

## The “Othered” Bodies: Fat Embodiment in Neil Labute’s *Fat Pig*

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### Abstract

This article aims to explore how Neil Labute engages with corpulent female embodiment in his play *Fat Pig*. This essay argues that Neil Labute employs fat embodiment as a literary device in an attempt to satirize a society that is pre-occupied with superficial appearances and to unmask contemporaneous social and cultural notions relating to fat female bodies. In developing this argument, Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Foucauldian discourse on the body will be utilized to afford further insight into how the fat body is conceptualized within the text in relation to social and cultural parameters.

**Key Words:** Neil Labute, *Fat Pig*, body, fatness, beauty

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# “Ötekileştirilmiş” Bedenler: Neil Labute’un *Şişman Domuz* Oyununda Şişman Beden Olgusu

## Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Neil Labute’un *Şişman Domuz* oyununda şişman kadın bedenini nasıl ele aldığını incelemektir. Çalışmada Neil Labute’un şişmanlık olgusunu toplumun yüzeysel görünüşe olan saplantısını eleştirmek ve günümüzde şişman kadın bedenine yöneltilen kültürel ve sosyal görüşleri vurgulamak için kullandığı fikri öne sürülmektedir. Oyunda şişman bedenin sosyal ve kültürel etkenler çerçevesinde kavramsallaştırılması Julia Kristeva’nın iğrençlik teorisi ve Foucault’un beden söylemleri bağlamında ele alınacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Neil Labute, *Şişman Domuz*, beden, şişmanlık, güzellik

Overweight is a mar to beauty... An excess of fat destroys grace and delicacy. A fat face has a monstrous uniformity. No theatrical producer would hire a plump actress to mirror the real depths of the human soul (Kersh and Morone, 2002, p. 166).

Writing in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1924, Dr. James S. McLester’s views concerning fat women raise key debates surrounding excessive embodiment: the social perception of fatness, the social stigma placed upon fat bodies and the place of fat females in theatre studies. Although Dr. McLester’s remarks summarize the negative stereotyping of fatness in 1920s US, these antagonistic attitudes towards fat individuals have remained unchanged since that time; rather they have dramatically increased in the twenty-first century. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, fatness indicated prosperity, high status and health (Farrell, 2011, p. 27). Yet, in contemporary American society, it is regarded as a threat and danger. Journalist Frank Deford’s comment in 2003 demonstrates the highest level that fat denigration reaches: “the greatest threat to our society is not al-Queda and it is not North Korea and it is not Iraq. It is the way we choose to live. How much we choose to sit, how much we choo-

se to eat” (as cited in, Farrell, 2011, p. 9). Frank Deford’s comment shows that contemporary American culture considers fatness to be an enemy that threatens the wellbeing and health of the nation. More than this controversial belief concerning fatness, the question why fatness poses much more danger to the US than a military conflict is still under scrutiny. Though there have been no all-encompassing answers to this crucial question, Dr. James S. McLester’s views capture some very valid points behind the fat stigma.

In the first place, what underlines Dr. McLester’s view of obesity in the quotation above is that fat bodies which do not comply with the socially-imposed ideals of feminine beauty pose a threat to society’s aesthetic concerns. In our contemporary age, advancements in visual technology, such as television shows and magazines, economy and culture promote the standards of female beauty which, in exact terms, prescribe the attainment of a slender and well-toned body. The desire to conform to the prevailing pattern of idealized beauty has generated a growing discontent and distress over food and weight gain. To an extraordinary degree, this anxiety reaches that fatness negatively influences most women’s lives in the US and comes to be synonymous with the failure to attain happiness, success and love. As Dr. McLester asserts, the reason behind the over-riding concern over fatness can be associated with the violation of society’s aesthetic values. However, pinpointing fashion phenomena as the main criteria would be to downplay and disregard the main point, that it is much more related to cultural factors significant in situating fatness in the political agenda. In the nineteenth century England, female corpulence was regarded as sexually appealing and women’s “silken layer” (Wolf, 2002, p. 192). In contemporary Western society, it is, in sharp contrast, perceived to be the manifestation of unattractiveness, ugliness and self-distrust. The drastic change in the perception of female fatness, as Naomi Wolf points out, does not visibly bespeak “an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience” (p. 187). Wolf goes further to explain that women’s dieting to abide by societal beautification norms instils in them the beliefs of failure, worthlessness and lack of self-confidence and self-fulfilment. In this way, denial of food becomes the effective

control mechanism over women in an effort to render them powerless, inactive, dormant and voiceless. This indicates that the driving force for the myth of slenderness is essentially not fashion or beauty but “a struggle over political hegemony” (p. 188). Accordingly, women whose excessive bodies are outside the ideals of femininity represent challenges against a society which seeks to assert authority over bodies in order to maintain the social restrictions placed on female bodies.

Secondly, Dr. McLester states that fat women will not be given a place on the stage on the grounds that fat actresses are unable to reveal the deep feelings of the human soul. The fact that Dr. McLester regards fat women as those who lack the morals and insight to express their inner selves becomes a concisely articulated expression of the common view that fatness is a benchmark for being “not only unhealthy but also unsightly and immoral” (Oliver, 2006, p. 3). From this standpoint, it can be interpreted that fat females’ self-identities are utterly incompatible with the social self and identity that individuals gain by having a socially acceptable body size. In the contemporary mainstream view of the body, the slender body, the supposedly ideal body, “codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contradictions of consumer culture” and thereby, becomes a token of contemporary social identity (Bordo, 1993, p. 201). The slender body has “detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control”, the qualities that one needs to relinquish his/her unbridled desire and appetite (p. 209). Any deviation from this self indicates that one has defects in character such as lack of self-will, self-discipline and self-regulation. In line with this, it can be stated that a fat body is regarded as “indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform and absence of all those “managerial” abilities” since it is widely believed that fat individuals suffer from lack of self-control to regulate their immoderate desires and resist the temptation of food to keep control over their life (p. 195). Concordantly, fat bodies serve as “Other” not only to their own real self but also to the ideal and disciplined Self, and hence thin people, seeing fat people as “Other”, constantly experience the dread of turning fat (Lupton, 2013, p. 56). In other words, fat flesh is viewed as a

serious menace to the integrity of one’s own self and social self and, accordingly, evokes repulsion and contempt for its excessiveness and lack of restraint. This situation creates a social strata whereby fat people are subjected to social stigmatization and discrimination in every area of their life including health care and employment. They are likely to live in poverty, earn less and be unemployed. They are exposed to derogatory humour and pejorative comments from the other people.

One further indication of the severity of fat loathing is that overweight characters, notably females, have less visibility than thin people in the media and on stage and are “more likely than thin characters to be the objects of humour and less likely to be shown in romantic relationships” (Pulh and Brownell, 2003, p. 214). The rationale for the lack of fat female presence in media can be closely linked to the presumption that they do not appeal to the male gaze as their bodies are neither sexually objectified and nor considered conventionally beautiful and attractive (Jester, 2009, p. 249). However, quite contrary to what Dr. McLester asserts about fat female actresses, there has been a growing visibility of fat female characters in theatre studies. The fat phobia rife in contemporary society inspired a critical interest for many American playwrights intending to explore the dilemmas and difficulties associated with the experience of being fat, and to challenge the pre-established notions of the fat female body. Mark Shaiman and Scott Witmann’s *Hair Spray* (2002)<sup>1</sup>, Irma Mayorga and Virginia Grise’s *The Panza Monologues* (2004), Dael Orlandersmith’s *Yellowman* (2000), Eve Ensler’s *Good Body* (2004) and Neil Labute’s *Fat Pig* (2004) offer different perspectives of fat embodiment in an attempt to reveal how fat bodies become the target of stigmatizing discourses and practices. Of these plays, this article will consider Neil Labute’s *Fat Pig* because it provides a rich wellspring

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Shaiman and Scott Witmann’s *Hair Spray* (2002) is an American musical based on the 1988 John Waters film *Hairspray* with an overweight protagonist, Tracy Turnblad, who achieves to take part in the popular teenage dance show and earns success and reputation although she is denigrated in a society which deems fatness ugly, aberrant and repulsive. Tracy challenges the society to undermine the deeply seated beliefs of beauty and femininity and starts a fight against the racial segregation prevalent in the Baltimore society.

for crucial questions in relation to fatness and social and feminine issues that intersect with each other in the play. *Fat Pig* depicts how an appearance-fixated society reacts towards the romantic love between chubby Helen and the slender and attractive Tom. With an emphasis on the ineluctable end of their relationship merely because of Helen's plus-sized body, Labute critiques and mocks American society's obsession with superficiality and physical beauty. This essay, therefore, aims to explore how Neil Labute engages with corpulent female embodiment as a means of satire on a society that is preoccupied with superficial appearances and as a tool to unmask contemporaneous social and cultural notions relating to fat female bodies. This rethinking of the fat body within social borders in a theatrical space is facilitated by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Foucauldian discourse on the body to present a further understanding of how a fat body is conceptualized within the text in relation to social and cultural parameters.

*Fat Pig*, one of the plays in Neil Labute's "beauty trilogy"<sup>2</sup>, dramatizes the emotional disturbance of Tom. Tom, who is a good co-worker, faithful and trustworthy friend, becomes infatuated with an intelligent, honest, librarian, plus-sized girl, Helen. Yet, when his relationship is exposed by his colleagues Carter and Jeannie, ridicule and satire on Helen's fatness arise, thus setting up a powerful dilemma for Tom with regard to his decision to pursue his love or societal

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<sup>2</sup> The plays in the trilogy, *The Shape of Things* (2003), *Fat Pig* (2004), and *Reasons to be Pretty* (2008) are interrelated in terms of their recurring theme: contemporary American society's fixation on superficiality and physical beauty. In *The Shape of Things*, Evelyn, a student at an Art Faculty, sees Adam as an experimental subject and, regardless of his feelings for her, physically refashions Adam in order to show the correlation between human will and human flesh. Thus, he is reduced to a sexual object to be gazed at and desired. As Adam becomes more handsome, confident, desirable and 'normal', his actions get more and more morally questionable. In the same vein, *Reasons to be Pretty* focalizes on the relationship between two couples, Steph and Greg and Carly and Kent. Greg's offhand remark about Steph's facial disfigurement stirs up fuss and squabbles, eventually leading to their split. Excessively obsessed with how others around him look, Kent judges them merely by physical appearances yet cannot see the real person inside. Kent cheats on his pregnant wife who has a beautiful face with a more attractive worker. In constructing characters whose values are determined by bodily attributes, Labute questions what it really means to be beautiful and how aspiration for physical allurements causes emotional and psychological distress and, thus, harms human relationships.

dictations. The end of the play, contrary to the expectations of audience, apparently shows that Tom is unable to set aside the cruelty of satire on Helen’s plumpness and, against Helen’s will, leaves her. Since the publication of the play in 2004, there has been a critical polarity as to whether the construction of fat body in the play confronts, transforms or reinforces pernicious stereotypes surrounding fat bodies that pave the way for fat oppression. As Labute himself asserted in an interview with Amsden, his attempts to write about the experiences of fat women are aimed at providing a powerful critique of society’s idealization of physical beauty (2004). In parallel with Labute’s statement, Julia Grace Jester (2009) highlights that the play focuses on the pressures and discrimination fat women face in society and underlines that it is almost impossible to reduce or eliminate weight stigma (p. 252). Yet, the study by Gesser-Edelsburg and Endevelt (2011) demonstrates that there has been some misinterpretation of the play’s main point. One audience evaluation shows that the play’s impact utterly contradicts the playwright’s intention to challenge prejudice towards fat women in the society (p. 374). Helen is portrayed as a stereotypical woman in the way that she becomes the target of comedy and humour triggered by jokes about her fatness and is objectified because of her desire to satisfy Tom. What is more, the play’s ending emphasizes Tom’s separation from Helen due to her corpulence. These comments leave room for some interpretations that Helen’s position as a stereotypical fat woman, together with the humour and the unexpected ending, reinforces persistent negative representations of fatness rather than confronting pervasive fat disgust. In dispute of this view, however, this article proposes that to consider Helen as the stereotype of fat women would undermine a critical point of this multi-faceted play. The construction of Helen as a fat woman can be seen as a literary design that the playwright employs to disclose and challenge the social and cultural notions imposed upon fat female bodies. The play foregrounds the centrality of excessive female embodiment to reveal the dilemmas of contemporary American culture, that is, its preoccupation with physical appearance and body image. This essay, therefore, argues that Labute’s approach to fatness calls for a thorough and detailed analysis of his

discourse on corpulence in order to examine and critique the social and moral texture of contemporary American society which is marked with superficiality, materialism and the domination of socially and culturally accepted beliefs surrounding the female body.

Structured in interrelated scenes with different titles, *Fat Pig* deals with the traumatic experience of Helen, an oversized woman, caused by her unsuccessful relationship with Tom. Tom and Helen who meet at an overcrowded restaurant foster an intimate relationship and love each other. When Tom's workmates, Carter and Jeannie, discover Tom's relationship with a fat woman, they do not approve of his love. Carter and Jeannie, fixated with superficial appearances, ridicule and degrade Helen just because of her hefty body. Torn between his love for Helen and the societal norms, Tom has to make a decision. Tom, who cannot deal with the shame and humiliation triggered by negative attitudes towards Helen's voluminous body, leaves her. In constructing characters whose lives are invaded by amorality, relentlessness, apathy, indignity and materiality, Labute offers the readers an insight into the social structure which harms individuals emotionally and psychologically with its own fierce and inexorable rules. In such a social climate, Helen's interaction with the other characters adds up to a lacerating portrait of contemporary mores which glorify the idealized female body. Helen suffers severe criticism and the contemptuous attitude of the representatives of the society, Carter, the unrelenting gazer and Jeannie, the obedient woman whose body is in accord with the beauty norms of the society. She is also deeply hurt by the grievous process of break-up with Tom, who comes to terms with contemporary ideals of beauty since he is overwhelmed by an intense fear of being negatively judged by the others. That being the case, she is victimized by the discriminatory fat discourse that emerges from cultural and social assumptions.

The play starts in a heavily congested restaurant where the Woman, who is eating a plateful of food, encounters the Man, carrying his lunch tray and looking for a place. The names of the characters remain unidentified towards the end of the first scene; only when their intimacy grows and she gives him her phone number, are their names specified, the Woman as Helen and the Man as Tom. Altho-



ugh her exact size is not given in the play, Helen is defined as “a plus size” (Labute, 2004, p. 5). Tom’s first words “pretty big” (p. 5) seem to allude indirectly to Helen’s corpulence rather than to the restaurant. Helen gives a place to him and openly expresses that she thought he had insinuated something offensive regarding her fat body, Tom strenuously denies it for the reason that he thinks that it would be rude to say pejorative words to someone’s face. Helen’s sensitivity is not an overstatement given the fact that, as she herself emphasizes later, people in public places, in the city or anywhere, discriminate against fat individuals on the grounds of their amorphous bodies. Fat individuals whose bodies spread over boundaries and intrude into others’ spaces endure negative judgement in terms of their largeness and expansiveness and, thereby, are treated with disdain and derision (Lupton, 2013, p. 3). In this regard, it can be stated that Labute’s use of restaurant as the setting serves an important purpose. A restaurant as a place where people meet to eat, drink and enjoy each other’s company is a public sphere. Considering the fact that public sphere is the places where cultural and social practices are put into effect, it can be indicated that the restaurant as the setting of the play has an important implication. The restaurant which is the meeting point for Helen and Tom features a social arena where the irreconcilable contradiction between desire both for food and for abstinence from gorging is overtly manifested. From this standpoint, it is noteworthy to mention that the restaurant functions to reveal the duality of consumer culture. As Zeynep Atayurt (2011) propounds, capitalist culture besets individuals with temptation for high consumption which enhances people’s tendency to become fleshy and condemns them for their intemperance which then causes physical deformity (p. 6).

In their subsequent conversation on the amount of food they take, Tom gives voice to his idea that everybody can do what they want to their bodies, a clear indication that he does not judge people by their appearances or decisions. Their conversation ostentatiously shows that though Helen is a rampant consumer, Tom is very careful to check the calorific values of food and does not generally indulge in overeating. Tom’s accurate precision over food consumption is not surprising considering how much contemporary American culture

changes the lives of individuals with its values of fashion and labeling. Their conversation also identifies something important about Helen's psychology. At one moment, Helen catches Tom off guard with her joke on their dating, making fun of herself, saying "Big people are jolly, remember?" (Labute, 2004, p. 10). Towards the end of the first scene, when Tom correlates her name with Helen of Troy<sup>3</sup>, apologising for his reference, Helen makes a self-deprecating joke about her weight, saying that it would take thousands of ships to carry her. At this point, Tom warns her not to make fun of herself. In the study by Anna Gesser-Edelsburg and Ronit Endevelt (2011), it is underlined that Helen's self-humour concerning her body cements the society's negative perception of fat bodies (p. 378). Expanding on Gesser-Edelsburg and Endevelt's interpretation, Helen's self-deprecating comments can be read as an internalization of fatphobic discourses in that she mocks herself for her overweight visage. The society which imposes shame and humiliation on fat people regarding their appearance prompts her self-inflicted feelings of dissatisfaction with her body. In this sense, it is important to say that her self-stigmatizing manner becomes a critique of society rather than nourishing anti-fat discourse. At the end of the first scene, Helen turns back to Tom to encourage him not to be afraid of taking a further step to start a relationship with her, and not to remain under the influence of an anti-fat discourse. This scene solidifies that Helen, living in a world where individuals are assessed by their appearances, is adversely and deeply affected by weight biased stigma.

In the scene "The Work Friends Figure it Out", Tom is troubled when Carter, his callous, peevish, interfering and inquisitive workmate, spreads the rumour that Tom is dating a girl. Obsessed with physical beauty, Carter evaluates people merely in terms of their out-

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<sup>3</sup> In Greek mythology, Helen of Troy, wife of Menelaos, king of Sparta, is the great figure who mesmerizes Paris with her feminine beauty and idealized body shape. Her beauty gives rise to the legendary war between the Greeks and the defenders of the city of Troy, culminating in the destruction and annihilation of Troy. Though the reference to Helen of Troy may seem to have an oblique connection with the main storyline, it can foreshadow "the cold war" between Tom and his social circle sparked off not because of Helen's admired body but because of her unaestheticized and disfigured body, though its results are not as much universal and devastating as the War of Troy.

ward appearances yet never makes an effort to see the real person inside. In contemporary US culture, anywhere in the city and even in the workplace, women bodies are on display and intensely fetishized, thus reduced to something to be gazed at, assessed and judged. This becomes more poignant at the moment Carter’s assessing gaze falls on Jeannie, whose body looks loose-fitting, flaccid and chunky. Though Carter emphasizes that his assessment is not something derogatory about Jeannie but only an observation, his comment manifests to what extent her body becomes the object of his judgemental gaze: “She seems to be packing it on some. That’s the problem with winter: chicks don’t get out much and they bloat up...” (Labute, 2004, p. 22). Tom’s reaction to Carter’s opinion manifests that Tom is not similarly fixated with bodies. Carter’s blabbing about Tom’s new relationship to Jeannie, whom Tom has just left, reveals a facet of Tom’s intimacy with women. When Jeannie learns that Tom is flirting with another woman, she is in a desperate situation. Their relationship was fleeting and perplexing on account of the fact that Tom, indisposed to show any allegiance to Jeannie, left her for no apparent reason, giving lame excuses. As Carter highlights later, whenever Tom becomes bored or cornered or feels nervous in a relationship, he puts an end to it. When looking at his new relationship with Helen, his attempt to tell a lie that he would meet a group from Chicago in order to hide the fact he is flirting with a fat woman can indicate that his growing intimacy is characterized with uncertainty and callousness. The question whether Tom takes a firm stand on his incipient love affair with Helen arouses in the readers an intense curiosity.

In the next scene “A Surprising Night Out Together”, Helen and Tom are seen trying cuisine in a restaurant, as if food is the only thing that connects them. When Tom asks her why she loves war movies, he holds her hands consciously but at this moment looks around the restaurant, a sign of his uneasiness occasioned by a strong sense of fear that someone would see him with an overweight woman. Helen’s answer to his question is very striking as it unmasks the degree to which fat individuals are marginalized in the society. Due to her bulky body, Helen prefers to watch war movies with her father and three brothers instead of waiting aimlessly for boys to ask

her out. She frankly says that she did not date a lot when she was younger. Once Tom warns her not to talk about her weight in a humiliating manner, she confesses that though she felt disgrace and embarrassment about her body shape at a young age, she is contented with who she is now. As Harris-Moore (2014) emphasizes, “accepting one’s body –one’s *fat* body- is both a material and symbolic resistance to the body perfection messages of mass media” (p. 145). In the light of this view, Helen’s acceptance of her fat body can be seen as a way to stand up against the dominant beauty norms. Although Helen embraces reconciliation between her body and mind, she is cognizant of the fat disgust ubiquitous in the society: “The trick is getting other people to be okay with it!” (Labute, 2004, p. 32). This statement places Helen’s private experience with food, eating and weight gain in a social and cultural strata, evidently inveighing against her culture’s increasing preoccupation with physical appearance.

When Tom asks Helen if she was plump in the past, he assiduously avoids using the word ‘fat’, instead says “big... boned” (p. 32). The only thing Helen expects from Tom from the beginning of their relationship to the end is not his courtliness but his honesty and truthfulness about their relationship. Tom is put under a test about the intactness of his credibility and trustworthiness. When Tom and Helen are very close to each other, Carter suddenly appears with the obvious intention of figuring out with whom Tom is having dinner. Although Tom promised to be upstanding and asserted that he loves Helen’s body, he introduces her to Carter not as his girlfriend but as someone from Chicago group, a clear manifestation of the fact that he cannot face any comment from Carter. Helen’s body is under the surveillance of Carter’s inspecting gaze at this time; when she goes to the restroom, he makes some insulting comments about the dimension of her body, saying “I hope it’s twins” (p. 34) and “beast” (p. 35). When Tom reacts against his invective, he says “She’s off to the bathroom... With a basket of dinner rolls hidden under her skirt, if I’m not mistaken...” (p. 35). Carter’s sardonic streak of humour regarding Helen’s body degrades Helen into an object of ridicule. Her body association with humour has been interpreted in the way that it feeds the common anti-fat attitude of society. However, this interp-

retation seems to overlook that it is unavoidably significant within the storyline of the play as humour serves to unveil that fat individuals are reviled and, to a great extent, that fat dislike has mushroomed under the established social norms. After Carter leaves, Helen questions Tom why he said she came from Chicago. Tom continues to lie to Helen, saying that he will go there for business. After a moment of silence, Tom confesses that he hid the truth from Carter, saying that it is a business dinner. Helen, aware of Tom’s feelings regarding the inferiority of her body, says that it is something they need to work on to overcome it. In the rest of the play, readers can trace whether his struggle works to overwhelm his increasing edginess about the shame and embarrassment which come with the social disparagement of her fat body.

Helen and Tom’s relationship becomes more serious and far more complex when Jeannie in the accounting department realizes that Tom has not turned in the receipt for the dinner with the Chicago group. Tom’s insistence in telling a lie that he will attach it later, and that Helen was one of the colleagues from Chicago, drives Jeannie mad: “You are, like, the worst liar ever. I mean it. In history” (p. 45). When Jeannie, informed by Carter about Tom’s date with an overweight woman, says that she called the company and was informed that no one had come from Chicago in the previous month, Tom’s falsity is brought to light. At that moment Tom has to explain Helen is the woman he is dating, Carter overreacts: “Are you fucking kidding me?! HOLY SHIT!!” (p. 45). Jeannie, learning that Tom lied to her to stop her nagging him and left her just for a “[f]at chick” (p. 43), is obviously overcome with feelings of disillusionment, despair and intense anger, smacking Tom with her open palm. Tom questions himself as to why he could not show enough courage to say anything about his affair with Helen, and Carter, having first-hand experience of living with a fat woman, that is, his mother, reveals that Tom felt distinctly unsettled by Helen’s massiveness. Carter experienced a great deal of discomfort and disturbance in relation to his mother’s huge body: “I’m fifteen and worried about every little thing, and I’ve got this fucking sumo wrestler in a housecoat trailing around behind me. That’s about as bad as it can get! I’m not kidding

you” (p. 48). Carter blamed his mother for her weightiness since he espouses the belief that fatness is not a disease like thyroid or another kind of fatal illness but rather shows that one lacks self-control with food consumption. Carter’s mother “shoveled shit into her mouth all the time” and became obese (p. 48). Her fatness had an adverse impact on her marriage since, in Carter’s opinion, her husband kept his distance from his home owing to her unappealing body: “How’s he gonna love something that looks like that, get all sexy with her?” (p. 48). Carter’s disgust towards fat people becomes clear when he relates how he insulted his own mother in the grocery store taking bags of junk food and checking their calories: “Don’t look at the package, take a look in the fucking mirror, you cow!! PUT ’EM DOWN!” (p. 49). In the face of abasement and denigration, his mother kept silent but shed one tear that he saw at the stoplight. Carter is not remorseful because he happens to think that his reaction is highly pertinent since he does not like being fat and the solution for it is exceedingly easy: “Do-not-jam-so-much-food-in-your-fucking-gullet” (p. 49). Carter’s credo of fatness echoes deep-seated beliefs about the strong link between overeating and fatness, and thereby his anguish becomes an explicit manifestation of society’s disquietude over fatness.

Although Tom is confused by Carter’s ideas, he does not want to be judgemental and says that he will try to come to grips with his doubtfulness. Carter’s response is “We can’t all be Thomas More” (p. 50), a statement that indicates the suffocating atmosphere Tom is stuck in. Carter’s reference to Thomas More may seem to be far-fetched but it rearticulates the old dichotomies of culture versus individual, of social imperatives versus individual zeal. Just as in the case of Thomas More, who was beheaded by virtue of his opposition to the principal forces of authority of his age, Tom, living in the contemporary world which leaves no room for his love, will get what he deserves if he stands against the vested social merits relating to weight and body size. The punishment Tom will suffer is the feeling of inferiority and shame, which will get worse when Tom shows Carter Helen’s photo. While Carter looks at Helen’s photo, he calls her “the boa” (p. 53), making an association between the size of the animal and Helen’s hugeness. In a broader sense, this association signifies

the further indication of Tom’s distress. Given the fact that boa constrictors suffocate their prey, it can be interpreted that Helen’s presence shows how Tom feels ‘suffocated’ by beauty and size discourses in contemporary American culture. Though Carter sees from Helen’s photo how genuine she is as a person, he says that she has to lose eighty pounds to look better. Tom’s discomfiture further intensifies when Carter takes Helen’s photo to show other colleagues.

In the scene “Old Territory for the New Couple”, where Helen and Tom are seen together, Tom’s unfeigned affection and passion for Helen is contrasted with his increasing uneasiness about public vilification over Helen’s overweight body image. Tom expresses sincere feelings about his relationship with Helen: “I haven’t felt this way for a long time. Ever, probably.... This is completely different. With you” (p. 56). When Helen reveals her intention to take another job in another town, Tom shows his intimacy: “Helen... you can’t leave town, I need you around. You’re like the sunrise to me. Like vitamin C or something. My oxygen” (p. 59). The close of the scene where Helen and Tom have sexual intimacy is significant in that it shows they are sexually attracted to each other. The fact that Helen tries to satisfy Tom’s sexual desires underscores what is valued in the public sphere for fat women, namely sexual objectification (Gesser-Edelsburg and Endevelt, 2011, p. 376). However, contrary to this view, it is important to argue that the scene, rather than emphasizing her sexual commodification, demonstrates that the problem in their relationship is not precipitated by personal matters but by confrontation with social issues inasmuch as Tom’s private thoughts sharply contradict with public beliefs, as he expresses himself:

**Tom** God, this feels so damn good! You know? I mean... just lying around here, us together. All alone.

**Helen** I know.

**Tom** It’s like... I feel like we’re on a raft or something. Paddling along, all the time in the world... no one around to bug us. (*Mimes paddling.*) Ahhh, this is the life! (Labute, 2004, p. 57)

The security of the couple’s private sphere is marred by the reality of the social realm where Tom’s angst festers beneath the pressu-

res of the conflict between personal ambitions and social demands. Helen, feeling isolated, gets the sense that they are hiding from others as Tom is overwhelmed by the feeling of discomfort when he is seen in public with her. Though he comes up with different excuses, it is evident that Tom, immensely influenced by the demeaning appraisal of Helen's body, avoids being in the social sphere with her. Upon Helen's apprehension, Tom wants the chance to prove to her at the beach party or public gathering that he loves her so much and takes their relationship seriously. Through this scene, the duality of Tom's public self and private self are more poignantly displayed.

In the scene "Twists and Turns at the Office", Jeannie and Carter elucidate their ideas as to why Helen's fat body evokes disgust and repulsion. In her heated argument with Tom regarding their ending relationship, Jeannie, in a fit of enraged self-justification, questions the nature of the love between Tom and Helen. Jeannie thinks that it is a "mothering thing" (p. 66), but if it is not so, she does not comprehend how Tom is not disturbed by what everybody is saying in the whole company about his relationship with "[a] fat sow" (p. 67). When Tom insistently says he loves Helen and feels so comfortable when he is with her, Jeannie questions him in order to grasp in what aspects Helen is better than her. Tom loves Helen because she is not obsessed with money, appearance and clothes as much as Jeannie; Jeannie's reaction is to say that Helen is fixated with junk food. Jeannie thinks that Tom is dating with Helen to get back at her since Helen functions as a "self-image killer": "She's fat, so does that mean that Tom secretly digs fat chicks, does it mean that I'm fat?! Huh?! Is that what all this shit is about, getting back at me?!!" (p. 68). As it is clearly understood from Jeannie's words, Helen serves as a self-image killer and 'other' to Jeannie in terms of body shape. In the play, Helen's irregular body stands in symbolic binary opposition against Jeannie's well-shaped body. Labute's positioning of the two bodies against each other has a complementary value within the narrative structure, yet serves another purpose. Sarah Sceats (1996) asserts that "food and eating are inseparable from both physical and psychic appetites and power relations", and explains further that "writers use feeding, feasting, cooking and starving for more than simple mi-



metic effect” (p. 118). Viewed from this perspective, it would not be groundless to assert that Labute sets Jeannie’s thin body against Helen’s chubby body not only to show fat oppression but also to destabilize established social and cultural axes. Jeannie is depicted, with her slender body, as the embodiment of femininity defined within the restrictive boundaries of the society. Jeannie’s fixation with surface appearance and her tendency to do sport to keep her body fit show her eagerness to follow social norms which dictate the beautification of the female body. In this regard, her body is “manipulated, shaped, trained” becoming a “docile body” which “obeys and responds” and, thus, increases the forces of the society (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). Yet in completely diametrical opposition to what Jeannie represents, Helen’s unbounded body comes to symbolize lack of control and discipline and that is, it cannot be subjected, manipulated and transformed. Her excessive eating is a palpable sign of her resistance to society which regulates and controls her eating habit in order to render her intangible and vulnerable. In this respect, her unrestrained ‘consuming’ becomes evidence of her disobedience to a society that, in a metaphorical sense, ‘consumes’ Helen emotionally and psychologically.

In response to Tom’s serious question of what he does actually think of Helen as a person, Carter says that he appreciates what Tom is doing because he could never do it. Carter explains that because Tom is handsome and successful, he does not understand why he wastes these qualities on a time-consuming relationship with a fat girl: “I don’t understand you taking God’s good gifts and pissing on’em...” (Labute, 2004, p. 70). Carter holds the belief that their love is against the law of nature, signifying the Biblical connotation of Noah, who did not match the apes with the antelope at the time of the Flood. He strongly believes in the principle “Run with your own kind” (p. 71). At that moment, Tom says that he loves Helen and wants to make her happy; however, Carter maintains that he is not against her happiness but, in a world governed by the strict standards of society, she would be happier with a fat or bald man who fits her better. Carter explicitly expresses the fundamental reason of disliking fat people:

**Carter** People are not comfortable with difference. You know? Fags, retardards, cripples. Fat people. Old folks, even. They scare us or something.

...

The thing they represent that's so scary is what we could be, how vulnerable we all are. I mean, *any* of us. Some wrong gene splice, a bad backflip off the trampoline... to many cartons of Oreos! We're all just one step away from being what frightens us. What we despise. So... we despise it when we see it in anybody else (p. 71- 2).

Carter's viewpoint that individuals whose bodies are deviant and different from aesthetic ideals create fear, disgust and repulsion displays the core idea of society, recalling Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Abjection is, in Elizabeth Grosz's words (1989), "a refusal of the defiling, impure, uncontrollable materiality of a subject's embodied existence" (p. 72). Drawing upon this definition, one may interpret that a fat body which is difficult to control and transgresses rigid body margins creates abjection insofar as it "disturbs identity, system, border" and does not "respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). When abjection takes place, the subject vainly "attempts to identify itself with something outside" and finds "that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it is none other than abject" (p. 5). In this respect, it can be indicated that abjection begets both external menace from which we must protect ourselves and internal threat that somehow lies grounded within us. The bilateral response to these external and internal threats generates disgust and fear. The fat body which goes beyond what is generally accepted as the bodily boundaries arouses detestation, aversion and fear. In this way, it produces anxiety and agitation for individuals as the fat body becomes the external projection of their deep and creeping fear about their own bodies that have the potential to become fat. Thus, the fat body is reduced to the object of fear which individuals shun consciously or unconsciously. After expressing his ideas with regard to fatness, Carter also informs Tom of the newly-emerging affair between him and Jeannie and gives the news that he will take her to the beach party. Tom expresses that it will not constitute a serious problem for him and they will remain what they are, that is, close friends. After Carter exists, Tom retires into seclusion in the dark room, holding the picture of Helen to muse over their relationship.

In the last scene “One of Those Blustery Beach Days”, where all the characters come together for the first time, it is seen that Tom’s apprehension heightens. In order to keep away from his workmates, he finds an excuse to take Helen near the dunes, to protect her from the wind. Helen objects that he did not introduce her to them, but Tom avoids fighting with her. Although Tom heretofore has acted in defiance of Helen, troubled as he is by what Carter and Jeannie have said about her body, his resistance proves short-lived. When Helen discerns that there is a problem that they cannot easily resolve, in order to convince Tom, she accepts to have surgery such as stomach stapling and a bypass operation. Despite her imploration, in order to evade from the social embarrassment about Helen’s body and the anguish caused by his iconoclasm against the preconceived values of their society, Tom leaves Helen, accepting his weakness:

**Tom...** If we were in some other time or a land that nobody else was around on... like that island from the movie, the Sinatra film- None but the Brave- then everything might be okay, I wouldn’t be so fucking paranoid about what the people around me were saying. Or even thinking. Then it could just be you and me, and that’d be so great. Perfect. But ... I guess I do care what my peers feel about me. Or how they view my choices, and yes, maybe that makes me not very deep or petty or some other word, hell, I dunno! It’s my Achilles flaw or something. I’m .... (Labute, 2004, p. 82- 3)

The surprising ending of the play demonstrates what Labute is only concerned with is to divulge intricate and complex sides of human nature as he himself asserts in the preface to *Fat Pig*: “Actually, I don’t ever worry too much about the audience liking my characters ... All I care about is creating individuals who are interesting. Interesting and as complex as people are in life. I hope I’ve done that here” (p. xii).

One of the outstanding features of Labute’s plays is to present life in all its aspects, which he does in the play: “... I love to make life unpredictable for a lot of my fictional characters as they face terrible mishaps, calamities, and upheavals...” (p. xi). The ending of *Fat Pig* mirrors the nature of human beings whose lives are disrupted by societal notions that adversely influence their lives: “... the story re-

ally deals with human weakness and the difficulty many people face when trying to stand up for, live up to, or come out for something they believe in” (p. xii).

When viewed from this aspect, it can be argued that Labute finishes the play with an unhappy ending to criticize social ills. Centralizing and politicizing Helen’s fat body, Labute criticizes society’s blind adherence to physical beauty and superficial things and the established social and cultural norms imposed on fat females. Yet, his critical stance does not produce ill effect, rather, as Christopher Bigsby (2007) points out, it has a healing power: “He [Labute] defended his portrayal of human fallibility as a necessary corrective to an unquestioning acceptance of private and public pieties” (p. 14). In this sense, the play, far from advocating that fat female bodies should transform or change, underlines the fact that society should overhaul its well-worn judgements.

In conclusion, Labute employs fat embodiment as a literary device to underline the negative experiences of living with an excessive embodiment in contemporary Western society in which the notion of beauty is reified. Labute emphasizes the plight of Helen, who cannot attain love and happiness in her society because of her body image that lies outside the ideals of feminine beauty, and in this way, situates Helen’s private experience with her body in the social paradigms. Since Helen’s fat body has its capacity to revive the controversies and anxieties of contemporary American culture, it metamorphoses from the private body into the social body. In this sense, her body becomes a site upon which social restrictions as well as repressions are inscribed. In attributing moral and social qualities to what is merely a biological entity, Neil Labute reveals the ways that contemporary Western society devalues fat females, though he does not directly propose any idea or solution to eliminate weight-based stigma. In doing so, he also voices a harsh criticism against contemporary Western society’s overvaluing outward appearances and its excessive focus on idealized beauty norms. In addition to Labute’s incentive to problematize fat embodiment, contrary to the common belief of the absence and undesirability of fat female characters in the theatre, by giving a central role to a fat character, he creates an

arena where the fat female body becomes the paragon of rebellion against the dominant orthodox views of a society and, thereby, onto which the protestations of fat females are projected.

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