all need to take ownership ask what sort of opportunities are or could be made available and how they might be pursued.

This is a politics of a dynamic world, which is constantly formed and reformed in the face of unknown futures. Such an approach calls for a fidelity to constantly seeking out redemptive possibilities for different, more open and new ways of creating spaces for the emergence of an alternative politics of the flesh, flourishing bodies and in turn potential worlds. Overall, we should aim to create a world in which all can flourish, a world in which you do not have to be "anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, or what you will put on" (Matthew 6.25).

For Reflection

Here are just a few examples of some questions which flow from the lens adopted here, which can facilitate thinking about these issues:

In which contexts in your locality are body size narratives and practices manifest?

What are the implications and effects of those body narratives and practices?

What do those body narratives obscure and what needs to be illuminated?

What are some of the blockages to illumination and how might those blockages be interrupted, new potentials enabled to emerge and possibilities for those narratives and practices to be re-synthesised?

Who are and who could be potential collaborators and co-creators?

Are there risks of change energies dissipating, if so, what are they and how might this be prevented?

How can new, positive body figurations and practices be propagated and amplified?

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