

**Embodying Geographies: Clothing Consumption and
Female Embodied Subjectivities.**

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Taken from Alpern, M. 1999 *Shopping Zurich: Scalo.*

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Summary of Thesis

This thesis is situated within three main developments within social and cultural geography concerned with the practices and spaces of consumption, the corporeal turn as a means to embody geographical knowledges and the role of clothing in the materialisation of bodies. The main intention of this thesis, therefore, is that it acts as a means of animating theoretical articulations of the body with in-depth empirical work (individual and group interviews and accompanied shopping) concerned with women's embodied experiences of clothing consumption. Therefore, the practices of consumption form a vehicle through which a detailed account of the intricacies of female embodiment can be discerned.

Female embodied subjectivity is made sense of through post-structural work on the (female) body which works against dualistic and static understandings of embodiment to highlight the fluid and messy constitution of subjectivity (Grosz 1994). Empirical articulations of female consuming bodies focuses on what this subjectivity looks/ feels/ sounds like, through elaborating upon the tension between material and discursive bodies, the ability of bodies to co-produce each other (including my own), and identifying a need to move beyond understanding the body as a presence which must be materially there to 'matter'. Instead, this account of female corporeality presents a more nuanced account of how women experience their bodies and thus, the role that theoretical bodies have for making sense of these embodied experiences.

Female embodied subjectivity is discussed as, what I have termed, 'bodily doings'. These are Slimming, Sizing, Zoning and Looking and are presented as independent yet related theoretically annotated empirical accounts of female embodiment. Through these 'bodily doings', I will highlight how the female body figures in accounts contemporary consumption beyond a victim/resistance dichotomy, rethink the typology of flesh in order to unsettle categories of bodies such as big and small, focus on the potential for the matter of female bodies, such as flab, for understanding women's experiences with their own materiality and re-orientate debates about 'body image' and what it means for women to look (at themselves and each other) and be looked at.

In a sense this thesis has no closure, and instead, concludes highlighting the potentialities that this thesis has for empiricising female embodied subjectivity in its inherent fluidity and indeterminacy and emphasises the importance of situating 'the body' as a place to theorise from and work with rather than upon, in order to get at what is too often uncritically posited as 'the geography closest in'.

Beginnings

Chapter One

“Today the body is, in many ways, more visible than it has ever been. From women’s clothing fashions that continually seek new ways to exhibit flesh to a veritable explosion of both popular and academic writing on the body” (Weiss and Haber 1999 p.1)

1 Introduction

In beginning this thesis I present you with a quote taken from a recent collection entitled *Perspectives on Embodiment* (Weiss and Haber 1999). The quote conveniently encapsulates the basis of my thesis. That of 'the body' and clothing or more precisely women's embodied experiences of clothing consumption. The quote makes explicit the centrality of the body within contemporary academic as well as popular literatures and also the obvious materiality of bodies as displayed and presented through clothing. This not only justifies the very existence of this thesis as an important development in fusing two interrelated bodies of literature but also hints at the need to take both the academic and material body seriously: a debate most often witnessed in the geographical literature as a play off between the material and the discursive body, the real and represented body and the biological and socially constructed body. However, what I intend to do in this thesis is to offer an account of female embodiment, taken to mean the "lived spaces where bodies are located corporeally and materially and discursively" (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.60), which is theoretically and empirically located in the body but which is not based upon or against any one model of thinking through the body. Instead, at its heart is a notion of messiness, fluidity, instability and multiplicity which reflects both the theorisation of the female body that I utilise as well as the content and presentation of my empirical work. As Moss and Dyck (2003) reiterate:

Theorising the body, indeed, is crucial to how we understand 'lived experience' and 'situated bodies', so that in pursuing the notion of an embodied social geography we need to retain at the centre of discussion the interaction between the body's analytic categories, the empirical constructs used to describe bodily experience and activity, and the theoretical understanding of the body and how it articulates with society" (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.60).

Therefore, this chapter will situate my thesis both theoretically and empirically as an account of female embodiment as articulated through women's experiences and narratives of clothing consumption. This is not a thesis purely about consumption for it is *through* the practices of clothing consumption that the intricacies of female embodiment are presented and made sense of. This sense-making is done through four particular articulations of the female body which I have termed 'bodily doings'. **Slimming**, **Sizing**, **Zoning** and **Looking** are presented as independent yet interlinked, theoretically animated empirical accounts of female embodiment which highlight the very nature of female bodies as narrated and experienced through the practices of consumption. They work in tension and collaboration with theoretical

interventions about the body and thus produce a commentary on how the female body figures in contemporary consumption but also illustrates the multiple nature of female embodied experience. As Grosz (1994) comments “Where one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able, male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, of a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities” (p.19).

This chapter will firstly situate the thesis within ‘the corporeal’ turn within geography and the wider social sciences and then discuss the interrelationships between clothing, consumption and the body and how particular bodily doings come into being through these relationships. I will then discuss the structure of my thesis in more detail with a summary of the content and connections between each chapter before concluding by beginning again and directing the reader towards the unfolding narratives which are my thesis.

1.1 Corporeal Twists and Turns

Weiss and Haber (1999) have commented recently that “Contemporary critical explorations of the body cut across disciplines and have become occasions for questioning the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries themselves. This current interdisciplinary discourse on the body is producing its own corporeal effects in both theory and practice (p.1). Indeed, it is obvious within geography and the wider social science literature, that ‘the body’ as a topic for academic consideration has increased substantially over the past ten to fifteen years. Within geography these accounts have been well documented (see McDowell 1999, Valentine 2003) so that bodily geographies have come to take on specific trajectories. This includes work which is based upon inserting ‘the body’ into geographical knowledge as a means of emphasising the (masculinist) absences implicit in the production of those geographies. This work unsettles dichotomous thinking within the discipline such as mind and body and nature and culture (Longhurst 1995; 1997) in order to remove hierarchical inferences about what constitutes body work. There are geographies which allow us to trace the histories of specific spatial registers (Nast and Pile 1998; Sibley 1995) and those that seek to understand the relationships between specific bodies and spaces (Valentine 1993; Johnston 1996). Moreover, other work focuses on analysing representational bodies as situated within the study of landscape and wider social relations (Nash 1996; McCormack 1998; Jackson et al 1999) and more recently there has been an agenda set within feminist geographies and geographies of health and illness to include the fleshy, material, unruly body (Longhurst 2001; Hall 2000) or those bodies which “ threaten to spill, soil and mess up, clean, hard geography” (Longhurst 1997 p. 493-494).

This list may in some ways simplify many of the complexities of understanding geographies of 'the body', however I feel that there are endemic problems within this work whereby "...it is not to argue that all geographers are shoring up a singular notion of the body, but rather that references to the body in geography tend to prepare the way for a dominant discourse favouring certain issues and methodologies over others" (Simonsen 2000 p.9). For example, a concern for the 'discursive body' creates a geography of the body as a surface onto which power relations are mapped which ignores the very experience of what it means and feels like to be embodied. Or in Moss and Dyck's (2003) words "severs the living connections between bodies and those things that create, make-up and sustain bodies themselves" (p.60). Equally, however, by inserting the materiality and experiential accounts of the body into geographical research, the body becomes disconnected from wider theoretical and political concerns and implies that the body must indeed be physically present in order to 'be' embodied. In a sense what we have is a stand off between geographies of the body rather than a collective of embodied geographies.

Therefore, I situate this thesis as a movement beyond bodily geographies that have come before it to present an account of 'the body' which is entangled with rather than applied to theoretical and discursive work. As Simonsen (2000) states "Greater understanding of the body requires interaction between theories about the substance of the body and analyses of the particularities of embodied experiences and practices" (p.9). Geography clearly has much to offer accounts concerned with the formation and experience of embodied subjectivity; that is how we come to experience and understand what it means to be an embodied subject, beyond reading bodies in and as spaces. However, this project is complex and requires a flexibility both on the part of the researcher and the epistemological approach taken towards the body itself.

For myself, this has involved an engagement with poststructuralist theories of the body which has, at its root, a notion of bodily fluidity. Longhurst (2001) comments that:

Over the last decade convincing arguments have emerged about the need to examine new ways of developing frameworks and terms for capturing the multiple, diverse ways in which each human embodied subject is formed. Focusing on a politics of fluidity is one way to do this" (Longhurst 2001 p.2-3)

By fluidity, I mean accounts of the body that move within, beyond and between dichotomies and discursive frameworks and which allow the conceptual and bodily space for material and discursive bodies to come into being individually, collectively, in tension with one another or not at all during any one (consumption) moment. Therefore rather than suppress the body, Falk (1994) comments about consumption that "The increase in the density of limits,

categories and norms related to corporeality produces a multiplicity and diversification of transgressions as a complementary opposition (Falk 1994 p.65). Moreover, this thesis deals with the particularities of female embodiment which led me to Elisabeth Grosz's (1994) work on embodied subjectivity. In engaging with what she terms the 'epistemological upheaval' of transforming and challenging prevailing models of the body, she recognises that while feminists have been hesitant to link women's subjectivity to 'the body'¹ this does not mean that the 'matter of bodies' should be replaced in favour of the discursive and textual body. Instead, she advocates an understanding of bodies that suggests that "bodies cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects of the very social constitution of nature itself" (ibid x).

Therefore, through an exploration of 'bodily doings'², the term I have used to collectively identify particular articulations of the female body, I will theoretically and empirically present the fluidity of female corporeality, which I take to mean "an immanence, a proximate fleshiness, a sense of woman as situated by her body and existing only in and through her body" (Witz 2000 p.11). For example in the context of my research this includes, re-experiencing past bodies and projecting bodies of the future onto present embodiments, squeezing breasts and thighs and bottoms, smoothing fabric over the body, remembering birthing experiences, narrating (embodied) relationships with clothing and other bodies, laughing, crying, eating, and so on. Each empirical chapter captures a different articulation of the female body but they all are co-constitutive and productive of each other. Compartmentalising bodies in this sense then should not stabilise bodies into safe categories but illustrate the messiness of those categories and the permeability of conceptual and bodily boundaries when dealing with women's own experiences of their bodies.

1.3. Dressing Up Geography

As already mentioned above, consumption and the practices of consumption are central to the very existence of this thesis in terms of the empirical focus of my research. Essentially what I am recounting are the narratives about and experiences of women's clothing consumption³ as

¹ A reticence towards focusing on the matter of female embodiment has developed partly due to the colonisation of women's bodies by science and medicine more specifically (see Martin 1994). Within geography, this reticence has also been acknowledged although is now being challenged by feminist geographers who call for the need to take the 'weighty materiality' of bodies seriously in an attempt to prevent the sanitisation of bodily geographies (see Longhurst 2001)

² 'Bodily doings' are based upon Grosz's (1997) articulations of bodies as *body morphologies* which will be discussed in more detail in the Chapter Three Bodies/Literatures.

³ It must be recognised that the consumption of clothing does suggest a bodily specificity of consumption practices because of the bodily proximity in which the goods are consumed i.e. clothes

discerned through my methodological practices. However, it is important to stress that consumption, in this thesis, has become a vehicle for understanding the female body rather than the topic of study per se. This decision is based upon recent work that considers consumption as active in the (re)production of social relations (Miller et al 1998) rather than simply about economic acquisition and lifestyle formation. This has involved considering the very practices of consumption, taken to mean “what people do when they shop and how they talk about shopping” (Gregson et al 2002 p.598), rather than reading meaning off the spaces in which these practices take place (Goss 1993). Moreover, these accounts demand a need to consider the consumer as ‘embodied’ (see for example Valentine 1999; Gregson et al 2000). Within this context, the body is understood not as a surface representation of the form and function of consumer culture. Instead the body is considered as becoming and produced through those consumption practices. McCormack (1990 in his study of fitness machines states “It makes no sense to talk of something called ‘the body’ in so far as bodies can only make sense within the cultural practices through which they take shape” (McCormack 1999 p.158) which echoes the sentiments of Elisabeth Grosz’s (1994) work on the co-constitutive nature of the body as mentioned above.

The specificities of female consumption practices have already been documented in some detail in social science work although there have been a number of problematic tendencies. Firstly, many of the accounts are historical, textually based and centre on women’s experiences of department stores in the nineteenth century and therefore bodies are absent from these accounts. Secondly, there is a tendency to situate women within particular discursive registers without exploring the complexities of female consumption practices. For example, women are often positioned as victims of particular regimes of power such as bodily ideals (Bartky 1990; Chernin 1983) or their engagements in shopping are seen to be based around functionality or leisure (Jansen Verbeke 1987), without taking account of the pains and frustrations of shopping. Crewe (2000) has commented recently that we need a more theoretically rigorous account of new retail geographies and indeed this thesis works with this suggestion by reformulating the specific positionings of women within contemporary consumption through utilising specific theories of the body. This includes feminist (re)appropriations of Foucault’s (1979) work on surveillance, work on the ‘flesh and bones’ of the female body, and work on the potentiality of the female gaze and body image for non-exploitative intersubjective relations with other bodies (Weiss 1999). Therefore, although this thesis is not primarily a commentary on contemporary clothing consumption it does make

are looked at, touched, and tried on by bodies. This could be compared to buying white goods or cars for example which demand a higher economic investment but is not intimately connected to the very materialisation of the flesh of bodies as with clothing.

explicit how theoretical interventions may place female consumers differently within the spaces and places of consumption. As Crewe (2002) comments of recent consumption work in geography:

“attention is being paid to the ways in which particular spaces are centrally implicated in processes of identity formation, and at how consumers display complex, multiple and often contradictory consumption imperatives” (Crewe 2000 p.278).

At this point it is important to introduce clothing, to the theoretical and empirical bases of the thesis. It may sound strange to note that until recently the body has not figured in work on clothing despite being the very ‘stuff’ which fills the fabric. Instead accounts have been dominated by post-modern theorisations of fashion whereby meaning is read off clothing as a cultural artefact and then rubbed off onto the surface of the body. In fact Wilson (1990) comments on this tendency within the fashion literature that the body becomes “an inert or unfeeling frame to be decorated and adorned” (Wilson 1990 p.59). However, recent development within the fashion literatures (see Wilson and Entwistle 2001; Sweetman 2001) have begun to put the body back into clothes and to embody accounts of clothing as the means through which we make sense of and experience our bodies rather than a set of discursive signifiers we place upon our bodies. As Craik (1994) posits “Clothing does a good deal more than simply clad the body for warmth and modesty or comfort. Codes of dress are technical devices which articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu, the space occupied by bodies and bodily actions” (p.40). A layer of fabric on the body re-materialises the body, it moves and manages the flesh, it exposes and covers up body parts and surfaces, it makes the body remember changes in its form and life situation and it is loved and it is hated. Entwistle (2000) has recently asked us to understand dress as ‘situated bodily practice’ which considers the importance of dress for understanding embodied subjectivity, precisely the main tenet of this thesis. Although there are no material bodies in her theoretical account she does state that “dress in everyday life is always more than a shell, it is an intimate aspect of the experience and presentation of the self and is so closely linked to the identity that these three – the dress, body and the self – are not perceived separately but simultaneously as a totality” (p.10).

Within this thesis, ‘dress in everyday life’ means considering women’s embodied experiences of clothing consumption⁴ and there have been surprisingly few accounts of women actually shopping for clothes (see Chua 1992) within the fashion literature. Instead the existing literature there is orientated around what it signifies to wear certain clothes (Kaiser 2001)

⁴ In 2000 £13.98 billion was spent on womenswear in Britain (Mintel 2001)

rather than looking at, touching, trying on, buying and storing clothes (see Banim and Guy's (2002) study about women keeping clothes they no longer wear for a notable exception). However, I feel that these accounts are significant in order to highlight the growing centrality that is placed on clothing for how women come to know and experience their bodies.

Within the thesis, it will become apparent that particular consumption moments are also critical to how women experience their bodies. For example, trying on clothes in a changing room when forced to look at your ageing body in the mirror whilst struggling to fit into a size fourteen jeans and remembering when you were a size ten on your wedding day; avoiding particular shops because you know your body will not 'fit' the clothes and 'fit in' with the style of the shop; or perhaps looking for a sexy bra but finding that you only fit into the training bras for young women. These are all empirical examples from my research and serve to illustrate the connectiveness of clothing consumption to women's wider embodied lives and more importantly how they 'feel about themselves'. As Dunseath (1998) comments:

“clothes very much form part of and reflect our sense of self, whether it be consciously or subconsciously. They are not just about enveloping the body – they connect with memory, identity, history, ritual, culture, race, sexuality and sensuality. They are how we relate the realm of subjective experience to the objective world around us” (Dunseath 1998 vii-viii).

1.4 (De) constructing the thesis

I now want to discuss the structure of the thesis which conforms largely to those literary and institutional structures that I, as a PhD student have to adhere to. However, whilst working within these structures I also want to highlight that by no means is this thesis a finite account of female embodiment. As with the fluid theoretical premise I have presented above, the words in this thesis should not be seen as constricted to the pages on which they are written and can extend beyond the text to the wider embodied lives and narratives of my research participants, as well as to alternative literatures about the body. What follows is essentially my attempt to capture the body in all its slipperiness within the confines of a thesis so that some chapters rub up against each other more easily than others. However, this tension, discomfort and ambivalence is not wholly problematic and instead it simply has become an integrated facet of my doing body work in geography.

Chapter Two entitled **Bodies/Literatures** works to develop the context presented in this chapter and acts as a framing device in terms of the literatures that inform and help to create the thesis. Most importantly is my intention to use theory to animate my empirical work (Bordo 1998) and vice versa to avoid any simplistic applications which abstract the body as a

tool rather than a place to theorise from. The chapter highlights those developments within consumption studies that provide the basis to my thesis but also the significance the relationships between bodies and clothing have for understanding embodied subjectivity. The chapter ends with contextualising more precisely my empirical discussion of female embodiment, 'bodily doings', which are based upon Grosz's (1990) idea of body morphologies which are collectivities of female specific bodily articulations that move within and between each other. The thesis, therefore, is framed to be less about consumption than as using research concerned with consumption practices as a vehicle to understand the intricacies of female embodiment.

Chapter Three, **Bodies and Methodologies**, presents in more detail the means through which I conducted my research, discussing the role of accompanied shopping and interviews, both group and individual, in providing access to both the practices and talk on practices of consumption. I also note the difficulties of researching 'the body' in this way by focusing on the processes of recruiting, labelling and placing bodies which demand attention to the interplay between discursively and materially placing bodies within the research. For example, it is important to recognise the co-constitution of bodies within the research process where the proximity of others (including myself) was important in how women negotiated their own embodied narratives and experiences of 'being researched'. Moreover, I note the benefits of questioning 'around' the body i.e. on bodily practices rather than 'on' the body for qualitative research and the ability of research narratives, as with bodies themselves, to extend beyond the spaces of the fieldwork and provide me with access to the wider embodied contexts of their lives.

Chapters Four to Seven are presented as a particular articulation of my research 'findings'. These are organised into 'bodily doings', as mentioned above, and each chapter highlights a particular mode of female embodiment as narrated and experienced through women's clothing consumption experiences. Each chapter works with/against/through theoretical literatures about 'the body' in order to centre 'the body' as means of creating new knowledges rather than recirculating old. **Slimming** focuses on the ways that 'the slimming body' is materialised and experienced beyond the often narrow critiques of the dieting industry that position women as victims of a culture of slenderness. This involves how women mediate the importance of a slim body against maintaining their own health, the significance of clothing as a material and emotional indicator of bodily change and how the slimming body is experienced as a series of absent and present, past and present and before and after bodies. I also discuss what I have termed 'institutionalised slimming' and suggest that an ethical shift occurs in women's engagements with slimming practices that relies upon an awareness of the inevitability of failure and a re-experiencing of bodily boundaries rather than a simple adherence to normative notions of achieving 'the perfect body'.

Sizing makes explicit what it means for 'the body' to be sized within the context of women's clothing consumption. Of central importance here is the role of numerical clothing regimes in quantifying the body whilst recognising the implications of the inconsistency in this sizing from shop to shop and when clothing different bodily parts. This process is temporally experienced as women yearn to be sizes they were and is ambiguous as it is possible to be a size i.e. be observed or quantified as a particular size, and to *feel* a size differently. The chapter then goes on to discuss a particular articulation of size by focusing on bodily bignesses. The plurality of this label encapsulates the multiplicity of bodily categories and this chapter displays empirically how bignesses cannot be understood in any singular way. For example, I note the difficulty in reconciling the fleshiness of bigness with the suitability of particular clothing for big bodies and the different ways that women articulate their feelings about their bodily size which demonstrates the personal contradictions of bodily politics.

Zoning, takes the fleshy materiality of bodies further and focuses on the 'bits and pieces' of female embodiment, drawing upon the literature which positions the female body as pliable and non-fixed and yet animating this literature beyond 'the body as metaphor' to encapsulate the very experience of messy female embodiment. This focuses on the role that clothing has for re-materialising particular problem areas of the female body, such as the stomach and bottom and in particular attempts to make sense of 'flab' as an extension of the female form that is both a part of and separate from 'the body', that can be managed and controlled and yet can grow and shrink indeterminately. This chapter also highlights the importance of bodily absences, the flesh that is not there and/or has been lost, bodily textures such as muscle and women's experiences of their post-pregnant bodies to understanding female corporeality. What is central is how clothing provides the medium through which women talk through their bodies as zoned in particular ways and situates these bodily instabilities within the context of their wider life experiences.

The final bodily doing, **Looking**, focuses on the ways that women look at their own and each other's bodies, within the context of clothing consumption and the role that looking has in the production and experience of bodies. This chapter is set within the literature within geography on 'the gaze', 'landscape' and 'body image' that moves beyond representational accounts of the body to consider more practice-based, in-body accounts of looking. I highlight in particular an absence in the literature concerned with understanding what it means to look at oneself in clothes in the mirror and to look at other women and offer alternative accounts of looking beyond an oppressive scopic regime situated within a patriarchal framework. These debates are empiricalised by focusing on 'mirror practices' and the process through which the body is evaluated in clothing through looking in mirrors. Moreover, this work also demonstrates the (re)enactment of body images from the past when looking at the body in

clothes which indicates the multiple presences of female embodiment that do not have to be materially there to matter. The chapter then goes on to explore the practices of women looking at each other and the role that the presence of other bodies has for women's negotiations of their own embodiments. This focuses on the different effects of comparing bodies to those in proximity to you in a shopping context from unease and embarrassment to connection and empathy. Therefore, this would suggest that there is no one way of interpreting 'the female gaze' and instead it makes more sense to understand how the gaze is embodied through the materialisation and emotional responses of bodies.

In **Closures**, I attempt to draw together my research findings, as set within the literatures on 'the body', clothing and consumption. I am hesitant to conclude because this thesis does not really end in the same way that I have placed the indeterminacy of the female body as central to my interpretations and analysis. Instead I offer potential trajectories through which my work can travel which by no means is an exercise in infinite definition. These trajectories are focused upon four main themes. The first, 'women consuming', highlights the significance of my work for repositioning the female body in consumption. The second thematic, 'clothing matters' highlights the role that clothing has for (re)materialising the body in its proximity to the flesh of the body. The third 'bodies/doings/geographies' works to illustrate the contributions this thesis makes to work in geography on the body by placing particular emphasis on the significance of 'bodily doings' for destabilising epistemological practices. Finally, 'empiricalising theoretical bodies' illustrates the potential for a fluid approach to the female body both theoretically and empirically by situating the role that bodily doings has for animating contemporary post-structuralist theories of the body.

1.4. Conclusions (Beginnings II)

In concluding this chapter in a sense what I am doing is beginning again as the thesis continues on its theoretical and empirical journeys. What I have intended to highlight in this chapter are the main tenets of my thesis as working with and against particular traditions of work concerned with the body, clothing and consumption. Essentially the thesis is about 'getting at' the intricacies of female embodiment through the practices of consumption so that consumption itself becomes less about acquisition and more a vehicle that provides access to an account of female embodied subjectivity. Crouch (2001) posits that "In the nuanced complexity of human relations there can be an exploration of non-commodity values. Sensuous/expressive embodiment provides further grounds through which the subject can be understood to encounter, rework and contest the world" (p.71).

This work also moves between articulations of the material and discursive body taking both the discourses about and the matter of bodies seriously. This shores up a new position of the body within geography; that which cannot be clearly demarcated or defined by theory and yet

animates theory and provides the very space from which new knowledges may come into being. Valentine (1999b) comments about the geographies of these embodied knowledges as dependent upon how we feel on the inside as well as what we look like on the outside. In short, then, it is about “the relationship between the inside and the outside – about our spatiality (Valentine 1999b p.331).

Bodily doings, therefore, present a messy manifestation of the spatiality of the body. Clothing activates the body through its proximity to the flesh and yet also acts as mediator between how we feel about our different embodiments; past, present and future; fleshy, absent and messy. The fluidity of the approach which I advocate, therefore, captures the indeterminacy of the female body and is also used as a means to highlight the fluidity of (empirical) body work and its capacity to extend beyond the spaces of the fieldwork and indeed the pages of this thesis. As Probyn (2003) has stated:

“we need to think of subjectivity as an unwieldy, continually contestable and affirmable basis for living in the world. Subjectivities are then simply a changing ensemble of openings and closings, points of contact and points which repel contact. In space, we orient ourselves and are oriented. That is the spatial imperative of subjectivities” (Probyn 2003 p.298).

Bodies/Literatures

Chapter Two

Theory “..needn’t be the object of analysis in order for a discussion to qualify as theoretical; it can be an animating force ‘behind’ an analysis” (Bordo 1998 p.86)

“Why not begin with the premise that the fact of our embodiment can be a valuable starting point for rethinking the nature of culture and our existential situation as cultural beings? (Csordas 1994 p.6)

2 Introduction

The two quotes mentioned above are significant for outlining the main intentions of the following chapter and indeed the findings of my thesis. Theory, for Bordo (1998) is a means to animate research and to produce new knowledges rather than simply a way to frame and give credence to research based upon the academic knowledge that comes before it. Secondly, Csordas (1999) highlights the role that embodiment has for understanding our place in the world and how we come to know our-selves; a place to theorise from rather than theorise about. Therefore, this fusion of both theory and embodiment as a starting point for research is where I situate my review of literatures. Embodiment, the very experience of what it means to be/have/feel/sense our own and other bodies is the foundation of this thesis. Women's embodied experiences of clothing consumption provides us access to new knowledges of the corporeal complexities of being a woman. To do this, theoretical interventions can be applied in proximity to empirical body work which places the body not simply as a metaphor for understanding contemporary consumption, or indeed the production of geographical knowledges (Longhurst 1995; 1997) but as a co-actant in the making of this thesis which adds dynamism or in Bordo's (1998) words 'animation' to bodily practices and narratives.

What follows therefore is a thematic development of literatures that both inform the very subject of my thesis i.e. the geographies of women's consumption experiences as well as the analytical approach that I take to my empirical work which makes theoretical sense of female corporeality within a variety of epistemological frameworks. I will firstly work to position the bodies in my research within work on the geographies of consumption and in particular women's experiences of consumption. This will serve to contextualise the significance of my research findings within accounts that often understand women's consumption as acquisition and/or as leisure. Moreover, it will suggest the significance that consumption has for understanding wider embodied relations and in particular the form and experience of female corporeality per se. I will then go on to introduce 'the theoretical' body to this literary context by discussing the body in geography literatures and the intellectual and empirical baggage that have formed what have been collectively termed 'corporeographies' (Longhurst 2001). Finally, I will present in more detail the consuming bodies in my thesis or what I have termed 'bodily doings' and situate this articulation of bodiliness within wider conceptualisations of the female body including post-structuralist work by Grosz (1994), Young (1990) and Weiss (1999). Whilst in the past this work has been critiqued conversely for the very absence of bodies within what have been largely abstracted accounts, I have found these accounts of the body most useful because they treat "individual human bodies as always a part of larger assemblages and thus provide a conceptual frame in which to take account of the variety of ways in which individual bodies and their capacities are affected in larger assemblages of

family, work and sociopolitical life” (McDowell and Sharpe 1999 p.20). In short, post-structuralist accounts of the body allow me to consider the practices of consumption as intimately connected and attached to the production and reproduction of female corporeality. Csordas (1999) has recently referred to work of this nature as ‘cultural phenomenology’ that is “concerned with synthesising the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably embodied” (p.143). This allows for what I will term the messiness of female embodiment.

2.1 Bodies-Consuming

Within this section I will provide the ‘consumption’ context to my research by examining what is meant by consumption and in particular a conceptual shift in understanding consumption as more than the ‘act of purchase’ and instead as productive in the mediation and experience of social relations, and thus our corporeal existence(s). As Pred (1996) has suggested “Consumption is a process intricately enmeshed in the situated practices and social relations of modern everyday life, the commonplace spatialities of individual and collective existence” (p.12). Moreover, I will discuss in more detail the specifically gendered nature of consumption, with reference to how women’s experiences have been understood within narrow discourses of functionality, pleasure and frivolity for example, and suggest that a more nuanced consideration of consumption refuses such finality and offers a more open and flexible approach to female experiences of consumption. Finally, I conclude by presenting consumption as an inherently embodied activity and the potential this statement has both theoretically and empirically for understanding consumption and of course the intricacies of female embodiment. What this chapter encompasses is essentially a layering of literatures as they inform each other and thus the very existence of my thesis.

2.1.1. consumption and geography

Work on consumption within social and cultural geography has developed substantially over the past ten years and much of this work has conversely emerged out of challenging exactly what has come to be known as ‘consumption’ (see Jackson and Thrift 1995 for a substantive review of geographical literature on consumption). Emerging from a historical reworking and revision of literature (see Miller et al (1998) for a historical review) recent work has identified that “..the problem is no longer that consumption is an unknown topic but that it is, in some senses, too well known” (Miller et al 1998 p.1). Critics are sceptical of naive histories of mass consumption which separate consumption from social difference and inequalities (Gregson 1995). For example, this is identified in the overuse and under-theorisation of the ‘the shopping mall’ as the pinnacle of modern consumption (Goss 1993) from which meaning is

read off the built environment rather than explored through the practices of consumption or the meanings that consumers construct in/of these spaces.

However, there is also a danger of simply 'adding in' the consumer or reading consumption off the processes of production whereby "(T)he culture of consumption is reduced to the economic imperative of sustaining sufficiently buoyant levels of demand to keep capitalist production profitable" (Jackson and Thrift 1995 p.205). Therefore, what has emerged as a disciplinary imperative is a concern for understanding precisely what is involved in what we name the 'consumption of goods and services' beyond purely focusing on the nature of acquisition. Therefore, consumption should be understood as not simply the 'act of purchase' but as incorporating what goes on before, during and after that purchase has been made. In a geographical sense understanding consumption is about the dynamic and spatial relationships between consumers, objects/services and the spaces in/through which they are consumed. Jackson (1993) states that "...it is much better to treat consumption as a process by which artefacts are not simply bought and consumed but given meaning through their active incorporation in people's lives" (p.209).

With this new imperative in place, I have identified three main thematic concerns within geographical research on consumption that are important in the framing and constitution of my research. These are concerns about the *spaces* of consumption, the place of the *consumer* her/him self and the *practices* of consumption; in short what consumers do when they consume.

Firstly, of course, geographies of consumption are concerned with the spaces in and through which consumption takes place. Jackson and Thrift (1995) identify the spatial nature of consumption in the form of specific *sites* of consumption, the *chains* that link consumption's multiple locations and the *spaces* and *places* of contemporary consumerism (p.206). By focusing on the sites of consumption, research has been orientated towards the spaces in and through which consumption takes place. This has involved working historically through the beginnings of modern consumption with work on the department store (Domosh 1996; Nava 1997) to the more recent emergence of the shopping mall, as mentioned above.

These consumption sites should not be viewed as simply vessels in which consumption takes place as an activity disconnected from that space(s) and instead are theorised as active and productive in the mediation of that consumer experience. For example, micro geographies of the spatial layout and organisation of a consumption space indicate directly how space is active in producing specific consumer behaviour and reinforcing social relations. Nava (1997) comments on nineteenth century department stores that:

"department stores provided a vast range of facilities that enhanced the convenience, comfort and pleasure of shopping. These included supervised children's areas, toilets and

powder rooms, hairdressing courts, ladies' and gentlemen's clubs and writing rooms, restaurants and tea rooms, roof gardens with pergolas, zoos and ice rinks, libraries, picture galleries, banks, ticket and travel agencies, grocery provision and delivery services. Standards of service were high and customers were made to feel welcome by obliging liveried doormen and deferential yet astute assistants" (Nava 1997 p.67).

Moreover work has also been done beyond the conventional sites of consumption, such as the department store and the shopping mall to focus on alternative sites of consumption such as the car boot sale (Gregson and Crewe 1994, 1997), the charity shop (Gregson et al 2000), the gym (Johnston 1996), and the home (Valentine 1999a, 1999b). What have been termed 'new retail geographies' (Wrigley and Lowe 1996) focus on the spaces of the workplace and the co-constitution of consumers and producers within particular spaces such as the restaurant (Crang 1996) and high street clothing shop (Crewe and Lowe 1995). Therefore, my focus on the spaces of clothing consumption can be contextualised within this research.

Also to be included this category of work is not only the spaces in which consumption takes place but the spaces through which commodities move. This involves work that moves consumption beyond the act of purchase to trace its origins and endings. Leslie and Reimer (1999) have advocated the use of a commodity chain approach to geographies of consumption in order to trace "...the entire trajectory of a product from its conception and design, through production, retailing and final consumption" (p.404), within the home furnishings industry. They argue that it is important to trace the systems of provision for an individual commodity, on a vertical axis, from design to manufacturing and also the discourses and knowledges that surround that commodity, such as gender and class, on a horizontal axis. However, the use of a chains is problematic because it relies upon a linear, uncomplicated and rigid set of relations between processes that in reality defy order and inevitability and demand connection and messiness. Therefore, I prefer to use the more useful term 'entanglements' (Crang 1997) which more acutely presents the situated complexity of any one consumption moment in terms of how consumers 'inhabit' those moments and the different knowledges and spaces that are co-present. Crang (1997) states that:

"processes of consumption are cast as local, in the sense of contextual; but where those contexts are recognised as being opened up by and constituted through connections into any number of networks which extend beyond delimiting boundaries of particular places; where imagined and performed representations about 'origins', 'destinations' and forms of travel surround various flows of people, goods and services in these networks; and where consumers (and other actors) in commodity systems) find themselves with these flows and representations" (p.47).

'Entanglements', therefore, allow for the extension of the consumer and commodity beyond the spaces in which the goods/services were purchased in order to take into account the trajectories of social meaning which are created by and lead to any one specific consumption moment. For my research, this notion also supports the indeterminacy of embodied relationships to consumption and the ability of practices of and talk on consumption to connect to women's wider embodied lives.

The next strand of geographical research that is relevant to my research is focused more on understanding the consumer. Consumers are essentially the do-ers of consumption. Studies of consumption, therefore, have placed particular emphasis on understanding what precisely consumers do, their relationships with commodities and how to think of their role within consumer culture more widely. Moreover, these debates are tightly aligned with ideas concerned with identity, a slippery term, but one which is used to understand the who's as well as the where's of consumption. Early work has been critiqued for the very absence of consumers (see Goss 1988) and a tendency for consumers to be sorted and categorised according to typologies of action. These could include positioning consumers as dupes or victims of wider economic and social processes out of their control (see Chapter Four for a discussion of how women have been positioned in this way in relation to the dieting industry and bodily ideals) or playful performers within the realms of post-modern consumer culture. Both of these accounts neglect any sense of consumer creativity and the sense that identity is about something more than the objects you consume.¹ For example, Giddens (1991) comments at length on the reflexive capacity of the self in late modernity whereby "The self becomes a crucial element of high modernity, consisting of a reflexive project based on biographical pluralism, a way of sustaining coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives...in the context of multiple choice filtered through abstract systems" (p.198). However, the tendency of such accounts of consumer identity assume identity to be plastic (Turner 1984) so that the consumer is positioned as able to pick and choose multiple identities through the consumption of goods and services. This implies that we can consume identities as we might commodities. The difficulties that I have with such statements is that the material affects of being a consumer is lost as is the tendency to see identity as a surface performance rather than as productive in the experience of an embodied subject.

¹ Attention has been placed upon the ways that commodities or *things* in fact have a social life of their own (Appadurai 1986), thus positioning agency with the commodities themselves. Lunt and Livingstone (1992) state that "The meaning of goods go beyond any simple conception of their monetary value and include their forms, the way they are used and their trajectories or social lives in given social contexts" (p.14).

Therefore, more recent work within geography has centred the consumer in accounts of consumption aided by a shift to ethnographic accounts of consumption and placed particular emphasis on what consumers do when they consume. This allows for a more dynamic conceptualisation of identity formation. This shift has meant that “attention is being paid to the ways in which particular spaces are centrally implicated in processes of identity formation, and how consumers display complex, multiple and often contradictory consumption imperatives” (Crewe 2000 p.278). Consumers, therefore, break out of rigid categorisations of behaviour and attention is paid to the ways in which consumption is more than the acquisition of a particular ‘lifestyle’ and is instead central to the production and reproduction of social relations. Thus, consumption is a process central to the formation of consumer subjectivities. For example, Williams et al (2001) document how emotions mediate consumers’ experiences of shopping. They state that “consumers made decisions about where to shop on the basis of past shopping experiences that created feelings of pleasure, pain, frustration, anger, excitement, guilt, desire and disgust”(p.217-8). The spaces of consumption, therefore, are constituted through shoppers’ practices and emotions as are shoppers’ practices and emotions mediated by the spaces in which they shop. This co-constituted relationship between consumers and spaces forms the context from which geographies of consumption should be understood.

Thirdly, I wish to focus upon the doings of consumption through highlighting the recent shift towards practices or, as Gregson et al (2002) have termed “what people do when they shop and how they talk about shopping” (p. 598). This does not just mean considering the moment of exchange when items are bought, but a plethora of other activities such as touching, looking, trying on and most importantly for this thesis the role of shopping within consumers’ wider life experiences. As Falk and Campbell (1997) comment that contemporary consumption requires “...approaching shopping both as practice and as physical sites requires a double perspective; one, which on the one hand, theorises shopping in its original economic role, and, on the other, places shopping in the broader context of public behaviour and public places” (p.10).

For example, Jackson’s (1999) work on shopping experiences in North London was used to understand not simply how identities were mediated through the consumption of specific items but became more about understanding family relations, ‘race’ and local neighbourhood change. He states that “we attempted to follow our respondents as they moved between diverse subject positions in the dynamic play of identity, interested as much in the association between people and place as between people and goods” (p.29). Therefore it is important to view consumption as tied up in the wider social relations of consumers lives. Another example of this dynamism is Miller’s (1998) work on grocery shopping which illustrates how grocery shopping is bound up with love, desire and ritual rather than the ‘routine

provisioning' of families by women. Zukin (1999 p.508) comments that it allows us to understand "(S)hopping as an act of love, deeply embedded in women's ideas about their moral, social and educational responsibilities, their role in maintaining a household and their sacrifice of self-gratification on the altar of partnership and parenting" (Zukin 1999 p.508). Shopping here goes far beyond simply 'buying stuff for the family' by illustrating the emotive and embodied relationships of everyday consumption and their significance for understanding 'the family'. Consumption practices, therefore, allow for the primacy of the consumer and the spaces through/in which consumption takes place but also allows for a consideration of the significance of consumption beyond the act of purchase to consider the creative potential of these practices within everyday life. In Glennie and Thrift's (1996) words, "human subjects and sense of self are not necessarily being emptied out or flattened, but may in fact are being deepened, opening up many positive as well as negative possibilities for social relations" (p.222).

2.1.2. embodying consumption

This focus on practices and doings, which develops largely out of the growing usage of ethnographic methodologies in consumption work (see Chapter Three), has also meant that 'the body' that is engaged in these practices has become central to understandings of both the spaces of consumption and the consumers themselves. Work on the consuming body within contemporary consumer culture has meant that particular notions of the body have become prevalent whilst others have been marginalised. For example, Featherstone (1991) focuses on two particular articulations of the body. The need for bodily maintenance in the face of ageing and death and the ability of bodies to perform² their identities as if they are always on stage. These two articulations are premised upon the focus in consumer culture on appearance, image and display of the body. He states that "Appearance, gesture and bodily demeanour have become taken as expressions of self, with bodily imperfections and lack of attention carrying penalties in everyday interactions" (Featherstone 1991 p.189). This account of the body is influenced by Baudrillard's (1990) commentary on the condition of post-modern consumer culture through which identity is mediated through the mass circulation of images. He states in relation to women's position within consumer culture that:

"For woman is but appearance. And it is the feminine appearance that defeats the masculine as depth. Instead of protesting against this 'offensive' formula, women would do well to let themselves be seduced by the fact that here lies the secret of their strength

² The notion of a performing self has been used within workplace geographies to illustrate the different 'roles' that workers adopt within specific. For example, McDowell and Court (1994) focus upon the gendered performance of merchant bankers in relation to dress, demeanour and bodily comportment and size.

which they are beginning to lose by setting up feminine depth against masculine depth” (Baudrillard 1990 p.133).

For Baudrillard (1990) women are constituted by their appearance which is deemed to be the very essence of their existence and something, perhaps, feminists should take note of in their analyses. However, I, like many other feminists, have difficulty with his account because of the neglect of the oppressive nature of appearance and the ways that it has come to substitute other forms of self-realisation. In terms of women’s bodies, images of particular bodily ideals i.e. thin, toned and fat free bodies, present to women the body they feel they should be. In Featherstone’s (1991) words “images make individuals more conscious of external appearance, bodily presentation and ‘the look’” (p.179) which has been blamed, by some, for women’s bodily dissatisfaction and eating disorders. (This debate will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven within the context of ‘body image’). Moreover, it is the “gap between the promise of the imagery and the exigencies of everyday life” (p.193) that presents the consumer with an irreconcilable dilemma; the materiality of the body will never live up to the body presented to them in the image. This is considered to be the inner logic of consumer culture.

The problem with this is the assumption that the body is a surface image and yet is also a pliable surface to be worked upon to conform to particular bodily norms. It is categorised and regimented according to these norms and does not exist beyond the image it becomes and is affected by. Within accounts of female bodies consuming, this has had particular effects which place women as victims of a patriarchal system of bodily norms which are never attainable. Bartky (1990) calls this ‘the fashion beauty complex’ which is a “system of corporations which set up norms for acceptable femininity through products, services, information, images and ideologies” (p.61). For her this alienates women from their bodies so they become victims of those bodily norms and their bodies become surfaces that need to be worked upon in order to conform³. For example, Bartky (1990) describes make up as follows:

“The strategy of much beauty-related advertising is to suggest to women that their bodies are deficient, but even without such more or less explicit teaching, the media images of perfect female beauty which bombard us daily leave no doubt in the minds of most women that they fail to measure up. The technologies of femininity are taken up and

³ It may be obvious from my description of Bartky’s (1990) commentary on women and consumption, that she utilises Foucault’s (1977) ideas about surveillance and the body. This will be discussed in more detail, with particular reference given to feminist re-articulations of this work (see Bordo (1993); Sawacki (1991) in Chapter Four within the context of how women narrate and engage in the practices of slimming.

practised by women against the background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency”
(Bartky 1990 p.71-72)

However, this form of account of the female body in consumption is dissatisfying because it places women as victims of consumer culture and their bodies seem helpless to resist or even evaluate their experiences of consumption differently. More recent interventions in the literature on the consuming body suggest that “an individual may experience multi-faceted, overlapping and fluid understandings of how they should be producing and regulating the space of their body which may not be completely congruent or consistent, and sets up tensions between different bodily ideals and sets of regulatory practices in different locations” (Lupton 1996 p.348). For example in their study of beauty parlours, Black and Sharma (2000) note the different ways that women talk about beauty treatments as less about vanity and conformity than stress relief and pampering. They pose the question of “how to take the testimony of women seriously whilst remaining critical of the system into which they are buying” (p.113). I feel that the answers to this question lie in a more experiential approach to the consuming body through which the body becomes a fleshy material presence that acts and is acted upon and is not a passive surface to be manipulated. This focus on experience “does not only imply an emphasis on the relational and dynamic role of the human body () in the web of social and cultural liaisons; it concerns more specifically the affect of these liaisons on the experiential aspects of the body” (Falk 1994 p.2). Therefore, the body has the capacity to affect and be affected by the norms of consumption which again suggests the importance of focusing upon practices and doings rather than reading meaning off the spaces of consumption and the consumers (bodies) themselves.

Within geography, inroads have already been made in work of this nature that seek to ‘embody consumption’ and to consider what it means to understand the consumer as an embodied subject. For example, Valentine (1999a) demonstrates what a ‘corporeal geography of consumption’ may look/feel/sound like in her work on the practices of food consumption in the home. Whilst she demonstrates the role of this particular space in producing particular modes of food consumption she also hints, more specifically at the role of the practices of eating in the production of bodies. She states “It is not only discourses and the regulatory power of the surveillant gaze of others that serve to produce the space of our bodies. Everyday routines and practices in different locations can also be linked to the space of our bodies” (p.348), such as the role of the business lunch or picking at children’s meals in mediating what food the body consumes (see also Valentine (1999b)). Moreover, whilst Featherstone (1991) suggests that consumer culture “...permits the unashamed display of the human body” (p.177) what he forgets is that it is only ‘certain’ bodies that are permitted to do so. Work has been done on how specific embodied identities are produced and experienced

when pregnant women go shopping for clothes (Longhurst 1998). In one example Longhurst (1998) identifies discrepancies in the exposures of certain bodies in shop windows and fashion photography and the overt covering up of pregnant bodies by the women she was shopping with (“..fatness, disability, incapacitation, uncomfortableness and ugliness were abundant in research participants’ accounts of their pregnancies” (ibid p.25)). Therefore, women’s identities are embodied through the practices of consumption i.e. looking in shop windows and thus, geographies of consumption are productive in the creation of the specificities of female embodied subjectivity.

Embodying consumption, therefore, means re-considering the consumer as an embodied subject, and simultaneously can offer up accounts of the body as it is situated within particular normative regimes of consumer culture. For example, Gregson et al (2000) get at these normative regimes through looking at how the body comes into being in different ways through the consumption of second hand clothing. They state that “the sale, purchase and consumption of adult clothing through charity shops are all shown to require the negotiation of various constructs of the bodily; the body as leaky excess; as polluting, contaminating, threatening other; as material; subject to disease and death” (p.103). Therefore, embodying consumption has great potential for engagements with theoretical articulations of the body as it does for empiricalising the very experiences of what consumption entails.

2.1.3. women consuming

In this section I will make explicit the means by which women⁴ have been situated within accounts of consumption, with specific reference to their bodies. Jackson and Thrift (1995) comment that “critical studies of consumption have all too often deteriorated into a kind of vacuous moralising, substituting indignation and denunciation for genuine analysis. As well as failing to engage with the pleasures of consumption, such studies also tend to ignore the very ironies and ambiguities that give contemporary consumer culture so much of its power and dynamism” (Jackson and Thrift 1995 p.220). In terms of understanding women’s engagements with consumption, the form of this ‘vacuous moralising’ has meant that accounts of female consumers have been compartmentalised into specific categories of experience.

Historical accounts of women’s consumption practices have focused upon how particular gender ideologies are reinforced through the built environment or the consumption space. Particular emphasis is placed upon the department store in the nineteenth century and

⁴ Although the focus of this thesis is on women’s experiences of consumption, there has been a recent shift in the literature to understand men’s experiences. See for example Campbell’s (1997) and Mort’s (1996) work on men’s shopping and Jackson et al’s (1999) work on men’s magazines.

involves examining the inscription of gender discourses within the internal arrangements of the shop. It is through this process that the “careful elaboration of context in terms of both place and a specific aspect of consumption points up the myriad and sometimes opposing influences on commodities and constructions of femininity in one place” (Dowling 1993 p.296). For example, Domosh (1996) focuses on consumer landscapes in nineteenth century New York City, and how the spaces of consumption were feminised not as commercial spaces but as cultural and civic spaces to reinforce domesticity whereby “By the end of the century, the domestic was more fully incorporated, and department stores began to function almost as home parlours, with tea rooms, restaurants, art galleries and grand architectural displays” (p.269).

These accounts are useful for discerning the spatial relationships between femininities and consumption, and for exposing any historical linkages with contemporary retail activity and design. However, both of these accounts provide limited space for the bodies, voices and experiences of the consumer and are dependent on the department store as the space of consumption to ‘read off meaning’; a similar device to the mall-centred approaches to consumption. Their dependence on archival material means that the authors rely upon a degree of inference about women’s interpretation of their consumption experiences.

More recent accounts of contemporary consumption have attempted to make sense of the different ‘ways’ that women shop. Again this tends towards a typology of shopping which narrows down women’s capacities to work outside of set conceptual frameworks. This debate most often orientates around women shopping for functionality i.e. the family food shopping or for leisure (see Jansen Verbeke 1987) i.e. clothes shopping, gifting and browsing with friends. For example, Campbell (1997), sets up all shopping as a fundamentally ‘feminised activity’ in relation to men’s experiences of shopping. In a comparison of what he terms male ‘tech-shopping’ and women’s clothes shopping he states that “(M)en are inclined to see shopping as a purely purchase-driven activity related to the satisfaction of need, whilst women are more likely to view it as a pleasure-seeking activity related to the gratification of wants or desires” (Campbell 1997 p.169). This reinforces a masculinist notion of women as irrational consumers, unable to control their desires as opposed to the rational male consumer whose concerns are purely with purchase. This has been responsible for an absence of (male) academic concern with female consumption practices when they have been associated with “...destructiveness, waste, extravagance, triviality and instability in fact all the things that men traditionally see or fear about women” (Pringle 1983 in Jackson 1993 p.217).

This narrow categorisation of consumer subjectivities means that women again are positioned in static subject positions which do not allow for alternative or co-present experiences and indeed their association with shopping in particular devalues their activities for being ‘feminine’. Moreover, alternative accounts of consumption and consumer subjectivity, as

mentioned in the previous section, is not accounted for. For example, it does not account for the significance of the pleasure women have when shopping, as Young (1990) comments in relation to women bonding when shopping for clothes “Women take care of one another in the dressing room, often knowing when to be critical and discouraging and when to encourage a risky choice or an added expense” (p.184). Miller (1998) has also shown how food shopping is more than a mundane functional activity and is central to how women negotiate relations of love and sacrifice when shopping for the family. Moreover, research carried out with consumers in a shopping mall in Finland (Lehtonen and Maenpää 1997) documented how shopping can both fulfil basic needs and be an enjoyable experience. In particular they describe how mothers and daughters shop together where “the fun of shopping does not derive from buying or wanting or desiring objects; rather, shopping is a convenient way of being together, enjoying oneself and the company of another person while at the same time doing the necessary shopping” (p.151). Therefore, it is unhelpful to state that female shopping is purely leisure driven (Jansen Verbeke 1987), especially when it can also be the means to develop personal relationships or for example could be distressing and upsetting.

What these studies have shown is the complexity of women’s experiences of consumption and the inability for their practices to be contained within conceptual categories. Instead, a more ethnographic approach to consumption illustrates the multiple nature of women’s engagements and suggests alternative consumer subjectivities⁵. For instance, the emotional pains of getting clothes to fit, trying on clothes in front of others and being surveyed by shop assistants which all contribute to an uncomfortable shopping experience in the context of my own research. My research intends to move within and beyond these accounts of consumption, whilst talking the specificities of female embodied consumption seriously without typologising or pathologising the significance of those experiences. Moreover, a more in-depth consideration of the consumer as an embodied subject can animate more theoretical understandings of the body so that geographies of consumption become active in the creation of new embodied knowledges rather than reinforcing those that have come before.

2.2 Clothing Bodies

In this section I will survey in more detail the connections between clothing, geographies and ‘the body’. I will firstly trace the place of clothing in geography and suggest the way that my thesis informs debates which have been started and have not yet emerged. I will then go on to discuss in more detail the relationships between clothing and ‘the body’, drawing upon recent work within fashion theory. However, it must be said that few of these accounts of clothing

⁵ For example, recent work has begun to consider alternative spaces of consumption where women can buy clothes such as second hand shops and charity shops (Gregson et al 2000) and catalogues (Clarke 1997) and underwear parties (Storr 2002).

focuses on the consumption of clothes and clothing is most often contextualised as being worn or it is analysed as a cultural artefact or text. Therefore, I will conclude this section by offering the specific means that clothing functions within an embodied consumption context.

2.2.1. fashionable geographies

Work within the geographical literature that is explicitly about ‘fashion’⁶ has been predominantly concerned with the relationships between culture and economy (Crang 1997; Jackson 2002) This has meant examining the dynamic linkages and connections between ‘cultural production and consumption’ (Crewe and Beaverstock 1998, Crewe 1996) and has centred around research done on the Nottingham Lace Market and the place of fashionable industries, such as clothing designers in local business networks and in the creation of a specific place identity. However, whilst this work was the first to explicitly work with clothing, it does not deal with the consumption of clothing and instead fashion is deployed as a means to think through local economic geographies rather than the experiences of consumption in those spaces.

It is with the recent shift in embodying consumption, as mentioned above, that clothing has emerged as a valuable commodity to consider within geographical accounts of consumption. In a review of contemporary literature on the geographies of retailing and consumption, Crewe (2000) chooses to focus on fashion as illustrative example of how geographers are unravelling “the production chains underpinning contemporary retailing and consumption” (p.282)⁷. However, towards the end of this review she hints at the potential for accounts of clothing to extend beyond these disciplinary frameworks whereby, “new work is venturing into as yet uncharted territories and developing quite sophisticated accounts of, for example, the relations between fashion, consumption, food and the body” (p.285). In a subsequent review piece Crewe (2001) engages in more depth with what she calls “more detailed and critical engagements with fashion through drawing together work on fashion imagery and discourse, theories of consumption and the body, questions of gendered identity and studies of

⁶ ‘Fashion’ is a slippery term to define and has different meanings dependent on the context within which it is used (see Ash and Wright 1988). The most useful definition that I have found is by McRobbie (1997) who situates fashion as a set of conflicting practices from the manufacture to the consumption of clothing. She states that: “..fashion is a *feminist* issue. It is comprised of six component parts: manufacture and production; design; retail and distribution; education and training; the magazine and fashion media and the practices of consumption. If we consider these one at a time, demonstrating their mutual dependence as well as their apparent distance from each other, it is possible to see a set of tensions and anxieties which in turn provide opportunities for political debate and social change” (McRobbie 1997 p.85).

⁷ Whilst this thesis focuses on the consumption of clothing, I want to emphasise the importance of work which recognises the exploitation, often of women, involved in the production of clothes (see McRobbie 1997) where women supply 80% of unskilled textile manufacturing labour (Phizacklea 1990).

selling spaces” (p.634). I am able to situate my thesis precisely within these new trajectories within the context of these recent developments in social and cultural geography.

Within geography, therefore, accounts of clothing have begun to emerge although largely it must be said that most of the inspiration for this work comes from outside of the discipline. Most notable is Gregson et al’s (2000; 2001) work on retro and second hand clothes shopping where they consider the ways that second hand clothing involves a re-enchantment of clothing and how clothing is vulnerable to specific discourses about the body. For example, they note how second hand clothing consumption “places an emphasis on practices of containment and metaphorical layers; which reconstitutes the body as a surface capable of infiltration, porous, and consequently requiring of protection, protection from the lingering traces of the bodily presences of the unknown” (Gregson et al 2000 p.119). However, beyond this example there is little evidence of similar work that connects the practices of clothing consumption and the body. Therefore, I now look elsewhere for inspiration from which to contextualise my thesis.

2.2.2. clothing matters

There are a number of histories and trajectories to literatures on fashion and for the purpose of this thesis I will not be considering all of this work in detail. Instead, I have chosen to set the scene as to which accounts of clothing most readily connect with the intentions of this thesis; notably to understand women’s embodied subjectivities through the practices of clothing consumption. Much of the fashion literature has conceptual baggage as reflective of the multi-disciplinary and political context within which clothing is considered. For example, feminist literature on fashion has been orientated around two main themes. Firstly, those that “have condemned fashion as being oppressive of women insofar as it perpetuates the inequalities between the sexes by converting women into objects for the male gaze” (Negrin 1996 p.75). Secondly, as a response to these accounts, others “argue that it is a gross simplification to see women as the passive victims of fashion since it can also serve as a means by which women can express their individuality” (ibid). Therefore, when, unwrapping clothing from its conceptual packaging it is necessary to critically engage with the means by which women are positioned in relation to fashion which may reinforce the form of bodily relations to oppression and resistance as mentioned above.

Firstly, I want to briefly discuss the recent shift in the fashion literature on clothing to consider the body. As I mentioned in the previous chapter it does seem strange that early accounts of clothing analyse clothing as a text on the hanger as one might a painting or cultural artefact (see Miles 1998 for a historical review of the fashion literature). Clothing is a template of the body that wears it but the corporeal relations of that clothing on the body are neglected in favour of a more textual reading. This is most readily influenced by costume history approaches to clothing and their concern with fashion as an art. For example,

designers make statements and commentaries and are praised for their often unwearable and unaffordable 'fashions' by those highly invested in the artistic value of fashion. For instance, Evans and Thornton (1991) analyse the 'modernist' work of Coco Chanel as follows:

"The anti-decorative rhetoric of Chanel's modernist approach is maintained in (this) version of the three piece suit.....(T)he machine aesthetic is exemplified by the suit's metallic sheen, straight lines and tubular forms" (Evans and Thornton 1991 p.50).

Nowhere in this kind of interpretation is there a body wearing the clothes or the space provided for alternative interpretations of that clothing by those that purchase or wear them. Moreover, these accounts have the affect of privileging certain accounts of clothing over others as Finkelstein (1997) warns that these accounts have the consequence of "naturalising the high visibility of haute couture while simultaneously deflecting attention from what fashion does routinely, which is to reinstate ideologically conservative values found in the conventions of the everyday world" (p.151). Therefore, she advocates a more 'anthropological' approach to clothing which considers what people do with clothes rather than what it signifies or represents. For Finkelstein, (1997), "the contemporary woman interested in fashion is encouraged to become a self-reflecting subject" (p.156) precisely because fashion encourages women to think how she is being looked at and how this status to be looked at has been formulated. Therefore, clothing becomes central to the production and experience of women's embodied identities.

The links between clothing and identity have been informed by post-modern accounts of culture more generally and reinforces the connection between identity and image i.e. clothing comes to visually represent the body rather than positioned as active in shaping the body itself. Wilson (1990) describes this relationship in that "one's identity is defined in terms of the image that one creates through one's consumption of goods, including the clothes one wears" (p.111). Lurie (1982) actually describes clothing as a 'language' through which a person is read and made sense of and Barnard (1996) comments on the 'messages' we send out to others when we wear clothing. However, what this does is deflect "attention away from a more valuable source of identity, namely, the historical precedents and the immediate politics of our circumstances" (Finkelstein 1991 p.190). These 'precedents' and 'circumstances' immediately imply the need to take the immediacies of the body in clothes seriously. As Young (1990) states, "...the reduction of self-identity to image are constructs through the clothes one wears. Image is not just the clothes but the bodies beneath them wearing them" (Young 1990 p.183).

In taking the body seriously in studies of clothing, theorists have grappled with determining what the specific relationships between bodies and clothing are. This involves thinking about

what clothing actually does to the body. For example, Negrin (1999) challenges that the naked body is any more natural than the clothed body and instead suggests that “both the naked and the clothed body are equally products of culture” (p.105) and for Silverman (1984), clothing makes the body visible, “..affecting contour, weight, muscle development, posture, movement and libidinal circulation” (Silverman 1984 p.143). In both of these accounts, the body is both affected by and affects the clothing placed upon it. The relationship between the matter of bodies and a layer of fabric is dynamic and productive and is by no means simply an exercise in layering meaning upon a bodily surface. Instead, the body is materialised through clothing; it is moulded and manipulated, squeezed and skimmed, enhanced and hidden.

Entwistle (2000b), in her book *The Fashioned Body*, conceptualises this relationship by understanding dress as ‘situated bodily practice’. She argues that dress is the product of practices i.e. the practices of getting dressed, whereby “Dressing requires one to attend unconsciously to () norms and expectations when preparing the body for representation in any particular setting” (p.11). Moreover, she places dress within a network of wider social relations, similar to Crang’s (1997) notion of entanglements. She states that:

”This positioning of the body at the centre of the analysis of fashion/dress allows us to examine practices and strategies from the micro-level of the individual experience of dress, through to the macro-level of the fashion industry, corporate strategies and marketing which must keep the body in mind when designing, promoting and selling fashion” (p.4).

Here, the body is placed at the centre of analyses of dress and fashion so that both the experience of clothing and the discursive production of clothing can be actualised in any one moment of dressing. Moreover, Entwistle (2000) also asks that we consider the ways that dress transforms the flesh of bodies into something knowable or suitable in specific situations, for example how women dress their bodies for particular professions and occasions. In her words “the dressed body is not a passive object, acted upon by social forces, but actively produced through particular, routine and mundane practices. Moreover, our experience of the body is not as inert object but as the envelope of our being, the site for our articulation of self” (p.335). For example, Guy and Banim (2000) make these links between clothing and subjectivity by examining how women use their clothing. They identify the means through which women “create, reveal and conceal aspects of their identity” (p.323) through clothing as three specific understandings of the self: The woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be and the woman I am most of the time. They noted in particularly the difficulty that women had in reconciling their bodies with their clothing as their bodily boundaries changed due to weight gain or weight loss (See Chapter Four and Six).

I find Entwistle's (2000; 2001) descriptive conceptualisation of dress important if we are to understand how dress mediates our experience of our selves, our embodied subjectivities. However, I am hesitant about this account because there are no bodies in her work! Whilst she engages in a number of post-structural accounts of the body, empirical bodies are absent and therefore are not wearing, consuming or experiencing the clothing as she advocates. This disjuncture between intention and practice, therefore leads me to another intervention into work on clothes and the body that actually work with bodies' experiences of clothing and centres the indeterminate ways through which bodies and clothing produce and reproduce each other.

Most significantly, Sweetman (2001) calls for a consideration of the 'affectual nature of dress' which is interested in the intimate embodied co-constitutive relations between clothing and the body in the creation of particular embodied subjectivities. For example he notes the temporal dimension to dress and the ways that both the bodies and clothing change over the life course whereby "we can talk of the restructuring of embodied subjectivities over the life course as a process that is centred in part around transitional stages in dress" (p.67). For example, recent work document how women clothe bodies which have had a mastectomy (van Hersh 2001), what it feels like to shop for clothes for a big body (Adam 2001) and how teenagers clothe their bodies (Abbott and Sapsford 2001). As Craik (1994) reminds us "(F)ashion statements appear to mark a moment, but the fashioned body is never secure or fixed. The body is constantly re-clothed and re-fashioned in accordance with changing arrangements of the self" (p. 225).

Accounts of clothing, have developed, therefore, to incorporate what it means for a body to wear clothing by recognising its connections with what it means and feels to be an embodied subject. In terms of the consumption of clothing, I will refer later to particular moments when clothing is looked at, held up to the body, touched, tried on and looked at upon the body in the mirror, which all have similar affective potentialities for understanding female embodied subjectivity to that of wearing clothing. This focus emphasises a step back from the point at which we wear clothing to the spaces where we consume clothing and the significance of these consumption moments for how we feel about ourselves. As Freitas et al (1997) comment:

The question is not simply what do clothes mean or not mean. Rather how do we use them to negotiate border spaces – spaces we need to conceptualise as tenuous, fragile, barbed or elastic rather than as fixed and dichotomous?" (p.334).

2.3 Bodies in Geographies

In this section I want to introduce the particularities of what I mean by the body within the context of work in geography. I do this as a precursor to the next section which considers the form and experiences of the body in the empirical sections of the thesis. Work on the body in geography has taken particular forms and this “dash to the corporeal” (Callard 1997) has resulted in the creation of specific embodied geographical knowledges. My intention, therefore, is to identify these tendencies and to engage critically with the significance of these for my thesis. This discussion will be arbitrarily divided into three sections that of dualisms, body typologies and fleshiness and messiness. However, I do acknowledge that this work does not exist in isolation from each other or indeed may have emerged from conflicting and divergent understandings of what constitutes the body. Therefore, I approach geographical work on the body by questioning what is meant by the body in each case, how the body figures in the production of geographical knowledge and what this articulation of bodily geographies can contribute to my own body work.

2.3.1 dualisms

Early work within geography on the body took its base from wider philosophical debates within feminist philosophy as to the denigration of the body within academic work and the reasoning behind this. Shildrick and Price (1999) comment that:

“In terms of intellectual activities, the body seems to have been always regarded with suspicion as the site of unruly passions and appetites that might disrupt the pursuit of truth and knowledge. At the risk of misleading simplification, it can be argued that the denial of corporeality and the corresponding elevation of mind or spirit marks a transhistorical desire to access the pure Intelligible as the highest form of Being. What makes the mind/body binary of the Enlightenment particularly characteristic is not the split itself, but a change of emphasis. When the intellectual traditions of Judeo-Christianity for example saw the body as the mundane path to a higher, valorised, spirituality, the post-Cartesian modernist period is marked by a rejection of the body as an obstacle to pure rational thought. As such, the body occupies the place of the excluded other, and can be dismissed from consideration altogether” (p.2).

It is from this conceptual place, feminist geographers have argued that not only has the body been disavowed from geographical knowledge but it has become Geography’s Other. By this it is meant that the body has not only been absent but that “it has been both denied and desired depending on the particular school of geographical thought under consideration” (Longhurst

1995 p.99). For example, Rose (1993) notes how within time-geography, the study of the movement of bodies temporally through space, ignores specific experiences of the body such as passion, emotion, disruption and feelings of relations with others. This shift in disciplinary concerns is aligned with debates which consider the dualistic⁸ nature of Cartesian derived modes of knowledge, as mentioned above, which separates the realms of the mind and body (see Turner 1984 for a historical discussion of the development of dualistic thinking). This approach to the body, in short “laid the foundations for the development of modern science and, in particular, medicine by establishing the body as a site of objective intervention to be mapped, measured and experimented on” (Valentine 2001 p.17).

Following this wider critique of dualistic thinking, the disavowal of all things corporeal can also be linked to what feminist geographers have termed the ‘masculinist’ nature of Geography which assumes a ‘knower who believes he can separate himself from his body, emotions, values past experiences so that he and his thought are autonomous, context free and objective” (Rose 1993 p.7). Therefore, particular geographical knowledges which do not conform to the regiments of this masculinist rationality have been marginalized because they are not deemed to be ‘legitimate knowledges’. As Longhurst (2001) argues “What constitutes appropriate issues and legitimate topics to teach and research in geography comes to be defined in terms of reason, rationality and transcendent visions, as though these can be separated out from passion, irrationality, messiness and embodied sensation” (p.25).

When understanding the body, therefore, it is impossible to ignore the means through which conceptual dualisms have framed it in particular ways. Another way that geographers have come to terms with the matter of bodies is through the relationships between essentialist and social constructionist accounts of the body. To summarise, “Essentialist approaches tend to take the differentiated embodiment of subjectivity, or the biological/anatomical body that is commonly purported to be the ‘real’ body, as a starting point for feminist analyses” (Longhurst 1995 p.100) whereas within constructionist analyses, “Bodies are considered to be primary objects of inscription – surfaces on which values, morality and social laws are inscribed” (p.101). Within feminist geography, this has allowed for a distinction to be made between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ to challenge the notion that any social meanings that are attributed to men and women are somehow ‘natural’ (see Women and Geography Study Group 1997) and to engage in work concerned with the ‘performative’ (Butler 1990) nature of the body and space (see Gregson and Rose 2000; Longhurst 2000). However, within the context of this

⁸ By ‘dualism’ I am talking about a specific relationship between two structures whereby the two sides are not in opposition but are related terms. For example, Woman is described only in terms of Man and the body is only described in terms of mind (see Longhurst 1997). As Grosz (1989) states “Within this structure, one term has a positive status and an existence independent of the other; the other term is purely negatively defined with no contours of its own; its limiting boundaries are those which define the positive term” (Grosz 1989 xiv).

thesis, it is the work that seeks to move between and beyond this dualistic way of understanding the body that underpins the approach(es) I advocate. As Longhurst (1995) states “Any upheaval of the dominant/subordinate structure between mind and body, between sex and gender, and between essentialism and constructionism will threaten the dominant term’s unquestioned *a priori* dominance in the discipline” (Longhurst 1995 p.103).

I will deal with the theoretical and empirical potentials of this in the following section of this thesis. However, in setting up dualisms as a form of critique and exposé of lost geographical knowledges, what is left is the (conceptual) space within which we can try to reformulate bodily geographies. For Rose (1993) this is a ‘paradoxical space’ that breaks out of the masculinist confines within which geography holds the body. She states that “Any position is imagined not only as being located in multiple social spaces, but also as at both poles of each dimension. It is this tension which can articulate a sense of an elsewhere beyond the territories of the master subject” (Rose 1993 p.151). Rose's (1993) advocating of this approach, for my research, highlights the importance of the difference between bodies as well as the difference that bodies can make to geographical knowledges; bodies therefore can occupy a (conceptual and empirical) position of both centre and margin. She in fact asks “for a geography that acknowledges that the grounds of its knowledge are unstable, shifting, uncertain and, above all, contested. Space...far from being firm foundations for disciplinary expertise and power, are insecure, precarious and fluctuating” (ibid p.160). Paradoxical space, therefore, can be considered as much as a strategy to approach the body in geography rather than simply something which geographers need to take notice of. Therefore, I take this strategy as a starting point for positioning the body in relation to the production of geographical knowledge in my thesis as moving between dualisms and thus, as central in the creation of new geographical knowledges. For me it is not simply that embodied geographies are paradoxical and exist in/as a space that is produced between and beyond binary thinking but that the very thesis is an exercise in producing paradoxical space, in particular working with the intermingling of theoretical and empirical bodies in all their variegated forms.

2.3.2. typologies

Within this section I want to discuss the resultant affects of the shift within geography, in particular within feminist, social and cultural and new medical geographies, towards ‘the body’. In particular, I want to introduce three main points which highlight the ways that ‘the body’ has become solidified and typologised within geographical knowledge despite engagements in what Longhurst (2001) names a fluid approach to the body (to be discussed in the following section). Firstly, I feel that there has been a tendency to simply pick a body and research it, which has meant there has been as stockpiling of bodily geographies each centred

around a different 'type' of body. It must be stated, however, that these geographical accounts are valuable in that, in Longhurst's (1997) words "Making the body explicit unsettles the production of geographical knowledge reorienting it to the concerns of a variety of marginalized groups" (p.496). For example, studies have been based on particular bodies which have been previously neglected from geographical study such as the pregnant body (Longhurst 1996), the muscled body (Johnston 1996; McCormack 1999), and the impaired body (Dyck 1995; 1999, Davidson 2000; Butler and Bowlby 1997) and the ageing body (Hugman 1999). Whilst I welcome the introduction of such geographies into a discipline that previously has not acknowledged the body as a legitimate foundation for knowledge, it has meant that certain bodies are presented as being more embodied than others. For myself, in picking those bodies which work against normalised understandings of what constitutes a body (if this is at all possible), a typology is formed as to which bodies are deserved of geographical intervention. This is a debate also waged in medical sociology where there has been a recent call to include the 'healthy' or 'normal' body where "primary emphasis is given to sickness, disability and death as opposed to vibrant physicality and associated embodied pleasures" (Monaghan 2001 p.331). Therefore, within my thesis, my approach has been in a sense to research any-body (see Chapter Three for discussion of recruiting bodies) without starting with a category or diagnosis with which I base my research. Instead, I advocate an approach which understands bodies as they come into being through the practices of consumption rather than beginning with a body whose categorisation then defines the practices. For example, when talking to 'big' bodies it was necessary for myself to remain open and reflexive about what constitutes bigness within the context of medical quantifications and personal feelings about what constitutes size. As Haraway 1991 (in McDowell (1996)) states about female embodiment:

"Feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in materials-semiotic fields of meaning" (p.36).

Secondly, I want to focus on the extent to which particular theoretical frameworks have been utilised within work on the body in geography. This has the resultant effect of producing particular understandings of the body which then becomes a normalised conceptual practice. For example, within geographies of consumption it is common for geographers to use Foucauldian⁹ ideas of surveillance in order to understand the way that consumer culture operates on the level of the body. Valentine's (1999a; 1999b) work on the eating body notes

⁹ The use of Foucault's (1977) work to understanding the female body within consumption will be

how Foucault's (1977) work on the disciplinary power of the gaze and (self) surveillance implies that "the body becomes invested with relations of power and domination" (Valentine 1999a p.330). Moreover in relation to the consuming body she states that:

"Discourses in the media, medicine, consumer culture and the fashion industry map our bodily needs, pleasures, possibilities and limitations to produce geographical and historically specific forms about how the space of the body should be produced (in terms of shape size amount of space it takes up, youthfulness, sexual attractiveness and so on). These are reference points against which we then evaluate our own bodies" (p.330).

Therefore, underlying her work is the sense that the body is a surface onto which a finite number of discourses are enacted. Whilst Valentine (1999a) does go on to recognise the ways that these discursive regimes are felt by bodies i.e. through bodily dissatisfaction and depression, there is an implication that while these bodies have an internal depth the work of discourse is something that is worked out upon the body. Moreover, there is no sense that the research participants are aware of the discourses that she presents as the force which then disciplines those bodies. Therefore the focus is on how discourse acts upon bodies rather than how those bodies experience the effects of that discourse. Another example of this tendency for consumer culture to work upon the body is found in Moss and Dyck's (2003) recent review of body work in geography. They summarise work in consumption as follows:

"Bodies in consumption, both as consumers and consumables, bring forward issues involving measurements against some idealised form of the body, resistance to hegemonic constructions of identities, and senses of subversion and conformity to hegemonic ideals of the body" (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.65).

I must state, however, that Valentine (1999a) does shift her placing of bodies in relation to discourse when she mentions that consumers have varying degrees of corporeal freedom in terms of when, where and what they can eat. However, the idea of 'freedom' does not sit easily with Foucault's (1977) work on the powers of surveillance. Instead, it is more useful to think about the degrees to which bodies work within and against these regimes of power; how they negotiate and materially experience those discourses. It is not as simple as resisting bodily norms but recognising the creative capacities of the body and thus the role of consumption practices in the creation of embodied subjectivities through discourse that rather as active in resisting the 'norm'. That is to say it is better to work with the body rather than on

critically discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

the body to avoid producing such accounts of the body as a surface onto which discourses are projected and/or deflected.

Thirdly, I want to focus on my particular confusion as to what the body becomes in many of these accounts of bodily geographies. Whilst I am not advocating a uniform account of the body for geographers, I am reticent about the affects of the uptake of theoretical ideas, such as the movement beyond dualistic thinking and Foucauldian analyses of bodies in spaces. For example, Moss and Dyck (2003) have frequently made explicit the differences between different modes of bodily geography. They describe two main schools of thought. Firstly, social geographies of the body describe “the nexus of personal and collective experiences of social, built and natural environments; tease out the constituent processes of individual and collective identities in relation to power; and explore the possibilities of bodily activities in space” (p.60). In a sense, these geographies promote the production of geographical knowledges as I mentioned above that document and attempt to make sense of the relationships between particular bodies and spaces. For example, Johnston (1996) uses the space of the gym to demonstrate the ways that spaces and bodies are mutually constituted and in particular highlight the ambivalence and contradictions in the corporealities of body builders. This occurs most often in accounts which place bodies in spaces which implies a body as a container moving in space rather than as a specific spatiality co-constituted by the spaces through which it moves.

However, (Moss and Dyck 2003) then go on to identify what they call embodied social geography which is described as “concerned with constructing knowledge that theorises *from* bodies, privileging the ways in which bodies are constituted, experienced and represented” (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.60). This allows for the conflation of both theoretical and empirical bodies or in their words discursive and material bodies as this work ‘pokes’ at the border of binary thinking, as mentioned above.

I view this development as helpful in valuing the role of theory in producing and being produced by and through the body and in a sense this definition summarises what my thesis attempts to carry out. However, what is problematic for me is any sense of what form these geographical knowledges may take, how to research them and indeed the tendency still to work with a dualism which implies a particular conceptual arrangement of bodies in relation to theories. The implication is that theoretical bodies and theorising from the body are somehow separate from the empirical bodies which are still researched upon. For me these abstract descriptions of geographical knowledge are not helpful when trying to elicit exactly what these knowledges constitute and their ability to contribute to wider debates on the body in social science.

Therefore, whilst I take this categorisation of bodily geographies to be informative in terms of my own thesis, it is representative of how accounts of the body in geography come to take on a life of their own as divorced from the actual doings and mechanism of what constitutes bodily geographies. I hope that my thesis, therefore goes some way to remedying this difficulty by more ambitiously animating theoretical accounts of the body rather than applying and producing ever more similar self referential knowledges.

2.3.3. fleshiness and messiness

As an example of how particular articulations of the body in geography have come into being I want to focus here on the recent shift within this work to consider fluidity. By fluidity, Longhurst (2001) advocates recognising both the capacities of work on the body to flow through and across disciplinary boundaries and for geographers to take seriously what she terms the ‘messy body’ and the leakiness of bodily boundaries. In one sense this move contextualises a wider interest by geographers in work on the body from a wide range of backgrounds such as cultural studies, disability studies, feminist philosophy and work on consumption and technology. However, it also means that geographers should be considering those bodies which have, in the terms of the debate featured above, been previously neglected from the discipline; to avoid ‘shunning dirty topics’ (Longhurst 1997); what Moss and Dyck (2003) call ‘integrating real, deviant bodies’ and Hall (2000) names “introducing the very stuff of bodies”, in the context of new agendas in new geographies of health and illness. These are bodies which exist as more than a bounded surface presentation, as described by Featherstone (1991) and instead leak and spill matter beyond their boundaries. This includes considering bodily fluids such as spit, puss, urine, excrement, blood, sweat, tears, semen, vaginal secretions. Not only do they challenge the solidity of bodily boundaries but are introduced as a means of messing up the sanitary conditions of knowledge production. For Longhurst (2001) this is described in relation to how the very matter of bodies can affect the theories which define them: She states that:

“Discourse and theory seem to offer a purity that materiality and practice threatens to taint and soil. I aim to soil the supposed purity of theoretical possibility by invoking material bodies. I want to talk about the shape, depth, biology, insides, outsides and boundaries of bodies placed in particular temporal and spatial contexts. The leaky, messy awkward zones of the inside/outside of bodies and their resultant spatial relationships remain largely unexamined in geography” (p.2).

Moss and Dyck (2003) critique Butler’s (1990) account of the body for idealising the power of discourse upon the body rather than recognising that “Actual bodies as concrete entities –

or our corporeal embodiments – are locales of human being (and media) through which people exist, act and experience environments” (p.68). They imply here that bodily performances do not necessarily relate to the appearance and experience of the body concerned. They use the example of how women with Multiple Sclerosis and M.E. exercise their impaired bodies as transitional; in flux between impaired and healthy bodily experience dependent on their negotiation of spaces and the intervention of medical discourse to diagnose and treat the body in particular ways. Moreover, Longhurst (2000) notes how when women talk about the experience of being pregnant, there is a disjuncture between the image of their body and materiality of the body. The difficulty arises in knowing exactly where the pregnant body begins and ends.

Whilst I endorse this recognition of bodies which have otherwise remained absent from the geographical literature, I have difficulties with the means through which this fluid approach is advocated. There is a tendency to pick and choose specific messy bodies to study which implies again that some bodies are more embodied than others. For example, Longhurst (2001) studies the toilet/bathroom narratives of a particular group of men as a way of troubling the assumption that only women’s bodies are leaky where “The aim was to get these men to talk about their bodies, not just as hard strong and sexualised but as vulnerable and transgressing boundaries” (p.66). This implies a pre-determined outcome of her research rather theorising from the talk and practice of those men involved in her research. Furthermore, she engages with ‘messiness in order to ‘scratch the hard crust’ of Geography’s surface:

“Such scratches, cracks and interstice create small openings through which to slip Otherness into the discipline. That which is coded by masculinist hegemony as abject, embodied and feminine cannot always be expelled from geography. Despite discursive reiterations, geography’s boundaries are insecure. Its corpus leaks and seeps and in this I take pleasure since it signals future possibilities for contestatory, and potentially, emancipatory geographies of difference” (p.90).

However, I question the ability of such geographies to offer such emancipatory possibilities when essentially these accounts are based upon the premise of merely adding in those bodies which were previously neglected. Adding in messy bodies may increase the number of typologies of bodies within the discipline but does not mess up geography’s masculinist tendencies. Instead, I feel that it merely solidifies the conceptual surface around particular geographies which then displaces the capacity of these knowledges to make the difference that Longhurst (2001) claims they can. Whilst she positions theory as ‘pure’ in relation to the tainted fluid body and I feel there needs to be more contact between theory and messy bodies

in order for them to make sense beyond the context through which they are made visible within geography. This is something I will develop in the last sections of this chapter.

Another tendency of this work is that the body is assumed to be a messy, material presence in the context of the fieldwork that exists *in space*. For example work by Butler and Bowlby (1997) on disabled bodies, focuses on the experiences of people with visual impairments in public space. They assume that the empirical body in that space is a physical presence rather than a body which has the capacity to extend beyond the context of that moment. They state that “In public space people feel themselves particularly open to the gaze of others, to be to some degree ‘on display’. “This heightens the salience both to others and to themselves of judgements about the social meaning of individuals’ bodily presentations” (p.419). However, what of the links between felt and seen bodies; those bodies that are remembered and brought into being the present and the role of other bodies in the experience of their own bodies. This non-materiality of bodies is a striking absence in this body work. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section and in conjunction with poststructuralist theory on body image (Weiss 1999) which suggests that “body images change – not only in response to actual changes (psychical and social changes) in the body/situation that need not be grounded or tied to a current state of affairs” (Weiss 1999 p.9) (see Chapter Seven). Therefore, the fluidity of bodies needs to be considered beyond the material fleshy present to take account of those bodies which are absent presences or hauntings (Behnke 2002) of the contemporary (consumption) situation.

Work in geography concerned with the body has been discussed in relation to those junctures within which I frame my thesis but simultaneously work beyond them in an attempt to illustrate what alternative embodied geographical knowledges may look/feel/sound like. In particular, I aim to move beyond binary thinking and to think through the co-constitutive nature of material and discursive bodies, whilst not rejecting theory for its neglect of fleshy embodiment and instead my intention is to animate theory with empirical bodies in order to provide a bodily context to these epistemologies. Moreover, whilst my bodies may be ‘messy in Longhurst’s (2001) terms I do not wish them to be isolated within the discipline. Instead my thesis informs debates as to what constitutes the female consuming body and how through understanding the body as it comes into being through practices can mess up the categories of bodily messiness. Moreover, alternative theorisations of the body which begin from the body and work beyond Foucault can make sense of female embodied subjectivity within the context in which is it produced and experienced. The intention, therefore, is not to prove the fluidity of bodies but to take this tenet as the point of departure in the creation of embodied knowledges.

2.4. Bodies in the Thesis

Within this final section of the chapter I want to make more explicit the very nature of what constitutes bodies in this thesis. In the above section I have placed the body within the literatures on consumption, clothing and bodily geographies and yet the precise means through which bodies come into being in my thesis have only been hinted at. Therefore, I take this finally opportunity to make explicit the body work which I intend to animate through my empirical work and the potential that this work has for understanding female embodied subjectivity. Firstly, I will introduce you to the theoretical basis of this thesis, that of ‘fluidity’ as an approach to the empirical bodies in my thesis and the means through which they are presented. I will then go on to frame what I have termed ‘bodily doings’, the means through which I have made sense of my empirical bodies and the role of clothing in the production of those ‘doings’ set within the conceptual context of Grosz’s (1997) work on body morphologies.

2.4.1. embodying theory

I begin this section with a quote from the introduction of a book *The Body and Everyday Life* (Nettleton and Watson 1998) where the editors state that:

“When approaching this book, we had assumed that the empirical study of the body in everyday life would yield a particularly vexing methodological problem. This is because we had assumed the body to be so absent that it would be difficult to access any data on it” (p.19).

I find this statement somewhat perplexing. In some ways the statement suggests that the body is something that cannot be easily accessed through methodological work and I agree, from my own experiences of doing body work that essentially what is presented to you are bodies as words and sentences on a page¹⁰. However, this statement also rests upon an argument made about much theoretical work concerned with the body. As I noted with reference to Longhurst’s (2001) work there is a suspicion of theories of the body for the absence of fleshy and material bodies which they seek to conceptualise. I agree as bodies slip and slide between

¹⁰ Indeed one of the most difficult suppositions of this thesis is the actual presentation of bodies within the context of language and words. Little reflection has been given within work which seeks to include the messy materialities of bodies within geography on how best to present such bodies to ‘get at’ the fluidity of their experience. Therefore, I reiterate that as much as this is an epistemological exercise it is also one of re-presentation and the consequent difficulties of capturing corporeal fluidity within the confines of academic regimes of writing and publishing.

conceptual and empirical reference points it is difficult to pin down exactly what is meant by 'the body' and I am acutely aware that post-structuralist theories of the body do not always engage with the kinds of empirical bodies that I have chosen to work with in this thesis. However, we should not generalise about these theories; some speak to the fleshiness of bodies more than others whereas others are based precisely upon intellectual and material distance between research participants and theory production. However, I do not find this reason enough to reject these theorisations because the resultant affects produce the kinds of typologised bodies that have been discussed above in relation to work carried out, thus far, in Geography.

In a sense what I am advocating in this thesis is an account of the body that begins with the body without any set determinant of what that body constitutes. I aim to begin with a conceptualisation of the body that is fluid, messy and indeterminate in its material form as well as the theoretical frameworks that attempt to define it. Therefore, the very nature of my empirical work and the theoretical animations I choose to make are based around a common element of fluidity. By fluidity I make two statements. Firstly, fluidity requires a recognition of the very existence of female embodied subjectivity as moving between theoretical and conceptual registers. It is not to take on particular theories of the body as an exercise in demasculinising geography but does so instead to exemplify the ability of geographical knowledges of the body to contribute to the formation of new approaches to and from the body. As mentioned above, this involves recognising the ability of bodies to exist as entangled in rather than applied to the dualistic tendencies of modernist thought such as mind/body, culture/nature, rational/irrational, Self/Other and material/discursive. Grosz (1994), in order to avoid the colonisation of the body by particular discursive regimes, offers a notion of the subject, which when "recognised as corporeal being can no longer readily succumb to the neutralisation and neutering of its specificity which has occurred as a consequence of women's submission under male definition" (Grosz 1994 ix). She advocates a particular means to understand the resonances and dissonances between body and mind which evolves into understanding the nature of subjectivity as 'psychic corporeality'.

The mobius strip is used as a metaphor to explain this relationship within her book *Volatile Bodies* (Grosz 1994), and also as a structuring device to belie her theoretical work. The mobius strip is a three dimensional inverted figure of eight which is connected in a way "which has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting to inversion, one becomes the other" (xii). When used as a metaphor for redefining the relations between dualistic thought, the subject comes to exist somewhere between these two alternatives. This suggests a shift in how to consider the very nature of female bodies through "rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychological interior and its corporeal exterior" (Grosz 1994 xii). In

addition, this provides the conceptual space to work with and beyond dualistic thinking: not to dismiss theoretical bodies nor reduce the body to a pre-discursive material reality. In fact she suggests that this metaphorical premise provides us access to other forms of knowing about the subject. She states:

“The notion of an inherently embodied subjectivity also implies the possibility of reconceiving the ways in which subjectivity itself is generally understood instead of seeing subjectivity as the product of a bare, generisable human form, which has specific details (sex, race, age, historical context, class etc.) as secondary attributes, the specificities of the subject, these particular “variables” of the universal are integral to the type of “bare humanity” presumed: in short given the embeddedness of subjectivity in its corporeality, the subject’s corporeal specificities inform the type of subject it is, constituting the very contours, nature and features of that subject” (Grosz 1993 p.42).

Fluidity is not simply advocated as a form of defence against the wider mechanisms of masculinist (geographical) knowledge but as a way to refocus debates on subjectivity as corporeally and psychically located. Brook (1999) in her survey on literatures that have theorised the female body identifies the body as being on the ‘threshold’ of knowledges and as simultaneously a liminal state in itself. She calls for a reconsideration of female bodies within dominant frameworks in order to challenge the means through which the female body has been confined within particular epistemologies. For herself, the narratives of bodies are important in remedying this confinement as “part of a move to localise and particularise the experiences and materiality of women, by rewriting the terms and concepts” (p.85). For example, she cites Davis’s (1997a; 1997b) work on cosmetic surgery, (which will be utilised later in the thesis in the context of women’s experiences of slimming), as an exemplar of how the narratives and practices of bodily experience challenge the assumption that women engaging in cosmetic surgery are victims of a particular bodily ideals. Instead, cosmetic surgery is understood as how women come to feel ‘normal’ and feel better about themselves. She states that “I learned of their despair, not because their bodies were not beautiful, but because they were not ordinary – “just like everyone else”. I listened to their accounts of how they struggled with the decision to have cosmetic surgery, weighing their anxieties about risks against the anticipated benefits of surgery” (Davis 1997a p.24).

Therefore, it is through the conflation of theoretical and empirical accounts of the female body that the intricacies of female embodied subjectivity can be determined. For the context of this thesis it is also possible to align this concern with ‘experience’ with recent accounts of

consumption practices and with those theorists of the body advocating the movement of bodies between material and discursive registers of that theorisation. The use of 'experience' and an engagement with women's everyday practices to formulate feminist epistemologies of women's social realities is not new and is widely debated within the context of feminist methodology and standpoint theory (see Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Critics argue that a concern with experience relies on empiricist tendencies which have the associated difficulties of re-presenting women's social realities when in fact "there is no guarantee that one woman's experience will be comprehensible to another, or that any one human being can ever fully understand themselves to others" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002 p.123). Instead it is more productive to think about experience within the conceptual and personal situation in which it takes place. As Grosz (1993) reminds us:

"Experience is not outside social, political, historical and cultural forces, and in this sense, cannot provide an outside position from which to establish a place for judgement, a pure perspective from which to judge theory or culture" (Grosz 1993 p.40)

Therefore, the fluidity of my approach allows bodies to slip between empirical and theoretical articulations centring neither the experience of bodies nor their conceptualisations. Experience and practices are considered as the medium through which these bodies become and therefore are contextually dependent and are not fixed or finite. Csordas (1994) asks that the "contemporary transformation of the body (is) conceived not only in terms of consumer culture and biological essentialism, but also in discerning an ambiguity in the boundaries of corporeality itself" (Csordas 1994 p.3). This in turn advocates what Geographers are beginning to realise that bodies are constituted both as discursive and corporeal (Moss and Dyck 2003); bodies cannot be pinned down and typologised as one or the other.

The second articulation of fluidity within this thesis does involve a step back towards Longhurst's (2001) work and her considerations of the actual fluidity of bodies themselves. In this instance the fluidity of bodies in the thesis is concerned with "the messy surfaces/depths of bodies, their insecure boundaries, the fluids that seep and leak from them, that which they engulf, the insides and outsides that's sometimes collapse into each other" (Longhurst 2001 p.23). For example, within the context of my research, I am interested in the materialisation of flesh and bodily bits and pieces (see Chapter Six) by clothing, the multiple presences of past, present and future bodies in a consumption moment and the ability of consumption narratives to spill out into women's wider embodied lives. However, a recognition of the fluidity of female bodies' and the specificities of female embodied experience is not without inherent difficulties. Understanding the corporeal nature of female subjectivity risks placing the body

back within the dualisms which sought to confine her in the first place. For this reason, there has been a fear within feminist work on the body that working with female bodies merely reinforces women's association with the body in particular negative realms. Shildrick and Price (1999) summarise these dangers as follows:

“in terms of our historical oppression and disempowerment, a series of justificatory strategies are founded in the linking of the feminine to a body that is curiously and uniquely unreliable, most evidently in the female reproductive processes. The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth and to lactate, is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason” (Shildrick and Price 1999 p.3)

However, rather than documenting the nature of female matter as fluid and in opposition to ‘the force of reason’ it is more productive to theorise from this materiality as fluid and inconsistent. Therefore, the very specificities of the narratives and practices of female embodiment becomes the animating force for theorising with bodies rather than about bodies. As Grimshaw (1999) questions with reference to her work on women’s accounts of aerobics, “is it possible to theorise or give an account of a more general kind of bodily orientation in the world which is connected to one’s engagement with a wide variety of tasks?” (p.109).

I do not wish to avoid the matter of female bodies nor do I wish to reduce the materiality of bodies to a surface reading of signification. For example, Kirby (1991) describes the female body as ‘stuck in the primeval ooze of Nature’s sticky immanence’ (p.12-13). This ‘ooze’ need not be another means of confining and categorising the body it can become a place to theorise from. Therefore, I reiterate the intention of this thesis is not to typologise female embodied subjectivity, through ‘bodily doings’ but to make sense of it within the very context of consumption experiences and those theories that work with the female body as ‘fluid’. Unlike Nettleton and Watson (1998) the place to start from is not the absence of the body but instead the multiple ways through which bodies are brought into being in the research process.

2.4.2. bodily doings

As mentioned earlier in the thesis, the means through which I present my empirical work is organised through what I have termed ‘bodily doings’. ‘Doings’ implies the engaging nature of the bodies I am presenting in this thesis and their capacities to act out into the world rather than be constrained by the context in which they consume. They are bodies which ‘do’ in that they are engaged in and talk about the practices of consumption. In short, bodily doings

juxtapose the body and embodiment where the body is understood as “a biological, material entity and embodiment as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and by mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas 1999 p.145). Bodily doings provide the potential for bodies to be understood in an indeterminate number of ways and contexts. This does not mean, however, that as a consequence that ‘anything goes’ in terms of suggesting a “single homogenous field on which all sorts of body types can, without any violence or transcription be placed” (Grosz 1994 p.23). Instead, a conceptual field is “established and regulated according to various perspectives and interests” (ibid). For this thesis, bodily doings are created through the practices and narratives of clothing consumption and therefore cannot speak to all bodies. What they can do, however, is to shore up alternative embodied geographical knowledges from which new theoretical and empirical trajectories can emerge.

In presenting the voices and practices of women in this thesis I do not advocate a typologising of the body that has tainted previous work on the body in geography. Instead, I take a similar approach to that advocated by Holliday and Hassard (2001) in their work on the body. They argue that “while we have produced an order of bodies, in the sense that we have attempted to sort chapters into themes and parts, we don’t expect those bodies to remain in place, or to contain themselves” (p.9). Therefore, in order for a notion of fluidity to remain as the centring force of this thesis, I represent these doings as separate chapters (Slimming, Sizing, Zoning and Looking) within which the bodies featured in them flow across the chapters and by no means do women experience their bodies in compartmentalised modalities or in the order of their presentation in the thesis. For example, a woman trying on a size twelve skirt may experience her body as numerically ‘sized’ and ‘slim’ in relation to the before bodies of past weight gain. She might also experience it as, ‘zoned’ in the context of her still feeling disgusted with her body as rolls of flab hang over the waistband of that skirt and as the fabric squeezes her flesh and as ‘looked/looking at’ in relation to the presence of other bodies in the changing room. Bodily doings are an organisational tool which in their depth as well as breadth attempt to capture the intricacies of female embodiment within the context of clothing consumption.

The means through which these doings came into being is a co-constitutive process between the voices and practices of the women I interviewed and went shopping with as much as the literatures that inform my research. Each doing has a specific theoretically informed purpose that challenges or makes explicit conceptual arguments made about the (consuming) body. However, the basic premise of bodily doings is that empirical bodies work in tension and compliance with more abstract accounts of the body. For example, Slimming works in tension with work on the consuming body, suggesting a more nuanced account of so-called bodily resistance and suggests the need to consider alternative engagements with embodied

consumption. Sizing works to mess up a specific categorisation of the body as 'sized' and considers the different articulations of what it means and feels to be big. Zoning works in close proximity with the 'flesh' of bodies and engages in ideas of the grotesque (Russo 1994; Shildrick 2002) as means of re-negotiating the flesh and flab of women's bodies as central to processes of self-realisation. This is done not just as an exemplar of the fluidity of female bodies but understands flesh as a productive force in women's understandings of their own embodied existence. Looking works with an embodied notion of body image (Weiss 1999) and reformulates conceptualisations of the gaze that hints at the possibility of reciprocal and connective looking relations between women rather than those which are oppressive and narcissistic. Therefore, bodily doings create a space for the female body to be considered as fluid matter as well as to be the animating force behind an analysis of that fluidity.

I will now go on to outline the inspiration for the 'bodily doings' within the thesis and then in particular outline the specific role that clothing plays in the ability of these doings to take form.

As already mentioned, Elisabeth Grosz's (1994) work on embodied subjectivity has provided a useful in-road for me in terms of identifying a fluid approach to embodiment. Whilst critiques of her work may highlight the absence of material (or empirical) bodies in her work, I find her capacity to engage with a wide range of theory on the body, such as Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Schilder (1950), whilst remaining committed to a fluid approach to embodiment, both refreshing and informative. Therefore, in a sense I have attempted in this thesis to empiricalise much of her work in order to elicit a theoretically informed yet empirically animated account of female embodied subjectivity.

Of particular use is what Grosz (1997) has termed 'body morphologies' through which she conceptualises the connections between inscriptive procedures upon the body and the anatomical structure of the material form. She states:

"Body morphologies are the results of the social meaning of the body. The morphological surface is a *retracing* of the anatomical and physiological foundation of the body by systems of social signifiers and signs traversing and even penetrating bodies. Morphological differences between sexed bodies imply both a traced 'biological' difference which is transcribed or translated by discursive, textual representations and corporeal significations. It implies a productive, *changeable*, non-fixed biological substratum mapped by a social, political and familial grid of practices and meanings. The morphological dimension is a function of socialisation and apprenticeship, and produces as its consequences a subject, soul, personality or inner depth" (Grosz 1997 p.245 my emphasis).

This statement should not be understood as a definition of the body but as a description of the way that bodies are produced and come into being. For myself it has three main advantages. Firstly, it takes into account the co-constitutive presence of discursive and material bodies. The body is seen to be penetrated and materially marked by discourse but is also mediated through biological difference. Body morphologies are produced in relation to an awareness of the sexual specificity of bodies which means that they provide a context for understanding the specificities of female embodied subjectivity. She states that:

“Masculinity and femininity are not simply social categories as it were externally or arbitrarily imposed on the subject’s sex. Masculine and feminine are necessarily related to the structure of the lived experience and meaning of bodies” (p.245).

A theoretical intervention which I have found useful in this context is Iris Marion Young’s (1990) work on female embodied experience comes closest to eliciting what the specificities of female embodied comportment¹¹ may look/feel/sound like in practice. By focusing on specific modalities of female bodies, for example, the pregnant body, the breasted body and the clothed body, she works with phenomenological approaches to the body to formulate and offer alternatives to patriarchal notions of feminine embodied existence. Feminine existence is understood as self referred, both subject and object, whereby women exist in proximity to their bodily selves but are always produced in a distance from it. She describes this relationship as follows:

“Feminine spatiality is contradictory in so far as feminine bodily existence is both spatially constituted and a constituting spatial subject. Insofar as feminine existence lives the body as transcendence and intentionality, the feminine body actively constitutes space and is the original co-ordinate that unifies space and is the original co-ordinate that unifies the spatial field and projects spatial relations and positions in accord with its intentions” (Young 1990 p.152).

¹¹ The three modalities of female embodied existence are ‘ambiguous transcendence’ which implies an openness to act into the world but is ambiguous because it is overlaid with immanence; “she often lives her body as a burden which much be dragged and prodded along and at the same time protected” (Young 1990 p.148). The second is an ‘inhibited intentionality’ whereby “the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills that are available to it” (ibid). The third is ‘discontinuous unity’ which implies that women do not exist in unity with themselves and their surroundings whereby “women tend to locate their motion in part of the body only, leaving the rest of the body relatively immobile” (ibid p.148-149).

For Young (1990) the source of this mode of female comportment is the delimiting affect of an oppressive sexist society on women because in her words “every human existence is defined by its situation; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of the situation” (p.142). Young (1990) therefore, goes on to consider the potential for alternative modalities of female existence which are based precisely in the specificities of female bodily experience. For example, she notices the capacity of pregnant subjectivity to be at once both centred and split; “myself in the mode of not being myself” (p. 168). Rather than being an example of how women’s bodies exist within a dichotomy of masculine transcendence and feminine immanence, the female pregnant body is both at the same time. She states:

“Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside separate. I experience my insides as the space of another yet my own body” (p.163).

Moreover, Young (1990) also attempts to centre women’s pleasure in clothes, in subverting the power of patriarchal looking relations that position women as a victim of a masculine gaze (see Chapter Seven) and focuses instead on the specific relations of fantasising, touching and bonding with clothes. Whilst this work is largely utopic in its nature it does provide a sense of what alternative accounts of the specific nature of female embodied existence may look and feel like.

However, there are critiques of Young’s (1990) work that suggest that despite claims to the contrary, she reinforces dualistic thinking rather than moving beyond it. Through viewing the female body through processes of transcendence and immanence, the transcendence of the body typically associated with male bodies is thus assumed to be the preferred orientation towards the body. Weiss (1999) indeed questions whether an “explicit reference to one’s body while one is engaged in an action necessarily takes away from the “transcendence” of one intentional act? (p.46). What Young (1990) does not do is to create a new space from which to theorise bodies from. Acting against patriarchy will always place women’s bodies as its opposition rather than as defined in its own terms.

For example, Young (1990) describes the example of a woman looking in the mirror as follows: ‘She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, moulds it and decorates it’ (p.154). She then counters this by describing the potential of clothing imagery as “not always the authoritative mirror that tells who’s the fairest of them all, but the entrance to a wonderland of characters and situations” (p.184). These two accounts signify the divisive tendencies of Young’s (1990) alternative accounts of female modalities between oppression and freedom from those discourse through which women navigate

looking/clothing regimes. For example, what of the intimacy of looking at and touching one's body when looking in the mirror and the bodily affects this may have for their feelings about their body beyond an implied self-criticism or a transcendent escape into fantasy. Both of these practices are possible but what of the potential for bodies to be materialised in these ways simultaneously rather than as a replacement of the other. Women can take pleasure in dressing their bodies whilst also re-experiencing the bodies they once were and want to become which may or may not be painful or discursively mediated by wider concerns with bodily aesthetics. Therefore, when attempting to understand the specificities of female embodiment it is critical not to slip back into old ways as Young (1990) has inadvertently done. I do not highlight this problematic as a dismissal of her work because it is necessary to think of a place for women beyond that of oppression and victimisation. However, body morphologies provide a more complex nexus of relations which in Young's terms would allow for transcendence and immanence, pleasure and pain with/of the body without judging one above the other.

Secondly, body morphologies take into account the fluid aspect of the material body which is produced and reproduced through sets of practices rather than just discourse. Critics of Grosz (1994) could object to the centrality she places upon the inscription of bodies in her account which could imply a return to a surface inflection of bodies as discussed in relation to accounts of the body in geography above. However, these processes of inscription are mediated through a non-unitary biological substratum and do not have predetermined affects upon the body with which the discourse acts. She reminds us that 'The raw material themselves are not 'pure' in so far as culture, social and psychological factors intervene to give them manifest forms' (Grosz 1997 p.244). Discourse, therefore, is actively created with and through material bodies or in more geographical terms "a discursively produced body (which) is constantly lived through its materiality and its representations in particular environments" (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.67).

And finally, bodily morphologies take account of the retracing of bodies thus anticipating the capacity of women to re-experience bodies that may not be materially there. This is important when considering the findings of my own research which locates the body in a number of non-material locations. I am not simply engaging with ideas about remembering bodies but how these remembered or projected bodies of the future become embodied and felt in a particular consumption moment. An example of this would be the 'phantom limb' whereby when a person has a limb amputated he/she still feels that limb in its absence. Langer (1989) describes this process as follows:

“the subject remains emotionally involved in a particular past experience to such a degree that it imposes itself on the actual present. By reopening time, memory evokes a certain past, inviting us to relive it – rather than simply to imagine or rethink it” (p.34)

Moreover, Young (2002) states “What we think of as mental phenomema: thoughts, memories, emotions, turn out to be corporeal phenomema; what we think of as bodily phenomena; postures, gestures, body habits, turn out to be emotions, memories and thoughts” (p.28). Locating subjectivity in the body allows for a reciprocal relationship between mind and body or what Grosz (1994) calls a ‘psychic corporeality’. An example of this is given in Behnke’s (2002) work on what is termed ‘ghost gestures’ whereby micro-movements of the body confirm the presence of past bodies. Behnke (2002) continues “Ghost gestures of this sort seem especially likely to become “trapped in the body”, migrating all too readily from one body part to another, haunting us far beyond the original occasions eliciting bodily comportment in question (p.191). Within my research, bodies haunt moments of consumption which indicates the plurality of female embodied existence beyond a weighty materiality. We do not have 'a body' but experience our material selves through a variety of non-material realms. Past and future bodies are experienced as absent presences when weight has been lost or gained for example and serve as a material and emotional marker of what bodies may become or have been.

This retracing of the body also has particular significance to recent studies in body image (see Chapter Seven) (Weiss 1999) which works against more representational accounts of what constitutes body image itself. Instead of beginning with the notion that the body stores and responds to representations of other bodies it would like to be, recent work suggest that body image is more dynamic and produced and experienced in relation to other bodies and objects. Body image therefore, becomes “a multiplicity of body images, body images that are copresent in any given individual, and which are themselves constructed through a series of corporeal exchanges that take place both within and outside of specific bodies” (Weiss 1999 p.2). Thus, the presence of other bodies and objects are crucial to the production of these body images which in the context of this thesis means that clothing has the capacity to produce and (re)enact past, present and future body images. Not only does clothing mark the movement of bodily boundaries, they ‘produce’ the body in particular ways. For example, Behnke (2002) describes trying on a pair of shoes as follows:

“I am aware of ghost gestures in my feet that reinstate the way I used to squeeze them into certain types of shoes; although I have not worn such shoes for years, the inner gesture of holding my toes in the way those shoes required still lingers even when I go barefoot” (p.189)

Therefore, body morphologies, as the inspiration for my own bodily doings, has much to offer in terms of the fluidity of embodied subjectivity and the fluidity of an approach to the female body. It works beyond binary thinking and yet makes space for the matter of bodies without reducing or typologising bodies. The bodies in this thesis are not the only bodily doings of female embodiment and serve as an entry point into wider and ever more expansive knowledges. The key to bodily doings is the animation of theory by empirical bodies which do not elide with one conceptualisation more than another.

Before concluding, I want to reflect upon the significance of clothing and consumption in the production of these bodily doings. Body morphologies have been represented as means of structuring my empirical work and as a means to animate existing theory on the body with those empirical bodies. However, it is also crucial to understand the place of clothing consumption as creative in the production of these bodily knowledges. The geographies of consumption have already been contextualised as central to understanding wider social relations (Miller et al 1998; Miller 1998) and integral to how consumers mediate specific relationships with those consumption spaces. The spaces of clothing consumption; the changing room; the shop floor, for example, provide the spatial context for eliciting particular forms of corporeal relations and thus the form of female embodied subjectivity. They are the places where clothing is touched, held up to the body, tried on, smoothed over the contours of flesh, looked at on the body experienced in relation to other bodies trying on clothes. These spaces are thus produced through these consumption practices; they provide the space whereby connections are made with past experiences of clothes shopping, where judgements about the materiality of the body are produced and experienced and where women reflect and make sense of their wider embodied lives. Ganetz (1995) describes these spaces as 'relational' whereby "the crowdedness and consequent intimate atmosphere seem to develop an extra intimacy and psychic closeness, especially since everyone in the fitting room is half undressed...It is conducive to confidences" (p.86-87). The spaces of clothing consumption therefore provide the corporeal situation of bodily doings.

Clothing, as discussed above, also has the potential to produce bodies in particular ways. For example, clothing makes a body 'a slut', 'a slob', 'a goth', 'too fat' and 'too thin'. The clothed body is a fluid entity with the capacity to be felt and 'read' in an indeterminate number of ways. As Entwistle (2000a) reminds us dress is both personal, laid in proximity to the skin (self) and is social in that it mediates our bodies' relationships with a wider audience. Therefore, "A study of the dressed body thus requires understanding of the socially processed body that discourse on dress and fashion shape, as well as of the experiential dimensions of embodiment wherein dress is translated into actual bodily representation" (ibid. p.325).

However, the consuming body is not 'dressed' in any finite form because when shopping for clothes, clothing does not have to be worn by the body and if tried on the clothing does not always lay easily upon the body's flesh. Clothing is readily tried on and discarded if the clothing does not 'fit' creating the possibility for clothing to materialise the body in uncomfortable and unwanted ways. In a sense a woman is made to face up to her material form whilst negotiating the wider discourses of what it means to be a consuming body. These bodies come into being through the practices of consumption and form the medium through which discourse comes to 'matter'.

Rose (1996), drawing on Irigaray (1985; 1992) when exploring the role of real and non-real spatial metaphors in understanding female subjectivity, discusses the significance of the 'envelope', conceived as clothes, jewels, cosmetics and the home, which contains the female body as a surface. She begins that "envelopes are another solid then; they depend on a certain kind of space to constitute the masculine subject and his feminine (m)other" (p.72). However, she then continues that these envelopes constitute both the role and risk of the subject because any representation is uncertain. Clothing, as an envelope of self, therefore cannot be read in solidified ways and has the potential to materialise bodies in alternative ways to exceed and extend beyond surface readings. Clothing makes leaps across bodies, across times and spaces, between the surfaces and depths of bodies and can become the means through which women make relationships with other bodies which are not necessarily harmful to the self. Therefore, in a sense clothing is active in the creation of these body morphologies. It mediates between the different corporeal relations of what constitutes female embodied subjectivity. However, as already mentioned, this thesis is not about consumption per se and instead clothing consumption provides the vehicle for a specific elicitation of bodily doings. I situate clothing as an active element in the creation of bodily doings which of course produces bodies which are specific to the capacities of clothing itself to 'make bodies'. I recognise that other bodily consumption practices, such as eating, exercising, singing etc may produce different bodily doings but I want to reinforce in this thesis is more the potential of these practices to provide access to more nuanced accounts of the female body.

2.5. Conclusions

Within this chapter I have presented the context within which my thesis is situated. This conceptual journey has passed through a number of literatures concerned primarily with consumption, clothing and the body. It charts a conceptual journey which rubs up against recent developments in those literatures and illustrates how the production of new embodied geographical knowledges, based upon the fluidity of bodies and knowledges, may look/feel/sound like in the form of 'bodily doings'.

Consumption and in particular a concern with the practices of consumption provides a vehicle in this thesis for 'getting at' female embodied subjectivity. A shift to a more practised-based account of consumption, as a movement beyond surface readings of consumption spaces and bodies, centres the role of practices in the very production of those spaces. In terms of this thesis, the spaces of clothing consumption are specific to how women experience their bodies in proximity to their wider embodied lives and other bodies. The consuming body therefore, is not a surface to be read within the myriad of possibilities on offer to it and instead is a creative manifestation of the relationships between clothing, the space in which they are consumed and the discourse which attempts to define it. Moreover, this emphasis on women's consumption experiences can be situated within moves to re-orientate their engagements in consumption beyond a victim/resistance dichotomy. Instead, it is more useful to "how to navigate the constitutive power of discourse" (Nelson 1999 p.350) and rather than imply a compliance to bodily norms and regimes, embodied identity should not be seen as an omen but as "trajectories of perpetual movement" (Black and Sharma 2000).

The significance of clothing and clothing consumption to this thesis has also been presented as crucial to the production and experience of these 'bodily doings'. Again this thesis is aided by recent work which positions clothing as active in the creation of specific materialities of the body and animates their work by placing bodies in the clothing. Clothing does not pin meaning to the body and instead "the body is constantly re-clothed and re-fashioned in accordance with changing arrangements of the self" (Craik 1994 p.225). Entwistle's (2000a; 2000b) understanding of 'dress as situated embodied practice' allows for a consideration of the spatialities of a clothing consumption moment in the constitution of female embodied subjectivity. Through the specific practices of looking at, trying on and touching clothing on and off the body and in relation to other co-present bodies, women are presented with a number of potential experiences of their bodily selves.

It has also been necessary to contextualise this thesis within work on the body in geography and in doing so highlight ways that I work with and in tension with developments in this field of Geography. In particular, the nature of recent work to move beyond dualistic thinking provides the justification of the fluidity of my approach to the body and hints towards the necessity of conceiving a body that is simultaneously material and discursive. Therefore, "In grounding the abstract subject/body in the materiality of everyday life, such unsettling, and the success or otherwise of its myriad implications, provides room for multiple and wide ranging audiences, places and cultural contexts" (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.69). However, a tension arises in relation to Longhurst's (2001) overly deterministic concern with the messy matter of bodies which contributes to a typologising of the body into distinct bodily categories. Whilst I also find this messiness central to how we should consider female bodies as indeterminate and leaking across material and conceptual boundaries I also feel that the

potential this fluidity has for producing embodied geographical knowledge has not been recognised. Instead, fluidity is utilised as a means to engage with a range of theoretical as well as empirical articulations of the female body in proximity with each other as well as providing the grounding tenet on which this thesis is organised. It is important, therefore, to theorise from this fluidity rather than about it.

And finally, the guts and bones of the thesis have been articulated to highlight my intention to animate particular theoretical understandings of the body. Fluidity provides a convenient structural basis to the thesis as my empirical bodies work beyond dualistic epistemologies, with and against particular theories of the body and simultaneously takes account of the inability to contain female embodiment per se. The specifics of female embodiment are not represented as exhaustive and finite and instead suggest ways that fluid articulations of the female body may look/feel/sound like and be made sense of in the wider theoretical literature. Grosz's (1994) work on body morphologies has been particularly useful in grounding what 'bodily doings' constitute and how they produce and reproduce the discursive and material registers of contemporary consumption. In addition, placing the very nature of subjectivity in the body allows for a conflation of minds and bodies and feelings and beings in accounts of women's own experiences of their bodies. It also offers in-roads in to other theoretical understandings of the female body and the sexual specificities of female embodied experiences. It has also become necessary to consider the non-material materialities of bodies as they are re-enacted through consumption and the significance of work on body image to highlight the multiple presences of female embodied experience. As Grosz (1994) states we need to examine the ways that bodies are "psychically, socially, sexually and discursively or representationally produced and the ways, in turn, that bodies reinscribe and project themselves onto their sociocultural environment so that the environment body produces and reflects the form and interest of the body" (Grosz 1993 p.242). Bodily doings, like body morphologies represent the need to take the productive capacities of bodies seriously and in Moss and Dyck's (2003) terms 'expand the materiality of spatialities' within work in geography on the body.

This chapter has provided the contextual and conceptual tools with which to approach the remainder of the thesis. What follows, therefore, are the methodological contexts which were active in the production of these bodies and then the 'bodily doings' themselves which form the basis of my particular articulation of female embodied subjectivity.

Bodies and Methodologies

Chapter Three

“Embodiment is about neither behaviour nor essence per se, but about experience and subjectivity, and understanding these is a function of interpreting action in different modes and expression in different idioms...There is no special kind of data or a special method for eliciting such data, but a methodological attitude that demands attention to bodiliness even in purely verbal data such as written text or oral interview” (Csordas 1999 p.148).

3 Introduction

Csordas (1999) suggests, the means through which we, as researchers, research 'the body' is less an organised set of procedures than a 'methodological attitude' with which we approach our research practices and research participants. This implies an intense commitment to the bodiliness of social science research itself. Whilst this may be construed as an epistemological vagueness on the part of the researcher, neglectful of any intellectual rigour or standardisation, I feel it is precisely through the openness and flexibility of a 'methodological attitude' that enables us to capture the plurality of embodied experience itself. Therefore, this chapter, works with an understanding of 'corporeality as a framework' (Grosz 1994) for constructing, implementing and evaluating embodied methodologies. This is an approach that advocates not researching 'on' bodies and instead prefers to situate the body as productive in, becoming through and constitutive of specific methodological practices and moments. These contextualised embodied methodologies recognise precisely "the research subject as embodied, as thinking, as feeling, as acting and as more than just a container for information about geographical patterns and relationships" (Parr 1998 p.343). For the purposes of my research this allows for the elicitation of the embodied practices of clothes shopping or the bodily doings of female embodied experience.

What follows is not a 'how' to of qualitative methods within the context of a geography PhD. Instead I present, through examples, the value of embodied methodologies for geographical research and then suggest ways that embodied methodologies can be formed and applied, using the context of my own research on women's experiences of clothes shopping. I will firstly outline the epistemological background to my methodological practices and refer to the recruitment of bodies, labelling bodies and the spaces in which the methodologies were conducted. I will then introduce briefly the internal workings of each of my chosen methodologies - group and individual interviews and accompanied shopping - focusing on the role these particular methods have in conducting embodied geographical fieldwork. The remainder of the chapter presents two particular thematics which have developed out of my embodied methodological practices which interestingly for Dyck (2002) is a "potentially daunting task and a heavy responsibility when,...it is from a context of fluidity and uncertainties that we eventually fix meaning" (p.235). However, I embrace the challenges and conflicts that my methodological practices have produced and present them as a part of what I hope to be an ongoing narrative within geography and beyond on the hows/whens/wheres of researching.

3.1 Doing Body Methods

In this section, I will situate my use of the term embodied methodologies within an epistemological framework of recent work on research practices and theorisations of the body. I will then focus more explicitly on how these abstractions came to be applied to more practical concerns of my fieldwork through researching bodies and placing bodies in particular fieldwork contexts.

3.1.1. placing the body in fieldwork

As mentioned above, a common trend throughout geographical literature on bodies is the tendency for this work to focus 'on' bodies and not to reflect adequately on the intricacies of carrying out such research and what is meant by 'the body' in context. My difficulties with methodological approaches to the body are summarised in the quote below which highlights the assumptions that are made by researchers about bodies within a research context:

“(The body of the researcher is understood) as the key research “instrument” or “tool” of qualitative research, and, second, the bodies of research participants – those we study – tell us more than the words of the transcripts of their accounts, and help to integrate the body with other geographical scales (Dyck 2002 p. 241).

There are three main problems with this statement. Firstly, the body of the researcher, understood as an 'instrument' and 'tool' implies a separation from the bodies of research participants. This suggests that these bodies are related to each other in a particular way i.e. the researcher researches upon a body(s) as separated from him/herself and that these bodies are whole, contained and act in and of themselves. These bodies are interpretable, transparent, coherent and in Grosz's (1994) words “ never quite reducible to a being merely a thing” nor ever able to “rise above the status of thing” (xi). This means that any recognition of the capacities of the research participants' bodies to take part in a relationship with the body(s) of the researcher is absent, as is their ability to 'research' the researcher's own corporeal presences (see section on 'Rachel's bodies').

This leads me onto my second difficulty with empirical accounts of embodied geographies which is a lack of awareness of the co-constitution of bodies which draws upon recent theorisations of the body (see Chapter Two) that argue “ to be embodied is to be able to be affected by the bodies of others” (Weiss 1999 p.162). An example of this is Longhurst's (1998) work on the experiences of pregnant women in Hamilton, New Zealand and specifically the constitutive and mutually defining relationships between pregnant bodies and cities. Nowhere in her discussion of methodology is there a sense of the way that bodies are

active in the production and experiencing of each other. She describes the aims of her research as being concerned with “..some of the ways in which the corporeal can condition and mediate pregnant women’s experiences of a specific place (p.21). The corporeal is firmly located in the body of the pregnant women, not in the bodies of other research participants or her own corporealities. In short, there is no sense of the connectivity of embodiment as experienced in a (group) interview or an ethnographic context, as I will discuss shortly.

Thirdly, while Dyck (2002) above makes reference to the value of research participants beyond the words of a transcript, I argue that this ‘beyond’ is little reflected upon in the ways that embodied geographies are represented within academic work. While quotations may provide access to the embodied experiences of research participants, it is useful to acknowledge the bodies which produce these words. For example, at no one time is a body simply *a* body. In an interview context a research participant may be positioned as a subject, a site of potential geographical knowledge or a knowledgeable body through which talk is mediated. However that body, for example, could also be a mother, a daughter, a slimming body, a body which was ill in the past, a body going on holiday next week and struggling to get a bikini, a body which shaves its legs, a body that has undergone breast augmentation, an athlete, a teacher, a PhD student. An interview transcript therefore, carries within and beyond the boundaries of the page, a multiplicity of embodied knowledges which extend beyond the context in which it was recorded, transcribed and analysed. These extensions and multiplicities are rarely articulated despite engagements with post-structural accounts of embodiment which are based precisely upon this tenet. For example, in Valentine's (1999b) work on eating practices, she notes that “contemporary eating habits can carry strong echoes of past memories of food at home, domestic routines and household bodily practices” (p.339). For her, bodies are ‘inflected’ by childhood which implies a static body onto which memories are layered. However, I would argue that through interviewing, it is not simply an inflection of bodies by memories which occurs but a re-enactment of past bodies as felt, re-experienced and re-embodied within the space of the interview. They are in short absent presences in the context of fieldwork. The body of the child eating in the past is therefore not just a memory rubbed off onto a contemporary corporeal manifestation but is another body present in the space of the interview. That body is not lost but is a co-present materiality or as Weiss (1999) calls it the ‘inter-corporeality’ which exists within our own and other bodies.

The three problematics are by no means exhaustive of the difficulties I have with Geography’s engagements with embodied methodologies but do I feel highlight for me the major difficulties I have had with body work that has come before me. What I intend to do is to entwine the theoretical premise of my thesis so that embodied methodologies should in fact embody the same ‘bodies’ that inform the rest of my words. Therefore:

“embodying social geography is () both a methodological and epistemological matter as well as being closely concerned with theorising body through the spatial lenses of geography as a discipline (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.60).

In articulating what I deem embodied methodologies to look/feel/ sound like, I feel great affinity with Hester Parr’s (1998) work on her experiences of interviewing people with mental health difficulties when she concluded that she was "mixed up and undecided about bodies and interviews". This ambivalence was based on how her body figured in an interview context and the resultant ethical dilemmas that emerged. For example, was hugging a research participant a strategic ploy or was it simply how she would have reacted in any other similar situation. I can relate completely to these feelings of ambivalence when each interview or accompanied shopping trip uncovers new challenges and sensations and when my body seems to be inescapable in a variety of research contexts. Therefore, this indecision and ambivalence has become the central tenet for my methodological practice highlighting the fluidity of research practices and 'the body' itself or what could be termed "the flows and filtrations that occur across bodies of knowledge and people's body boundaries (Longhurst 2001 p.2). Embodied methodologies therefore are messy in terms of how we understand what is meant by 'the body', through talk and practice, as well as through the uncertain nature of the type and role of the researcher in the implementation of a methodology. Therefore, I question should we be looking for 'a' way to research 'the body' when a messy, unpredictable and varied approach to methodology seems more appropriate on a number of levels. To refer to Hester Parr's observations again:

"the researcher's understandings of subjective experiences inform the theorisation of place and space, and the key argument here is that these understandings are best achieved by messy methodologies which seek to 'tune in' to research participants' different ways of telling" (Parr 1998 p.351).

The focus of my thesis, as discussed in the previous two chapters, has been to understand how the body doings of female embodied experience as they are activated through the context of the talk on and practices of clothing consumption. The underlying assumption here is not that I begin with a typologised body as a raw material for the study of female embodiment and instead I begin with bodily practices; a body which 'does' and whose subjectivities are “an unwieldy, continually contestable and affirmable basis for living in the world....a changing ensemble of openings and closings point of contact and points which repel contact’ (Probyn 2003 p.298). This messy, flexibility, fluidity or multiplicity is what grounds my methodology

and indeed my understanding of female embodied experience. Bodies talk to me and to each other about their own and other bodies, past present and future bodies, isolated and plural bodies, painful, scared, playful and humorous bodies. Bodies shop with and for me. as consumers, women, research participants, mothers, daughters etc. This list is indicative of the depth and breadth of the bodies that join me in a research context and is by no means finite. An interview was never just two people in a room talking about shopping and instead became the medium through which multiple embodiments were narrated and actualised. Goss and Leinbach (1996) comment on focus groups that they are 'poly-vocal' methodologies and I would further this by adding that they are also 'poly-bodied'. Therefore, embodied methodologies need to provide the intellectual, emotional and practical space for all/or some of these embodiments to come into being and again I reiterate that the premise that in order to achieve these aims, we need to learn from our bodies or in Bordo's (1998) words "get down and dirty with the body on the level of its practices" (p.91)

3.1.2 recruiting bodies

The major problematic facing any researcher wanting to engage in research on bodies is the actual recruitment of bodies. There are a number of important issues that I considered before and during the phases of my recruitment which hinge directly on my own investments in theorisations of 'the body', as mentioned in the previous chapter, and in embodied methodologies. Firstly, I did not want to recruit women according to a number of pre-determined categories such as social class, age, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. Work within geography has tended to focus on the ingredients of embodied identities when recruiting research participants rather than shifting to an understanding of identity that is produced and articulated through the fieldwork itself. This is a critique levelled most easily at new geographies of health and illness whose recent movements into work on 'the body' have tended to document particular bodies who are deemed to be more embodied than others. For example, Moss and Dyck (2003) have commented recently in relation to their work on women with Multiple Sclerosis (M.S.) (see Dyck 1999, Moss and Dyck 2001) that women with chronic illness "think through and talk about their lives in perhaps a more explicit way that those with an able or non-chronically ill body" (p.69). I question the rationale of researchers to decide which bodies are more embodied than others; are these indeed the questions we need to be asking of embodied research anyway? Instead I argue from the basis that all bodies are of course embodied; not to a greater or lesser extent but in a differentiated and multiple manner. My intention therefore, was not to pick and choose a sample which was representative of all women, nor was it to focus on particular 'types' of women, instead my

recruitment process was diverse and open to allow the space for ‘any body’¹ to take part in my research. My reasoning was to avoid the body-picking tactics mentioned above and instead to shift attention away from the body itself to the practices and talk bodies are engaged in.

This may sound ‘messy’ but in practice worked extremely well. I contacted women, both groups of women and individuals, through women’s organisations such as the National Women’s Register, The Women’s Institute, student organisations, slimming groups, an Internet support group for Big Beautiful Women (BBW), social groups for people with disabilities and posted notices in women’s centres and on mailing lists. I also recruited women more informally by snowballing through personal contacts and acquaintances. As with Miller et al’s (1998) experiences of their work on shopping in North London, I found recruiting women from places where they met up anyway meant that I could more easily carry out group interviews and also extend my recruitment as participants recommended alternative groups of women who they knew would be interested in talking to me or going shopping. As a result I was able to finish my fieldwork having interviewed a range of women of different ages, class backgrounds, abilities, sexualities, ethnicities, sizes but most importantly of all a range of embodied women². (see Appendix One for a comprehensive list of my research participants). The flexibility of my methodological practice also meant that I offered women the opportunity to be interviewed individually if they did not want to be interviewed in a group. This became necessary particularly for those women who did not feel comfortable in talking in front of a group of women.³

The recruitment for the accompanied shopping part of my methodology was less open in that I depended in part on women agreeing to shop with me who had some knowledge of me already. This could be a friend or a friend of a friend or somebody that approached me after meeting another one of my previous research participants. There was a sense that research participants established their own ethical practice before agreeing to take part in the research

¹ It must be said that whilst I adopted this open approach to recruitment there is a notable absence of particular bodies within my sample. For example, I was unable to recruit pregnant bodies.

² The geographical location of the research participants was not purposefully decided in order to elicit any geographical trends concerned with women’s clothing consumption. Appendix 1 documents the range of places the research participants were located which is driven mainly by my institutional location (Sheffield) and the research participants themselves.

³ The composition of group interviews is regularly debated (see Kitzinger and Barbour 2001) and there are no set criteria for what makes a ‘successful’ group interview. Market research orthodoxies may suggest using between 8-12 people which often means people talk over each other or not at all, transcription is difficult and thus creative analysis is stifled. The group interviews I carried out contained between 2 and 8 women (the optimum of which was between 3 and 6). The premise of this is based upon the value accredited by Longhurst’s (1996) ‘failed focus groups’. She found when women didn’t turn up for her group interviews on pregnancy, the consequent smaller size of the group generated in-depth interactive and embodied talk. Moreover, 8 research participants became the limit I set for groups in order to reduce the problems mentioned above.

by establishing a level of trust and connection with me. Joanna, a woman who responded to an email posting, was the only woman who agreed to go shopping with me of whom I had had no personal connection with before the research. In fact, she asked that we meet up before going shopping to find out more about my research intentions. I have found no reflection in the literatures on methodology on the recruitment of research participants for such ethnographic work (see Ribbens and Edwards 1998). However Oakley (1992) in her account of women interviewing women feels that “research cannot proceed without a relationship of mutual trust being established between the interviewer and interviewee the prospects are particularly dismal” (p.56). Ethical practice, whilst much reflected upon in feminist literature on methodology, is most often placed as the responsibility of the researcher as “your accountability for the research, how you should present yourself, what the researched are to be asked to comment on and what information it is proper to give them” (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002 p.157). I do not dispute these concerns but I also feel that in the case of this particular methodology, the research participants were involved in the decision as to get involved in the research and then what form the accompanied shopping was to take.⁴ This included women asking me direct questions as to form the shopping will take i.e. what my role would be, deciding on the location of the shopping and which shops we went into and also telling me when they were ready to stop or take a break. (This will be discussed in more detail in the section on ‘accompanied shopping’).

3.1.3 labelling bodies

As part of the process of recruiting bodies, I found myself having difficulties with the words that I used to describe the bodies I was attempting to recruit. Whilst I have readily admitted above to having no set criteria as to who to approach to be involved in my research, this inevitably meant I was dealing with differentiated bodies whose ‘discursive’ labels are problematic to negotiate. As Farquhar (2001) states “If the population in question is defined on the basis of a characteristic or behaviour which is not only stigmatised, but also potentially invisible or covert, then coming forward to participate in research may identify an individual as a member of a ‘deviant’ group” (p.49). This issue became particularly pertinent when I was recruiting women with disabilities and ‘women of size’ (see Chapter Five on Sizing) which meant coming to terms with both the moral and material difficulties of defining exactly what I meant by disabilities and bodily sizes. For example, I felt affinity with Alison Adam’s (2001) personal and metaphorical reportage of clothes shopping for big bodies when she found it

⁴ All research participants were asked to sign a form of consent (see Appendix Two) which formalised our research relationship. It documented that I would maintain confidentiality throughout the research, and maintain the anonymity of research participants whilst they permitted me to use their words in the write up and consequent publishing of work from my PhD.

genuinely difficult to approach a friend, colleague or acquaintance to interview, thereby categorising any of them as 'big women'. Within the fat activist literature 'fat' has been reclaimed from "a word which has been used to hurt, and substituting its destructive power for a more positive and descriptive meaning" (Cooper 1998 p.9)⁵. However, this is not a unitary experience. Rosa, one of my interviewees whom I recruited through a website called *Sizenet*⁶, an internet resource and support service for Big Beautiful Women (BBW's) used the words 'big' 'hefty' and 'large' to describe herself but never used the word 'fat'. Moreover, when carrying out a group interview with some women from a disabilities social group in Sheffield, I introduced myself in a particular way that positioned my research interests in women's clothes shopping rather than disability per se. The following research diary extract documents the moment whereby Nina, the group leader, and I introduced my research to the group:

Nina then quietened the group and asked me to introduce myself. I said I was doing research on women's clothes shopping and that I had come along here tonight to talk to some of the women. At this point Nina asked if she could just say a bit and she talked to the group about the problems she has with shopping not only with wheelchairs but with buggies and how difficult she found it when her children were little. She then asked who would like to do an interview and about five women came along and we went into a corridor which had seats in a corner and started to chat.

Social Group for People with Disabilities 14th May 2001

By focusing my talk on the experiences women have of clothes shopping I orientated my research less about the bodies doing the shopping and more about their experiences of going shopping. However, Nina's interjection, provided more context for the group by introducing the kinds of issues that may be pertinent to women in the group and indeed herself i.e. the negotiation of wheelchairs and pushchairs in clothes shops. This clarification, again shifted the aim of project to investigate the women's experiences of shopping which draw upon a social model of disability whereby disabilities are less about physical manifestations of the impairment than the difficulties experienced when doing things with/as a body (see Chouinard 1999).

Therefore, in some ways during my recruitment I actually avoided drawing attention to labelling the bodies whom I was attempting to recruit and focused instead on orientating my

⁵ Terminology is a contentious issue within the fat activist movement as it is within my PhD. For example see Cooper (1998) for a discussion of why words such as 'fat', 'supersized' and 'size positive' are used over words such as 'large', 'big' and 'chubby'.

recruitment around an interest in women's experiences of clothes shopping. My intention was that any specificities of particular bodily experiences would come through the interview and/or accompanied shopping rather than simply be the driving force behind my recruitment strategy.

3.1.4. bodies in research spaces

I feel it is also worth reflecting on the variety of research spaces in/through which interviews and accompanied shopping took place.⁷ The location that the fieldwork took place was most often dependent on the research participants themselves and was active in how each of the participants' bodies were produced and experienced within the context of the fieldwork. I would meet particular groups of women in places where they would usually collectively meet as a group. For example, The Women's Institute and National Women's Register often meet formally and informally in one person's house over coffee and/or wine which in Longhurst's (1996) experience also made women feel more relaxed and less anxious about the interview. I would go along to a meeting which had been organised especially for the purpose of taking part in my research and thus carried out the interview within the context that it would normally have met. The disability social groups met weekly at a community centre and a cricket club where I interviewed them when they were not participating in other activities. As Holbrook and Jackson (1996) found with their research on shopping in North London, recruiting through ready formed groups meant that people already knew each other and were more confident in challenging and engaging with other group members. They state that "although we prompted the discussion, raising topics on which we wanted further elaboration, at times it felt as though we were 'eavesdropping' on conversations that could have occurred without our presence" (p.139).

Other group interviews, with groups of friends who did not have a regular meeting space for example, took place in more ad hoc spaces such as a sandwich shop, someone's kitchen, a café and a student union bar. This was when working with groups that would not normally meet regularly and were organised as a consumption encounter in itself whereby we would eat and/or drink within the context of the interview. I found that the strategy of diverting attention from the interview to having lunch or a coffee, for example, to be valuable when engaging the women in talk. Eating and drinking makes pauses in the conversations possible and gives both parties time to think or simply be silent. Moreover, it meant that the interview felt less like an interview than 'a chat' or conversation. However, sometimes the conflation of

⁶ *Sizenet* can be found at www.sizenet.com

⁷ See Green and Hart (2001) for a study of the role of 'informal' and 'formal' research settings on the research process.

eating and talking about bodies were in conflict as documented in an interview below which was held over lunch in Chris' kitchen:

Chris: Anyone like a chocolate fix?

Pat: I mean we've just been talking about size and she's giving us chocolates...

laughter

Sandra: Isn't it lovely

Chris: Ay?

Pat: We're just on about our weight and you're giving us chocolates...

Interview with Playgroup Workers 3rd March 2000

Chris offers chocolate to the group at a moment in the conversation when the women are talking about weight gain and dieting. The group laugh about this but Pat recognises the conflicts involved in feeling unhappy with her weight and simultaneously being offered chocolate; a food which she shouldn't eat if she wanted to lose weight. This conflict was also evident when carrying out the interviews with women with whom I went shopping, which often occurred over lunch or a coffee before and after shopping had come to an end. Some women talked about not wanting to eat too much if we were continuing to carry on shopping as it would make their body bloated and trying on clothes problematic. However, another commentary on these interviews was that they were a welcome break and felt like the kind of activity they would normally engage in if shopping alone or with someone else.

The major reasoning behind the choice of research spaces was again flexibility and dependent as much on where women felt comfortable as the convenience of the location. Conversely it is both the familiarity of the situation and engaging in diversion practices which enable women to talk more freely and openly about their experiences but equally must be viewed as active in producing particular bodies within the context of the fieldwork.

3.2. Flexible Methodologies

In this section I will provide more intellectual and practical context to the three types of qualitative methodologies⁸ that I utilised in the course of my research: group discussions, individual interviews and accompanied shopping. My intention is not to provide an exhaustive account of the advantages and disadvantages of using these particular methodologies and instead to provide an insight into the practicalities of utilising these methods when researching embodied geographies

⁸ For substantive commentaries of Geography's engagements with qualitative methodologies see Parr (1998), Smith (2001) and Crang (2002).

3.2.1 Talking Bodies

In this section I will explore the particularity of the ‘talking’ methodologies that I utilised as part of my fieldwork which consisted of group interviews and individual interviews, as mentioned previously often due to the choice of the research participant herself. Talking methodologies, tend to focus upon the verbal dialogue produced by research participants within a methodological context. Feminist critiques of talking methodologies, state that a focus on language is separate from any material and/or social reality; in short, reality become discursively constructed by language. However, what is also important within talking methodologies is the embodied nature of this talk from the talk elicited about and on bodies to the bodies themselves doing the talking, the ways they are arranged and comported, the means through which they move and feel. In short, talking bodies provide the access to the bodily doings which form the empirical basis of my thesis. Therefore, the argument should not be for or against any material or discursive reality but instead “as simultaneously and mutually constituted as corporeal and discursive“ (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.67). Talking about clothes shopping does not involve describing experience as separate from the issues such as the ‘tyranny of slenderness’, Body Mass Index, obesity, health, families and instead provides embodied and re-experienced articulations as to what it means, feels, looks like to go shopping for clothing within the wider context of their embodied lives. In Silverman's (1993) words we need not have one without the other because:

“in studying accounts, we are studying displays of cultural particulars as well as displays of members’ artful practices in assembling these particulars...there is no necessary contradiction in seeking to study both particulars and practices” (Silverman 1993 p. 114).

Ultimately, in essentially one-off interviews, I cannot guarantee the representativeness of the interview to express the totality of that group or individual experience but can infer the contextual significance of that talk within a particular research moment.

Group interviews or focus groups have recently become popular within the social sciences (see Kitzinger and Barbour 2001 for a review of the historical development of focus groups) as a valuable qualitative methodology. In short, “focus groups are ideal for exploring people’s experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns. The method is particularly useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary” (Kitzinger and Barbour 2001 p.5). Focus groups have been used extensively in research on consumption but not without controversy. Cunningham-Burley et al (2001) summarise their use in this context as follows:

“Social scientists are commissioned by purchasers, providers and users of health care; they operate in a climate which seems to privilege consumers and their views, but disempowers them in practice” (p.192).

This tendency has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, as consumers are placed within the processes of consumption but only as part of a potential market and as passively affected by market forces. However, the focus of my research was to draw upon the interaction or intercorporeality (Weiss 1999) formed between bodies both through the talk and through the practices of the interview situation. Therefore, group interviews provided the perfect methodological solution for getting at the multiple nature of female embodiment. The contextual and interactive nature of focus groups (see Morgan 1988) means that:

“Focus groups should not be seen as a way to access some static but as yet untapped set of opinions or preferences. The participants need to be considered as active subjects who are involved in constructing social reality through interaction, both in their daily lives and in the focus group” (Cunningham-Burley et al 2001 p.191).

For example, in an extract from a group of playgroup workers, there are conflicting materialisations of Chris’s corporeal presence within the context of a group interview:

Chris: I was fat as a child I’ve always been fat as a child I was huge as a child.....
Sandra: I don’t know what the hell you’re on about you’re not even fat now
Chris: Oh I am Sandra
Sandra: Do we see each other with different eyes...
Chris: yes I think we do
Interview with Playgroup Workers 3rd March 2003

Chris understands her body as fat (“I’ve always been fat”) whereas her friend Sandra has difficulty reconciling this description with Chris and does not think she is fat. This leads Sandra to question whether in fact they ‘see each other with different eyes’ which suggests that bodily size is not something that is objectively quantifiable and instead is a contextually contingent material effect that is seen and felt differently. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) call this the “synergistic effect of dialogue whereby research participants respond directly to each other’s talk. However, I would add to this point that we should not just consider the talk that frames the narrative of group interviews but also the corporeal presence of other bodies. Dyck (1998) states that “methodological approaches that focus on narrative accounts and

other qualitative methods provide ways of producing knowledge to merge from bodily being, experiences and activities from a plurality of voices and places” (p.238)

Indeed, more recently, focus groups have been used within feminist research because of the potential the group narrative has for consciousness raising, the focus on shared experiences and for developing alternative hierarchies i.e. between research participants rather than between the researcher and the researched (Madriz 2003, Wilkinson 1998). In short they are seen to “serve to expose and validate women’s everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies” (Madriz 2003 p.364). Moreover, I feel that the topic of my research, women’s clothes shopping, was an important factor in the relative success of my group and individual interviews because women may already be used to talking about clothing in the context of a social and/or professional context. Young (1990) describes the role of clothing talk in the formation of female socialities as follows:

“When we are relaxing with one another, letting down our guard or just chatting, we often talk about clothes: what we like and what we can’t stand, how difficult it is to get this size or that fabric, how we feel when we wear certain kinds of clothes or why we don’t wear others. We often feel that women will understand the way clothes are important to us and that men will not. Other women will understand the anxieties, and they will understand the subtle clothing aesthetic” (Young 1990 p.184).

It must be said that, Young’s (1990) statement does support many of the experiences of interviewing that I encountered when talking to women. However, I do feel that this description is somewhat utopic and dependent on an equality and reciprocation between women that, in the context of an interview, may not occur. Not all women felt comfortable in contributing, not all women agreed with other women and not all women felt affinity and compassion with other women. However, I agree with Morgan (1988) when he states that “The frequent goal of focus groups is to conduct a group discussion that resembles a lively conversation among friends or neighbours, and most of the problems come from topics that fail to meet this goal” (p.22). Talk on clothes shopping provides a convenient conversational vehicle for women to explore issues concerning their embodied existence without having to draw explicit attention to their bodies. For example, I found it more useful to ask ‘tell me about any recent clothes shopping experiences’ than ‘How do you feel about your hips and thighs?’. (See section entitled Body Talk for a further explication of this issue).

It is also interesting to note that much of the feminist reasoning behind the use of focus groups for feminist research is the individualism of other qualitative methods such as interviewing. Indeed above I have highlighted the usefulness of focus groups to my research

precisely because of the interactive nature of the talk that can be produced. However, to assume that interviews are somewhat devoid of this interaction is to risk neglecting the power and quality of the narratives in which I was involved in in the context of individual interviews. Indeed, one of the critiques levelled at interviews and qualitative methods in general is the influence of the researcher on the research situation and the presumed fact that “an interview is an unproblematic window on psychological or social realities” (Wengraf 2002 p.1). However, if we begin instead from precisely the interactive and contextual basis of any interview situation “the interview is not, and cannot be a sterile instrument through which “truthful” reports and “honest” reactions can be extracted from inside the heads of research participants” (Wilkinson 1998 p.120). Indeed, any interview, group or individual is based upon the interaction between at least two people as England (1994) reminds us “The intersubjective nature of social life means that the researcher and the people being researched have shared meanings and we should seek methods that develop this advantage” (p.82). Therefore, I do not consider the individual interviews I carried out to be devoid of the kind of interactive talk that was generated in group interviews but undoubtedly it will be a different form of interaction that involves the intervention of my talk as well as of my research participants. For example, below is an extract from an interview with Rosa, through which the interaction between myself and Rosa is imperative to the creation of an inter-corporeal narrative:

Rosa: you know whether you're big big and round or tall and thin you have a shape

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: and if you're gonna wear something big and baggy you're gonna hide that shape

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: and I think I've come to realise now I'd rather show my shape off even if I don't particularly like it

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: you know it gives me more confidence

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: so people perhaps don't see you in the way that you think they do because you're being more confident with them

Rachel: yeah and if you're wearing in a confident young

Rosa: yeah yeah

Rachel: kind of stylish way rather than looking

Rosa: that's right that's right

Rachel: yeah I was saying the exact same thing to my Mum this morning she was trying on her Summer clothes for holiday

Rosa: laugh

Rachel: and she put on she's bought like a size twenty top and a size sixteen and the sixteen was tight but it looked so much better

Rosa: yeah it does

Interview with Rosa 24th May 2001

Here, as Rosa describes the changes in clothing practices that she has experienced in buying less baggy clothes, I intervene in her talk by offering up a similar experience that I had had recently with my Mum, who tends to wear clothes that are too big for her rather than clothes which, in Rosa's words 'show my shape off'. I am simultaneously agreeing with Rosa's observation that fitted clothing can make you look smaller rather than hiding your shape and offer an intimate experience of my own in recognition of this agreement. Bondi (2003) has recently argued that we can learn much from literatures on therapeutic encounters for how qualitative methods are carried out in order to enrich our work rather than make it therapeutic. Of particular pertinence here is the Freudian influenced process of identification whereby "identification is therefore a concept that represents the spatiality of self and other in terms of flexible and open boundaries together with movement across those boundaries" (Bondi 2003 p.69). In this sense I shared in her experience by re-experiencing my own. Connections with research participants were also made when I was asked and responded to direct questions by women on topics ranging from how I felt about the links between eating disorders and 'fashion', whether I had ever dieted and what I felt about different aspect of clothes shopping such as style of clothes. However, as above, I also offered up my own experiences and opinions about clothing and clothes shopping as well as taking more of a passive stance as an interested listener.

3.2.2. Shopping with bodies

The form of methodology that I have termed accompanied shopping involves going shopping with women when they are shopping for clothes (and sometimes other items or services). Going shopping in this context primarily involves high street and mall shopping although this did sometimes involve other forms of shopping such as second hand shopping and shopping for sari fabric in specialist shops. In addition, going shopping, does not just mean following women into clothes shops and watching what they do as they look at, touch, try on and purchase clothing but also involves showing each other clothes, trying on clothes in adjacent

cubicles, chatting, having cup(s) of tea and stopping for lunch. This form of methodology does not fit neatly into the categories of ethnography, or participant observation (see Parr 2001; Katz 1994 for examples of geographers' engagements with these methodologies) which dictate longer more intensive periods of contact with research participants. However neither is it divorced from the main motivations behind utilising such methodologies or "a concern to understand the world views and ways of life of actual people from the 'inside', in the contexts of their everyday lived experiences" (Cook 2001 p.127).

I have found surprisingly little reflection or guidance on how to engage in these methodologies despite the recent ethnographic work on geographies of consumption (Crang 1996) which focus on the practices and doings of consumption rather than representations of consumption spaces (Gregson et al 2002). One exception to this is Chua's (1992) study of women shopping in Singapore. However, he adopted a relatively passive role as a male researcher in a female shopping space and the research "remained entirely at the observational level and never developed into one of participant" (p.117-8). Another example of similar methodological practice is found within research carried out by Miller et al (1998) in their shopping project in North London. They utilised a 'loose' definition of ethnography when taking part in 60 accompanied shopping events with people living on a particular street and spending time in these homes over the course of a year in order to "have some sense of the wider social context of the individuals concerned" (p.65). However, within the context of this research, little reflection was provided on the accompanied shopping methodologies in terms of how the methodology was organised, how it was experienced and the role the methodology had in the types of geographical knowledges produced.

The accompanied shopping was carried out with nine women, sometimes on a repeat basis (see Appendix 2 for a comprehensive list of the research participants taking part in accompanied shopping) and was followed up with an interview either directly after going shopping (i.e. over lunch or a cup of tea) or a few days later. My motivation behind this was to try to elicit direct reflection from women about their shopping practices to add depth to my own observations and participations. Moreover, this methodological intervention also provided the space for alternative accounts of particular consumption moments which may challenge and deepen my understandings of shopping practices.

As the words 'participant observation' suggest, my position as a researcher within the context of each accompanied shopping is flexible moving from periods where I became more of an observer to moments when I was participating more actively in the shopping context. In short this means that "these kinds of settings, situations and interactions 'reveal data', and also (suggest) that it is possible for a researcher to be an interpreter or 'knower' of such data as well as an experiencer, observer or a participant observer" (Mason 1997 p.61). My intention was to replicate a shopping experience as close to the woman's 'normal' experience of

shopping, although I do recognise that this would never be entirely possible. However, I adopted an entirely reflexive and flexible practice which meant I was open about my intentions about the accompanied shopping, provided the space for women to say if there were any moments in which they felt uncomfortable for example if they wanted me to remain outside of the changing room space.

Sometimes, in the interview after the accompanied shopping I asked research participants directly about how they felt about going shopping with me and to reflect upon the methodological practice. One example is documented below when talking to Joanna about the accompanied shopping experience:

Rachel: yeah OK and also like the whole going shopping with me I mean did you find that OK ..me being there?

Joanna: I did I really enjoyed it

Rachel: oh that's good

Joanna: well it actually reminded me of when I used to go shopping with my partner

Rachel: oh right

Joanna: cos it was one of things we did quite a lot

Rachel: yeah yeah

Joanna: and actually that was when we tended to go to Meadowhall cos we used to go on Sunday

Rachel: oh OK

Joanna:...um..and um it was sad to lose that

Rachel: yeah

Joanna: and um and it was nice to have you there

Rachel: oh that's good (laughs)

Interview with Joanna 21st May 2001

I was actually pleased with this account of Joanna's experience of accompanied shopping with me as I had in fact enjoyed going shopping with her. Going shopping with me had re-activated a past experience of shopping for Joanna of shopping with her ex-partner. Some women commented to me before the shopping that it was like having a personal shopper and someone who is there just to shop with/for you! This was always framed within the context of having to shop in other circumstances for another person, for example a partner or a child.

However, there were moments when my presence did not feel so easy and welcome. Ultimately, I was a researcher who was shopping with women in order to make sense of the practices of clothing consumption. My overt researcher status was made apparent by a

notebook which I carried with me in which I noted down events and observations as they occurred throughout the accompanied shopping. An incident when my researcher status became obvious is documented in an extract from my research diary below:

I walked out of the changing room and got out my pen and paper and wrote some more notes. I decided it was better to be open about it and I couldn't avoid the fact I was doing research! We walked out and I said to Kate did she mind me having the notebook. She said no and that she knows what it's like. I then tried to articulate my nerves about going shopping with her and her academic and feminist investments in methodology but she said not to worry about it and to write things down.

Shopping with Kate Nottingham City Centre 31st July 2001

In this instance I felt that my research practices of writing in a notebook was an intrusion and in some ways 'spoilt' the research situation by drawing attention to the reasons behind my presence. Kate seems less bothered by my notebook scribbling than I am and told me not to worry about it and to continue writing. Perhaps in this case my reflexive practices became more paranoia on my part than useful in recognising the situatedness of the knowledge produced in shopping moments based upon the effects that my presence was making in the course of the research. As Rose (1997) remarks "at the same time as they defend reflexivity, many feminist geographers acknowledge the difficulty of actually doing it" (p.306) and I would argue in this instance I was over reflexive to the detriment of my research practice. In this case it is better to acknowledge that my presence is indeed inescapable during periods of accompanied shopping but this is in part why the methodology worked so well at 'getting at' the practices of clothing consumption. My involvement in the very experiences of shopping i.e. chatting, showing and trying on clothes etc meant that women felt less that they were being researched *upon* and more that they were going shopping *with* me.

3.3. Methodological Moments

In the following sections I will provide specific moments from my methodological practice which I found particularly useful when considering the potential of my methodologies for understanding female embodiment and the role of bodies in the knowledges produced and created through the implementation and involvement of methodologies.

3.3.1. 'getting at' bodies

As already mentioned, the main premise of my thesis is to consider female embodied experience as produced through the practices of clothing consumption. Whilst ethnographic

work described “as an ontological perspective which sees interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these” (Mason 1997 p.61), may be the methodology of choice to ‘get at’ these bodily practices, I have found that when interviewing women about clothes shopping a range of embodied talk emerged which moved beyond pure description of clothing consumption experiences. Ultimately the proximity between bodies and the looking at, trying on and wearing of clothes means that talk on clothes shopping is talk intimately connected to bodily experience, both through verbal articulation and practices within the context of the interview. For example women touched and grabbed their bodies, showed each other clothes on and off their bodies, and described intimate experiences of childbirth and medical procedures.

I was particularly interested in how women made these links themselves between clothing and their wider embodied experiences. This has resonance with narrative approaches to identity (see Finnegan 1997) which recognise the ways in which people ‘story’ their lives or that “all of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located, locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives” (Somers 1994 p.606). While understanding the self as storied implies a time sequence, a plot or a set of cultural conventions, there is no definitive form that narratives take. Instead the process is more creative and represents not a mere expression of either outward reality or inner state but an active form of organising personal experience” (Finnegan 1997 p.76). In the instance below, Scarlet begins to make sense of the breakdown of her marriage through the conversation we are having about her relationship to clothing and her body.

Bo: yeah are we talking about the sort of things you want

Rachel: yeah yeah totally

Laughter

Rachel: well they usually go off totally from the clothing cos I’m more interested in how you can get at certain things through clothes shopping

Scarlet: mmm

Rachel: you know clothes shopping or clothing is central to a lot of

Scarlet: yeah cos we’ve talked about lots like relationships children

Rachel: yeah cos that’s what I was quite interested in talking to people that have had kids they haven’t well sort of younger well sort of your age because families play a central role in it whether you’re shopping with children or you’re playing out relationships that you have with clothing your daughters a lot of the older women I’ve spoken to talked about that and also like now you about your children and about your..partners

Scarlet: mmmm

Rachel: it sounds a bit of a mix match but um

Scarlet: it's funny even when you do interviews you think about stuff I hadn't really put that together about Simon really I mean I knew it had happened but I

Bo: well the same thing with Billy

Scarlet: but I didn't see that as a big thing but clothes really was

Interview with Young Mums 13th March 2001

Bo asks me directly whether Scarlet and herself are talking about the 'right' thing because as we join this narrative both women have been discussing the breakdown of their relationships. I respond by articulating the connections I feel can be made between clothing and their wider lives and Scarlet comments that "I hadn't really put that together about Simon really I mean I knew it had happened but I". Previously Scarlet had commented how Simon, her husband had started wearing clothes to make him look younger, as well as working out vigorously in the gym. For Scarlet, this indicated a shift in her relationship and thus her marriage that she was no longer comfortable in. She also talked about removing all of her husband's clothes from her wardrobe, spending more money on her own clothes because she felt that she used to spend all of her money on her husband and her son and had started losing weight. Clothing became the indicator of how her relationship had broken down and how she was developing a new relationship with herself and her (clothed) body. Crang (1997) states that "people tend to make sense of things as stories. Comprising events, imputing motives, agency and roles, rather in terms of static characteristics" (p.194) and I feel that in this instance talk about clothing consumption provides the narrative distance for Scarlet to make sense of her situation which previously may have been too painful in its emotional proximity.

It is also important to mention the role that body talk had in the narration and (re) experiencing of specific embodied identities. I use the word 'talk' purposefully because "it has important ramifications in turning us towards the to and for of conversation rather than singular acts of speech" (Laurier 1998 p.38). One of my most memorable interviews, in this context, was with a woman in her early thirties called Rosa for the ways in which talk about clothes shopping provided the medium for talking through her 'bodies'. Rosa talked about the timing of the interview as a significant moment in her life when she was re-experiencing her body not as something to be ashamed of and covered up but as something she must come to terms with and even like. She told me that her mother had died from breast cancer a year previously and that this had made her face her own mortality. She also talked about her ex-husband and how her first marriage had reproduced her body in particular ways as follows:

Rosa: that's how I lost my weight was my first husband and I split up I've been married before

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: and ur he had an image you know he had a very big ego and I don't think I fitted into it being a big girl....he lost the weight and I put it on and it didn't match and after he'd left you feel you have a point to prove to everybody you know and I have no idea how much I lost I don't know what I weighed but I think it was between six and seven stone

Rachel: oh my goodness that's really small

Rosa: yeah yeah

PAUSE

Rachel: but I mean that's the way you react

Rosa: I was bigger than I am now when I was married to him you see and I could do with losing quite a bit now but I I was a lot bigger when I was with him but you see I was very frumpy then if you look at pictures of me then I look a hell of a lot younger now and I have the look that I'm a hell of a lot slimmer but I'm NOT a hell of a lot slimmer but I haven't I do something with my hair sometimes and just wear younger looking clothes

Rachel: clothes yeah

Rosa: and it does make a difference and I suppose back then I was even more self conscious about wearing the big baggy stuff to hide it constantly in jogging bottoms

Rachel: (laughs).....well maybe you have to go somewhere and come back from it to realise

(Interview with Rosa 23rd May)

What interested me was that whilst I was asking her about her experiences of clothes shopping, these had specific connections to her wider life experiences or body moments. Rosa describes losing weight after her first husband left her. During this relationship she had been 'bigger than she was now' which didn't 'fit' with her husband's ego and own weight loss. Her consequent reaction to their separation was to lose weight 'because you have a point to prove'. However, she experiences her present embodiments, with her second husband, differently. She tells me 'I'm NOT a hell of a lot slimmer but I haven't I do something with my hair sometimes and just wear younger looking clothes'. The change in her marital situation is echoed in her feelings towards her body as she dresses her body 'younger' and engages in beautifying practices rather than hiding her body in 'frumpy clothes'. Clothing

practices, therefore, become the signifier for how her feelings towards her body has changed. Her past and present bodies all come into being within the context of this in-body narration concerned with the details of her bodily transition. This supports precisely Somers (1994) articulation of narrative identities as “constituted by a person’s temporally and spatially variable place in culturally constructed stories composed of (breakable) rules, (variable) practices, binding (and unbinding) institutions, and the multiple plots of family, nation or economic life” (p.625).

It is important to note in these two incidences, the depth and variety of her in-body narrative that comes out of talk on clothing consumption practices which again reiterates Somer’s (1994) observations that “narrative identity narratives are not incorporated into the self in any direct way, rather they are mediated through the enormous spectrum of...practices that constitute our social world” (ibid). This indicated to me that a central tenet of embodied methodologies is the ‘type’ of questioning that needs to take place in order to get precisely at bodies through talk. From my experience, researching 'the body' requires an openness *to* practices i.e. 'shopping' rather than a focus on *the* body. Reflecting upon clothes and clothes shopping allowed women to make sense of their wider marital situations and the connections between their relationships with their body and other people/bodies. The stories people tell are not just versions of reality through which the body is experienced and re-experienced in a number of ways. As Birch (1998) states “the telling about yourself and your experiences is the assembly of life episodes that the researcher can use to show how individuals see themselves and place their understanding of social life” (p.172).

3.3.2. Rachel’s bodies

After a recent presentation of some of my preliminary thoughts about my methodological practice to an academic audience, a person asked me whether “it all had to be about me”? This comment referred to the analysis I had made of much of my methodological practices and in particularly the centrality of my bodies in the research process. Within feminist geography and beyond, the importance of recognising the role of the researcher in the research process has been widely discussed and can be defined as:

“a self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical scrutiny* of the self as researcher. Indeed reflexivity is crucial to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions. A reflexive and flexible approach to fieldwork allows the researcher to be more open to any challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises” (England 1994 p. 82).

Being reflexive is often mis-conceptualised to be in Rose's (1997) words a 'transparent reflexivity' which "depends on certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable. As a discourse it produced feminist geographers who claim to know how power works, but who are also themselves powerful, able to see and know both themselves and the world in which they work" (p.311). Instead, the relationship between researchers and research participants is far more messy and less certain during the planning and implementation of methodologies as well as for the potential analyses and outcomes. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) state "There is no one-way street between the researcher and the object of study; rather the two affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process" (p.39).

However, the tone of the questioning which introduced this section implies that my reflection on my own embodied presence in the research had been viewed as illustrating a degree of narcissism perhaps self absorption and moreover, a distancing from the 'real' matter at hand; my research participants. In fact, the importance of including my bodies in the analysis of my methodology and wider empirical chapters is precisely because my body was central to the mutual constitution of my research participants' bodies and vice versa. The processes of connection between researcher and research participants have already been discussed within feminist geography (Gibson Graham 1994) and yet there has been no reflection within embodied geographies on how 'the body' is actively constituted within the research process. This does not mean, as the comments levelled at my methodology might suggest, documenting how I felt about my body in the research process but to integrate into any analysis how all bodies involved in the research are produced and re-reproduced in specific research situations.

For example, in the extract from an interview with Debbie, it become apparent that her body is produced in direct relation to her observations and intimations concerning my own body.

Debbie: OH YEAH it's just something that I never went for I'll always have short fat stubby legs always I'll never even when I lose weight you've got to you've got nice long legs you see so you can wear jeans

Rachel: they're not that long look how short these trousers are (nervous laughter)

Interview with Debbie 22nd August 2001

Here Debbie's legs as 'short, fat and stubby' are compared to my own 'nice long legs'. Debbie views my own body as having the potential to wear jeans that her body would not be able to wear. My discomfort with this comment is apparent as I draw attention to the fact that the trousers I am wearing are too short. My discomfort comes from the fact that firstly, I do

not personally experience my legs as long and thin and secondly. I am concerned that Debbie is comparing herself unfavourably to me and the consequent effect this may have. Therefore, I attempt to position my body as similarly problematic to Rosa's by showing her the fit of my trousers and laughing about it. Delph-Janiurek (2001) comments that nervous laughter can mark a potential danger in the narrative which "may be a threat to the progression of an unproblematic interaction, such as behaviour that somehow threatens the identity or the role enacted by one or more of the interactants" (p.417). Debbie's comment produced our bodies as 'different' and yet my intervention tried to overcome this by producing them as 'similar' to reduce the potential disjuncture between our corporeal presences.

However, I was not always able to re-position my body within the context of an interaction with a research participant and in some cases my body was produced without my personal intervention. The following extract is from my research diary which describes shopping with a thirty year old woman called Star documents one such incidence when she makes direct comments about my own body:

**We stopped by a size eight t-shirt and Star commented on how we could only get one boob into that which inevitably was true! Her awareness of my body shape took me off guard and I hadn't realised that just as I had been observing Star shopping she must have been watching me or at least becoming familiar with my body.
(Research Diary Shopping with Star 23rd September 2000)**

This particular incident made me face up to and feel for myself what it means to be embodied in relation to someone else's in-body shopping practices. Throughout this particular accompanied shopping Star referred to her body in collusion with mine as if we both knew what she meant but I felt unable to challenge her. For example here, in an outsized clothing shop, she highlighted she could fit into a small size but for both of us this would be impossible elsewhere. Whether I wanted to or not I was being literally 'sized up' and my role as researcher was being doubled up as I realised that Star was engaging in a research practice of her own. Women do watch each other while they shop (see Chapter Seven entitled Looking) but this verbal recognition of these looking practices made me think about the immediacy of both of our embodiments in the research context. Whilst this practice could bring me closer to Star in an empathetic sense it also distanced me from her in that I disliked being categorised and made to face my own embodiment. Stanley (1992) openly advocates this form of interaction and in challenging the 'hygiene' of contemporary methodologies suggests that "personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (p.58). I agree that this bodily proximity perhaps admitted me into Star's embodied experiences of clothes

shopping but that it is not to say it was a wholly comfortable and welcome experience. As Mason (1997) states “in a sense you may be unable to control the ways in which your identity, status or role are perceived, and you may find yourself constantly trying to negotiate and renegotiate them” (p.65).

In relation to this, I now offer a final example from accompanied shopping where my body is not in collusion with my research participant and instead is produced as different with particular consequences for our relationship. Sarah is a twenty five year old woman I met through a friend that I went shopping with twice over the period of six months. The following extract is from my research diary during our second time shopping together as we both try on underwear in a cubicle changing room in Marks and Spencers:

I went into a cubicle opposite Sarah who was still trying on. I called out to Sarah to ask how she was doing. She said OK. I walked over and asked if I could come in and she said yes. She said she felt embarrassed but it was OK. She had on the blue bra which she said she really liked but it was too baggy and showed me the space in the fabric with her finger. I could sense she felt a bit upset and so I asked if she wanted me to look for it in a smaller size. She said there wasn't one but that was OK. She said she did like it and it shouldn't matter about that slight gap but it made her look smaller and didn't make her feel that good when the smallest size was too small. She said this was illustrative of the whole size problem. I asked about the other one and she said it fitted better but it was white and she really wanted a black one.

I drew the curtain and felt like I had intruded. I showed her the Sophie Dahl range and then felt tactless that although there were bigger ranges of sexy underwear there was no sexy smaller sizes. I felt very uncomfortable about how I was negotiating my own size politics and Sarah's bra experience.

(Research Diary Shopping with Sarah 29th May 2001)

I deliberately didn't mention Sarah's body before presenting to you my diary extract because I wanted to illustrate precisely how Sarah's body came into being for me through my own clothing and presence in the changing room. Sarah allowed me to see her trying on a bra which was obviously difficult for her when the smallest sized bra was too big and she articulated that she felt embarrassed about me being there. My difficulty was as much to do with how I felt about my own body as about entering someone's personal space. I had also tried on bras and my experience had been that they were not big enough to accommodate my breasts. In addition, my own body politics 'got in the way' as I pointed out the range of 'bigger' bras as we left the changing room which I had based upon my own experience of bra

shopping rather than what had just happened to Sarah in the changing room. As Rose (1997) states "If the process of reflexivity changes what is being reflected upon, then there is no 'transparent self waiting to be revealed'" (p.313). I did feel uncomfortable and unable to reconcile Sarah's breasts with my own feelings as to what that means for a woman. Consequently, in a follow up interview over lunch half an hour later I provided space in the narrative for Sarah to talk about her feelings on the matter of bras. In this way, my research diary and interview extracts, engage in a narrative with each other and provide further insight as to the experience of particular consumption moments.

Rachel : cos I find it really strange that they do a range for bigger breasts but there's no equivalent for....smaller women

Sarah : that's VERY annoying yeah they're always going on in magazines about big sizes or whatever and they never talk about but maybe there's only like one size like there's only one size you can get really 32AA 32A that they start at so there's more range of figure sizes and one small size (laughs) but they who it doesn't take much effort to make good bras in my size it's weird and I can't be the only person who's my size

Interview with Sarah 29th May 2001

I tentatively asked Sarah about how she feels about the bras available for 'smaller women' as much to resolve my feelings of guilt and confusion for the earlier incident but also to fill the gaps in my own body politics. These two extracts show how both of our bodies were being created in relation to each other's as simultaneously too big and too small. I feel that it wasn't so much that my body got in the way, that I was made to confront Sarah's materiality as problematic rather than my own. She had highlighted an absence in the provision of bras for women of her size and for me an absence in my consideration of smallness through academic and personal research investments. This also has immense implications for recent work in feminist geography asking that we consider bodies that have been neglected because they are deemed too 'much' for the discipline to handle. As Robyn Longhurst (2000) suggests "we still cannot talk easily about the weighty materiality of flesh, or the fluids that cross bodily boundaries in daily life" (p.125). While I think this work needs to be done and indeed started my PhD wanting to focus on 'outsize' clothes shopping, this work suggests that materiality can only be considered in relation to weighty, messy and 'abject' bodies. We need to consider why we think these bodies are more important than others. Utilising this form of methodology therefore can highlight the absences in the geographical work on the body, make us face our own bodily investments and mess up our certitude. Moreover, it illustrates the need to

understand terminology such as small and skinny as much as weighty and fleshy through practice not definition.

Rachel's bodies does not just mean recognising the 'impact' my body may have on the research process but for understanding the co-constitution of bodies within the practices of fieldwork and moreover, the importance of this interaction in the context of understanding female embodiment and the multiple and fluid ways through which female bodies are experienced and come into being. This does not mean maintaining a distance in order to avoid awkward and difficult moments as documented above because "we do not parachute into the field with empty heads and a few pencils or a tape-recorder in our pockets ready to record the "facts"" (England 1994 p.85). We are involved in the research; this much is unavoidable. However, the 'Rachels' that take part in the research are "un-centred, un-certain, not entirely present, not fully representable; this is not a self that can be revealed by a process of self-reflection" (Rose 1997 p.314).

3.3.3 Embodying Analysis

Before, concluding I want to comment briefly on the analytical approach that I established during the analytical moments of my research which involved making sense of transcripts and research diary extracts. Recently geographers have advocated the need to be explicit about the analytical methods we use within the analyses of qualitative research because "all too frequently the actual process of interpretation remains opaque, with vague references to key themes having simply 'emerged' from the data" (Jackson 2001 p.202). Ultimately all of the interviews I carried out were recorded and transcribed⁹ and supplemented with notes I made about the interview in terms of bodily movements and interaction. The accompanied shopping was written up in a research diary in the form of chronological analytical journey through the entire time I was shopping with any individual woman, noting down everything I observed and felt and beginning to make sense of what these observations meant in relationship to literatures on female embodiment. This included, in Ely et al's (1991) words "personal dialogue about moments of victory and disheartenment, hunches, feelings, insights, assumptions, biases and ongoing ideas about method" (p.69).

I am tentative to present an exact methodology which I used to analyse transcripts and research diary texts because "everything depends on our purposes at hand" (Silverman 1993 p.108). In more abstract terms, my methods have inadvertently been informed by ethnomethodological approaches which are concerned with 'the ways in which people construct their social worlds as well as having a number of practical outcomes' (Silverman

1998 p.263) as well as conversational analysis, which, although located in opposition to the politics of ethnomethodology, framed my interest in the conventions of talk and their role in the production of specific forms of talk. As Laurier (1998) reminds us “a story constructed in conversation was, in many, many ways, different from a story written into and read out of a typical book, what with the possibilities for interruption, redirection, attentiveness, receptions and shows of understanding” (Laurier 1998 p.36-37). However, I am aware of the difficulties that conversational analysis poses for embodied research because of what has been termed an ‘obsession’ with the space-timing of that particular conversation event. The ability of talk to leak out of the context in which it is said is therefore often overlooked in favour of understanding the conventions of talk at hand. Instead, I am undoubtedly most obviously informed by the bodiliness of my research interests and I would argue that my analysis became more inter-body than inter-text. Analyses therefore extended beyond the text on the page to the embodied presences and absences in the interview, the bodies of those shopping with and around me, my own bodies as well as the bodies of feminist work on ‘the body’ which inform my overall thesis. For example, analysing interviews and diaries meant re-embodiment practical instances; remembering touches, flushes, squeezes, drinking, eating, crying, laughing, scratching, showing body parts and clothing. In a sense it meant re-annotating words on the page to draw attention to the embodied practices and talk of interviews and accompanied shopping. My analysis became a form of re-embodiment as well as a meaning making process that also involved thinking through bodily practices such as surveillance, emotions, comportment and subjectivity.

In general my analysis in the empirical chapters utilises large amounts of conversation and dialogue in order to get at the nature of embodied talk and the means by which multiple bodies come into being through the talk on and practices of clothing consumption. In particular, “focus groups are typically designed to elicit something less fixed, definite and coherent that lies beneath attitudes, something that the researcher may call feelings, or responses, or experiences, or world-views” (Myers and Macnaughten 2001 p.174). This cannot be discerned from ‘cherry picking’ quotes which form a consensus across different interviews and instead my intention was to contextualise each research engagement in order to understand the ways in which bodies came into being in that moment.

On a basic level, my analysis consisted of thorough readings of each transcript and diary extracts similar to the approach utilised by McDowell (1997) to understand the different voices and narratives present in the interview. This does not mean taking account of simply who was speaking but also of how voices speak to themselves and each other. A focus on

⁹ The transcription was annotated to include pauses (....), emphasised speech in capital letters and annotations of specific tones, moods and actions such as irony, sarcasm, tears and laughter (see

listening to these different voices therefore, enables me to get a ‘feel’ for the interview to re-experience the research moments and to begin thinking about the ways that bodies were being contextually produced and experienced. Whilst ‘coding’ is a term used to refer to the ways by which researchers categorise their data (see Strauss 1987 for a detailed discussion of coding practices) I am hesitant to use this word which implies a form of ordering of the text into discrete variables. Instead, I prefer to use the word ‘annotation’ which implies a less rigorous ordering of text and provides the space for the flexibility of the meaning of codes within the context of that section of talk and/or practice. Therefore, after reading through the transcripts and diary extracts, I began to annotate them with words and sentences that gave meaning to how ‘the female’ body was articulated. I was interested in making connections between for example, narrations about the space of a changing room and the means through which different bodies are placed and thus experienced within that space. Moreover, I focused upon the means through which links were made explicitly between consuming clothing and women’s wider lives such as families, relationships, dieting and bodily politics. The bodily doings of slimming, sizing, zoning and looking could be described as my ‘organising annotations’ because they became the means through which I organised my empirical data but I use these words as ‘doings’ to emphasise the messiness and multiplicities of female embodiment rather than a means of categorising female bodies per se. As will become apparent in the following four chapters, no one body is slimmed, zoned, sized or looked at/from in the same way.

Embodying analysis then, is, as the introductory quote illustrated, an attitude towards data that relies upon an openness to the practices through which bodies emerge out of the data rather than a way of identifying how bodies are described in the data. In fact, it may feel from this brief discussion that I in fact had no discernible method of analysis and I would add that my analysis developed precisely from the difficulties I had with ‘applying’ a method of analysis! Instead, I approached each transcript and diary extract as contextually significant in that ways that bodies were produced and reproduced which meant that my analysis was inherently messy, disordered and uncertain in any claims to be representative of female embodied experience. For myself, this is highly satisfying because it is premised on my own and other’s understandings of female embodiment as “an organic or ontological ‘incompleteness’ or lack of finality” (Grosz 1994 xi).

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter I have introduced what I have contextualised as specific aspects of my methodological practice and motivations which have drawn upon both academic and

Silverman (1993, 2003)).

methodological questions as to how to make sense of and research bodies and geographies. My main difficulties with work on the body in geography is an absence of reflection on what it actually means to research embodied geographies and a tendency to premise the research by working on rather than with bodies. I hope that this chapter has gone some way to revitalise these debates with some hands on experience of what it looks/feels/sounds like to carry out embodied geographical research. There are three main conclusions that I wish to draw from this chapter that I feel have direct implications for the future of embodied geographical research.

Firstly, if bodies are to be understood as fluid and multiple and as formed through multi-narratives between different bodies, then methodologies should reflect this messiness by placing importance on the contextual significance of any research moment. For example, within my research, the practices of recruiting, labelling and placing research participants provided the space for understanding the reciprocal production of specific female embodiments. These considerations required a great deal of flexibility and openness by myself as well as by the research participants, for example in relation to the words I used and the access research participants allowed me to have to their experiences of trying on clothes in changing rooms. Kearns et al (1998) have recently commented on research ethics that the “idea of a code denotes a normative position which potentially denudes responsibility to the level of compliance. A code can diminish social space for creative constructive and co-operative participation in research by all parties encompassed by the activity” (p.307). I would echo these sentiments for those embarking on embodied geographical research. There is no one way of carrying out embodied research projects but it is the very messiness of research practices and the flexibility of the attitude you take to your research that most easily captures and presents the messiness of female corporeal experience.

Secondly, it is important to recognise how the bodies come into being within the research process as related to specific methodological practices. Both interviews and accompanied shopping were introduced as methodologies which could ‘get at’ bodies through the embodied nature of talk and practice. For example, group interviews allowed me to focus upon the interactive nature of talk and indeed bodies, within the context of a conversation about clothing consumption whereas, accompanied shopping provided me with direct access to the practices of clothing consumption and a follow up interview produced reflections upon those practices. These research practices are heavily dependent on the mode of questioning that I undertook and I argue that it is conversely a distancing from the body through questions on practices that provided me with access to such in-body talk about women’s wider lives. Body talk is not just bodies talking but talk that is embodied and is able to make links and connections with other bodies.

Finally, I want to comment on the importance of embodying debates on reflexivity which question the role of the researcher in the research. Undoubtedly, as a researcher interested in the body', it is crucial to understand your own feelings surrounding your embodiment. I had to face my own personal contradictions and political motivations for choosing to do this research as well as the relationship I have with my own body throughout the course of my fieldwork. However my body was also actively involved in the production of bodies during interviews and accompanied shopping which in turn became part of the analysis not just something to reflect upon in a methodology chapter! Recognising the multiplicity of your own embodied presences can only add depth to your analysis of a research situation that you are active in producing and reproducing.

Therefore, researching bodies in geography should definitely take the form of an attitude rather than an approach per se whereby the space is made for multiple approaches, spaces, voices and of course bodies. In the words of Trinh. Minh-ha (1989):

“when armors and defense mechanisms are removed, when new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body, women begin to experience writing/the world differently” (Minh-ha 1999 p.259).

Slimming

Chapter Four

“There will be times when you come adrift. Your emotions and life events will make it difficult at times to eat with that care and attention. You may gain some weight. Maintaining weight loss does not mean you never gain any.”

(Bovey 2002 p.256)

Slim *adj* 1 fine, graceful, lean, narrow, slender, svelte, sylphlike, trim

THIN 2 a slim chance, little, negligible, remote, slight, unlikely

***Vb* become slimmer, diet, lose weight, reduce.**

(The Oxford Quick Reference Thesaurus 1998 p.389)

4 Introduction

This chapter will focus on understanding ‘the slimming body’ as it is narrated and actualised through the talk and practices surrounding women’s clothes shopping. There is no attempt, therefore, to define what is meant by ‘slimming’ in an absolute sense and instead the basis of this chapter is the voices and experiences of my research participants. As the quotations above highlight, the meanings and practices associated with slimming are by no means fixed and instead fluctuate between discursive registers and actual bodily experiences. It is important to note that whilst the focus of my interventions into these women’s lives has been through clothing consumption, there are many connections between slimming and clothing. For example, Grogan's (1999) work on body image highlights a connection between clothing and the bodies people want to have and we need only look at the pages of Weight Watchers magazine (see Plate 1) to note the identification of bodies before and after weight loss with specific dress sizes or styles and the connections made between a thinner self and the hyper sexualised self.

The chapter will begin by contextualising ‘slimming’ within a variety of institutional and personal definitions and then, within the often polemical critiques of feminist interpretations of ‘the dieting industry’, offer alternatives to these. The chapter will then progress with an exploration and extension of these ideas using my empirical work which will involve an introduction to group talk on slimming through clothes shopping; the experiences of shopping with Kate, a woman who has recently lost and gained weight and then a discussion of my observations and interviews with a Dietdays¹ group, its members and employees. My intention is to illustrate the multi temporal and spatial embodiments to their experiences and narratives of slimming and to highlight the significance of the multiple nature of these embodied states for understanding female embodiment. Moreover, this chapter will involve refiguring feminist work that use Foucauldian (1977) ideas of power for understanding women’s experiences of slimming and other consumption practices. In the concluding section ‘living slimming’, I suggest alternative ways that women understand and negotiate their slimming practices beyond a model of domination by, or resistance to, a disciplinary power.

¹ The name of the slimming organisation with which I carried out my fieldwork has been changed to *Dietdays* and will be referred to as such throughout the thesis.

MY FANTASTIC SUCCESS: Tracy Storey

She had tried every diet going, or so she thought. After the birth of her second daughter, Tracy decided enough was enough – it was time for action

“I had a Dream”
(and Weight Watchers made it come true!)

A If my life it's been my dream to be slim, so there aren't enough words for how I feel now that I've reached Goal. I feel so proud of myself and my confidence has improved 100%.

Weighty matters

For Tracy Storey, 27, being slim really is a dream come true. Before reaching Goal in June 1999, the last time she was slim she was aged 9 and the last time she weighed 9 stone 5 pounds she was around 14. Since then it's been one diet after the other. “My two brothers are quite big and my dad is quite hefty,” she says, “so I think it's a family thing. I used to wish I look after my mother – she's always been around 7 stone.”

“I've tried every diet there is – the soup diet, the egg diet. I'd lose weight but it went back on as soon as I came off those diets. So the more I tried to lose weight, the more depressed I'd get and the more I'd eat. I joined a slimming club where I could eat as much of some things as I liked. For instance I could sit down and have a whole chicken, but it got so boring eating the same thing. And you can't live the rest of your life eating like that, can you?”

“As a teenager I used to look at my friends and wish I could be like them. Then I'd read people's success stories in magazines and think, Well I MUST be able to do it if they've done it, but why can't I?”

The will to succeed

After her first daughter Rebecca was born, Tracy joined Weight Watchers and lost a stone. Then she became pregnant again and gave up. After Megan was born Tracy settled at 13 stone until one day she decided enough was enough. “I thought, I am absolutely sick of this. I can't stand it any longer. Suddenly, I just got my head around the idea of losing weight and I was absolutely determined to do it. I saw that ad on the tele-

vision with the girl screaming in the changing room and I said, That's me, I'm going to do that and I don't care what it takes.” Tracy rejoined Weight Watchers with her friend Joanne (who has also got to Goal) and found that everything just clicked into place. “It felt different from the beginning, like a fresh start. I had tried for

continued on page 12



“I had tried for so many years to lose weight, but I like my food and there was always a little part of me that didn't want to give that up. This time I was prepared to make any sacrifice”

Jeffrey Rogers: Black diamond trimmed bag, £79.99; Etern black 6x8 bottom skirt, £29. Accessories necklace from a selection at Morison; black chain bag from a selection at Ragdale Hat Boutique. Photographed: Henry Aiden; hair and make-up: Le Kitchener. Photographed at Ragdale Hall Health Centre, nr Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, LE14 5PW Tel: 01664 434821.

Plate One: Before and After Bodies (Weight Watchers Magazine March 2000)

4.1 Placing 'Slimming'

4.1.1 defining 'slimming'

When planning and researching this chapter I found myself questioning exactly what is meant by 'slimming'. According to Ogden (1992) 95% of women have dieted at some time in their lives. From my own experiences, I understand 'slimming' to be a means to lose body weight, to diet, not in the normative sense of the food one eats, 'food choice' (Murcott 1998) or the food one eats as part of a 'special diet', but as a means to specifically reduce one's body size through eating, or not, specific foods. Moreover, to me, slimming involves other practices such as exercising or 'doing' a specific diet either through buying a particular dietary text for example, Rosemary Conley's Hip and Thigh Diet (Conley 2002) or joining a slimming organisation and having weekly weigh-in's (Weight Watchers) with a group of 'slimmers'. This provides a form of regulatory framework for constituting slimming practices. However, these practices could also include buying and eating low calorie food. For example, a recent survey by Mintel entitled British Lifestyles 2001 found that £1.13 billion is spent in Britain each year on low calorie foods (Mintel 2001a). Therefore, it would seem that 'slimming' is not only about personal weight loss (or gain) but is significant within the wider processes and practices of food consumption and production.

Understanding 'slimming', also demands a recognition of the processual notion of embodiment; of doing, motion and transition. To want to slim implies a need to change a present embodied state to another, with the prospect of 'being slimmer', thinner, smoother or smaller the ultimate goal. The slimming body is not permanent or fixed and is indicative of a tension between 'before' and 'after' bodies, as will be discussed shortly, although it must be said that the rhetoric of these bodies does imply a degree of fixity. In short it is better understood as a mode of being rather than a categorised bodily form. It is also important to recognise the means by which the slimming body is framed within medical discourses of the healthy body which work against my notion of the processual nature of the slimming body. Instead these accounts implicate a body which is a biological entity in need of management and of which obesity is the product of psychological as well as physical deficiencies. For example, the motivations behind a person wanting to slim are summarised in a medical text book as follows:

"The first decision a severely obese person has to make is that she (sic) wants to lose weight, either because she finds her body unattractive, or because others remark about her obesity, or because she learns that morbid obesity is dangerous to her health, or that it is aggravating an existing disease" (Abraham and Llewellyn-Jones 1997 p.31).

There are a number of reasons implicit in this account of why women should engage in slimming practices. Firstly, bodily dissatisfaction, secondly a fear or surveillance from others

and thirdly specific investments and entanglements with medical discourses of 'the healthy body'. The first two of these motivations will be discussed in the next section when thinking about feminist inspired accounts of 'slimming' but firstly I want to dwell for a moment on the connections between dieting and health. The quote above (Abraham and Llewellyn-Jones 1997) highlights the simplicity with which some medical practitioners approach the issue of weight. There is also an apparent gender bias to these accounts as the patient they refer to throughout their chapter on obesity is a woman but there is no explanation as to why these issues may affect women significantly differently to men. Moreover, the prevalence of the Body Mass Index (BMI)² within the medical profession seems to act as a justification for slimming for health reasons rather than questioning or examining the practices of slimming per se. Instead it typologises bodies within a range of desirable numbers according to weight and height which encourages men and women to conform to specific medical-based approaches to size. Indeed some of the women I will talk about in this chapter refer directly to slimming for health reasons and in accordance with the BMI.

The effects of medicalisation on women's bodies have been well documented within the context of cervical screening and childbirth (Martin 1994), menstruation (Knight 1991) and within the fat activist literature the same can be said of weight loss. For example, The National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) highlight the failure of weight loss programs and the damage they inflict on 'fat' people's self esteem stating that "(P)eople of all sizes are misled about the extent and severity of the health risks associated with being fat and are told that being thin is the only way to good health, and that dieting makes people thin" (NAAFA 2002). There have also been recent critiques of medicine's approach to weight loss (Rothblum 1990; Cogan and Ernsberger 1999) arguing that "(H)ealth interventions for weight loss have reinforced a culture of slimming, and along with the food, fashion and cosmetic industries, have contributed to an epidemic of unnecessary and potentially harmful dieting practices among women" (Germov and Williams 1996 p.98). This would suggest that medical and feminist critiques of dieting are beginning to align which in Bordo's (1993) words demands more of a 'cultural' and ethnographic approach to women and weight which is focused on understanding "the direct grip that culture has on our bodies through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life" (p.16).

² The Body Mass Index (BMI) is calculated by dividing the weight of a person in kilograms by the height of the person in metres squared (Brownwell 1995 p.386). The desirable range for a person to lie in is between 19 and 24.9 and obesity is defined when a person has a BMI over 30. These ranges have been discerned by insurance companies who have used these statistics to show a significant increase in morbidity and mortality with a higher BMI than a lower BMI (Abraham and Llewellyn-Jones 1997 p.31). My opinion is that these ranges are arbitrary and offer no account of the experiences of weight loss, weight gain or being 'embodied' as slimming.

4.1.2 feminist engagements with ‘the dieting industry’

Feminist critiques of ‘slimming’ and what is understood under the umbrella term of ‘the dieting industry’ are centred around self dissatisfaction and surveillance of the body (Wolf 1990, Brownmiller 1984). Critiques of the dieting industry are most commonly narrated through feminist critiques based on the patriarchal nature of society. As mentioned above these debates align themselves with what Chernin first coined as ‘the tyranny of slenderness’ (Chernin 1992) or as “..exploiting women’s body dissatisfaction by treating their perceived problem and offering to solve it” (Ogden 1992 p.48). In particular, feminist writers often connect women’s preoccupation with body weight and size with “.. a troubled relationship to food (that) frequently hides a serious problem with female identity in an age when women are invited by social circumstance and individual inclination to extend the traditional idea of what it means to be a woman” (Chernin 1986 xi). Often these accounts begin with a personal resume of the author’s experiences of dieting, slimming and/or eating disorders which then informs the narrative for the rest of the book (see Bovey 1994; 2002).

My frustrations with these forms of text is that they provide no space for women positioned between the pro and anti diet movement and instead these polemical texts dichotomise these debates between resistance and domination and are notable for the absence of accounts of the lived realities of dieting. They neglect any pleasure or unexpected outcomes of ‘slimming’ or joining a slimming group beyond weight loss or gain such as socialities of affinity, sharing and friendship as will be discussed later. For example, Ogden (1992) describes the dieting industry as follows:

“The dieting industry sells itself to people who want to lose weight. It is used by women who see themselves as being fat, yet act as if these women *actually are* fat. Slimming magazines do not try to ‘stop you *feeling fat*’, they sell various ways to ‘stop you *being fat*’” (Ogden 1992 p.16).

However, compare this to text taken from the introduction of a Dietdays magazine below:

‘Welcome to the new issue of Dietdays magazine, in which we’re really looking forward to summer. At this time of year, many of us decide to lose weight and get fitter - and hope we’ll feel great on holiday in our summer clothes. But whatever your size, shape or age, the real key to looking and feeling your best this summer starts on the inside with self-confidence’ (Dietdays Magazine 2001).

Undoubtedly, the underlying assumption here is that women need to lose weight and that this will make wearing summer clothes, most likely revealing clothes, more bearable. As Bartky (1990) warns “(T)he technologies of femininity are taken up and practised by women against the background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency” (p.71-71). However it is interesting

that a further emphasis is placed on developing self-confidence, whatever your size, which represents a shift away from medical based categorisations of 'healthy bodies'. This confidence is displaced from the 'outward' materiality of the body to a non-located 'inside' akin to Grosz's (1994) idea of 'psychical corporeality' or "A notion of corporeality, that is, which avoids not only dualism but also the very problematic of dualism that makes alternatives to it and criticisms of it possible" (Grosz 1994 p.21). My main objections of critiques of the dieting industry, as with 'the fashion industry' per se, is that women's actual involvement is neglected or assumed to take a particular form as are their negotiations of the discourses and practices of slimming. Women, as slimmers, are in danger, therefore of being seen only as dupes or victims of powers beyond their control.

4.1.3. Re-situating the 'slimming body'

My observations of the slimming literature parallel Grosz's (1994) observations of feminist rearticulations of scientific epistemologies in "challenging the discourses which claim to analyse and explain the body and subject scientifically – biology, psychology, sociology – to develop different perspectives that may be able to better represent women's interests" (Grosz 1994 p.61). Common to many accounts of women's engagements with slimming practices (mentioned above) as placed within a wider patriarchal system of control is the use of Foucauldian (1977) historically contingent notions of power in modern and traditional societies. In particular, his idea of the 'micro physics of power' has resonance with how the female body is located within a nexus of patriarchal relations and what has been termed a 'colonizing culture' (Morgan 1994). For example, within work in Geography on food consumption, Valentine (1999) concludes that:

"The dominant discourses around food and eating in contemporary western society are associated with ascetic practices of discipline and self-control. These discourses operate through processes of shaming which are mobilised by the surveillant gaze of others in these spaces (partners, parents, employers, etc) and by a fear of the material consequences of ignoring the regulatory regimes and practices in these environments" (p.347).

There is a tendency within applications of Foucault's work to women's wider life experiences to situate their practices within a dichotomous economy of domination or resistance. I would suggest that this is precisely the theoretical stance that Valentine uses to understand her empirical work. However, as Foucault (1977) considers there are "...innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of power relations" (p.27). The 'docile body' is not a victim but wholly immersed in its own production(s) and "able to choose among the discourses

and practices available to it to use creatively” (Sawacki 1991 p.104). Again, as Foucault (1977) reiterates

“power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic position – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them” (Foucault 1977 p. 26-27).

Undoubtedly there have been many feminist critiques of Foucault’s work due to the bodily neutrality of his work, the very nature of the surveillance that he describes (see Chapter Seven for a further discussion of this work) and a wider concern that despite claims to the contrary, universal assumptions creep into his poststructuralist work. Bartky (1990) instead points towards the particularity of women’s bodily discipline, summarised as follows:

“Feminine bodily discipline has this dual character: On the one hand, no one is marched off for electrolysis at the end of a rifle, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed by countless women in an attempt to master the rituals of beauty” (Bartky 1990 p.75).

Bartky (1990) despite this awareness of the specificities of female experience, focuses on the significance of the discipline of “an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination” (ibid). However, other feminist theorists point towards the need to recognise women’s “capacities, abilities and strengths” (Hartsock 1990 p.158) and the space that Foucault’s notion of power through a genealogical narrative gives women the ‘freedom to disengage’ (Sawicki 1991) from a so-called ‘colonizing culture’ (Morgan 1994). A more recent example of this shift in understanding the experiences of women’s embodied consumption practices recent work by health promoters suggest it is important to move away from a weight centred approach to health to a health-centred approach to by avoiding dieting (Cogan and Ernsberger 1999). Moreover, Hopwood (1995) in her discussion of various weight loss strategies introduces the idea of particular therapeutic approaches to weight loss as ‘empowering’ which provides “...an expansion of choices and an increased capacity to resist discursive effects” (p.79). She goes on to say that “(T)his may come from greater knowledge about the self, the development of personal resources or skills, the opportunity for critical assessment of dominant discourses, and/or the presence of a supportive community” (Hopwood 1995 p.79)

In this sense, weight loss involves shifting the subject, reconstituting the subject and an inherent awareness of bodily experience not simply bodily discourse. Kathy Davis' (1995) work on the narratives of women who elect to have cosmetic surgery has resonance with a focus on practice as opposed to bodily surface. Like myself, she has difficulties reconciling a critique of the so called female beauty system and 'women' as 'a normalised victim of disciplinary regimes' (p.105) with the stories women tell of their embodied experience before and after surgery. She places the practices of cosmetic surgery precisely within the tensions of feminine embodiment or "the objectification of women as 'just bodies' and the desire of the female subject to act upon the world" (p.115-116). This in turn allows the women to negotiate a sense of self and relationship with her own embodiment akin to Hopwood's (1995) idea of empowerment. What is also interesting about Davis' (1995) work is that women who have cosmetic surgery are not necessarily searching for 'perfection' but instead want to 'feel normal'. Therefore, the aim of cosmetic surgery is to experience some form of projected, imagined and desired normalised body within their own personal capabilities and desires. In contrast to feminist critiques, therefore, there is nothing inevitable about women's experiences of cosmetic surgery or indeed the discourses and practices of slimming. In Bordo's (1993) words "we desperately need an effective political discourse about the female body, a discourse adequate to an analysis of the insidious, and often paradoxical, pathways of modern social control" (p.167)

4.2 Realising the 'slimming body'

In realising the slimming body, therefore, I want to introduce some of the ways that 'slimming' as practice and ideology came into being through talk surrounding clothes shopping. I have chosen three examples of individual and groups of women in order to illustrate the multiplicity of embodied experiences and narratives. The examples are also organised in order of the degree of 'engagement' they have in slimming practices. In other words the degree to which they are currently engaged in slimming practices. The first group of women are reflecting on slimming as a practice they have engaged with in the past but realised in the present through their immediate lived realities. The second woman has recently been to Weight Watchers³, lost weight and regained some of that weight. Thirdly I have spoken to women who are currently member or employees of Dietdays whom I expected to have closer investments with the specific discourses and practices of that slimming organisation. Therefore, this chapter will present slimming by suggesting a move away from traditional feminist critiques of 'the dieting industry' and argue for a more embodied and experiential interpretation of talk and practices of

³ Weight Watchers is a slimming organisation, similar to Dietdays, that is organised around weekly group meetings (see www.weightwatchers.co.uk)

slimming through clothing consumption “not as individual pathologies but as culturally, politically and discursively located forms of embodiment and body management” (Crewe 2001 p.634).

The group of women I am about to introduce you to are co-workers at a playgroup in the south east of England and have all worked with each other over the period of at least ten years. All the women are in their late fifties, apart from Sandra who is eighty three years old and are friends in that they do meet socially outside of work. The interview took place over lunch. This proximity to each other in terms of friendship and the intimacy of eating together meant that the conversation flowed freely and I had the sense that the topics I was bringing up would have been things they would have talked about previously. Although my focus was on clothes shopping this talk became a vehicle for exploring their experiences of slimming and body transition. I have used lengthily extracts of talk to avoid abstracting sentences and quotations out of their context and I feel that the significance of group interaction here is central to understanding the formation of individual embodiments in relation to each other.

4.2.1 remembering bodies

In this section I will begin by introducing you to the kind of embodied talk common to many of my interviews which makes explicit the links between size, slimming and feelings. This particular group of women have bodily histories in which they are used to experiencing their bodies as dynamic and constantly changing and in flux, in relation to gaining and losing weight and changes in body shape.

Chris: It doesn't matter what size you are it's how you feel about yourself and that's why a lot of this you're doing

Rachel: That's kind of what I'm interested in personally and like for my research

Pat: But I have to say I'm not happy with myself..

Sandra: NO no no no

Chris: No I'm not either..oh I'd like to be a size twelve I would

Sandra: Now bear in mind...

Rachel: Why is that?

Chris: because I was a size twelve and when I was a size twelve I really felt good you know my whole image changed I lost weight I dyed my hair I got married.....and I lived happily

ever after in inverted commas as you do you know and so I remember that era as being very pleased with myself..being eight and a half stone when I was married was like.....

Sandra: (interrupts) bear in mind that I'm old enough to be everyone's mother or grandma here..when you get to my age your size doesn't matter so much..it really doesn't...

Chris: No

Sandra: you just have to look round for something that you're going to look alright in sort of thing...I don't worry so much I mean you (Pat) said you wished you were....

Pat: I mean I'd only be a sixteen I would never be smaller..

Sandra: yeah I expect I wished I..

Pat: Cos then I'd feel more confident in myself

Chris: Yeah

Sandra: ..as long as I'm well I don't really mind

Chris: I think as long as you've got your health really is the main thing but it's the media and the television and the magazines and the newspapers...

Interview with Playgroup Workers 3rd March 2000

Chris, Pat and Sandra talk about each other's relationship to specific clothes and clothes sizing as articulated within periods of body weight gain and loss. Chris in particular connects being a size twelve with her wedding day⁴ and as being 'pleased with herself'. Pat describes being unhappy with herself and wanting to be a sixteen however Sandra seems more concerned with 'looking alright' and not worrying about 'it' so much at her age. Chris, meanwhile, battles with her own feelings about being healthy and being slimmer making vague links between her own feelings and the media.⁵ However, it's obvious from her previous talk surrounding her wedding day that it is not only the media that informs her present concerns about her own body. Slimming practices are important to these women as something they have engaged with in the past but when reflecting on these pasts they are connecting these practices and bodily changes

⁴ Further work on women's relationship with their wedding dresses Friese (2001) focuses on the meanings behind the purchase of the dress as being more than a symbolic object and instead "...the dress turns into a producer of meanings helping women through the various stages of the transition process into marriage" (p.68).

with specific feelings and desires in the present. There is a complex temporality to their embodiments as bodies are remembered and re-experienced despite not being materially present. For Chris, the married body is an absent presence or 'haunting' (Behnke 2002) as she attempts to come to terms with her contemporary embodiments. This body is not physically present but is brought into being as a means to make sense of her current relationship with her body. This illustrates the need not just to take the weighty materiality (Longhurst 2001) of bodies seriously when considering female embodiment and instead to consider how absent bodies can be materially felt (see Chapter Seven).

It is also important to notice the way that Chris and Pat distance themselves from their concerns with weight loss in relation to Sandra, who I learn outside of the interview has had breast cancer (she mentions at the end of the interview as being content with 'being well'). The connections between ageing and death and the consuming body, are often theorised, as Featherstone (1991) highlights, as "...unwelcome reminders of the inevitable decay and defeat that are in store, even for the most vigilant of individuals" (p.186). In this way, consumption requires a bodily vigilance to defend against mortality or a need to deny its inevitability through a variety of bodily practices including exercise and slimming. However, in this instance women are forced to prioritise their concerns about their own bodies and weight loss desires in relation to Sandra's experience of serious illness. Sandra professes that size doesn't matter so much when you're older precisely because of her brush with mortality. Moreover, she is suggesting that embodied looking practices change orientation with age to a less oppressive evaluation of their own bodies. (This will be discussed further in Chapter Seven). Therefore, these women's bodily narratives are inflected with a form of ethical decision making that demands a reprioritisation of bodily desires in the face of mortality. Stearns (1997) remarks that "...dieting is fascinating beyond its role as a daily constraint because of what it may say about other moral uncertainties in modern life (p.247) and I would argue that critiques of the dieting industry need to situate these practices within the wider context of women's lives and their past slimming experiences.

4.2.2 clothing as a material/emotional indicator

In this section I want to build on the section of the group narrative mentioned above to consider the emotional and material significance of clothing to 'the slimming body'

⁵ 'The Media' is often positioned within literature on 'body image' as the reason for women's preoccupation with bodily size and texture. For examples of research which questions this notion see Thompson and Heinberg (1999).

We enter the conversation here as the topic of weight loss and weight gain is introduced through the premise of asking about whether there are times they prefer not to try on clothes.

Pat:.. you just go through spells when you really do feel big and you just don't wanna do anything..you just wanna..'I don't wanna look for clothes I'm not in the mood'

Sandra: yeah..especially when you can't find anything to fit you and you think you're a freak...

Chris: Yes

Pat: Yes

Sandra: You really do

Chris: and you see that all goes back to and we were watching a programme on anorexia last night and it all goes back to food...doesn't it and you get so frustrated when you see people and they say 'well I eat anything and I don't put on any weight'..

Pat: ...well there are people like that....

Chris: yes and it just doesn't seem fair does it

Pat: ...four sugars in a coffee and a Mars bar a day and they're skinny as a rake

Chris: yeah

Sandra: ..does it really matter what size we are

Helen:..but then you've got to look back at your own family

Chris: I think deep down it doesn't matter..theoretically it doesn't matter but socially and emotionally it does..

Pat: (interrupts) It does it does because why do we say we are much more confident if we lose the weight...

Chris: That's right we are we are I don't care what you say we ARE..

Pat:...I was much more confident when I lost my weight and I..it was just different..

Chris: (interrupts) I agree with you Pat I do

Sandra: All I can say is that when you get older it doesn't matter so much..

Chris:...so when does it kick in when you're about sixty?

Sandra:...um probably a bit later than that..probably in your late sixties mind you don't forget I was very ill at one time so now I'm only too pleased...

Interview with Playgroup Workers 3rd March 2000

From this extract you are introduced to a number of ways that weight loss and gain, clothing consumption and embodiment are enmeshed with each other. Here the women discuss body sizes and in particular Chris and Pat try to resolve their feelings about their own bodies. When clothing doesn't 'fit' in the literal sense, Sandra is a 'freak' but when Pat 'feels big' she experiences an emotional body unable to even try on clothes. What is especially interesting to me is that Chris tries to reconcile her personal preoccupation with size with knowing it shouldn't matter; it doesn't matter 'theoretically' but it does 'socially and emotionally'. This ambivalent statement suggest that when reflecting on her body in the abstract it does not matter to Chris but when made to confront bodies such as in a changing room or on television or on the pages of magazines her bodily realities are brought into being and are felt. Therefore they DO matter. The idea of being and feeling introduces the flux between material and emotional ways of self knowing as an "awareness of the wholly subjective component of self, that is, feeling states, as well as the reflective dimension of giving meaning to felt awareness" (Tomm 1992 p.102). The women are essentially evaluating slimming practices in relation to their individual bodily contexts. Pat and Chris agree on feeling more confident when they had lost weight in the past. Chris questions Sandra, the oldest woman in the group as to when feeling different about your body 'kicks in'.

Slimming, is understood as a set of simultaneous emotional and material trade offs between particular bodily sensations i.e. being and feeling their bodies. Within this in-body talk, slimming bodies are desired and despised, experienced as pleasurable and unattainable and unfair and as being (un)healthy. In this case the impending mortality of bodies is brought to the fore implying an inevitability to women's experiences of their bodies, particularly with regard to Sandra's illness. As Hopwood (1995) suggests:

"(S)ubjective experience has no essential shape: we are being positioned and repositioned within discursive contexts all the time, subject to our capacity for making choices and resisting" (p.80).

4.3 Shopping with Kate

Kate is a woman in her mid thirties who I was introduced to by a mutual friend who felt she would be interested in taking part in my project. During this first informal introduction, Kate talked at length about her recent experiences of slimming with *Weight Watchers* and how she had lost a lot of weight. She also said she was finding it difficult being away from home

because she could not regulate her diet and exercise as easily. Her honesty struck me and yet surprised me because despite having a similar academic background to me, she seemed to have no critical engagement with 'slimming' per se. I learnt a valuable lesson here in not to expect anything inevitable about how women negotiate their relationships with weight loss or gain!

4.3.1 actualising slimming through shopping practice

In the previous section I talked about the importance of group narratives in the explication of 'slimming', however 'going shopping' involves attributing more attention to practice and talk on practice as mediated by my own reflections during the research process. A recent shift within the consumption literature reformulates the role of shopping in the constitution not merely reflection of existing social relations and suggests that "the act of shopping is actually about something else entirely" (Gregson et al 2002 p.598). Therefore, the practices of clothes shopping, as observed and narrated through accompanied shopping, becomes a means to understand 'slimming embodiments'. Moreover, my own interpretations and experiences became central to Kate's own embodied experiences of clothes shopping as did the importance of particular consumption moments in the actualisation of particular embodied states.

The following extracts document Kate trying on a dress in Next.

Women were scrabbling round me to look at clothes on the rack and I was just writing and watching to make sure Kate didn't catch me at it. However in mid scribble Kate called to me and I threw everything into my bag and followed her in. She was walking very fast down the middle aisle and dived into the changing room. She said that the dress looked awful but that she thought she should show me. It was too tight on the stomach and she could tell from this that she needed to lose a couple of pounds. She stroked round her tummy and touched the sides of her waist to show this. I also said that it was gapping at the middle and there seemed to be a lot of material. She agreed and said she was high waisted. I nodded in empathy and that her boobs didn't fit into the v-neck design on the dress. She hoisted them up and laughed but they didn't fit into the dress. I sensed that she may be a bit pissed off with this as the dress wouldn't fit and might have done before. However she said she just wanted to show me and then got dressed.

Shopping with Kate 31st July 2001

When trying on a dress, Kate is experiencing her body in a number of ways. Firstly as something that 'doesn't fit', similar to Chris' comments, in terms of the fabric of the dress

clinging too tightly to her body. Secondly, in relation to this, her body is split into specific problematic areas, the stomach, her waist and her breasts. Thirdly, her body is 'touched', not only by the fabric but by her own hands ('she stroked round her tummy and touched the side of her waist'). The movement of the fabric laying close to her skin to the inside fleshiness of her body bits, motivated this need to slim. All this occurs through a singular moment of consumption.

Finally, and most importantly, she views her body as in need of reduction ('she needed to lose a couple of pounds'), thus reaffirming her comments about having put on weight since leaving Weight Watchers. The practices of clothing consumption produce her body as a body that doesn't conform to sizing and is in constant tension with the clothing being tried on. Another extract from my diary based on trying on in Marks and Spencers changing room reads:

She said that obviously if she lost a few pounds then the sixteen would fit better and if she bought the eighteen she would have to take in the arms if she got slimmer. Here again she was imagining her future body but her body in a month not years ahead!

Shopping with Kate 31st July 2001

This presents her consideration of possible and potential bodies but that there's nothing inevitable or permanent about this future. Dress alteration would only occur when her body changed shape and became the 'before' body again. Thus indicating again the capacity of non-material bodies to have a material affect on contemporary embodiments.

In the interview held over lunch she talks with me about this particular experience:

Kate:for example when I first put that dress on where did we go first Next....that lilac dress...I wouldn't have if we weren't doing this kind of shopping experience and I felt part of it is to say to you 'look this is like this and it doesn't fit' I wouldn't have even stepped out of that cubicle because I just knew I looked awful in it and things and..whereas you wouldn't have that anxiety in a Marks and Spencers changing room

Rachel: no

Kate: because you can just the person who you want to show would be in there

Rachel: would be there yeah

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001

This extract provides more depth to understanding the specific nature of the experience, not only the pain involved as I had sensed and written in my diary but also the active nature of Kate's performance for my benefit. Part of this experience of trying on was to show me these awful moments and to let me into the experience with her.

4.3.2. self realisation

As the interview progressed Kate began to place her slimming practices within the wider context of her life by pin-pointing particular consumption moments which have taken on significant meaning to her now. In the following extract she connects trying on jeans with a point in her life eight years ago when she met her partner which is similar to the bodily symbolism of the wedding dress as Chris talked about earlier.

Kate: it's totally different I mean I know I have put weight back on and I'm not a hundred percent happy with how I look and I'd like to get back down to where my goal weight was cos I felt much happier about that and I was going to the gym a lot more and I felt fitter and better and I'm going back to the gym this week cos I've had this time of not being able to go cos I've not been very well....um.....but yeah it was just such a brilliant feeling when I sort of shopping I mean I remember a long time ago about eight years ago I'd lost lots of weight and I hadn't realised cos I'd done it sort of relatively slowly um cos I hadn't been doing it in a measured way like I had done this time but I went um to (.....) and I met my um partner so I was very excited about that and wondering what was going to happen and I went into Gap I thought hmm I think I'll try some black jeans on and I can't tell you the feeling of when I put them on and I zipped them up and they looked....and I walked straight out into the middle of the shop to look in the big mirrors you know um and the woman said 'oh they look really good' they cos she's helped me choose style and size and things like that so they looked really good I said 'you have no idea what this means to wear these cos I've just lost loads of weight and I can't believe I can get in size twelve jeans' you know and I've still got them and um I did get into them two months ago but I wouldn't get into them (laughs) now but I will in a couple of weeks but it makes such a difference because you look at something and it looks as it looks on the hanger I mean it's not always perfect it didn't mean I could get into everything I wanted to but it just it just opens up your choices much more

Rachel: yeah

Kate: and that was good and it was just about feeling I look more like me really

Rachel: yeah

Kate: I used to look at myself and think THAT'S NOT ME ACTUALLY (hesitant laugh)

Rachel: yeah

Kate: it's my me on somebody else's body

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001

Kate brings to the context of the interview a remembered embodied experience when trying on a pair of size twelve jeans. Like Chris' relationship to her wedding dress, this pair of jeans epitomises a time of happiness and 'excitement' for Kate, which she seems to experience as intensely as she did eight years ago. However, her bodily temporality is brought forward again as she imagines her body fitting into these jeans, 'perhaps in a couple of months' when she gets down to her 'goal weight'⁶. Moreover, it is obvious that the jeans are more than a pair of trousers and instead are an indicator of selfhood when she talks about 'looking and feeling herself' in those jeans. During periods of weight gain Kate describes seeing herself on somebody else's body; from the neck down she is not herself, but below that her body is malleable and can be returned to her true 'self'. This also implies a geography to the parts of the body in which Kate has emotional investments. The body below the neck is disliked and unrecognisable yet also has the potential to be changed and become, part of her-self again. This is explored in more detail in Chapter Six which focuses on the fragmented nature of female embodied experience as 'zoned' in to particular regions which have particular corporeal significance.

Therefore, the slimming body here is not just an embodied state, pinned like clothing to flesh but is a malleable absent presence which haunts the present body but has the potential to be actualised again through slimming practices. She tells me 'I have the confidence of knowing it works once it worked very well so I can do it again it's just right for me'. Therefore these moments of consumption in the changing room are precarious for selfhood because just as Kate can always slim to fit her true self so she can put on weight, as she has already indicated to me she has. Her past body haunts this changing room moment. Therefore, a slimming body is always fearful of return to past embodiments and in this instance, clothing marks a boundary for Kate as 'the visible envelope of self' (Entwistle 2001 p.37). Kate tells me:

so I'm a bit nervous at the moment cos I'm putting weight back on so but I'm no where near as big as I was at all I mean it's a good job cos I've given all my clothes away

⁶ As part of the Weight Watchers programme each slimmer is asked to provide a goal weight which they negotiate with their group leader. This can be related to the Body Mass Index although more likely associated to a women's prior weight or that perceived by the individual to be their own desirable weight.

(laughs) but I'm never going back to that again it was unhealthy and um I hurt my back and it was not good and I won't do it again.

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001

Slimming, therefore, is a fluid bodily modality which is unable to be typologies because of the multiple presence of past and present bodies which 'haunt' consumption moments.

4.4 Institutionalised Slimming

4.4.1 Background to 'Dietdays'

Dietdays is a British slimming organisation which claims to have had three million members since its foundation thirty years ago and today holds over five and a half thousand meetings every week (Dietdays 2002). I decided to contact them in order to carry out interviews with women who were currently engaged in slimming practices, or as I have termed earlier are high investors in slimming at the time of interviewing. My PhD has had a tendency to spill out into a number of spaces and as part of the recruitment process I attended meetings once a week for three months (July to September 2001) in order to get to know the women and to recruit some of them for interviews. The context of the meetings is central to how the women negotiate their slimming embodiments within the specificity of the discourses and practices of the Dietdays programme. In addition to carrying out interviews I also wrote a research diary of my experiences of the Dietdays meetings which will be used to complement my interviews within this section.

The Dietdays meeting I attended was run by Debbie who is also on the Dietdays programme which is a prerequisite for all employees. The meeting lasts for an hour, in which women are weighed individually and their weight loss or gain is recorded on a record card by Debbie. The women pay £3.95 and are also encouraged to buy the monthly magazine and a variety of Dietdays books and food. The women also contribute money to a raffle which is drawn at the beginning of the meeting and also bring fruit or other 'diet foods' which are placed in a basket and then given to the Slimmer of the Week. After everybody has been weighed Debbie starts the meeting, which it is not compulsory to attend, drawing the raffle, announcing the Slimmer of the Week and then talks with the group about a specific topic. For example, when I was there the topics included, how to manage the Dietdays programme when on holiday and also getting each woman to provide a specific recipe with the group. The group are also encouraged to share their slimming experiences individually as Debbie talks about each person's weight loss, gain or maintenance for that week.

Looking back at my research diary it is interesting to note my first reactions to sitting with this group of women:

I smiled at everyone that came in because they all stared at me wondering who I was, whether I was a new member and if not what was I doing there. I wondered if they were assessing my weight and judging how much I wanted to lose. I looked down at my dress which was pulling on my thighs and felt a little uncomfortable. I actually felt like joining as everyone seemed so happy to be losing weight and I wanted to be a part of it I also felt extremely uncomfortable about being there when I was critically engaging in everything that was going on around me. A confusing situation.

Research Diary Dietdays Meeting 17th July 2001

There was a sense of belonging here that I wasn't expecting. The women talked openly and articulately about their experiences and the therapeutic model of the group surprised me. It became hard to stick to my feminist critiques when women obviously got pleasure from weight loss or used the group as an emotional outlet to talk about looking after their sick parents or an impending operation.

In total I carried out two focus groups with members of the group and one interview with Debbie the group leader (see Methodology Chapter for more on the recruitment process), on which I will draw on the following two sections. My intention was to see if there are any differences in engagements with discourses surrounding slimming which I have discussed previously.

4.4.2 'before(s) and after(s)

Of particular importance to the rhetoric of Dietdays is the use of before and after photographs. They are displayed at the meeting for the group to see and picture men and women who have achieved weight loss which are mostly over two stones. They are presented as before and after photographs, which pin bodies to two specific moments (see Plate 1 for an example from the Dietdays monthly magazine.) You never see the in-between and subsequent after bodies and these particular embodiments are solidified through weight quantities and dress sizes (for women). As Bigwood (1998) states:

“Our living present is torn between a past that it takes up and a future that it projects. There is more being beyond what I sense at this moment because my incarnate existence takes place within the indeterminate horizons of space and time. (p.107).

Carol and Jan, both in their fifties, are two women that I met at my first meeting. Carol had been coming to the meeting for two years and lost over two stone whereas Jan, her friend had only been coming a year and has lost 'a bit of weight'. The interview took place during an actual Dietdays meeting which was an interesting experience as at some points other women would come and chat to Jan and Carol not realising I was doing an interview. However, it did serve as a constant reminder of where we were and what they were doing there. Both of these women seemed to have a preoccupation with the before(s) and after(s) bodies as we talked about clothes shopping:

Jan: but like Carol says you don't wear those now all I'm looking to buy at the moment now is a ur a new pair of black trousers new pair of blue trousers we were talking about this the other day it's like a uniform um I've got black jackets blue jackets a red jacket

Rachel: laughs

Jan: black and white dog two checked jacket

Rachel: yeah

Jan: SO I'm looking to buy a new black sweater a blue sweater a red sweater and a camel sweater

Rachel: it's like your new uniform

Jan: and that's me done that'll do me right until next Spring

Rachel: yeah yeah

Jan: and um

Rachel: is that like what you were saying you were waiting for until you've lost more weight

Jan: yeah yeah we'll have to be getting down because we both own a pair of trousers that are too big (laughs) don't we

Rachel: oh do you?

Jan: we need trousers

Carol: we need trousers

Rachel: yeah yeah

Carol: tops we can get away with I think can't we

Jan: I can fit in some of me smaller trousers that were too tight so that were too tight so that were a bit of a bonus

Rachel: so have you got a lot of clothes in your wardrobe that you do fit you don' fit you know that are a lot of different sizes

Jan: I haven't so much now I've had a good clear out I mean I've only lot a bit of weight

Carol: she wasn't as heavy as me anyway

Jan: so I'm just keep wearing the clothes I've already got anyway

Rachel: yeah yeah

Jan: but some of them just bury me

Rachel: yeah

Carol: some I can hold them out like this (gestures)

Dietdays Meeting Sheffield 18th September 2001

The women talk about their bodies here as a postponement of future embodiments. They are currently 'in-between' the before and after bodies and therefore wait to buy more clothes and start getting rid of old clothes that are now too big. In addition, whilst in the before and after photographs (see Plate 1) you have a sense of the different styles of clothes associated with particular bodies i.e. big and baggy to fitted and clingy. Jan talks about wearing a 'uniform' of jackets, sweaters and trousers whilst she is slimming just as women involved in Guy and Banim's (2000) study of women's relationships to the clothes in their wardrobes suggests that women stressed "the need to be vigilant because of the shifting body shape that they had" (p.320). For Jan this also suggests that she covers up and makes her body respectable for a woman of her current size. Jan later talks about wanting to buy a dress next Summer when her body will be 'ready' to be dressed in such a way. She states:

"...: we're still sort of wearing those clothes and I've promised myself that next Summer I'll go and buy meself a new Summer dress because these are doing me now are too big and then I'll go out and do it"

This illustrates that slimming bodies are transitional bodies and clothing has a role in 'marking' the shifts in bodily boundaries. They are constantly made aware of their bodies in transition through clothing and as the fabric on the body becomes too big, the space between the body and the fabric materialises her past bodies. For example Carol talks about trousers that bury her and Jan fits into pairs of her old trousers that didn't used to fit her.

However, whilst these women are imagining their future bodies, Debbie's body temporality is reversed as she talks about how she negotiates her bodily pasts when shopping for clothes. For her clothing is a constant reminder of the body she used to be and also the body she wants to have. This is different to the idea of postponement as experienced by Jan and Carol above and instead these before and afters are an unwelcome presence for Debbie rather than a reminder of how much weight she has lost on the Dietdays programme.

Debbie: I HATE SHOPPING AT THE MOMENT cos I've put on a lot of weight I've lost a weight I've lost three and a half stone but nine and a half stone I went down to and I gained a lot of weight...over eight years

R: yeah

D: and when I've lost weight and gained it back it's awful going shopping cos all you're looking at all the time is what you used to wear

Interview with Debbie 22nd August 2001

Kent (2001) comments about the 'fat body' that it "...is endlessly present in its representation as *past*. It is drawn back, recalled, referred to again and again, only to be cast out again; and through that casting out, it forms the margins defining the good body, the thin body that bears the mark of the self's discipline" (Kent 2001 p.136). In relation to this observation, the presence of clothing displayed within shops is enough to activate this past body in the present. Debbie does not speculate on what she feels 'awful' about but we can infer that it relates to how she feels about the materiality of her present body in relation to her past bodies. Moreover, the longevity of this process is revealed as Debbie admits to gaining and losing weight over a period of eight years. Therefore these periods of weight loss and weight gain can shift the materiality of her own body or again as Kent (2001) describes it as 'drawn back, recalled, referred to again and again'.

However, Debbie's narrative also reveals another problematic in establishing bodily boundaries during periods of weight loss as she describes to me the difficulties she had when buying clothing after losing five stones eight years ago:

Rachel: knowing what you look good in and what will fit you and God it must be a real shock to the system

Debbie: yeah...see it's not I don't suppose like I lost five stone...

Rachel: see that's a lot

Debbie: yeah eight years ago and I did it in ten months it's as a short space of time but um I lived in the same clothes as I did before til I'd lost at least four stone

Rachel: really why do you think that was?

Debbie: I DON'T KNOW I don't know....whether

Rachel: did you not believe that it'd happened

Debbie:.....you NEVER feel that you're a thin person anyway no matter how much weight a big person will never feel like a thin person they'll feel a lot better about themselves but they won't ever...I don't know you just never

Rachel: no I agree with that

Debbie:...I can remember going into a shop with my Mum I was going to a wedding and I picked this dress up I think it was a size twenty two twenty four

Rachel: yeah

Debbie: and she said Debbie for goodness sake you'll you don't need that dress and I said course I do and I went in and I got in the fourteen

Rachel: wow

Debbie: and it was very straight with buttons up and I couldn't believe that was from Evans

Interview with Debbie 22nd August 2001

This before and after story is complex as here Debbie, in a 'before' body talks about her previous experiences of being an 'after body' i.e. one that has been reduced. Debbie describes the difficulties she had in understanding her new 'after' body. She continues to wear the 'before' clothes because she cannot come to terms with her new self. Clothes sizing, previously a indicator of self becomes problematic as the slimming body has transgressed her previous knowledge of self as big. It is hard to leave this past body behind and Debbie says a fat person will never feel like thin person, perhaps indicating that pounds on and off are a remembered materiality and not ever completely removed from her bodily existence. This has resonance with Margaret Shildrick's (2002) recent theorisation of the monstrous as a disruptive force for uncovering and rethinking "a relation with the standards of normality that proves to be uncontainable and ultimately unknowable" (p.1). She continues:

“Although what counts as normative, and indeed as monstrous, is always caught up in historically and culturally specific determinants, what matters here is that those two concepts remain locked in a mutually constitutive relationship. The monstrous, then is a necessary signifier, a signifier that is of normality, of a self that is constructed discursively against what is not, and yet, as I have indicated, that is nonetheless unstable. The apparent security of the binary self/non-self that guarantees the identity of the selfsame is irrevocably displaced by the necessity that the subject be defined by its excluded other” (Shildrick 2002 p. 29-30).

4.4.4 Living Slimming

As slimmers, women exist in this transitional embodied state where they are constantly reminded of the befores and the afters but have to manage an altogether different embodied experience that of slimming itself. Critiques of the dieting industry tend to focus more widely or abstractly on ‘women’s condition’ however none seem to focus on what the actual experience of slimming is. Within the Dietdays group interaction, there was constant awareness of everybody’s lived realities of dieting; that on occasion you would ‘pig out’ and sometimes you would fancy a biscuit or three! Therefore, women were not always considering the potential for their bodies to fit into, or not, particular items of clothing and deferred this potential in favour of eating fattening food. Moreover, many women there were not first time dieters and there was an unsaid awareness that slimming was something that you could return to and that inevitably ‘failed’. Below is an extract from my diary describing my attempts to recruit a group member which positioned me face to face with this kind of talk.

I started explaining what I was doing and gave specific examples about clothing like the inconsistency of clothing and getting things to fit body parts. She nodded and added that they don’t seem to make tight trousers for women with big thighs which she thought was bad. I agreed and I then went one step further and said about waist bands and showed her the gap on my skirt like some of my interviewees have done as well. She laughed and said she knew what I mean. I asked her how long she had been coming and she said this was her third group. She had lost weight in the past and then put it back on and joined another group but this time it was for keeps and she was sticking to it.

Research Diary Dietdays Meeting 17th July 2001

In this instance a sense of humour is used to face the inevitability of dieting not working, particularly as most of the women were not new to dieting and their presence at a slimming

group only served to reiterate that they had been here before. However, this was not articulated simply as an example of failure for not adhering to the diet and instead there were elements of camaraderie and a therapeutic semblance to their discussion. Women encouraged each other and supported each other if they had maintained or gained weight that particular week. Women also shared the complexities of their wider lives and I recall particular instances when a woman discussed the recent death of her mother and another talked at length about her fears of an impending operation on her foot. Whilst this was not therapy on a professional level, slimming was not the only reason these women were there. Debbie the group leader was well aware of this fact and in particular the connections between eating and emotional moments:

course you do like when it's stressful times most of us comfort eat you know and there's no point telling them well you shouldn't do that (laughs)

This echoes Valentine's (1999a) work on eating in the spaces of the home which identifies the place that food has in people's lives as "a comforting sensation that compensates for feelings of boredom, loneliness, illness or emotional troubles" (p.334). Moreover, in her analysis of NutriSystem (a food supplement slimming programme) literature Hopwood (1995) states that there is little space provided to question the idea that thin is good. She feels that this privileges rational and unified consciousness and "the extent that women experience difficult or intense feelings and find sustaining self-control problematic, this discourse provides no real opportunity to go beyond the behaviour to an underlying meaning" (Hopwood 1995 p.72). The similarities with the experiences of Dietdays slimmers are clear, however the need for a general underlying meaning is again less a force applicable to all women and instead is more contextually significant such as a foot operation or the death of a loved one. That is not to dismiss those arguments about the existence of female malady as a result of patriarchal relations (Wolf 1991) but to re-orientate them to allow for alternative geographies of embodied existence that spill out from the body.

Another example of this awareness of self/selves is what Kate describes as 'cognitive therapy'. Below is an extract from an interview when she explains how she deals with her embodiment within the context of a changing room.

Kate: things like that oh yeah yeah and to really counter it I read this thing on cognitive therapy and I countered it it was suggested to me and I taught myself that you counter it by remembering something that somebody's said to you that's positive and it gets you through that barrier cos otherwise sometimes I've got paralysed and not been able to go into a shop or get out of one (laughs nervously) cos I get into the changing room and think I can't walk out again it doesn't happen now but it happened up until three or four or five years ago

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001

In this sense, a cognitive therapy approach allow Kate to cope with her emotional responses to being in changing room which supports empirically what Foucault (1979) has termed 'confrontations' or 'inversions' of dominant power relations i.e. in this context the surveying looking relations of being in a changing room. Feminist authors have already contextualised women's reactions to dominant cultural norms as protest (Orbach 1997) and freedom in the case of eating disorders. However these ideas of liberation and pleasure are received with scepticism as Bordo (1993) states "To *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities (1993 p.149). Contrary to this view, Davis (1997) focuses more on the choices available to women in their negotiation of bodily consumption practices and suggests that it is also important to "uncover the myriad ways that women engage in subversion, in and through their bodies. And it is mandatory that feminist scholarship takes an explicitly political stance, but also avoids being moralistic or overly-political, thereby ignoring the aesthetic features of contemporary body practices" (Davis 1997 p.15). When understanding slimming, therefore, it is crucial to understand what it means and feels to engage in slimming practices rather than suggesting at the symbolism of those practices for supporting a dominant patriarchal culture.

4.5 Conclusions

In returning to Davis' (1995) work on cosmetic surgery, there is an obvious correlation between her need to situate the narratives of women's experiences of cosmetic surgery with that of women's embodied talk surrounding slimming. This chapter has illustrated the benefit of a nuanced and in-depth understanding of bodily practices, in this case 'slimming', for liberating women's bodies from reductionist positions of domination and subversion. As Grosz (1994) reminds us, it is more useful to "regard the body as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undesirably at the pivotal point of binary pairs" (Grosz 1994 p.23) such as victim versus resister or in the context of Dietdays before(s) and after(s) bodies. These bodies are in fact never wholly reducible to one state or another and it is this uncertainty that makes it hard to position women within these underlying dichotomies.

Clothing provides an interesting means through which to consider slimming in that clothing itself traces the bodily boundaries of weight loss and weight gain. It can reveal or engulf material forms and bring into being the hauntings of bodily pasts by marking with fabric the corporeal boundaries which have shifted and changed. It does this through the symbolism of numerical sizing regimes as indicators of bodily transition and the emotive connections that

clothing has to marking a past and present, before and after body(ies). For Kate and Chris this has meant the realisation of an inevitable weight gain as mediated through the re-experiencing of past (absent) bodies, for Sandra and for Debbie clothing highlighted the difficulties she has in understanding exactly the potential for what her body is or does and for Sandra weight loss becomes less important for her bodily self which is a recognition of her own mortality in relation to her experiences of breast cancer.

It has been obvious that particular trade offs have been made between being healthy and being thin and for example needing to eat food and slimming. Piggling out and feeling uncomfortable with weight gain seems to be integral to the experience of slimming. However, it could also be argued that the very fact that these women can be identified and/or self identify as slimmers means that they have succumbed to the power of pervasiveness of slenderness as ‘the’ bodily ideal to which to aspire which aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers” (Bartky 1990 p39). This account would ignore what Young (1990) terms ‘moving in shadows’ whereby “It may not be possible to extricate the liberating and valuable in women’s experience of clothes from the exploitative and the oppressive, but there is reason to try” (Young 1990 p.187). Women did not narrate their experiences as being victims, some found pleasure through slimming and watching their bodies change and grow into new and old clothes. Moreover, Kate found ways of acknowledging her anxiety and moving beyond this by removing herself from a changing room, whilst the Dietdays slimmers continue to return to the group fully aware that they have regained the weight that they originally lost, and thus used the group as a means of support and therapy as well as to weigh their bodies.

The messiness of the talk and practices of clothing consumption suggest these alternative ways of thinking through the significance of slimming to women’s bodily practices to that of collusion. Bordo (1993) calls these discourses ones that encourage us to “imagine the possibilities and close our eyes to the limits and consequences” (p.39). I would counter this claim by concluding that women **are** aware of their limits and consequences of slimming practices and indeed negotiate their own trajectories through the incoherent discourses of bodily discipline. The aim of feminist work on consumption, therefore, should not be to judge whether women should or should not be slimming but to understand how slimming as a practice is integrated within women’s experiences of consumption and their wider embodied lives.

Sizing

Chapter Five

“In my view any celebration of size diversity requires a shift away from a narrowly defined ideology in which those who don’t use politically correct language are excluded, derided and pitied. Our potential for celebration lies in the incredible diversity of the human form and the manifold ways of expressing this diversity” (Bovey 2002 p.29)

5 Introduction

Throughout the period of researching and writing my PhD there have been a number of developments within the British clothing industry that highlight the role of sizing as a numerical indicator such as 10, 12, 22, 34. Firstly, the Department of Trade and Industry commissioned a national survey in August 2001 to ascertain the average proportions of the population of Britain (Freeman 23rd August 2001 p.8). The survey involved scanning 10000 men and women, and taking 130 different measurements from each person. The professed aim of *Size UK* is to help retailers determine what proportions constitute different clothing sizes. Moreover, around the same time, Marks and Spencers, a clothing retailer, commissioned a survey of their own and measured approximately 2500 women in order to get ‘an accurate picture of the shape and size of women today’ (Marks and Spencer August/September 2000). The information was then transferred to the templates of their clothes so that the proportions reflected the shape of contemporary British women. This in turn resulted in a ‘Fit For You Range’ of clothes. Therefore, it would seem that numerical sizing has become of central importance for clothing manufacturers and retailers.

However, I feel that there is more to size than these numerical regimes when considering women’s embodied experiences of clothes shopping. As Freeman (23rd August 2001) reminds us:

“It’s not necessarily about vanity, it’s not even about a desire to be thin: clothing size has become as much a signifier of a woman’s identity and lifestyle as where she lives and what she does. And yes this is partly about body fascism and pressure from society for women to be a certain size and shape, but also because this attitude has become so pervasive it takes on an even greater significance” (p.8).

Therefore this chapter intends to work with and move beyond the meanings and associations with numerical indicators of size and to think through sizing as ‘experienced’ drawing on Iris Marion Young’s (1990) idea of experience as expressing “subjectivity, describes the feelings, motives and reactions of subjects as they affect and are affected by the context in which they are situated” (p.13). Within work on geographies of ‘the body’, terms such as big and small and fat and thin have been used in a way which concretises their material form and places them as opposites on a dichotomised scale. For example, Bell and Valentine’s (1997) book *Consuming Geographies* separates its discussion of ‘the body’ into two sections entitled ‘Places a fat body won’t let you go’ and Minimising space: anorexia’. There is no sense of how these materialities are experienced or produced in different ways, nor is there a sense that these categories are fluid and run into each other. For example the idea of feeling big but being small or being small and feeling stigmatised. Cooper (1998) describes this

tendency as “a dry and colourless distillation of the marvellous diversity of human body shape” (p.33) and I would further this by saying that the tendency of labelling bodies in this way means that the plurality of embodied experience is neglected from accounts of consumption.

A discussion of my empirical work will be split into two distinct empirical sections. The first will introduce the significance of sizing as a numerical indicator for women’s embodied experience of clothes shopping. This will highlight the emotive nature of clothes sizing as well as the complexity of understanding women’s size given the inconsistency of quantifying bodies in this way. The next section is called ‘bignesses’ in which I attempt to grapple with how it feels to be ‘big’ within the context of shopping for clothing. This understanding of ‘sizing’ engages with a far more embodied approach to sizing which requires “finding a way of representing the self that is not body-neutral or disembodied (and therefore presumptively thin) but intimately connected with the body in a new vision of embodiment that no-longer disdains the flesh” (Kent 2001 p.130-2). When discussing sizing in this way, I will engage with recent conceptualisations of ‘the grotesque’ and ‘the monstrous’ that are reticent about the apparent dichotomised nature by which the monstrous and grotesque only exist in opposition to normative bodies. Instead Shildrick (20002) argues that issues surrounding morphological diversity are ‘not reducible to sameness and difference’ (p.2) and instead postulates that “(T)he issue is not one of revaluing differently embodied others, but of rethinking the nature of embodiment itself” (ibid). I will conclude by suggesting that size can no longer be accredited to a particular numerical indicator. As Tseelson (1994) states “(B)y failing to examine the roots, conditions of production and implications of the categories themselves, such discourse affirms their ‘natural’ and ‘self-evident’ status and reproduces the power relations that sustains them’ (p.87. Instead, by focusing on the embodied experiences of size, within the context of clothing consumption, I present the ways in which women negotiate their own trajectories through these ‘power relations’ rather than their adherence to particular norms of conventional femininity.

5.1 Numerical Bodies

5.1.1 Inconsistent Sizing

Clothes sizing acts as a means of quantifying the body in a similar way to that of the ‘pounds on and pounds off’ policy of Dietdays (see Chapter Four). Numbers or numerical sizing provides the means for women to actualise through talk their body’s material form and fix it both spatially and temporally in a particular moment of looking at and trying on clothing. In Chapter Four Chris talked about being a size twelve on her wedding day which for her,

signified a moment of being content with her body and with her life. Therefore, these numbers have meaning beyond that of quantification and move into realms of past and present emotional as well as physical 'wellbeing'. However, what is different from the 'pounds on and off' approach to quantifying the body is the inconsistency of clothes sizing from shop to shop which thus provides women with a number of potentialities with which to understand their own materiality.

Women narrate this inconsistency by realising the apparent 'real' and 'unreal' sizing of their own bodies. For example Jamie, a twenty one year old student tells me that "I'm probably quite flattered if I fit into a size that I knew I blatantly wasn't but at the end of the day you know you're not that size'. Moreover, Elisabeth, a woman in her late forties goes into more detail about the significance of her body fitting into a size twelve:

Elisabeth: oh it's the sizing that's so hard with me I my idea that you could be a I mean I possess trousers that range in size from twelve to sixteen and I know that I won't fit a twelve but THEY ARE A TWELVE AND I DO FIT INTO THEM and yet most of the time I'm either fourteen or sixteen you know why can't they get it in a uniform size

Interview with National Women's Register 12th December 2000

In a sense knowing your body is about knowing your 'real' size and this becomes particularly significant when your body cheats the numerical indicators by fitting into a size that isn't really yours. Thus, in this instance, the size twelve acts as a form of template for Elisabeth's body, marking her as smaller than she 'really is'. This also works in reverse. When speaking to Debbie, the Dietdays consultant I introduced earlier, she tells me that:

....NO I try and take up trousers I mean Evans have a good idea cos they have a petite range which is bizarre you can have a petite size twenty six or size twenty or whatever but the legs are good because although they now recognise women at five foot are big women

Interview with Debbie 22nd August 2001

Debbie simultaneously can be big in terms of where she shops (Evans is a clothes shop which supplies clothes for women from size 14 to 32¹), big in terms of the clothing's numerical size ("twenty six or twenty or whatever") and can also be petite in terms of her height and the specificity of their range of clothes; petite. However, labels have emotional significance for all three of these women and are far from just numbers on a hanger. What is interesting is that women know they are in some ways 'cheating the system' and their own body knowledges reach beyond that which they are told in a shopping context. Women I have spoken to also talk about going to certain stores which they knew had a generous cut so that they could fit into a smaller size than they really were. Clothing consumption, therefore, involves practices that depend on intimate body knowledges as well as an awareness of the inconsistency of the products they are consuming. For example, Shelley Bovey (2002) asks the question:

What happens to women's brains when they buy clothes then? Are they really seduced so much by the idea of wearing a size 8 that they will go to the manufacturer that casts this Cinderella type wish upon them? (p.12-13).

Sizing, as a collection of multiple embodiments and practices needs to be considered for its emotional significance. Williams (2001) calls this the interpretative nature of emotions that involves a 'level of evaluation and judgement concerning the very practices themselves' (60). Valentine (1999), within the context of research on geographies of eating, labels this process as a form of 'corporeal freedom' whereby some women claim that the pleasure, deprivation and self-discipline (of dieting) 'is not worth it' (p.336) and therefore would eat what they like. I would argue that it is not freedom 'from' bodily norms that is central to women's consumption practices but it is more useful to consider that women engage in these self-reflective emotional practices which allow for their evaluation of the size they want to be.

5.1.2 Being/Feeling Sized

This notion of embodied self-reflection is a perilous affair and devoid of any certain outcome of feeling. Shildrick (2002) prefers to view this as a more liminal state whereby "(I)n seeking confirmation of our own secure subjecthood in what we are not, what we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being" (Shildrick 2002 p.1). The emotional vulnerability that emerges when coming to terms with bodily size can be empiricalised below when highlighting the practices of coping utilised by Joanna when

¹ Evans has 271 solo shops and 57 shops-in-shops in Britain as well as 19 international outlets. The clothing is also available by mail order and the Internet. (see Fearon 2000)

she shops for clothing knowing that her body has recently changed shape and size from weight gain.

When shopping with Joanna, a woman in her late thirties who has ME², the inconsistency of sizing was actualised through the specificity of her shopping practices. Joanna goes shopping using a motorised wheelchair because of her illness and consequently is unable to try on clothes in many shops because the changing rooms cannot accommodate wheelchairs. Therefore, Joanna measures clothing with a tape measure in order to guarantee that the clothing she takes home are the right size for her body. She told me that her bust measured forty two inches and because of this, tops were difficult to buy which was another reason for her measuring clothing to ensure a 'good fit'. This practice relies on knowing the dimensions of specific parts of her body. However, when shopping Joanna also used this practice as an opportunity to show me the inconsistency of sizing. The extract below describes one such instance of looking at tops in Debenhams, a department store.

Joanna wanted to look at the Casual Club range. She firstly looked at some tops on a low rail and saw a blue t-shirt that she liked. She got out her tape measure and the eighteen was too big so she picked up the sixteen which was 46 inches. She said that getting a sixteen would be a boost to her morale and laughed. This built upon what she had told me in Marks and Spencers about getting bigger over the years and never buying anything these days below a sixteen. She then picked out a vest top in size sixteen and measured across the chest. This one was forty inches and totally proved the point about the disparity in sizes, this on clothes displayed only a metre apart in the shop

Shopping with Joanna 15th May 2001

This inconsistency meant that size sixteen for Joanna was both a boost to morale and an indicator of her body having changed shape over the years. Size sixteen is both attainable and impossible for her ageing body and measuring the clothes in this way, with a tape measure, gives her a form of control as to how she will experience this materially when trying on at home. Williams (2001) states 'confronted with a difficulty or impasse of some sort, for example, emotion transforms the situation, making it somehow more 'tolerable', 'liveable' or 'bearable' (58). In this particular moment(s) of consumption the responsibility of quantifying

² M.E. (myalgic encephalomyelitis) is a potentially chronic and disabling neurological disorder, which causes profound exhaustion, muscle pain and cognitive problems such as memory loss and concentration. (For more information about ME see MacIntyre 1998).

her body was placed with Joanna, whereby she could engage in consumption practices that would enable her to feel alright about herself because clothes would fit her body rather than having to face the potential outcome of them not fitting her and feeling dissatisfied with her body because of her recent weight gain.

Although Joanna used the tape measure during her time shopping with me, she doesn't always rely on this means of measuring her body. A later diary extract reads:

Although Joanna used the tape measure today she did say that sometimes she forgot it and relied on just looking at an item sometimes if she was too tired to try it on. I think she used a mixture of 'just knowing' and actually checking physically with a tape measure to make sure it has a good chance of fitting over her breasts

Research Diary Shopping with Joanna 15th May 2001

However, I find out at a later interview that even measuring clothing in the shop cannot guarantee clothes fitting as when trying on the tops at home, they didn't always fit Joanna. Knowing your size is difficult and somewhat different from a 'being' a certain numerical size. This conjuncture always offers the potential of getting it wrong and of clothes not fitting which can be upsetting for Joanna. Moreover, when shopping, Joanna later questions me on my own feeling about sizes, bodies and clothing which reveals more about the significance she attributes to clothes sizing beyond that of quantifying her body.

Joanna looked at a top and asked me about my take on body image and sizing! I was stumped a bit because I never know where to start! I said that I didn't believe in labels of fat and thin and it's as much to do with emotional states as it is pounds and inches. She agreed and said that some days she could look in the mirror and feel fine even though she was a size sixteen but other days she could think she looked 'heavy' because she had put on weight and used to be a fourteen. While looking at the top she also suggested that perhaps manufacturers feed off women's dissatisfaction with their bodies and produce clothes that don't suit women so they never feel satisfied but always come back for more.

Research Diary Shopping with Joanna 15th May 2001

Joanna, in response to my answer to her question, narrates a deeper level of significance for sizing in that she can look in the mirror and feel different sizes at different moments. Ultimately, although sizing can be used to quantify a body, this does not account for how

women 'feel' their own size that often occurs in the moment of a look or a glance (this will be something I will explore further in Chapter Seven). Joanna feels that clothing actually encourages women to be dissatisfied with their bodies, what Ussher (1989) names 'the pedagogy of personal inadequacy' (254), because clothing consumption always offers the possibility of being a particular numerical size, this is what feeds the need to consume. Shelly Bovey (2002) comments somewhat ironically on this point that "(If just the idea of a trendy wardrobe were to set you off on a weight-loss regime, then sadly you would probably find that next season your new clothes would no longer fit. Then psychologically, you would feel like hell" (Bovey 2002 p. 101). This circular pattern of slimming to fit to slimming again situates Joanna and female consumers more generally, not as slaves to the fashion industry' and instead, I would argue' as self reflective agents of their own practices, as mentioned in relation to the slimmers in the previous chapter.

5.1.3. Multiple Sizing(s)

At this point I want to return to the interview with playgroup workers that I mentioned in the Slimming chapter. I feel that the following lengthy extract from this interview demonstrates further the plurality of sizing, not only in relation to Anna's articulation of simultaneously feeling and quantifying size but also in relation to the multiple ways in which women come to terms with sizing of bodies within the situation of a group interview.

Pat:..if you haven't lost weight they can make you feel very guilty..the slimming magazine one I did was better but the woman who did it was adamant that everybody everybody who did it needed to be a size twelve and so if you didn't put your ideal weight as anything that she...well sure you'd want to be a twelve 'I said I've never been a twelve in my life that I remember..you know..instead of saying well how much do you want to lose and be comfortable with yourself they tend to sit you down thinking you're going to be a twelve and I would never be a twelve....

Chris: You were on the way up they'll tell you..

Pat: Yeah but you know...

R: So do you think specifically about keeping yourself at a dress size?

Pat: No I wouldn't worry..

Helen: I used to be a twelve top and twelve bottom but I'm now a fourteen bottom and it doesn't bother me..

R: You don't mind

Helen: ..no I look back to my family my grandmother was a big lady and one of her daughters is a large oh I shouldn't say that..she must be a size eighteen...so therefore...

R: You can say it(to Chris)

Chris: Would you all like a cup of tea?

laughter

Helen: ..so I think at some point I may be like that..and I think so I've gone up a size but maybe that's me turning following my Dad's side of the family.....and I accept whatever...I've gone up a size..that doesn't bother me..

Chris: .but if you went up another size from a fourteen to a sixteen how would you feel..

Helen:..I don't know because I kind of look at my Dad's side of the family and think that's the way they've gone and maybe that's the way I'm gonna go...

R: Yeah

Helen: ..and you know if it is then I'm going that way..and I'm not bothered..IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME as long as I do want I want to do...

Chris: I was fat as a child I've always been fat as a child I was huge as a child..

Sandra: I don't know what the hell you're on about you're not even fat now

Chris: Oh I am Sandra

Sandra: Do we see each other with different eyes...

Chris: yes I think we do

Interview with Playgroup Workers 3rd March 2000

Here we see how women come into conflict with the significance of size as the outcome of weight loss for a slimmer, size as 'hereditary' and passed down through family bodies and the complexities of 'sizing' as a category for women's actual everyday existence. Within this interview extract, Pat challenges her slimming club's assurance that she should be a size twelve when she believes her body doesn't fit or even suit that size. This is a denial of the weight categories, such as the BMI, which drive these slimming organisations in terms of the weight that is suitable for different bodies to lose and to maintain a goal weight. In contrast Helen is quite nonchalant about her sizing and she understands her own weight gain as hereditary and inevitable in relation to her grandmother's bodily changes. For her, size

doesn't matter as long as she can do what she wants. However, the extract ends with Chris questioning Helen's comparative ease with her size and thus, discloses to the group that she has always been 'fat' and 'huge'. Chris and Helen experience the changes in their bodily size in different ways, as both inevitable and as uncomfortable and unwelcome. There is also a disjuncture between how Sandra sees Chris' body and how Chris experiences her body in relation to her bodily pasts and presents. Sandra, her friend, does not see Chris in the same way ('do we see each other with different eyes').

Sizing here is embedded in narratives of numerical sizing, inheritance, feeling a size and as a means of being 'looked at'. This calls for an account of bodily size away from more representational or textual understandings of the body as fixed categories and instead involves examining how these categories are understood, mediated and experienced through a complex web of embodied relations. Moreover, these examples provide an excellent example of what an understanding of bodies as 'morphologies' may look, feel and sound like. To reiterate, in Grosz's (1997) words body morphologies presuppose "...a productive, *changeable*, non-fixed biological substratum mapped by a social, political and familial grid of practices and meanings" (Grosz 1997 p.245). This definition alone supports my argument for an embodied, experiential and pluralised approach to sizing which takes account of the diversity and interconnections of what it means to both feel and be sized. Whilst numbers present to us a means of quantification they do not quantify the intensity of sizing in its emotive capacities.

5.2 Bignesses³

In this section I want to explore 'sizing' in recognition of the multiplicity of sizing, as mentioned above, by understanding what it feels to be big within the contexts of clothing consumption. This does not mean that I contradict my earlier reticence about fixing bodily types within bodily categories and instead I have set up an arbitrary boundary between labels such as big and small in order to present the inherent messiness of these categories in and of themselves. To reiterate what I have discussed above, the meaning of numbers and/or

³ Although I have chosen to focus on bignesses in this chapter as a means of destabilising body typologies, I want to highlight that bodily smallnesses are also central to my research and thus to understanding female embodied subjectivity. Whilst much has been written on this topic in relation to anorexia and eating disorders (see Bordo 1993), little reflection is given to those women who have difficulties shopping because of the smallness of their size. Women I spoke to and went shopping with had difficulties in finding clothes small enough for their bodies and often had to dress in children's clothing which in turn had implications for their feelings concerning their femininity. Moreover, often women talked about being accused of having eating disorders because of their size and were wary of the attention that their bodies received. This work is also an excellent example of how we need to move beyond just considering the weighty materiality of the body (Longhurst 2001) and consider those bodies which have different materialisations of flesh such as that which is absent.

terminology for women is complex when viewed as a means of reconciling their own material existence with the surface led moralities and meanings attached to being a 'size'.

This section will begin by contextualising bignesses within particular articulations of big bodies within the medical profession, morality and fat activism or politics. I do this not as a comprehensive literature review but to summarise the dominant means through which big bodies have been situated in particular ways. I will then follow this with empirical examples of what it means to be big within the context of clothing consumption and the specific articulations of bigness as experienced through looking at, trying on and wearing 'outsize' clothing. I do this with particular reference to concepts of 'the grotesque' and 'the monstrous'.

5.2.1 Contextualising Bignesses

In the previous chapter I situated 'the practices of slimming' within wider literatures on the dieting industry. This involved questioning the pervasiveness of the promotion of 'thin' and 'thinner' as 'the' bodily ideal. Moreover, these debates concerning size also needs to be contextualised within medical, moral and feminist understandings of bigness.

5.2.1a Medical Bignesses

Size within the remit of medicine is most often articulated in debates surrounding the affect that being overweight or obese can have on our health (see Fairburn et al 2002 for a comprehensive overview of the medical literature on obesity). In fact, obesity has recently become the most pervasive way that size is considered through government as well as medical discourse. One in five British adults have recently been categorised as obese and thus costing the economy directly and indirectly two billion pounds a year (Hutton January 27th 2002 *The Guardian*) and British people have recently been described by *Weight Concern*, a group of nutritionists and psychologists as the "fat people of Europe". Being big within weight defined categories is situated in relation to the costs this has for the British economy and on the nation's health and it is categorised using the Body Mass Index (BMI), as mentioned in the previous chapter. However, Lebesco and Braziel (2001) argue that by designating obesity as the cause of diseases such as hypertension, breast cancer, cardiovascular disease and colon cancer (Hu 2003), a potential market is created as obesity is positioned as a preventable and curable disease, which thus supports the economies of the dieting industry.

The term obesity has a Latin meaning of 'haven eaten' which neatly represents the dominant notion of how bignesses are understood within the medical profession, as a result of the over

consumption of food and in particular the consumption of the 'wrong' type of food. However, other articulations of obesity point towards the ambivalence of determining 'a cause' (Powdermaker 1997) and what Cooper (1998) calls the 'exaggeration' of the health risks of being fat'. Instead, Ogden (1992) claims that it is a myth that "we believe fat people eat differently from thin people, that dieters are fat and that dieting is the solution to being fat." (p. x). By shifting the origins of obesity away from food consumption to the practices of dieting, obesity can become untangled from a cycle of blame on the individual that is posited by the medical profession as to the cause and responsibility of obesity. It also allows for the extent to which women overestimate their size (Rothblum 1992) which calls into question the quantifiable nature of measures such as the BMI and in addition, provides the space to question whether you can actually be fat and fit or fat and healthy. This trend is more widely commented upon by Kuhlmann and Babitsch (2002) who highlight the ways that "research on women's health...avoids for the most part debates around the materiality of the body and instead focuses its analyses on social position and/or symbolic practices" (p.438). A repositioning of medical practices concerning obesity therefore would point focus away from the damaging potential and causation of fat and instead onto the experiences of bigness and the materiality and fleshiness of these bodies.

5.2.1b Moral Bignesses

Secondly, obesity and bodily bignesses are associated with particular versions of morality which are historically contingent upon the value placed upon particular bodily aesthetics (Stearns 1997). The difficulty in pinning down any one meaning of bignesses is deciding in a sense what bignesses actually constitute because "what counts as fat and how it is valued is far from universal; indeed, these judgements are saturated with cultural, historical, political and economic influences" (LeBesco and Braziel 2001 p.2). Commonly fat in a western context is considered to represent particular qualities in an individual such as indulgence, laziness, greed, lack of restraint, violation of order and space and stupidity. There is tendency in these accounts to read meaning off the body and to infer particular qualities that result from being a particular size. "As Shildrick (2002) reiterates "(T)he disordered body is not merely an affront to form, but casts doubt on the moral constitution of the subject" (Shildrick 2002 p.32). The significance of morality to understanding bignesses in contemporary Western society is thus illustrated in research which highlights discrimination against big bodies in the workplace, education and in the provision of goods and services such as transport and of course clothing (Breseman et al 1999, Rothblum 1992).

There are, however, associative problems of these readings of fat bodies. For example, a recent account of nineteenth century slimming practices (Huff 2001) challenges the widely held notion that “prior to the twentieth century, corpulence was, if not preferred, then at least a culturally acceptable model of embodiment” (p.39). Moreover, a recent study (Beauboef-Lafontant 2003) of African American women illustrates how whilst physical strength and size has been used to highlight women’s emotional and physical strength, these kinds of accounts of bignesses hide the extent to which women experience weaknesses, pains and frustrations with their size. In addition, feminist theorists of fat would argue that ‘society’s’ denigration of women being big is a reaction against the freedom that women have carved out for themselves (Wolf 1990)

My difficulty with these accounts is that whilst they work towards finding the meanings and motivations behind the symbolism of fat in contemporary western society, bignesses are rarely discussed in their own right. What I mean is that big bodies come to be symbolic, managed or denigrated rather than experienced, embodied and empiricalised. Therefore, there is a need to embody accounts of bignesses precisely within the context of what it means and feels to be big rather than what it signifies. As Bovey (1989) suggests “fatness in women in the West at least, is linked in representation (and in life) to a fear of female transgressionIt is difficult to explain the rationale behind this. We know we are fat, we are told we are ugly, gross, elephantine – we only have to look down at our bodies” (p.96). This problematic is now discussed within the context of the final section of this discussion of bignesses on politicised bignesses.

5.2.1c Politicised Bignesses

The fat activist movement is by no means coherent in how it positions ‘the body’ within its political framework nor is it coherent as to what constitutes a ‘fat’ or ‘big’ body (See Chapter Three for a discussion of the difficulties of body terminology). In fact the literature written on this topic is important precisely for its divergences rather than its coherent political doctrine. What underlies the movement though is that big bodies are stigmatised and discriminated against within society, for many of the reasons I have outlined above. The politicisation of bigness can be divided into three main themes. Firstly, some fat activists work against the notion that fat individuals are not responsible for their own oppression and instead view bignesses as ‘society’s’ problem (Cooper 1998). Organisations such as The National Association Against the Discrimination of Fat Americans (NAAFA) work against size discrimination in all aspects of public life such as employment and medicine (www.naafa.org). Secondly, there are those activists that work towards a celebration of

bignesses through particular self-help organisations and creative, political and artistic interventions (see Friend 1992; Rowley 1996). In these cases, the focus is placed upon accepting your size rather than changing your body to conform to normative bodily ideals. Thirdly, and perhaps most controversially, are those who position themselves somewhere in between these politicised accounts of bignesses. For example, Shelley Bovey, author of the 1989 book *Being Fat is Not a Sin* adopts an approach which uncovers the discrimination of fatness in society but also recognises the painful realities of living with bignesses. She describes the fat activist movement as follows: “We are told we must love ourselves, accept ourselves the way we are. But we all carry inside ourselves an image of how we want to be. For many women this is longing to be thin” (Bovey 1989 p.144). More recently, Shelly Bovey (2002) has begun dieting and has lost weight which has not been accepted by all quarters of the fat activist movement who see this act as a betrayal of fat politics. However, I would argue that it is this middle ground approach to politicisation that most adequately frames the experiences of fat women. Being big is different for all women and Bovey (2002) highlights the debate should not be about size but about how you feel about yourself within particular modes of your everyday lives (or indeed geographies). I conclude with a statement that adequately summarises this articulation of fat politics and the need to move beyond the meanings of size to the bodily capacities of being sized:

“Until society can come to understand that it is acceptable for people to come in all shapes and sizes and that ‘beautiful’ and ‘thin’ do not necessarily equal ‘good’ or ‘intelligent’ anymore than ‘fat’ and ‘obese’ equal ‘bad’ or ‘stupid’, it will be an uphill struggle to demonstrate that positive traits, competencies and abilities are not related to size” (Cowell Breseman et al 1999 p.192).

I will now go on to discuss bodily bignesses within the context of some of my empirical work. Within these examples it will be evident that some women narrate and experience their bignesses in the ways which have been articulated above in terms of medical, moral and politicised bignesses. I will also weave into this discussion an elaboration of the ‘grotesque’ (Russo 1994; Bakhtin 1968) and ‘the monstrous’ (Shildrick 2002) which are useful concepts to use to understand the relationships between ‘the fat body’ and ‘the society’ that defines/is defined by it. Russo (1994) comments that ‘The grotesque body is open protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing; it is identified with non-official ‘low culture’ or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation. The transformative potential of the grotesque is something that is also mentioned in Shildrick’s (2002) work on the monstrous where she comments that “it is the corporeal ambiguity and fluidity, the troublesome lack of fixed definition, the refusal to be either one thing or the other, that marks the monstrous as a site of

disruption” (p.78). Therefore, rather than the big body being a static representation of all that is not understandable within normative bodily size, instead, these two accounts provide the potential for bignesses to be understood in their own capacities as embodied beings rather than “as exceptions that prove the rule” (Russo 1994 p.10)

5.2.2 Being Big/Shopping Big

Within this research, talk about and practices of clothes shopping has allowed access to the means by which women intervene and engage with different articulations of bignesses and the ‘grotesque’ or ‘monstrous’. I now want to provide you with two further examples of shopping practices and talk which engage with the specificities of experiencing bignesses. A good example of the simultaneity of these understandings can be found in an interview with Jude. Jude is a woman who contacted me through a women’s group and contextualised her desire to be involved in my project in relation to her life time experiences of weight loss and weight gain, and in particular the failure of a gastric bypass operation⁴ that she had had which meant she had put on most of the weight she had originally lost and was often in a considerable amount of stomach pain. We enter the interview below as I question her about how she feels about debates surrounding the politics of size as I mentioned above:

Rachel: so what do you think about the debates around women’s body image and fashion and sort of cults of slenderness?

Jude: I won’t play (laughs)

Rachel: laughs

Jude: I’m bigger than the average I take up more air space and WHO CARES you know I suppose deep down I’d like to be thin but it’s not gonna happen it’s not the end of the world...

Rachel: laughs nervously

Jude: if people don’t like it they ur can sod off why haven’t I got a boyfriend (laughs loudly)

Interview with Jude 7th February 2001

A gastric bypass operation involves reducing the size of the stomach to form a pouch which limits the amounts of food that can be eaten by the individual whilst increasing the feelings of fullness (see Abraham and Llewellyn Jones (1997) for a more detailed explanation of the procedure).

Jude refers to the 'debates' as a game that she herself won't play. In Bovey's (2002) terms this equates with the social model of fat acceptance that '(S)ociety should accommodate me, I should not have to accommodate society' (p.99). Her way of dealing with her own bignesses is to dismiss the moral obligation to be smaller and more acceptable and instead to recognise the limitations of her own embodiment and to 'live with it'. However, my reticence with this almost textbook fat politics is raised when she makes a comment about not having a boyfriend. Does her dismissal of the significance of her bigness actually mask another concern for being able to have a relationship with a man? Whilst she claims to not care I also feel that her talk is tinged with a reticence as to what her bigness actually represents in practice. The discussion continued:

Jude: yeah cos if you're looking at you know a t-shirt that's that big and got extra large on it you know when perhaps it would only fit a size sixteen eighteen then it's not gonna do much for your psyche is it

Rachel: no not at all

Jude: and you know you get back into this 'oh I'm feeling fat' business you know I've got to diet because I'm wearing an extra large t-shirt

Rachel: yeah

Jude: it's pathetic.....the fact that there is like you say a lack of fat politics

Interview with Jude 7th February 2001

Here Jude talks in more depth about the actual experience of being big rather than swathing her talk in fat politics. She makes specific connections between the numerical sizing ('extra large') and how it make her feel negatively about herself and therefore her size ('it doesn't do much for the psyche'). The connotations of wearing an extra large t-shirt means that she 'feels' her size in a way that positions her as in need of reduction. Jude's bigness is precarious as she shifts between fat politics and a dissatisfaction of self. She is positioned precariously between these two understandings of bigness as too much and as alright. This precarious positioning can be contextualised by what Shildrick names the liminality of the monstrous body. The monster far from being an 'other' to a normatively created 'same' "(A)lways claims us, always touches us and implicates us in its own becoming" (Shildrick 2002 p.4). That is not to say that Jude is 'monstrous' but that monstrosity is produced in relation to its

normative other and vice versa. This duality is central to how we understand what it means to be embodied and rather than viewing bigness as an extraordinary morphology it is more adequately understood as a “psychic reawakening of an originary confusion of form and lack of singularity as the condition of all” (Shildrick 2002 p.106).

The second empirical example I wish to present documents my experiences of going shopping in Reading with Star, a thirty year old woman. I went shopping with her on two separate occasions, each time also carrying out an interview. As a means of introducing this empirical example I wish to discuss briefly the ‘type’ of clothing that are available for big bodies. In terms of clothing consumption, the term ‘outsize’ is frequently used to describe the range of clothes and consequently the bodies that wear the clothes. Adam (2001) cheekily observes that the word ‘outsize’ sounds a lot like ‘outside’ and concludes that this only reiterates that big women are ‘outside the norms of size and fashion. As Freespirit (in Riggs 1983) states “You can’t get clothes, you can’t go places” (p.140). *Evans* and *Ann Harvey* are two British retailers that stock big. Moreover, other clothing retailers have their own sub-brand of larger sized clothes such as H & M and New Look have ranges of clothes called Big is Beautiful and Inspirations accordingly. Plates 2 and 3 show two examples from outsize clothing catalogues that actually help to illustrate the difficulties in what I am grappling with in terms of understanding bodily size. Plate 2 is taken from an *Evans* catalogue and illustrates the kinds of bodies which are used to model clothing in the catalogue. Outsize bodies in this context may be big in terms of the size models they use (size 16) but are not big in terms of the texture of those bodies. There are no rolls of flesh, no cellulite and it is not easy to place these women outside of sizing regimes of what we consider to be a ‘normal’ body. Plate 3 shows an example of swimwear from a New Zealand Magazine *Bella* (www.bella.co.nz) which is a monthly general interest publication aimed at ‘women with more’. The difference with these images is that the women are larger and older, their bodies are bigger and less in proportion than the *Evans* models, cleavages are visible in some pictures, and some of the women have rolls of flesh and cellulite. However, these bodies are less on display and are instead covered up with sarongs and throwovers implying the need to hide or flatter particular parts of the outsize body. As Cooper (1998) states ‘many of us continue to subscribe to an ethos of ‘if it covers me up, I’ll take it’ (p.20). Moreover, Adams (2001) suggests about clothing big bodies that “(I)t is as if their bodies are refusing to conform, yet

holiday basics... swimwear

A. PLEAT NECK SWIMSUIT
With rounded cups. Available in standard and fuller fittings.
80% Polyamide, 20% Lycra® Elastane
Hand wash
Colour: Black
Sizes: 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30
Standard Cup **EW 058 £20**
Fuller Cup **EW 059 £30**

B. STARFISH PRINT SWIMSUIT
With discreet bra support.
84% Nylon, 16% Elastane
Hand wash
Colour: Blue
Sizes: 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32
EW 061 £20

active viii

DOUBLE BLOCK ZIP SWIMSUIT
discreet bra support.
Polyamide, 20% Lycra® Elastane
see machine
see 51/51/black
Sizes: 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32
062 £25

RED AND BLACK COLOUR BLOCK SWIMSUIT
discreet bra support.
Polyamide, 20% Lycra® Elastane
see machine
see Multi
Sizes: 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32
063 £25

order now on 990 99 1111
hours a day, 7 days a week
see [OnLine www.evans.itd.uk](http://www.evans.itd.uk)
check stock availability OnLine

Lycra® is a registered trademark of DuPont.

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Plate Two: Outsize Bodies I *Evans* catalogue Autumn 1999

Make a splash this summer with Jennifer Dean's *Bella*! After the classic black swimsuit, all designs for a "Bella" feel like to welcome her to the summer and enjoy. Matching coverage are all the way to the moment. It's your time with style and love some fun!

From *Bella*'s *Bella*, a sheer black dress with a cuped front and hood, another fashion statement for the season.

Bella's *Bella* from *Bella*: dressed with bold, bright, fun print with Lycra leggings in a myriad of colors. Or by the way, when you of a little black dress from *Bella* with buttons on the shoulders, a power-rod pocket on the front and a cheeky cut at the side.

you can tell a Bella woman because she is...

Plate Three: Outsize Bodies II (*Bella Magazine* Summer 1998)

the clothes they are generally offered are very conformist and conventional, containing those bodies that threaten to break out” (Adam 2001 p.50-51).

Both publications I have used here would claim to be displaying outsized models in outsize clothing but do so in different ways. The difference lies in what constitutes a big body, what clothing is suitable for these bodies to wear and what does this typology of clothing therefore imply about the body wearing them. There is a view that “all fat women are alike, and that the way we behave is determined by the fat on our bodies, rather than our personalities, or our experiences of fat oppression” (Cooper 1998 p.26). These are precisely the issues that women engage with when they are shopping for outsize clothing.

When shopping with Star it is interesting to note that she defines herself as big although over the course of her involvement in the research she lost and subsequently regained weight. Therefore, the openness of her bodily boundaries became significant to how she negotiated particular shops can animate accounts of the ‘grotesque’. As Russo (1994) states a ‘grotesque’ body is connected to the world not as a static and closed and instead is a ‘body of becoming’ and is open and protruding into the world. I found her to be a seasoned shopper in that she knew where to go to get things that fit her and avoids or renegotiates places where she knows they will not. For example we spent about half an hour in one shop looking for jewellery whilst ignoring the clothes because she tells me that there is no way they will fit her. Despite these avoidance tactics, Star purposely negotiates her consumption practices towards shops that she knows will stock clothing that will fit her utilising size, as a numerical indicator, as her guide. The first shop we go into is *Evans* which Star gets many of her clothes from both through mail order and in the store. An extract from my diary reads:

Star picked up a bias cut skirt and said this sort of shape fits her figure and held it up to her waist and swirled around the skirt in a circle. Star seemed to have in-depth knowledge about what style suited her and what style didn’t without trying anything on. She said that she knew the sizing in this shop (Evans) so that there was no need to try things on. She then immediately picked up a tunic top from the same range and held that up saying that doesn’t suit bigger ladies because if you have big boobs then you end up with a huge shelf and a tent between your boobs and your tummy! She also mentioned that the sizing was small, medium and large so that for once in her life she could be a small. We both laughed. Sizing became a joke to be shared although I also felt there was an underlying awareness, certainly on my part, that being a small size is never really a possibility

Research Diary Shopping with Star 23rd September 2000

In this diary extract it is interesting to note the different practices Star uses with which to negotiate which clothing will suit her body. Firstly she only goes to shops which stock clothing that will fit her body so as to avoid, like Joanna, clothing not being big enough for her and her feeling bad about this. Secondly, she identifies particular styles that will or will not suit her body, based upon past experiences of dressing her body and looking at other women of a similar bodily size to her in 'unsuitable clothes'. Unsuitable in this case, the tunic top means that the clothing materialises the bignesses of a body in a particular way by hanging off the breasts and producing a huge flap of empty material. Thirdly, she notes how the actual labelling of clothes sizing in Evans can mark her body as small; something that could never happen in non-specialised clothes shops. Whilst we both laugh, this inevitability is uncomfortable for me and her so despite the body practices her body will still not fit into other sizes.

In an interview after we have gone shopping, Star talks about how she has come to shop in the particular ways that she does.

Star:..um I sort of think I've got quite a lot of background to it and always having been somebody who's either been taller or bigger than everyone else you know and it's my personality is the way I dress to a lot of people I mean you can tell a hell a lot about them and I would say I'm not sort of straightforward in what I wear cos I've always had to like look into different ranges and try different things on and

Rachel: Yeah

Star:..um it would be very easy just to go tunnel vision and I'm just going to wear suits for the rest of my life but that's just not me

Rachel: yeah

Star: ..but I mean so what you're doing (my research) is very interesting and the more hopefully whatever this leads onto I do think that the high street..the high street shops and catalogues they HAVE TO realise that you know Dawn French didn't call her range um

Rachel: 1647

Star: 1647 yeah cos it sounded good forty seven percent of women are size sixteen or over and that is a huge amount of people and we are talking about people who have got money to spend

Interview with Star 23rd September 2000

The bodily skill and awareness that Star has developed over the years of 'being big' and losing and gaining weight is something she has developed herself. She refuses to go 'tunnel vision' and conform to what the shops tell her that her body should wear and instead chooses to make up her own rules as to what a big body should and can therefore wear. She confidently tells me about the percentage of women that are over size sixteen which she uses as a way to highlight the inadequacies she has found in high street shops and catalogues and to prove the point that she is not alone in her experiences of clothes shopping. This has resonance with Jude's articulation of fat politics and whether the responsibility for providing clothes for big bodies should be placed within society or in this case clothing retailers. However, like Jude, Star also has some difficulties in reconciling the experience of being big with her political motivations. Bovey (1989) suggests that part of the problem with the fat activist movement is that it 'puts a forced smile on the face of fat without revealing the depths of unhappiness and humiliation that most fat women experience' (p.9). In this extract from the interview Star is telling me about a family wedding she will be attending in a few weeks and how that is making her feel:

but like today I had two packets of crisps and a bar of chocolate and I hardly ever eat chocolate I don't know what was happening really but but um I've..I wanted to lose a little bit more for the wedding and it's not about what people think because now I think people are like they're not particularly pleasant to know because if they're like that with somebody's weight what are they like as people

Interview with Star 23rd September 2000

Like Jude, the significance of her bignesses is always present, lying under the surface, but with the potential to break out, literally both in terms of the fabric of her clothing and figuratively in terms of her feelings and emotions. The surveillance of her body by family members at a wedding will bring her bignesses sharply into being through comments and stares. This has similarities with an account which documents the eating practices of overweight women eating in public (Zdrodowski 1994) where women who feel surveyed by their families alter their eating practices or feel depressed and invaded by their presence. Star admits to me about eating chocolate and crisps whilst also wanting to lose weight before the wedding and she later tells me that 'I you know I still have problems with my body but who doesn't'. However, for Star, clothing acts as a way for Star to 'be normal' of covering up fat

and slimming bodily boundaries so as not to look different from everyone else. Being big then does not come with its in-built politics of self-acceptance and societal blame and instead the lived realities of being big is a stand off between accepting your size and being aware of the consequences of it. Bovey (1989) acknowledges this living contradiction amongst the fat activist women she interviewed where “(S)ometimes we construct our desire to lose weight as a side effect because it is painful for us to acknowledge that we are still unable to accommodate our fat bodies or admit that we want to be slimmer” (p.55).

3.3 ‘Suitable’ Clothing, Suitable Bodies

In relation to Star’s practices of dressing her own bignesses, I now want to focus more on the suitability of clothes for big bodies. Cooper (1998) suggests that “(L)arge size clothes shops....sell big, draping garments instead of the fitted and body conscious fashions that are prevalent along the rest of the high street” (Cooper 1998 p.43). I would argue that is not simply that the meaning of bodies is read off a clothing label, as accounts of bigness have done in the past. Instead I suggest that clothing for big women is central in producing particular materialities of bigness not just by reifying a disgust of ‘fat’ per se by being called ‘outsize clothing’. Gregson et al (2001) comment about second hand clothes that “clothing (...) is not just about fashion and adornment, body shape, disguise and aesthetics, or even functionality, but an extension of our own corporeality. It becomes us; we personalise it and possess it through our own leakiness” (p.119). I would suggest that bignesses become embodied in particular ways through the trying on and wearing of particular clothes as the bodily flesh is marked, move and manipulated from the very practices of engaging with clothing.

I would now like to introduce you to two women, I met through a website called Sizenet (www.sizenet.com) set up as a means of support for Big Beautiful Women (BBW). Louisa and Mary are two BBW’s who met each other in a chatroom on the Internet site and we join the interview as they talk about buying sexy underwear.

Louisa: but that’s something I want...I’m not supposed to (whispers to me) but I want sexy stuff

Mary: yeah sexy underwear that would be nice

Louisa: you know

Rachel: cos that’s what you said in the email that you wanted to look in shops so you’d find that I mean I thought of Ann Summers but

Mary: Ann Summers do a few but they don't have a great big range for larger women they do have some but not much not what I WANT I saw this slim girl in a lovely PVC number I want it in my size

Rachel: yeah

Mary: not HER size MY size

Interview with BBW's 7th August 2001

Both women talk about wanting sexy underwear as that worn by 'slim' women. They want underwear that is made and designed for their bodies and not that which suffers from the 'tent syndrome' of outsized clothing. They highlight in this conversation not only the inadequacies of their own bodies for sexy clothes (Louise whispers to me, as if embarrassed, about wanting sexy underwear as if it is not allowed) but also of the inadequacy of the underwear for their bodies. The transcript excerpt illustrates the force with which Mary emphasises this point and the fact that clothing for slim bodies may not in fact be the right cut or shape for larger bodies. This is also a point elaborated on in more detail by Greaves (1990) in a self-help guide for dressing bigger bodies. She states that "(T)he assumption by clothes manufacturers, society in general, other women and the women themselves is that they cannot look good anyway, so any attempt at dress sense is a hopeless task" (p.136). It is not a case of just enlarging normatively sized clothes but of designing clothes for big bodies in the first place.

There is also a sense within this interview extract that an absence of sexy underwear produces Mary and Louisa as unsexy. Adam (2001) comments in relation to her personal survey of the female outsize clothing market that:

"In the process of this growth, in both size and maturity, she supposedly loses her sexual attractiveness to men, and become less visible perhaps but certainly ambivalent at the same time" (Adam 2001 p.42).

Being big, therefore, inevitably makes you more visible but your body becomes invisible as it is hidden under clothing, referred to in the context of my research as 'tents', 'fat frocks' and 'hideous smocks'. Moreover, bignesses are invisible in that they are 'not sexy' and therefore are corporeally absent as embodied sexual beings (Evans Braziel and Le Besco 2001). This ambivalence between visibility and invisibility is experienced as these women attempt to purchase sexy underwear but find whilst their bodies are matter to be clothed they do not matter in the same way as slimmer bodies. As Kent (2001) states "(T)he fat body must be repeatedly evoked at the margins, drawn in and then expelled, in order to continue taking the weight of corporeality off the thin bodies – playing much the same role as that taken by the

female body in relation to the male” (p.136). However, Russo (1994), when considering the nature of the grotesque female body, questions the extent to which women can make spectacles of themselves, as Louise fears in her articulation of wanting to wear sexy underwear on her big body. In her reading of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival (Bakhtin 1968) she suggests that the “masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate and destabilise the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organised society” (p.62). Rather than being merely oppositional and reactive the grotesque can act as a “redeployment or counter production of culture knowledge and pleasure” (ibid). Therefore, whilst it may be easy to read Louise's difficulties as evidence of the morally tinged polarity of the normative slender body versus the othered fat body, I prefer to situate her body within the ambivalent space of the grotesque which works with and against the normalcy of bodily aesthetics. This provides Louise with the potential to be sexy and visible for the category of the female grotesque is “crucial to identity formation” (Russo 1994 p.14).

Rosa, another woman I recruited through the Sizenet website, talks about this materialisation of bignesses through clothing in relation to a recent period of self-realisation after leaving an oppressive marriage and meeting a supportive partner. Gamman (2000) suggests that “there is a tradition of imposed limitations that operates to keep binary oppositions in place between the ‘female’ ideal and the female grotesque’ (p.71). I would argue that the provision of outsized clothing actually forces the creation of a discursive dichotomy between normal and abject sizing for women. Not only setting a template for suitable sizing but also the style in which bodily flesh should be displayed. In my conversation with Rosa, she offers up alternatives to the dominant means by which big bodies have been clothed, breaking out of this dualism and dressed which has enabled her to feel differently about her size and actually surprised her in terms of how her body can be materialised in clothing differently.

Rosa: and it did I think it was just before Christmas no just after Christmas I bought myself two pairs of jeans and I hadn't worn jeans since about eighteen

Rachel: wow

Rosa:....and I knew they did jeans in bigger sizes but I'm like God how can someone my size wear jeans?

R: yeah so you set a barrier up almost I can wear this but I can't....

Rosa: yeah so I was ALWAYS ALWAYS in black leggings...they were the same black leggings with elastic waist but if you got bigger they stretch with you and you get smaller they'll cling to you

Rachel : yeah

Rosa: you know and I'd worn these for years and I I was just fed up with absolutely fed up with it

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: so I changed started wearing the jeans and then I was buying the sort of tops to go with it which again (says goodbye to partner who's leaving)...um that sort of went with it had that sort of nice sort of casual so like I bought um...like the tops were shorter and they had like glittery pictures on the front....AND I'D HAVE NEVER HAD BOUGHT THOSE A WHILE BACK

Interview with Rosa 24th May 2001

In buying two pairs of jeans, Rosa is engaging in shopping practices which are new to her. Not only do shops now stock jeans in her size, when she thought that she shouldn't be wearing them at her size, it has meant wearing different tops which were cut short against her body and more casual, again away from the type of formalised body dressing of 'suit wearing' that Star also wanted to avoid. Traditional outsize clothing of leggings that stretch with a body's material boundaries as they grow and shrink are replaced with more casual clothing, with glittery pictures on the front' suggesting a move away from formal wear to more casual, fun and dynamic clothing. She commented that "I don't believe it they fit and actually I don't feel that I look repulsive" and "I thought yeah OK I'm not a magician I can't hide it you know it's there but I really didn't look as bad as I thought I would".

The conversation then continues as Rosa makes connections between being big and wearing big.

Rosa: I think sometimes...you being big you...are made to feel that you're an outsider you're a bit of a freak or whatever especially if you're getting onto the real larger size

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: and...so what you're actually trying to do is you're trying to hide it hoping that nobody will spot you if you don't wear anything conspicuous you won't get seen and it doesn't work so my philosophy now is wear what you feel comfortable in and if you have

the confidence to try on things that you perhaps wouldn't normally wear you might actually be surprised at the result

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: and it can make you feel younger it can make you look younger it won't hide the big it won't hide the fat you have but it'll help you wear it better

Interview with Rosa 24th May 2001

In undergoing a process of bodily transition, Rosa is wearing different styles of clothes than she is use to wearing i.e. jeans and T-shirts. This is different to what she sees as the dominant ways by which bigger bodies are dressed whereby you are an 'outsider' a 'bit of a freak'. I take this to mean outside of fashionable clothing or the normalised regimes of clothing a body. Instead of hiding her body in clothes, Rosa has begun to try out different clothing, some of which clings to her body and she has been surprised by the result. Instead of hiding her body or what she refers to as the 'big' or the 'it'⁵ she is wearing clothes that reveal 'it'. Cooper (1998) suggests in relation to outsized clothing that "When we follow clothing rules instead of wearing what we want, it is as though we are communicating our desires to look 'normal' or 'presentable', but trying to camouflage our fatness implies that the reality of our bodies is too terrible to admit" (p.43-4). Whilst Rosa does not dismiss that fact that she is big or 'fat', she has developed a way of clothing her body which materialises 'it' in a way that is comfortable for her. The 'otherness' of fat or the monstrosity of excess flesh is simultaneously distant, an 'it' managed by clothing and close in that it is part of her embodied being. As in Shildrick's (1997) liminal account of the monstrous, being big involves creating 'another space outside my framework' (p.119). She concludes:

"It is a space where the double relation between the normal and the monstrous does not hold; a space that no one of us can fully occupy. As such, it mobilises an ethical economy in which our specificities, rather than haunted by, are in communion with the differences between and internal to us all" (ibid).

5.4 Conclusion

Within the context of this chapter I have illustrated the particularities of bodily size in relation to the practices and talk based upon women's experiences of clothing consumption. Through the use of empirical examples, it has become evident that sizing can not be conceptualised as

a static and quantifiable means through which to categorise bodies and instead understanding sizing through practice based accounts of consumption provides us with access to the ways that women come to be and feel bodies in a multitude of ways. For example, Elisabeth and Debbie find numerical indicators difficult to reconcile with their material selves and Joanna works within this confusion by developing her own sizing practices such as using a tape measure and reflecting on the motivations of ‘the fashion industry’. Female embodied consumers are not duped into believing that particular sizes may represent particular qualities to themselves and wider society. As Shildrick (2002) maintains “if all categories are themselves unstable and the idea of rigid universalist divisions are untenable, then it is difficult to employ meaningfully, universal categories of good and bad, right and wrong” (Shildrick 1997 p.104). Instead, by conceptualising bodies through categories of sizing as it is practised and experienced, the solidification bodily boundaries and representations are melted and the liminal nature of female embodied subjectivity is recognised.

The difficulties of categorising bodies has been further exemplified by exploring the categories of bodily bignesses within the context of clothing consumption. Through an empirically animated application of the ‘the monstrous’ (Shildrick 2002) and ‘the grotesque’ (Russo 1994) it is evident that placing big bodies within discourses which categorises bigness as ‘other’ to a normative bodily slenderness does not adequately account for how women actually experience their bodily sizes. Bignesses, as exemplified by the medical, moral and political discourses placed upon them do not sit easily within these representational regimes. Instead, the ambiguity of monstrous and grotesque bodies as neither othered or the same and simultaneously both provides the means for us to understand ‘the multiplicity of embodied difference’ and to undo singular categorisations of ‘the body. Jude’s apparent nonchalance with how her body may be received with disgust by others is tainted by her questioning of not having partner and Star, like Joanna, manages her shopping practices to prevent clothes not fitting but simultaneously fears the family surveillance of her body at an upcoming wedding.

The significance of clothing is important to note in how these women have articulated their bignesses because, as mentioned above, outsize clothing and bodies are intimately connected as the means through which each materialises each other. Whilst clothes sizing is used as a way to regulate clothing and therefore bodily size, the actual experience of engaging with these numerical indicators and the particular style of outsize clothes reveals the connections between feeling and being a size. The embodied self, therefore, always exceeds its representation (Budgeon 2003) and is not held within the binds of particular discursive regimes of power. Therefore, Rosa’s articulation of her recent changes in clothing practices

⁵ The ‘it’ as a mode of female corporeality will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

illustrates how she can dress her body in a way that makes her feel better about herself but which does not cover up her bigness or 'it' which is unavoidable but not necessarily to be covered up. The monstrous, therefore, 'always claims us, always touches us and implicates us in its own becoming' (Shildrick 2002 p.5) and is not necessarily something to be revered or neglected or indeed fetishised and over-burdened with significance. The place of bodily categories within clothing consumption, therefore is in their *doings* rather than illustrative of their *meanings*.

Sizing, therefore, is much more than the means through which women's bodies are labelled, surveyed, quantified and categorised and instead by focusing on sizing as practised by bodies rather than representations of bodies, a more. As Budgeon (2003) reminds us, when considering what it means to be embodied we must advocate:

"(A) refusal of a single explanation or a point of causal origin is made in favour of locating the body as an event, within the context of a multiplicity of practices and regimes; a network of activities through which a body becomes" (p.51-2).

Zoning**Chapter Six**

“She examined the women’s bodies with interest, critically, as though she had never seen them before. And in a way she hadn’t, they had just been there like everything else, desks, telephones, chairs, in the space of the office: objects viewed as outline and surface only. But now she could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs Gundridge’s back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases round the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed, her sweater a woolly tea cosy over those rounded shoulders; and the others too, similar in structure but with varying proportions and textures of bumpy permanents and dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip; their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones, without by a carapace of clothing and makeup”

Atwood, M. 1995 *The Edible Woman* London: Virago p.167

“A woman’s body “is capable of defeating the notion of fixed bodily form, of visible, recognisable, clear and distinct shapes as that which marks the contour of the body. She is morphologically dubious” (Braidotti 1994 p.80)

6 Introduction

The quotes displayed above illustrate the difficulties of reconciling what is meant by 'the body' within the context of its composite parts. In the first case, bodies can be separated into discrete body parts; as areas of movable flesh which come into being as surface and outline through clothing. This is akin to more general observations made of the promotion of female bodily consumption practices which "isolate female bodily parts in order to sell merchandise that will improve or make desirable the parts needing servicing: from clothing to hair products to make up to body fat or flab" (Kerner Furmar 1997 p.57). In the second case, Braidotti (1994) outlines the case for understanding female corporeality as 'dubious', 'non-fixed' and unpredictable. The female body, therefore, is not merely a bounded container of the self; experienced and lived as a bodily wholeness. In this chapter, the very nature of female bodily form is discussed through, what I have called, the bodily doing(s) of zoning the body. These practices of zoning highlight the significance of bodily matter, flesh and 'flab' for how bodies are materialised through the practices of looking at, trying on and talking about clothing. Matter is understood not merely as brute nature or a bedrock biological rootedness (see Chapter Two) but, in agreement with Bordo (1998) is a recognition of "our inescapable physical locatedness in time and space" (p.90). Moreover, Bigwood (1998) drawing on Butler (1993), calls this a 're-naturalisation of the body' whereby, the body "is not a *fixed given* untouched by the dominant representational system, yet its anchorage in the world nonetheless consists of an interconnected web of relations with the human and non-human, the cultural and the natural" (p.107). In the context of this chapter zoning refers to the myriad ways women's fleshy materialities are experienced and narrated through the practices of trying on and purchasing clothing. In particular I am interested in exploring how the very matter of bodies; the flesh, flab or adipose tissue informs the intricacies of female embodied identity. As Holliday and Hassard (2001) state "instead of spending time refuting the claim that women's bodies leak, ooze, intermingle and are far from self-contained, we must accept this proposition and theorise from it" (p.7). For example, Elisabeth Grosz (1994) builds upon this proposition by suggesting, within the context of body building, that "there must already be a plastic and pliable body in order for it to be possible to mould and sculpt it" (p.143).

This chapter will focus on three main practices of zoning the body. Firstly the means by which women split off their bodies into significant 'bits and pieces', secondly through recognising the significance of the surfaces and textures both on the body and under the skin and finally in recognising the specificity of body boundaries in relation to clothing. Of particular significance to this chapter is to understand the nature of female 'normative' embodiments, working with and against ideas of fragmentation, fluidity and abjection. I will situate the three materialities of body zoning within the context of the literature in geography

and beyond. My intention is not just to review the literature but to offer some sense of how body zones can be used to intimate “a politics that takes as its orientation not the body as such, but the fleshy interface between bodies and world” (Ahmed and Stacey 2001 p.1). In this sense flesh, the very matter of bodies can be understood as a means by which women mediate an embodied relationship with the world, in this case within the context of narrations and practices of clothing consumption.

6.1 Bits and Pieces

6.1.1 Contextualising Bits and Pieces

When understanding the body as ‘zoned’ into bits and pieces I am essentially talking about how to think through women’s embodied existence not as some illusive whole but as separated materially and symbolically into distinct and messy determinants. The very totality of the term ‘the body’ can imply a physiological and representational wholeness through which ‘the body’ is made meaningful. Longhurst (2001) links the absence of accounts of the messiness and fluidity of the body in geography as illustrative of a tendency of geographers to utilise social constructionist accounts of the body which “render the body incorporeal, fleshless, fluidless, little more than linguistic territory” and also as reflective of “a particular politics of masculinist knowledge production” (p.2) within the discipline. However, I am concerned that the approach that Longhurst (2001) advocates to remedy this absence risks fetishising those bodies which are deemed to be more material than others. My concern, as discussed in Chapter Two is that female corporeality either becomes the exemplar against which all messy materiality is measured rather than premising the debate on a notion that corporeality per se is an indeterminate and messy materiality and not something attached to specific bodily forms. This is reiterated by Grosz’s (1994) refusal “to subordinate the body to a unity or a homogeneity of the kind provided by the body’s subordination to consciousness or to biological organisation” (p.165) and instead she asks us to consider:

“Part of their (human bodies) own ‘nature’ is an organic or ontological incompleteness or lack of finality, an amenability to social completion, social ordering and organisation” (p. x-xi).

Moreover, Shildrick (2001) builds upon this observation as already mentioned in the previous chapter in her discussion of ‘the monstrous’. She claims that “what matters is not any empirical claim to anatomical certainty, but the production of morphological imaginary. And once the normative standard of ordered and sealed bodiliness, against which monstrosity is measured, is understood as an impossible ideal in itself – as something to be achieved rather

than as given – then it makes good sense to take the incoherence of the monstrous as the starting point” (p.160).

In accounts which focus on understanding the consuming body, the extent to which the body is coherent and compartmentalised into particular areas for improvement and modification has already been identified. Featherstone (1991) states that “Consumer culture latches onto the prevalent self preservationist conception of the body, which encourages the individual to adopt instrumental strategies to combat deterioration and decay () and combines it with the notion that the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self expression” (p.172). Accounts of embodied consumption practices focus on particular bodily areas such as tummies, thighs, bottoms, breasts and flabby bits which become areas for women to manage through particular bodily practices. For example, Bartky (1990) notices the significance of exercise classes developed for women that are ‘designed not to form or reduce the body’s size overall, but to sculpture its various parts” (p.67). These include thick ankles or saddlebag thighs.

Clothing also has a particular role to play in the management and re-materialisation of particular bodily parts or ‘problem areas. Plate 4 documents a feature in a women’s magazine about how to dress your body and how to control, cover and enhance particular parts of your body. Here clothing is used to reduce body parts, such as bottoms, breasts and tummies. Conversely clothing can also be used to enhance body parts such as breasts and hips. As Entwistle (2000) states “Conventions of dress transform flesh into something recognisable and meaningful to a culture and are also the means by which bodies are made “decent”, appropriate and acceptable within specific context” (p.323-4). Whilst I agree with a general supposition of this statement, Entwistle’s (2000) account does seem to focus on the meaning added to the arrangement of the body by clothes rather than how clothing contributes to how we experience our corporeal selves. Instead clothing materialises the body and does not just rub off meaning onto the body’s surface but facilitates the becoming of flesh in different ways. For example, Sweetman (2001) describes the embodied experience of wearing a suit as follows:

When I wear a suit, I walk, feel and *act* differently, and not simply because of the garment’s cultural connotations.....but also because of the way the suit is cut, and the way its sheer materiality both enables and constrains, encouraging or demanding a certain gait, posture and demeanour, whilst simultaneously denying me the full range of bodily movement what would be available were I dressed in jogging pants and a loose fitting T-shirt” (Sweetman 2001 p.66).

Within this example, a suit makes Paul’s body act and move differently, providing the body with alternative capacities of embodied action. However, what is missing from this

Laying the right foundations

slimmer swimmer

A high-cut one-piece will lengthen your legs, while a deep neck will create a narrower look. Vertical contrasting lines on the body or as edging also create a narrower silhouette
Swimsuit, £19.99, Next



• A Lycra vest, or one with wired cups, will minimise and support a large bust
Vest, £10, Marks & Spencer



• Tummy-control knickers hold you in and look pretty
Knickers, £10, Bhs



• Go for the full monty to slim tummy and thighs
Body trimmer, £22, Marks & Spencer



• Low-cut tummy controllers avoid visible panty line
Knickers, £12, Bhs



big bust

Opt for a dark jacket in a loose, boxy shape and try doing up only the top button to show a flash of contrasting T-shirt underneath
Jacket, £50, Dorothy Perkins

big hips & thighs

A wraparound skirt to mid-calf will narrow the entire hip and thigh area by drawing the eye downwards
Skirt, £29.99, Kays



round tummy

Flat-front trousers will flatten your tummy; straight legs lengthen the silhouette, especially if worn with a shoe in a matching colour
Trousers, £39.99, Morgan



• Styles with a solid band and a heel slim the foot and add height
Sandals, £89.99, Kurt Geiger

For stockist information turn to page 176 or call Red Direct on 0870 600 6020 Available by mail order

Plate Four: Dressing Body Parts (Shape Magazine October 2001)

description is the means by which a layer of suit fabric would actually produce his fleshy body in particular ways. For example, shoulder padding making his body broader across the back, a tight waistband on his trousers producing a belly which hangs over a belt and sock which leave a mark from the elastic around his ankles. Moreover, a suit may highlight flesh which is not present such as baggy shirts indicating weight loss or poor muscle definition and trousers which are tight around the crotch exposing the relative size of his penis and testicles.

Therefore, what I want to do in the remainder of this section is focus on the ways that clothing materialises the female body in particular ways using a notion of 'flab' and bodily absences as examples of this process of zoning 'the body'.

6.1.2. Flab

In this section I want to discuss the ways that specific bodily parts were narrated and experienced not as specific organs but as bits of flesh or flabby bits or wobbly bits. These body parts have no discernible name; they are not 'organs' they do not have an anatomical name and yet they feature highly in women's narration and experience of their own bodies.

To question 'what is flab' is a simultaneously obvious and ambiguous task. In a recourse to the medical literature the layer of 'flab' that women commonly refer to can be defined as subcutaneous tissue meaning tissue being, living, or made under the top layer of skin. This tissue, or 'adipose tissue', is made up of billions of fat cells called adipocytes and is organised beneath the skin in three layers entitled superficial, deep and visceral layers. (Liposuction for You 2003 p.2). It is the deep layer of fat which is commonly removed during the cosmetic surgery procedure of liposuction¹ and is the matter which, in more colloquial term we can grab, squeeze, feel moving when we run and walk and also manage and manipulate through bodily practices. It is touchable through the skin and does not seep out unless sucked out! However, it is this substance that is disavowed by men and women within the context of achieving bodily perfection. Bordo (1993) in her discussion of weight loss advertisements talks about the dominant bodily ideal as "a body that is absolutely tight, contained, bolted down, firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control. That are soft, loose or "wiggly" are unacceptable, even on extremely thin bodies" (Bordo 1993 p.190-191). This is similarly presented in Plate Five in an advertisement for a low calorie chocolate *Halo*. The premise behind the advert is that

¹ Liposuction is a surgical procedure whereby then "unwanted bulges" (Bordo 1993) of people of normal weight are removed through suction.



Plate Five: 'Gobble without the wobble': An advert for *Halo* chocolate bars (*Essentials Magazine* July 1999).

the 'wobble' of bodies or the flab and fat should and can be avoided by eating a low calorie chocolate bar.

When shopping with women these flabby bits were actualised by trying on clothing and looking at their bodies in clothing. Clothing here acts as a boundary marker for flesh movements but also as a means of manipulating it in such a way as the women experience it as difficult and unpleasant. For example, the extract below documents Kate's experience of trying on a top in a changing room:

She had on the sixteen top which I said fitted her better. She walked over to the mirror to look at herself in the top. She looked at the top on her body from the front and the side. I said it didn't pull as much as the fourteen. She touched the flap at the bottom of the top each side and said that it was very snug. I said it was better it have it fitted that falling off. She didn't seem sure. She said she hated it when you could see rolls of flab at the back. She decided to try on the eighteen.

Shopping with Kate July 31st 2001

Here a bigger size of top (an eighteen) would prevent the materialisation of flesh in clothes as rolls of flab which is evident when trying on a smaller size. Instead, a size eighteen hides the 'flab' and produces a smoother bodily line. Kate avoids 'filling' her clothes in a way that her body does not seep through the actual material of the clothes to be exposed as rolls. This form of avoidance is also articulated by Star except this time the clothing is not even tried on as Star tried to avoid exposing her body as it is the midst of reducing through dieting:

I picked up a leather style pencil skirt and asked her if she would wear this. She said that she couldn't wear that because she couldn't show the tops of her legs. She then paused for a second, held up the skirt to her to see where the hem lay and said 'perhaps when I lose a bit more I could with a top and knee boots'. I encouraged this because I thought she would look nice in it and then realised I may have over stepped the mark in putting pressure on her to wear something she was not comfortable with. I also held up a halter neck top and mentioned that a friend of mine who also had big boobs wore one and it looked fab! However, Star felt that she didn't want to show the top of her arms and that she would have to wear a bra which the halter neck top would not allow. Again she had knowledge not only of her own body but of the clothes she can wear on her body. It never seems to be as simple as whether you like the look of it.

Shopping with Star 23rd September 2000

In this instance, whilst I attempt, in good faith to clothe Star's body, she reacts in a way through which she feels the materialisation of specific areas of her body in clothes. The top of her legs and the top of her arms are bodily zones she does not yet feel comfortable in revealing through clothing. These are areas commented on by other women in the course of my research as those which are not to be exposed and to be covered up. Moreover, her breasts cannot be accommodated in a halter neck top without the support of a bra and the very suggestion of such clothing by myself immediately encourages her to rethink how she will manage her flesh in clothes. In this instance she talks about her bodily zones in an anatomical sense i.e. arms and legs, but also as places where flab can form. As Bordo (1993) reiterates "it is perfectly permissible in our (sic) culture (even for women) to have substantial weight and bulk – so long as it is tightly managed. Simply to be slim is not enough – the flesh must not "wiggle" (p.191). I also feel with both of these women there is a processual nature within a particular consumption moment through which particular body parts become significant in the negotiation of their embodied selves in clothes. For Kate, this materialisation involves the process of looking at herself in the mirror, touching the material, smoothing her hands across her body and then paradoxically feeling revulsion at the rolls of flab but also feeling smaller when trying on a clothes size which is 'too big'. For Star, this revulsion is never actualised through looking or touching and instead her fears concerning the materialisation of body zones in clothing prevents her from contemplating revealing particular parts of her body. However, Star also experiences the potential of her bodily parts to be exposed by particular items of clothing after weight loss which suggests that the revulsion is not a permanent state of disavowal and it will change with further weight loss.

In another example, Jude, talks to me about the problems of wearing clothing that clings to her body when we discuss a new range of clothing available at Evans.

Jude: THEY'RE NOT TRENDY

Rachel: mmm

Jude: and what they're offering in even in the way of this Seven range is awful

Rachel: yeah I think from what I've seen it's over fashionable they're going out of their way like you can be big and trendy

Jude: but it's not

Rachel: not something you could wear everyday like a boob tube I made my friend put on a boob tube (laughs) and ur she's like it's just obscene Rach you know like like she's

got really nice boobs and they're big but if she was to wear that out clubbing she'd get so much attention and she wouldn't feel like her in it

Jude: yeah

Rachel: you know

Jude: well they're selling one here that's got these sort of little satiny tops made of elastic

Rachel: yeah that's

Jude: that's fine if you're a size ten twelve whatever when you've got a great lump of fat hanging underneath your boobs it does nothing

Rachel: yeah

Jude: all you've got is the emphasis and it makes you look pregnant

Rachel: I mean some women feel comfortable wearing whatever size don't they?

Jude: yeah I mean there are women that but does it look good?...it doesn't does it

Interview with Jude 7th February 2001

Here I use an example of one of my friends trying on a boob tube, in a shop which sells clothes for larger women as a means of prompting Jude to talk about the suitability of certain clothes for her 'big' body (See Chapter Five for a discussion of the meanings and practices of bignesses). For Jude, wearing a boob tube even if it is one made in her own clothes size, would mean having a "great lump of fat hanging underneath your boobs". The consistency of this flesh, 'hanging' provides a downwards momentum and is materialised by the clothing, as suggested by Jude, to make a body look pregnant. Whilst these type of clothes are a conscious move from the traditional style of outsize clothing as mentioned in Chapter Five, these clothes actualise particular body bits which Jude isn't comfortable with. This type of bodily materialisation also involves an awareness of the risks of exposing such bodily bits. For example, Louise talks to me about her fears of wearing a PVC dress without her jacket on because it would expose certain fleshy parts of her body:

I've got a very nice black PVC number you know (laughs) but I couldn't wear that out.....I have actually worn it I have actually worn it with a black skirt under an orange jacket.....a halter neck thing but no way could I take the jacket off cos there's no back you know

Interview with Big Beautiful Women (BBW) 7th August 2001

For Louise it is the unsaid but implied bodily flesh on her back, as experienced by Kate as 'rolls', that she is not comfortable in exposing. Whilst she chooses to wear a PVC dress she is not comfortable in displaying the ways her flesh is materialised by the dress, as Jude feels about how her body would look like in a boob tube. When discussing bodily fluids in relation to embodied geographies, Longhurst (2001) lists the bodily fluids which cross bodily boundaries between inside and outside as "tears, saliva, faeces, urine, vomit, sweat and mucus" (p.30). However, fat or flab, as mentioned by the women above, does not figure in this list precisely, I suggest, because it is positioned below the skin and therefore does not 'leak out' in the same way as tears, spit and vomit. Its absence from a list of leaky variables is illustrative of the ambiguous nature of flab simultaneously under the skin yet materialised as a substance in and of itself in our attempts to manage it, for example by clothing.

This is made particularly pertinent in an interview with Claire, when it became apparent that she wore certain pieces of clothing with which to 'control' her flesh which at previous times in her life she felt had been out of control in relation to weight gain. We enter the narrative here as Claire talks to me about wearing minimiser knickers which is a piece of underwear designed specially with an elastic panel to shape and support the stomach or tummy.

Claire: I think it can sometimes I admit to wearing a pair of some minimiser pants

Rachel: do you?

Claire: things like that sometimes just things like that make you feel more confident

Rachel: yeah

Claire: one of my biggest hang ups is the size of my stomach so

Rachel: yeah

Claire: it makes me feel confident

Rachel: my experience of that is that by the end of the night I'm so full of beer you have to take it off..but there seems to be quite a lot of that sort of underwear doesn't there

Claire: there is but again it's very expensive but I think it can make a massive amount of difference

Rachel: yeah

Claire: I mean I'm going to my work's Christmas do tonight and surprise I am wearing a dress and I'll be wearing my pull in pants and my tights with the tummy panel as well so by the end of the night I'll be like get me out of this d'you know what I mean

Interview with Claire 13th December 2000

For Claire, the minimiser pants provides her with the means to manage the flesh of her stomach which is the part of her body about which she feels particularly paranoid (“one of my biggest hang ups”) in terms of its size and texture. By smoothing the line of her stomach, Claire feels more confident. This is made explicit through the example of wearing a dress to a work’s night out which also implies that it is the surveillant gaze of others as well as her own dissatisfaction with her stomach that the minimiser knickers can help to alleviate. As Ahmed and Stacey (2001) comment, “skin, as well as other bodily surfaces and folds, expose bodies to other bodies, rather than simply containing ‘the body’ as such” (p.4)

I think this interview extract illustrates precisely the fluidity of bodily boundaries, with particular reference to flesh, flab and fat. It is a substance that moves beneath the skin yet can be sucked out, lost through dieting, gained through illness, food consumption and pregnancy and managed by wearing minimiser knickers. Flab challenges the stability of corporeal boundaries in different way to the fluids mentioned by Longhurst (2001) because it is not visible or touchable and because it only becomes understandable through the skin and in this instance through clothing. Therefore, as an abjected form of matter, flab “resists the determination that marks solids, for they are without any shape or form of their own” (Grosz 1994 p.194).

6.1.3. body as ‘it’

In the previous section, the narration and experience of bodies focused on specific areas and materialisations of flesh. As Grosz (1994) comments in relation to Kristeva’s (1982) concept of abjection, abjection involves “the privileging of some parts and functions while resolutely minimising or leaving un- or underrepresented other parts and functions” (p.194). However, whilst this suggests a body experienced as a series of ‘bits and pieces’, women also articulate the extent to which flesh, flab or fat is experienced as a totality. When I mention totality, I mean that women narrate their fleshiness as an ‘it’ rather than a collection of bits and pieces as mentioned above. ‘It’ somehow covers the body but has no discernible location or definition. Orbach (1987), in relation to compulsive eating, refers to fat as a barrier that women build up against the patriarchal positioning of women in society. She states that “Fat is not about lack of social control or lack of will power. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage” (p.18). In one sense this conceptualisation of flab or fat embodies a form of bodily proximity; a layer which contributes to the production of specific embodied subjectivities for women. For example, Charlotte Cooper (1998) comments that:

The difference my fatness connotes has been, and continues to be, one of the most challenging and enriching areas of my life. I am very proud of my difference, I feel like a survivor, and I think my perspective as a fat person is a benefaction that has made me special” (p.2).

However, conversely, understanding the ‘it’ of female corporeality can also represent an estrangement of women from their bodies. For example Hutchinson (1994) states that “(A)s women we split our bodies off from our selves and turn them into objects that we disown, deny, haul around as burdens and find wanting” (p.152), as illustrated in part in the previous section. However I would argue that it is not as simple as a process of objectifying the body and instead understanding the body as ‘it’ represents a more reciprocal existence for women and their embodiments; for those whose bodies do wiggle and wobble. I prefer to view ‘it’ as a creative layer, unlike tears and excrement which physically leak and materially leave. Instead flab grows, shrinks and moves beneath the surface of skin and is always symbolically present even if it is not materially there.

For example this extract from an interview with Rosa documents a conversation that she had with a colleague at work:

Rosa:I can't remember what got us onto it but I mentioned something about weight or something I don't know how but the conversation always goes that way but there you go um and I said something about being big and this lady I've never seen before in my life and she said well she said you wear *it* well *it* suits you and I thought well that's the MOST strangest thing anyone's ever said to me

Rachel: (laughs) how are you supposed to respond to that

Rosa: I actually felt quite nice...

Rachel: yeah

Rosa: because I thought

Rachel: it's quite strange isn't it

Rosa: YEAH it was almost like.....she was saying you're big but you wear *it* well you know like I'm saying trying to wear things that suit you

Interview with Rosa 24th May 2001 (my emphasis)

In the previous section, Rosa expressed ambivalence about her size when coming to terms with ‘it’ and feeling big. However, in this conversation with a colleague, her flesh or her ‘it’ is talked about as being worn literally like clothing (‘you’re big but you wear *it* well’).

Moreover, later Rosa makes a connection between wearing 'it' well and recently beginning to wear clothing that suits her 'it' rather than covering *it* up (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of the connections between clothing and the materialisation of bodily bignesses). Moreover, in a similar vein, Kate comments on her bodily pasts that:

People said they never really felt I looked overweight when I was big but my face I never really put weight on my face and I didn't put weight on my hands and I also disguised *it* quite well so you know wore dark clothes and I'm tall and carry *it* well

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001 (my emphasis)

Here, the 'it' of Kate's material form is not evenly distributed as a constant layer and instead she notes an absence of flesh on her face and hands which hides the materiality of her flesh elsewhere. Because of this, Kate felt that she could 'carry it well', in addition to wearing dark clothing which disguised the flesh on the rest of her body. Wearing *it* well is a way of coming to terms with bodily bignesses and avoiding the objectification of particular bodily parts as 'bad' in Featherstone's (1991) words "a sign of moral laxitude" (p.178).

These two examples illustrate the intimate relationships between the materialisation of the flesh of bodies, clothing and the presentation and sensation of bodily size. The *it* is not a particular part of the body but the wholeness of her bodily size which is inescapable yet not always an unwelcome presence. A layer of fabric, such as that which clothing provides, materialises her flesh in a different form again as pinched, pressed, covered, skimmed and flattered. It is the matter of fabric which materialises the matter of flab. Therefore, the body may be estranged in the ways that bits are separated off from a bodily whole but they are experienced as closeness and proximity to self. Entwistle (2000) states that "(D)ress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them" (p.7) which does seem to support Rosa's and Kate's convictions regarding their experience of their bodily bignesses. However, clothing as a "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle (2000) is not just about how you look but is equally about how your flesh is arranged, moved and manipulated by clothing. In addition, just as clothing also exists as something separate from clothing, as a layer, like fabric, worn on the body; fleshy size is something that you can wear which is indicated by the multiple ways that *it* is experienced.

6.2 Bodily Absences

The previous section has focused explicitly on bodily 'bits and pieces' that are in clothes or imagined in clothes as a way of highlighting the ways in which women's bodies are zoned

into specific parts yet simultaneously as a wholeness and separateness of flesh. However, equally women's bodies in clothing also highlights the significance of bodies which are not there or parts that I have termed 'bodily absences'. This may sit uneasily with the claims I have made above for a consideration of the meanings and practices of flesh, flab and fat in clothing. However, the problem with bodily geographies demanding a focus on what Longhurst (2001) terms 'the weighty materiality' of bodies is that it risks 'fetishising the body as the lost object' (Ahmed and Stacey 2001 p.3) and that which cannot be transcended. Therefore, the body/bodies/bodily zones which are absent or 'not weighty' are neglected from accounts of the body in geography.

Within the Chapter Four, I have already discussed the narration of before an after bodies in the context of slimming but weight loss also demands a recognition of the zones of the body which are not there. The following extract from an interview with slimmers Carol and Jan, highlights how the practices of weight loss reduce the body in specific ways.

Rachel: do you think you notice more on other parts of your body when you're losing weight you know more than on your breasts maybe....?

Jan: with me it's my back I've lost a lot on my back and round me chest me top half

Carol: mmmm

Jan: but I've not got a lot of weight on me bottom half

Carol: no

Rachel: yeah

Carol: this is where mine's gotta go here (points to hips and tummy) I've still got a lot left on here but I've lost a lot of body weight on on the top half

Rachel: yeah

Carol: which you do when you get older anyway it goes it goes there ur it's settled there I don't think I'll lose anymore of there now anyway I'm hoping the rest of it's coming from ere but I have lost some from me tummy

Rachel: yeah

Carol: that's gone it's just the legs

Interview with Slimmers 18th September 2001

The prevalence of the 'it' materiality is present in this narrative as it was in the previous narratives. Jan has lost 'it' around the back and Carol has lost 'it' on top. However, weight is

still to be lost from the bottom half as Carol's bodily gestures indicate. The longevity of flesh is also actualised as Carol talks about 'it' settling on her stomach. In a sense, this provides a finitude to Carol's corporeality in particular areas and not others as those areas of flab which are more likely or not to 'leave' her body.

However, in an interview with Claire, a twenty year old woman, who admitted to me during the recruitment stage of my research that she had had eating disorders in the past, talks about bodily 'absences' but in a different way to that of Jan and Carol. She narrates her fleshy absences less in terms of inevitability and more in terms of feeling better about herself.

yeah I think how I actually felt that day how I felt about myself ur I mean in periods when I've not eaten for around a month and I've just had one cheese sandwich a day which I've done three or four times I do go very very small I know I've got quite big hips but I go completely flat you know um and the last time that happened would have been around Christmas this year and I went shopping when I got my loan in and I felt much happier cos at that point all my other clothes were really hanging off me not baggy they were hard to keep up you know and I did feel happier because I could walk in and think I can get that and that's gonna look fine and I'm not gonna have to worry about a bulge or anything like that

Interview with Claire 13th December 2000

Claire offers a candid description of her eating habits and the means by which this affects her embodied identity. Her hips felt smaller after a period of disordered eating which she knew from the sensation of her clothes 'hanging off' her. Moreover, eating less meant no discernible bulge, which becomes evident when wearing clothes. I felt uneasy about Claire's eating practices although I could not deny her own feelings of happiness concurrent with her weight or flesh loss. This particular material experience of absence is akin to recent re-theorisations of the anorexic body as embodied rather than victimised (Brain 2002). This rethinking of subjectivity requires new contexts for resistance to and transformation of existing relations.

A movement away from totalising accounts of the material form of the body and a more nuanced conceptualisation of the female consuming body illustrates precisely this multi-corporeal body that "challenges the givenness of any body, the sense of foundational and certain form" (Shildrick 2001 p.163). These intricate narrations of what it feels to be embodied or in-body highlights the multiple nature of female embodied existence as simultaneously bits and pieces and as estrangement, proximity and as absent. In theoretical

terms these empirical accounts get closer to challenging the totality of theoretical accounts of the body. Like Grosz (1994) I am hesitant to posit this as merely reiterating western interpretations of the female body as ‘other’; “lacking not so much or simply the phallus, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order” (p.203). This interpretation of the messiness of female embodied existence only serves to reiterate all that has become what Braidotti (1994) calls the ‘misogynous discourse’ of western philosophy. Instead, she calls for a more nomadic form of feminism which looks outwards towards new ways of thinking through female identity; ways which redefine “what we have learned to recognise as being the structure and the aims of human subjectivity in its relationship to difference, to the “other” (p.94).

6.2. Surfaces and Textures

6.2.1 contextualising surfaces and textures

The second means through which women zone their bodies within the context of clothing consumption is focused upon the surfaces and textures of bodies. I must firmly stress that I do not intend to reinforce post-modern accounts of the consuming body, as mentioned in Chapter Two, which rely upon reading meaning off the surface of the body, and instead I am interested in the matter of skin, blemishes, cellulite and flab. As Grosz (1990) states the body “has a texture, tonus, a materiality that is an active ingredient in the messages produced. It is less like a blank smooth frictionless surface, a page and more like a copper plate to be etched” (Grosz 1997). Therefore, the very matter of the surfaces and textures of bodies are a productive force that mediate the relationship between bodies and the context within which they are placed. Instead I draw on recent work by Ahmed and Stacey (2001) who seek to ‘think *through* the skin’ rather than *on* the skin in order to avoid fetishising the body or indeed the skin. ‘Thinking Through the Skin’ requires “in part to think through how ‘the skin’ acquires the status of a ‘fetish’, that is, how the skin is assumed to contain either the body, identity, well-being or value.” (p.3). This conceptual shift beyond reading meaning off the body’s surfaces provides the space for a mode of thinking that reflects on the body not as the object of thought but on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, when skin touches and is touched by others and/or the self.

Within, Chapter Five, I discussed the moral uncertainties attached to being sized and in particular ‘bignesses’. This was linked inextricably to an abhorrence of flesh being present. Therefore, my other concern in relation to my idea of zoning the body is understanding exactly what is meant by ‘flesh’ as both a surface(s) and texture(s) of the body. Flesh or flab or fat is essentially covered with skin, itself marked and textured, yet it also moves beneath

the skin not as an organ, but as the matter of female bodily existence. It grows and shrinks, it feels soft to the touch yet can be marked with cellulite, stretch marks, spots, hair and scars. It can be moulded and manipulated with hands and fabric, can be grabbed and rubbed between our own and the fingers of others and appears in rolls which have their own inside and outside as the skin touches itself.

In a sense the contradictory nature of flesh at once identifiable yet unrecognisable is akin to Grosz's (1994) concept of the mobius strip (see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of Grosz's (1994) work on female embodied identity) which she presents as means with which to theorise female embodied identity as always extending the frameworks which attempt to contain them. To recap she states that:

“(T)his model provides a way of problematising and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity but the fusion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the invisible onto the outside and the outside onto the inside” (Grosz 1994 p.xii).

Similarly this observation which rethinks the relations between bodies and the world can be linked to Prosser's (1998) work on skin, transexuality and transformation. He works beyond readings of the skin that seek to understand the body through signifying registers of meaning and instead advocates an understanding of skin which works to reconstitute and sustain the material body as discrete, generative or productive referent. He states:

“Bordering inside and outside the body, the point of separation and contact between you and me, skin is the key interface between self and other, between biological, the psychic and the social. It holds each of us together quite literally contains us, protects us, keeps us discrete and yet is our first mode of communication with each other and the world” (Prosser 1998 p.65).

The link between these accounts are twofold. Firstly, they outline the difficulties of understanding the surface of bodies as a two dimensional plane through which meaning is generated and produced and secondly, they advocate an approach to bodies and skin, which is premised on the perilous location of its existence on the boundaries of both outside and inside, surface and depth, the biological and the social. As Ahmed and Stacey (2001) remind us “the skin, as bodyscape, is inhabited by, as well as inhabiting, (the) space” (p.2). Moreover, “the skin is not simply present (in the here or now); in so far as it has multiple histories and unimaginable futures, it is worked upon, and indeed it is worked towards” (ibid). Therefore, in the empirically driven sections that follow, I will explore two typologies of body surfaces and textures. These are firmnesses and post-birth bodies that are presented not

merely as a means of describing the material differences between them but as means of illustrating the role that flesh plays in negotiating particular relations between bodies and spaces.

6.2.2 Firmnesses

Bordo (1993), in her engagements with advertising for a variety of slimming practices, observes the shift in achieving particular bodily aesthetics from the weight of the body to the surface and texture of bodies. As explored above, those parts of the body that bulge, wiggle and wobble are unwanted which suggests a desire for firm as well as thin bodies. As Bordo (1993) reiterates “The ideal (here) is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, “bolted down”, firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control”. (Bordo 1993 p.190-191).

In order to achieve firm bodily boundaries, women engage in exercise as well as dieting because to be slim is not enough if the body still wiggles. For example, we join an interview with Lynn and Roz, as Lynn describe her experiences of going to the gym.

Lynn: cos I used to go to a gym in town I used to go three or four times a week and I were really REALLY fit them you know but I had one of those personal trainers well this one seemed to think that you were only fit if you had muscles so eventually I got.....I got bigger than what I was than I I was before I went

Roz: cos you had all the muscle

Lynn: they built me muscles up you know so me shoulders were MASSIVE

Rachel: yeah

Lynn: you know so I didn't think that were very feminine so....

Roz: mmmm

Lynn: I went in to another trainer eventually and that were alright but I tried to really enjoy it

Interview with Librarians 10th July 2001

Lynn talks about her body becoming masculinized through building up the muscle on her body which she did not like. Therefore, she changed her training practices in order to become more feminine or less musclely. In this sense the firmness of female bodies can result in the

body becoming too big or ‘MASSIVE’ so that it is no longer ‘feminine’. Johnston (1996) notes the implications of muscle build up for female embodied identity in her study of female body builders. She notes that working upon the body’s boundaries through engaging in practices such as going to the gym and working out provides an ambivalent conceptual space through which to understand female bodily boundaries. She concluded that the meanings and experiences of a body builder’s body was not singular and could be simultaneously be read and experienced as feminine, transgressive and abject. For example, she suggests that women can be situated within a Foucauldian framework of docility and discipline but can also be interpreted as challenging normative ideas of male and female bodies so that a common response is to view the female muscular body as ‘unnatural’, disgusting and masculine. For Lynn, her motivation for joining a gym was to firm up her body and to rid her body of the wobbly bits abhorred within Western contemporary bodily aesthetics. However, her firmed body was too much and thus she changed her practices to prevent her body being too masculine. There is an ambiguity surrounding Lynn’s bodily firmnesses between having too much muscle and not enough. Her body does not, therefore, sit easily within any one theoretical or discursive interpretation of bodies. Johnston (1994) in fact supports the ambiguity of female muscle and states that “female body-building disrupts the Western Othering of female bodies” to allow for “contradictory readings of pliable bodies whose sexed form is geographically historically, politically and culturally specific” (p.337).

Within, my empirical work, the contradictions of sexed bodily boundaries as mentioned above, was also narrated in relation to particular moments of consumption when women try to dress their firmnesses. In some instances it became difficult for women to reconcile their muscular body with clothing made for a so-called ‘female body’. Abigail is a fitness instructor and in the extract below we talk about how her body has changed in relation to the amount of exercise she does through the specific example of trying to find a pair of jeans to fit her:

Abigail: for me trousers always always trousers because I mean I’ve been exercising for over twenty years I mean I’ve got very musclely legs now and I can can very rarely find trousers to fit I mean NOW I mean I bought my first pair of jeans this year and It was the first time I’d bought a pair of jeans in about six years

Rachel: really

Abigail: again

Rachel: you couldn’t get them to...?

Abigail: I couldn’t get them to fit because if I can get them to fit round my legs they’re massively big on the waist and hips and and if I can get it to fit on my waist I can’t get

my legs in them and it's not the awful I mean OK maybe specifically a problem for sporty a sporty problem but there's this whole feeling when you can't fit your calves into a pair of jeans and you find two pairs and you pull them to knee level so trousers definitely I have MASSIVE problems with trousers

Interview with Abigail 18th July 2001 (her emphasis)

Here the firmness of Abigail's body means that her body, as defined by the boundaries of muscular flesh, is too big and too small to fit into a pair of jeans. Her waist and hips are too small for a pair of jeans which may fit her thighs and conversely, a pair of jeans which may fit her hips and waist she is unable to pull up over her calves and thighs. Jeans are an item of clothing which are made to fit half of the entire of the female body and therefore can act as a template for a large amount of female flesh. Not fitting into this template indicates to Abigail that she does not fit into feminine norms of bodily size, not because of the wobbliness of her flesh but because of the consistency of her flesh as muscle. Bordo (1993) discusses how "contemporary images of female attractiveness (to) oscillate between a spare "minimalist" look and a solid, muscular, athletic look" (p.191) and I would suggest that Abigail experiences difficulties with clothing her body precisely because she does **not** oscillate between these normative bodily contradictions. Instead, Abigail does not easily fit any category in that she is simultaneously firm yet big ("I consider myself to be a sporty looking large woman").

Later on in the interview she talks about shopping for sportswear in particular and how the style of certain clothing implies the kind of body which should be engaged in exercise.

Abigail: um but sports depending on what you choose to wear I think that sports wear is still very very small um and an awful lots still some of these micro shorts or hot pants type shorts which are basically like large Bridget Jones pants

Rachel: yeah they are like that

Abigail: yeah which I wouldn't wear and I wouldn't feel comfortable in um so I suppose in my opinion sports clothes is the same as a lot of the fashion industry they do tend to be very small sizes and again it makes you feel that you have to be a certain way to be able to wear those clothes be a certain shape look a certain way and you've got to be totally perfect and again the thing that I really object to I've done a lot of a lot of the fitness magazines and I know there's the campaign to try and change things in women's magazines but if you get fitness magazines um especially the American ones which has a

lot of sports clothing in America the girls that are in those magazines don't necessarily look as though they do a lot o sport but they do look absolutely perfect it's again the kind ofpush up type bras which you can now get you can get like cleavage sports bras

Interview with Abigail 18th July 2001

Shopping for sportswear, such as those clothes Abigail needs to wear for work, presents her with the normative aesthetic of what a fit body should be. She talks about how sports clothing is very small and revealing and reflects the bodily ideals represented by the fashion industry more widely. She feels as if these kind of clothes produce her body as the incorrect size for doing exercise and that while her body is fit and firm it is not small and slender. Her comment reiterates Bordo's (1993) observations about the contradictions of contemporary female bodily aesthetics. She feels that the women she describes in the magazines don't look as if they work out i.e they are not too muscley yet they have retained their breasts (or "signifiers of femininity" (Johnston 1996 p.333)) by wearing push up exercise bras which would seem to act against the notion of supporting and controlling breast flesh during periods of exertion and exercise. Moreover, it implies that you need a certain type of body in order to do exercise. I think what is implicit in this account is an acknowledgement of the non-conformity of her body to particular feminine ideals and that while her boundaries may be firm her bodily proportions in clothing still positions her as non-feminine.

6.3.3. Post-Birth Bodies

In this section I want to focus on the surfaces and textures of the post-birth body. By this I mean how women narrated and experienced their bodies in clothes after they had given birth to their children rather than during the pregnancy themselves. The embodied geographies of the pregnant body have been well documented within Geography through the work of Robyn Longhurst (see Longhurst 1998, 2000, 2001). She focuses in particularly on the corporeal, performative and theoretical potential the pregnant body offers to masculinist accounts of the body in geography whilst also highlighting the significance of the pregnant body for understanding embodied subjectivity. She describes the pregnant body as "that (which) transgresses the boundary between inside and outside, self and other, subject and object" (Longhurst 1998 p.20). In terms of bodily surfaces and textures, Longhurst (2001) focuses on the pregnant body, following Grosz (1994), as a 'mode of seepage', and on the material changes of the body during pregnancy; "the enlarging of the breasts for feeding the infant, the

swelling of the stomach, the threat of the body leaking fluids and splitting itself in two” (p.41). This is articulated in below in an interview extract with two young mothers, Bo and Scarlet, where Scarlet is describing her pregnancy:

I HAD MY FACE forget the rest of me but I looked really like my hair was in good condition my face but from the neck down I was like a blob like a mass of stretch marks everywhere but I was really I don't know why that was like I guess I had to be a 'pretty' pregnant woman cos I thought I can't glow anywhere the rest of me is crap (laughs)

Interview with Young Mums 13th March 2001

Scarlet's pregnant body is 'crap' from the neck down; 'a blob like a mass of stretch marks everywhere'. Her face and hair were particular bodily parts which 'glowed' in comparison to the rest of her body which did not. Young (1990) comments that "the pregnant subject...is decentred, split and doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. It's inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head (p.160). This latter comment about the separation of the pregnant subject into the head and trunk is the direction that I now want to take my empirical discussion of post-birthing bodies. This discussion will focus on the surfaces and textures of those female bodies which have given birth to babies and whose clothed bodies now materialise the effects of that pregnancy birthing experience. This means taking into account, for example, stretch marks and the redistribution of flesh around the trunk of the body which occurs in a bodily zone below the neck and above the knees.

Stretch marks are left behind on the skin of women who have given birth and are symbolic of and felt as a reminder of the child/children that was once lived within the body of the mother. During pregnancy, the body changes in size and texture as the baby grows inside the womb and leaks as the baby is born (see Longhurst 2001). Moreover, the pregnant skin no-longer acts as a divide between self and non-self and instead "the skin is the site (and sight) of change in pregnancy. It softness becomes more elastic, stretches and is stretch-marked; it mutates and expands growing new skin inside of itself (Tyler 2001 p.72). The post birth body is materialised as an affect of the pregnancy and birthing experience through the appearance of stretch marks on the body. This is actualised in an interview with a group of women below as they discuss buying and wearing pair of trousers.

Dee: well I can't get Next trousers on fullstop

Elisabeth: no you can't

Dee: they're not long enough I'm long bodied

Anthea: the style has gone a bit more hippie hasn't it

Elisabeth: yeah

Anthea: yeah cos they're not so much round your waist they're a bit more dropped than that they're not OK for not flashing your tummy off you know I've got the stripy effect you know on your tummy

Elisabeth: that's children you know

Laughter

Interview with National Women's Register 12th December 2000

Here the women talk about buying trousers to fit their bodies. The contemporary hippie style of trousers means that for Anthea trousers no-longer cover up her stomach and instead hang below it. Therefore, her stomach, with the 'stripy affect' of stretch marks is revealed through wearing trousers. These marks have been left behind on her skin as a result of being pregnant twice. Stretch marks are evidence, it seems, of what used to move beneath the skin and in this sense pregnancy does not leave the body after a child is born. Young (1990), in her account of pregnant embodiment discusses how "In pregnancy my pre-pregnant body image does not entirely leave my movements and expectations, yet it is with the pregnant body that I must move " (Young 1990 p.163-4). She mentions this in relation to the shifting of bodily boundaries within pregnancy itself and the difficulty she had in reconciling "where my body ends and the world begins" (p.163). However I would argue in the case of post-birth bodies that the skin, or in this case stretch marks on Anthea's body acts as a form of embodied memorial of her pregnancy. Although she attempts to cover up her marks with clothing, they do not rub off and instead I argue with Young (2002) that this flesh 'haunts' her body. She states:

"My body is constituted not only out of my imaginary anatomy but also out of others', other bodies toward whom I yearn. Of course these acts of the imagination, too, are embodied experiences but not embodied experiences of the world. They are embodied experiences that hold s the world to me in a certain configuration. I materialise in my body the ghosts of my ancestors" (Young 2002 p.45).

In relation to the nature of the memory of post-pregnant flesh to remember, I want to present a further extract from the interview I carried out with Bo and Scarlet which describes the reciprocal relationship both women have with their own and each other's post-birth bodies and bodily textures.

Scarlet: I spent time last week over my stomach you know I showed it to you I've known Bo for over a year and it's the first time I've ever shown her my stomach and it's not I mean it's not horrendous but

Bo: I showed her my bum

Scarlet: Bo showed me her bottom (laughter) but I've got this roll of fat and it's not actually it's not since I've I'm losing weight it's not that bad but it's from where I've got a Caesarean scar and this other scar and I've got this roll of fat but the scar itself is a really long one but it made me cry last week I don't know why I was just you when you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and I was just wearing some kind of nightie and it looked kind of nice until you saw my stomach and it really upset me and I started crying and I wasn't crying I realised I wasn't crying about the surgery or anything which is insane I'm not crying because I almost died I'm crying because I have a roll of fat on my stomach and a white scar that's what made me and I thought after I cried I was laughing at myself and I was thinking how fucking shallow are you I mean I'm not crying that oh my God my baby almost died I'm crying because I have a roll of fat on my stomach and I just thought (laughs) that sums up culture you know what I mean

Interview with Young Mums 13th March 2001

I found this particular part of the interview very touching and moving as Scarlet relates her traumatic birthing experience, during which she and her baby nearly dies, to how she now feels about her post-birth body. Scarlet and Bo admit to me that they had shown each other their post-birth bodies. Bo has shown Scarlet her bottom and Scarlet has shown Bo her stomach and caesarean scars. Scarlet describes crying after catching a glimpse of her stomach in the mirror but being confused as to whether she was crying for her own and her baby's life or the textures of her body and the 'rolls of fat' and scarring. Scarlet has trouble reconciling her concern for her body's aesthetic appearance ("fucking shallow") and for being a mother and having her child with her ("oh my God my baby nearly died"). The very matter of her skin and flesh provide her access to her birthing experiences and her life as a post-birth body within a 'culture' which labels her body as unsuitable. Probyn (2001) comments on her investigation of skin as beginning in "an acknowledgement of the different shades, textures

and feel of skin, of skin as testimony both to the subjective state of individuals and to the histories that have moulded them” (Probyn 2001 p.87). This is particularly apparent throughout Scarlet’s narrative. It is not simply that pregnancy and birth marks the skin’s surface but that it remains as the means by which women have access to their bodily pasts, presents and futures. Whilst Young (1990) talks about the doubling of pregnant embodied subjectivity as challenge to a unified self. I would argue that the very material state of pregnancy and birth is always potentially to be enacted post-pregnancy through the medium of the skin and flesh. As Prosser (2001) reminds us:

“We become aware of skin as a visible surface through memory. If someone touching our skin brings us immediately to the present, the look of our skin – both to others and to ourselves – brings to its surface a remembered past. It is a phenomenological function of the skin to record” (Prosser 2001 p.52).

6.4 Conclusions

In this chapter I have engaged with the female body as it is ‘zoned’ empirically and within writings on the body which are premised on the multiplicities of female embodied experience. These multiplicities are presented within the context of women’s experiences and narrations of clothing consumption but also to illustrate the role of particular dimensions of female embodiment, such as bits and pieces, bodily absences and surfaces and textures, for rethinking the messiness of female subjectivity beyond a process of ‘othering’ women’s bodies in relation to a masculinised totality. Instead, as Grosz (1994) suggests different assumptions and methods are required in order to think through the ways that bodies ‘function interactively and productively’ and ‘generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable’ (p.xi).

It is evident that the very matter of bodies, the flab, flesh and skin, provides the means through which multiple embodiments are formed and experienced. Moreover, clothing, as fabric placed on top of the skin, revealing, covering, moulding and shaping flesh, materialises the female body in particular ways. For example, this includes the rolls of flab that Kate experiences when trying on a top, the control underwear that Claire wears to alter the shape of her stomach or the absent body parts that become apparent in clothing when Jan and Carol lose weight. I feel that flab is an important form of embodied matter somewhat neglected in Geographers’ list of female fluids (Longhurst 2001) precisely because it does not leak out and is in some ways unknowable because you cannot see it and because it changes and moves beneath the skin. For example, Kate and Rosa talk of ‘it’ and yet cannot locate ‘it’ or name ‘it’. However, it is part of the body yet also separate from it; it moves beneath the skin, growing and shrinking but is also felt and remembers bodies which have past and which are

becoming. Flab therefore is the means through which women develop a relationship with themselves and the world around them; clothing simply presents this female matter to the world which intervenes in this relationship in particular ways. For example, Rosa learns to wear it well as opposed to engage in practices which disavows her flab from her body. In addition, by 'thinking through the skin' (Ahmed and Stacey 2001), the layer which moves above the flesh of bodies is no longer adequately theorised as a two-dimensional layer through which a body is read, and instead is the means through which femininities are felt i.e. firmnesses and bodies remembered i.e. post-birth bodies.

In all of these examples it is crucial to theorise from this instability; from the multiplous nature through which women understand their bodies as zoned in a number of ways. This involves engaging precisely with how women experience their corporeal selves rather than attributing meaning to those composite parts which in some ways are too familiar and too easily abjected from the female body as evidence of its uncontrollable nature. Both Holliday and Hassard (2001) and Braidotti (1994) have been used in this chapter as evidence of how to reformulate the type of questions that should be asked of female corporeality. Namely re-theorising (and I would add) re-empiricalising female bodies precisely from these instabilities. This results in bodies whose wobbly bits become central to how women come to know their embodied selves, whose bodily parts become significant in their absence rather than their 'weighty materiality', whose surfaces have great emotional depth and whose skin speaks to previous lives and bodies. I am not advocating a mere recognition of the messy, unruly and out of control nature of female bodies and instead I want to take their recognition to a place where "the potential for alternative figurations of the body does exist" (Holliday and Hassard 2001 p.6). As Braidotti (1994) reminds us:

"feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of essentialism. In feminist theory one *speaks* as a woman, although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experiences (Braidotti 1994 p.4).

As one of my research participants puts it, we need to recognise that "women grow up and get bigger and get lumpy" !

LookingChapter Seven

“I looked at myself in the mirror, wondering, What is it about me? What is it that is so besotting? The mirror was full length: in it I tried to catch the back of myself, but of course you never can. You can never see yourself the way you are to someone else – to a man looking at you, from behind, when you don’t know – because in a mirror your own head is always cranked around your own shoulder. A coy inviting pose. You can hold up another mirror to see your back view, but then what you see is what so many painters have loved to paint – Woman Looking In Mirror, said to be an allegory of vanity. Though it is unlikely to be vanity, but the reverse: a search for flaws. *What is it about me?* can be so easily construed as *What is wrong with me?*”

(Atwood 2000 *The Blind Assassin* London: Virago p.318)

7 Introduction

This quote neatly encapsulates the main concerns of this chapter. In the extract from Margaret Atwood's (2000) book *The Blind Assassin*, a woman describes the embodied practices of looking at herself in the mirror. Her looking is laden with the objectifying gaze of a male observer yet is simultaneously experienced as a personal search for bodily flaws ("What is it about me? can be so easily construed as What is wrong with me?"). Moreover, what is evident is the means by which looking is not just about seeing but is a means of arranging the body ('your head cranked') and connects the body to other discursive, spatial and temporal realms ("what you see is what so many painters have loved to paint"). Therefore what this chapter attempts to do is open up the practices of looking as a means to understand the body not as a text off which meaning is read but as a means to understand the specificities of what it means to look at your own body, to feeling looked at by other bodies and to look at others bodies. Or more specifically in the case of my work on clothing consumption, the practices of trying on clothes, looking at clothing on the body in the mirror and observing other women trying on clothing and their bodies.

As Gregson et al (2002) state in relation to second hand clothes shopping:

Shopping for clothes places a high premium on relations of looking. Frequently highly methodical, careful and comparative, it involves lengthy amounts of 'just looking' and trying on, but is also about the framing of an embodied self and negotiations of 'fashion' (p.614).

Whilst it may seem that my focus on the 'visual' could be compared to critiques I've made elsewhere (see Chapter 2) of approaches to the body and clothing whereby meaning is read off the surface of skin or indeed fabric, I intend to present my empirical work to understand the ways in which the body is materialised and felt through particular looking practices within the context of work on 'body image' and 'the gaze'.

The chapter will begin by placing the practices of looking within the context of work on 'body image'. This will involve engaging with recent rearticulations of the concept of body image by Gail Weiss (1999) and Elisabeth Grosz (1994) who focus on the means through which body images come into being through 'corporeal exchanges' with (non) present bodies and images of bodies rather than understood as a one dimensional picture of the body that we hold in our mind to which we compare ourselves. Instead I try to think through what it 'feels' like to look at or be looked at in relation to mirrors and the literal or perceived presence of other bodies. As Grosz (1994) states "The body is as much a function of the subject's psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy" (1994 p.79). Moreover, I will also focus on how to evaluate the politics of looking and the discursive power of actual body

images as contextualised within work on ‘the gaze’ in Geography (Rose 1993; Nash 1996) and what it means for women to look at their own and other women’s bodies. Through the use of empirical examples I will suggest alternative ways of looking to that of narcissism, self surveillance and psychological oppression (Bartky 1990) and I turn to what Kruks (2001) has termed “respectful recognition” or ‘a relationship in which one is deeply and actively concerned about others, but neither appropriates them as an object of one’s own experience or interests nor dissolves oneself in a vicarious experience of identification with them” (p.155).

I then go on to explore ‘looking’ empirically within the specificity of clothing consumption in sections concerned with mirror practices, comparative bodies, and connective embodiment. My intention, therefore, is to illustrate the embodied nature of looking at our own and other bodies which focuses on the particularities of women looking at their own and other women’s bodies. Instead, as Budgeon (2003) suggests:

“Being cannot be reduced to an effect of the consumption of images but instead is the result of various forms of self-inventions which occur within embodied practices which also are not effects of representation but sites of production” (p.52).

7.1 Bodies/Images/Looking

Within this introductory section, I will introduce the concepts of ‘body image’ and ‘the gaze’ and the potential that they have for aiding an understanding of the looking practices involved within the context of women’s narrations and practices of clothing consumption. They are not to be understood as the only means through which these practices can be framed but have been selected for two major reasons. Firstly, recent re-articulations of body image work with the central premise of this thesis which moves beyond a static and categorising tendency of the body. Secondly, work within feminist geography’s concern with the visual, moves beyond conventional understandings of landscape to consider the potential that looking at bodies may have for rethinking landscape viewing positions. Both of these developments imply a shift in the role and function of the gaze for understanding empirical work and for revaluing women’s embodied experiences of consumption per se.

7.1.1 Unpacking Body Image

In this section, the concept of ‘body image’ will be explored in order to offer an account of how images of bodies have figured in accounts of women’s experiences of consumption. ‘Body image’ as a concept has already been utilised in particular ways to understand the relationships between women’s bodies and the display and representation of bodily ideals

within consumer culture. This work is informed, if somewhat covertly, by Schilder's (1950) account of body image as "the picture of our own body which we form in our mind that is to say the way in which the body appears to ourselves" (p.11). The most commonly used example of this literal application of this definition of 'body image' can be summarised by the conclusions of a recent Body Image Summit organised collaboratively with the British government and the British Medical Association (BMA) in May 2000. The summit worked on the premise that "waif like models are fuelling an epidemic of illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia" and criticised the "widening gap between the shapes of real women and size six or eight models" (Cussins 2001 p.105). It is suggested here that women configure an 'internalised ideal body' by comparing their actual body shape against the socially represented ideal body (British Medical Association 2000 p.33). The assumption is that a set of representational images of bodies have some form of impact on the perception or image that an individual woman has of her own body. For example, studies often 'test' the impact of media images by 'exposing' (usually young) women to pictures of fashion models and then record their consequent feelings of bodily (dis) satisfaction such as shame, guilt, stress and depression. (For examples of this work see Thompson and Heinberg 1999; and Dittmar 2000).

In this respect, body image is a singular bodily representation that is capable of transmitting meaning to the self' for example, a person may develop a 'faulty perception of optimum body size' (British Medical Association 2000 p.33) such as suggested by some work on anorexia. Or is capable of transmitting meanings to 'society' or to both self and society. For example a thin body may well represent achievement and control to the individual, and femininity and passivity to society. Body image, therefore, is often conceptualised as the means by which we transmit and experience bodily values through the image of the body we see or in more simplistic terms as 'a person's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body' (Grogan 1999 p.1).

However, recent more accurate readings of Schilder's (1950) work have challenged this static and representational account of 'body image'. Instead Weiss (1999) and Grosz (1994) focus more on what Schilder calls 'body image intercourse' or the plasticity and (in)stabilities of body image whereby body images are "continually being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in response to changes within one's body, other people's bodies and/or the situation as a whole" (Weiss 1999 p.17). This does not mean a return to a post-modern account of identity as a fragmented and free-floating set of options, instead this recognition of the multiplicity of body images serves 'to destabilise the hegemony of any particular body image ideal, or in other words "involves the relations between the body, the surrounding space, other objects and bodies, and the co-ordinates of vertical and horizontal" (Grosz 1994 p.85).

This understanding of the inter-corporeal nature of body image provides the potential for understanding the body in consumption beyond a visual representation or as a physical material presence to be moulded and manipulated. Instead a multitude of body images are (re)experienced, (re)produced and (re)constituted within particular consumption moments but are not necessarily something which can be touched, felt or seen. Weiss (1999) suggests that “Our body images may indeed lack the stability of concrete phenomena that are visible before our eyes, but neither are they wilful creations of our minds that only arise when we consciously reflect on them” (Weiss p.166). Instead they are manifested through their occurrences and recurrences and the capacity they have to change the course of embodied action or sensation. For example, if a woman looks in a mirror to ‘see herself’ in a suit she has just tried on, her body image is not just the reflection of her body in a suit that she sees projected back at her in the mirror. Instead, Young (1990) suggests that the “visual makes possible a kind of schism between the immediate me and the me that is seen in the mirror” (p.37). I argue that it is this schism that provides the space for a multitude of body images with the potential to be actualised either individually or collectively within a singular moment of consumption. To return to the woman in the changing room. She tries on the suit. The size is different from last time. Bigger, 14 not 12. She looks in the mirror; the colour looks good next to her skin. Does she feel comfortable in it, is it ‘her’? Does it construe the right ‘image for the impending job interview? Is she good enough? How will the woollen fabric feel against her sweaty and nervous skin,? Rub the fabric to see if it creases. She could do with losing a few pounds she looked slimmer last night in her old suit in front of the mirror in her bedroom. She’s hungry and will get a coffee and a cake after leaving the shop. Low fat of course. Her Mum had a similar suit once. Does that mean she is turning into her mother? She sees her mother’s eyes she feels her mother’s touch.

All or some of these ‘body images’ need not be consciously reflected upon or experienced in the moment. Indeed she may not be aware or even feel any of these body images. Weiss (1999) suggests that ‘Their (body images) anonymity ensures their efficacy, but it also helps to mask the central role that our body images play from one moment to the next in our everyday life’ (p.66). The question, therefore, is not to ask what our body image *is* but how our body images are *produced* and to what material affect, both conscious and unconscious.

7.1.2 Understanding ‘the gaze’

In this section I want to focus on the conceptual frameworks concerned with ‘the gaze’ within which it is possible to contextualise these practices of looking. It is necessary to unpack exactly what I mean by ‘the gaze’ within the context of both consumption and work within

geography. Post-modern accounts of consumption commonly focus upon the centrality of the visual and particularly advertising and images in contemporary consumer culture as discussed in Chapter Two. Featherstone (1991) notes that “the perception of the body within consumer culture is dominated by the existence of a vast array of visual images. Indeed the inner logic of consumer culture depends upon the cultivation of an insatiable appetite to consume images” (p.178). For Featherstone (1991) these images make individuals more conscious of external appearance, bodily presentation and ‘the look’ (p.179) and “remind us constantly that we fail to measure up” (Bartky 1990 p.40). I have two main difficulties with these kinds of accounts of consumption, firstly the reliance upon the visual nature of consumer culture means that other sensory functions are forgotten and the body is positioned as a surface both as representation and as a malleable and plastic form on which to work upon. There is no sense here of how looking at bodies and images of bodies can be felt beyond that of aspiration or self-dissatisfaction, for example. This leads me on to my second difficulty with the visual which is that it becomes the means by which women are victimised through the visual power and surveillance practices of consumer culture. In short women’s ‘insatiable appetite’ for images identifies both a lack of control over affective outcome of consumption practices and a narcissistic investment in their appearance which “produces women in estrangement from her bodily being” (ibid p.40). For Bartky (1990) the specificities of female narcissism, therefore, indicates an ‘infatuation with an inferiorised body” (ibid).

For the specifics of my research concerns, landscape, understood as a ‘way of seeing’ (Cosgrove 1985) provides a focus with which to understand the particularity of looking relations in terms of the politics and practices involved in looking at particular bodies. Whilst my research focuses more in the practices involved at looking at ‘real’ bodies as opposed to filmic or pictorial representations, I am interested in working with feminist interpretations of landscape in geography as supporting my interest in understanding how we see and are seen within the context we are in.

Feminist geographers’ approaches to landscape are of particular significance to my research, as they challenge what has become known as the masculinist nature of landscape viewing. Rose (1993) states “the discipline’s visuality is not simple observation but, rather, is a sophisticated ideological device that enacts systematic erasures” (Rose 1993 p.87). By erasures Rose (1993) means the power relationships between society and the environment implicit with the production and consumption of landscape is not often made explicit. Moreover, the ‘Geographer’ involved in the interpretation of landscape is often absent although this absent presence reinforces a masculine gaze. Therefore, these accounts of landscape ask that we consider that we are always looking from somewhere, not from nowhere, which implies that we take account of the power relations implicit in ‘the gaze’.

Much of the feminist critiques of landscape work within Geography has origins within similar work done within film and art theory. The basic premise of much of this work is summarised in the following quote:

“In most popular representations it seems that men look and women are looked at. In film, on television, in the press and in most popular narratives men are shown to be in control of the gaze, women are controlled by it. Men act; women are acted upon. This is patriarchy” (Gamman and Marshment 1994 p.1).

Within representations, such as film and television, the ‘look’ is deemed to be controlled by the male whilst the female is ‘looked at’ by this male gaze. The subject positioning of these looking relationships implies a particular understanding of power (in this case patriarchy). As within accounts of body image, women become victimised and controlled by a gaze of which they have no power to return. Berger (1972), in his work on female bodily representations in 18th century nude oil paintings and contemporary advertising, also notes a further significance of ‘the gaze’ to the formation of female subjectivity. He states:

“One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman herself is male; the surveyed female. Then she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” (p.47).

This deeper analysis of the gaze positions women in a complex set of looking relations whereby she is indeed looked at by others i.e. men, but then simultaneously women look at themselves as they are looked at by others, thereby producing themselves as objects to be looked at and in relation to consumption, to be worked upon. Again, this has resonance with Bartky's (1990) understanding of female narcissism whereby female embodiment is a contradictory form of closeness and estrangement from her bodily being:

On the one she is it and is scarcely allowed to be anything else; on the other hand, she must exist perpetually at a distance from her physical self, fixed at this distance in a permanent posture of disapproval” (p.40).

Therefore, whilst much of the discussion within geography on ‘the gaze’ has focused upon looking at visual representations of landscape, I feel that these observations are important when understanding the wider context of the production of particular femininities within contemporary consumer culture. Indeed, Linda Mulvey (1989) who has written extensively on the female gaze in film states that:

“The image of woman as spectacle and fetish sets in motion another chain of metonymies, linking together various sites in which femininity is produced in advanced capitalist society: woman as consumed and woman as consumer of commodities, women exchanged in image and women transforming themselves into image through commodity consumption” (ix).

However, it must be said that what is missing from these accounts of ‘the gaze’ within geographical and wider representations is any notion of what it means and feels for women to look at themselves and other women and any notion of alternative articulations of ‘the gaze’ which move towards a less oppressive scopic viewing regime. Nash (1996) in her work on representations of bodies as landscapes suggest that recent moves within film theory seek to avoid generalising looking relations which suggests that looking does not produce “static positions of identification, distance, voyeurism, narcissism or fetishism but movement between them” (Nash 1996 p.151). For example, I am interested in what it means and feels like to look at one’s body in the mirror whilst trying on clothes, what regulatory practices are engaged in when looking at other women in the changing room and what the potential is for a female looking position to move beyond narcissism and self-criticism to a more open and reflexive engagement in looking at our own and other bodies. Young ((1979) in Bartky 1990 p.35) states that “developing a sense of our bodies as beautiful objects to be gazed at and decorated requires suppressing a sense of our bodies as strong, active subjects moving out to meet the world’s risks and confront the resistances of matter and motion”. I will suggest that my empirical work does indeed work with this idea of bodies ‘moving out into the world’ and of having reflexive capacities with which to engage in embodied looking practices. For example, looking at other women need not result in feelings of bodily dissatisfaction but instead hint towards a concern for another body or a revaluation of our own bodily selves.

Therefore, what I intend to do for the rest of this chapter is to work with the two concepts of body image and ‘the gaze’, as they have been articulated within a variety of disciplinary, political and other contexts, in order to establish the extent to which they can inform the specificities of women’s looking practices when shopping for clothes. These will be focussed on understanding mirror practices, re-enacting body images and looking at other bodies.

7.2. Mirror Practices

In this initial section I want to focus on specific practices of 'looking in the mirror' as experienced by women when shopping for clothes. Within a changing room context, women are not only provided with the space to try on clothing but also to look at their bodies in clothes when looking in the mirror. Ganetz (1995) also comments that it is a relating space whereby women's friendships and relationships with each other are given 'free rein'. She comments that "It is about confirming each other, at the same time as the person is expected to give personal advice on what works and what does not, what suits and what does not" (p.86). Changing rooms are either communal, whereby mirrors are positioned around the sides of an open space in which everyone tries on clothes in front of each other, in cubicles, whereby each woman tries on clothes in their own enclosed space which has its own full length mirror(s) or indeed some changing rooms have both communal and cubicle space which means that women can move from an individual space to collective spaces; thus looking in the mirror on their own and in the presence of other women.

Looking in the mirror is a practice that has much intellectual and cultural baggage and it is obvious to note the role that the mirror plays in psychoanalytic work. This refers in particular to Lacan's (1977) idea of 'the mirror stage' whereby a child begins to realise that it is a bounded body by seeing its image in a mirror. The contradiction of this process is that while the child may identify with the image "what it sees as unified exteriority, however, belies the turbulence and chaos occasioned by its motor and sensor immaturity" (Grosz 1994 p.42). Moreover, when a child looks in a mirror, "the gaze is always torn between two conflicting impulses: on the one hand, a narcissistic identification with what it sees and through which it constitutes its identity; and on the other a voyeuristic distance from what is seen as Other to it" (Rose 1993 p.103). Therefore, from a psychoanalytic perspective, looking in the mirror can highlight the contradiction and difficulties of reconciling images of the body with the very experience of being/feeling embodied.

Whilst Lacan's (1977) work focuses on the experience of the child, he posits that the early experiences of an imaginary anatomy or a perceived wholeness provides the basic from which we come to know our embodied selves, the stability of which cannot be maintained. For example, Grosz (1994) reminds us that we are only able to see and feel certain parts of our body and that a unified image of the body is not an accomplished fact. Instead, "it must be continually renewed, not through the subject's conscious effort but through its ability to conceive of itself and to separate itself from its objects and others to be able to undertake wilful action" (p.44). However, as mentioned above, recent understandings of 'the body image' challenge this idea of a unified body image, as does Chapter Six, and instead argue that "body image is itself an expression of an ongoing exchange between bodies and images"

(Weiss 1999 p.3). Therefore, when looking in the mirror it is important to situate the multitude of other bodies and images of bodies that are co-recent in that moment of looking. To reiterate Weiss (1999) it is not that images of the body are discrete “but form a series of overlapping identities whereby one or more aspects of that body appear to be especially salient at any given point in time” (p.1).

This section will now go on to demonstrate through the use of examples the embodied nature of looking in the mirror, with reference to the significance of recent reconceptualisations of body image for unsettling the unitary and one-dimensional nature of the reflection of the body in the mirror.

7.2.1. Looking at/as Bodies in Mirrors

The purpose of this section is to introduce what looking practices, within the context of trying on clothes in a changing room, looks and feels like. I would like to draw particular attention here to the ways in which women touch their own bodies in clothing and how looking in the mirror become a ways of trying to reconcile their bodies with the clothes that are placed on the skin which marks out their malleable bodily boundaries, as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to ‘flab’.

I will now introduce you to Sarah, a twenty six year old student from Manchester. The following research diary extract describes trying on clothes in Top Shop. Sarah is trying on clothes in a cubicle style changing room whereby each cubicle has a full length mirror covering the left hand wall and a row of clothing pegs on the other. Sarah identifies as being ‘small’ and tells me before our first shopping experience together that she is a size 6-8 and find it difficult to find clothes that fit her body. Clothing is often too big for her or exposes her body in ways that she is not comfortable. We join the shopping as Sarah is showing me a pair of jeans and the tops she is trying on.

She came out wearing the jeans and both tops. I asked her what she thought and she said she liked the pink negligee and thought she would buy it. It looked like a vest and came just over her bottom. She said that the vest was a little too big and she had actually picked up a ten and whether an eight would be better. I said I thought it looked OK but she said it was different when she wore it on its own. I then asked her about the jeans. At this point she was looked in the mirror from all angles, front, side and back, again twisting round to see her back. She felt that the jeans were a little low on the back and said she didn’t want to show her knickers. She showed me the fabric and gap between it and her skin. She also pulled on each of the thighs and said although the jeans fitted they were tighter than she would have liked.

Shopping with Sarah 29th May 2001

As Sarah looks in the mirror she moves her body in twisting movements in order to materialise her body in the mirror from different perspectives i.e. from the side, the back and the front. Looking at clothing on her body makes particular parts of her body come into being more obviously than others so that she does not experience her body as a 'whole'. For example, she notices that her knickers show at the back of her jeans and that a gap of fabric has formed between the two layers. She is not comfortable in revealing this part of her body i.e. her bottom nor the consequent sexualisation of her body that occurs through exposing her underwear outside of her trousers. She also notices that the fabric of the jeans cling to her legs making her appear skinny which she was also not comfortable with. At first glance, Sarah's looking practices highlight the materialisation of different images of her body. Of course she recognises her reflection in the mirror to be her own body in its entirety. However, she then moves her body to observe particular parts of her body as they appear to her in the clothes in which she has tried on. In this instance particular parts of her body i.e. her bottom and legs which are materialised in the jeans as too small and revealed become separated off from the rest of her body.

I later question Sarah about this experience and how she evaluates the ways that clothing appeared on her body.

so I guess it's like the colour and then you touch it and the size and the feel of the material size...and things like cut and stuff I'm not an expert on I don't know I could probably get it to fit better than I used to be like telling something's going to fit but you just have to try things on

Shopping with Sarah 29th May 2001

This narrative neatly summarises the interwoven embodied practices of selecting and trying on clothes and looking in the mirror. The clothing itself, its colour and fabric, is touched and felt both off the hanger and then when worn on the body. Sarah also admits to having her own tacit body knowledges that she has developed over time in order to discern whether clothing 'fits' her body. Clothing on hangers provide a disembodied template of her body which is more difficult to reconcile with her material self and Sarah can only imagine what her body would look and feel like filling the clothes. However, when looking at her body in the pair of jeans, in the mirror, her material form is actualised as skinny because the jeans not only feel too tight but 'look too tight' in the reflection in the mirror. When looking at herself, Sarah grapples with this confusion as to whether her body is too thin or that the clothes themselves

'make' her look thin. This demonstrates the interconnections of touch and sight when attempting to reconcile the material form of her body in clothing as it is reflected back to her when looking in the mirror. As Grosz (1994) states:

“Sight and touch are able to communicate to each other, to provide confirmations (or contradictions) of each other, because they are the sense of one and the same subject operating simultaneously, within one and the same world” (p.99).

I now want to turn to an extract from a group narrative which articulates the significance of mirror practices for understanding female embodiment in a different way to that explored through Sarah's experiences. We enter the narrative as I ask the women about what they think about changing rooms.

Rachel: what do you think about changing rooms using changing rooms?

Elisabeth: I hate the changing rooms in Coles (a department store) because they have rear view mirrors that stop people from buying

laughter

Ruth: I think that's true I mean slightly odd but true about mirrors I think the older you get the less you actually want to see yourself

Elisabeth: yes you may not appreciate this (to me) cos you're very young

laughter

Elisabeth: I actually hate shopping for myself and that's partly I look at something I think that looks great and then put it on you think oh no it hasn't taken the years off you still look older and fatter

laughter

Elisabeth: you know so I think you're right you only want a little mirror in you're our my age

laughter

Interview with National Women's Register 12th December 2000

The women in this group talk about mirrors within a humorously framed narrative. The prospect of looking at your body when you are a particular age is both amusing and uncomfortable. By distancing themselves from my experiences of my own body (“you're very young”) Elisabeth talks about not wanting to look in the mirror at their age around three main articulations. Firstly, Elisabeth talks about how “rear view mirrors” ultimately would show

the reflection of a women's bottoms and thighs that, as discussed in the zoning chapter, is a common bodily zone that women frequently identified as not liking due to flab, cellulite and wobbliness. This particular comment is laughed at by the group as they agree it is an inevitable sign of age and as a looking practice they could all relate to. Secondly, Elisabeth talks about looking at clothes on her body which do not live up to her own expectations of the power they have to transform the age of her body. This places responsibility with the reflection in the mirror to materialise clothes on her body in a favourable way. However, this is a perilous affair that readily disappoints. Thirdly, she then mentions how the mirror should be small at her age so that she cannot see particular parts of her body, such as the rear view which will thus compartmentalise her reflection to parts of her body she is more or not comfortable with. Looking in the mirror at clothing on your body at a 'certain age' has the potential for possible transformation but equally the danger of not re-presenting your body as "younger" and "thinner". Lasch (1984) comments that mass consumption represents "a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one's own fears and desires" (p.28). For these women, the mirror acts in the same ways as Lasch (1984) comments about consumer culture, mirrors and clothing do not always 'take the years off' the body.

However, this focus on the visual as a series of external judgements that promotes inner anxiety does not account for the means by which this topic is talked about in relation to deciding to view their bodies in a smaller mirror. I feel this represents a form of control which the women exercise over the mirror and the reflection that is reflected back at them, to ensure a more 'flattering' looking practice. This represents another context with which mirrors can be used as a means of recognising your inner and outer selves. For example, mirrors are used as part of treatment for women who are overcoming eating disorders as a means to 'improve' their body image. It is concluded that the more time women spent in front of the mirror the better they felt about themselves (Bryan 2002). Within feminist work on the body, attempts have been made to challenge victimising accounts of the role of the visual in consumption which reorientate the politics of female consumer subjectivity. For example, Kim Chernin describes looking in the mirror as follows:

"..I now got up and went to look at myself in the mirror. For the first time I was able to perceive the transparent film of expectation I placed over my image in the looking glass. I had never seen myself before. Until now all I had been able to behold was my body's failure to conform to an ideal" (Chernin 1983 p.18).

At this moment, she looks in the mirror and sees herself differently from that which she has seen before. What she is describing is the voyeuristic distancing she has experienced in previous looking relations whereby her body becomes a 'failure to conform'. She now,

however, describes looking in the mirror as ‘coming to knowledge of myself’. questioning why she looked into the mirror and saw that which she was not and instead began to question why attainment of particular bodily ideals had become the means through which she saw her reflection.

7.3. (Re)enacting Body Images

In this section I will draw on one particular empirical example of shopping with Kate in order to illustrate the multiple nature of the ways that body images come into being through the practices of trying on clothes in a changing room. Whilst the last section focused on the meanings and practices of looking in the mirror, I now want to focus more precisely on how these practices can be situated within recent re-conceptualisations of body image that move beyond considering the body as an external visual representation to make spatial and temporal connections with the moment of looking and touching the body.

Kate, is a 40 year old woman with whom I went shopping with over the period of one day. We join the narrative as Kate is trying on different sized tops in a changing room cubicle. The changing room was organised with cubicles around the edge of the room and a large open space in the middle with free standing mirrors and sofas for other shoppers (women only) and children to sit. I did not enter into the cubicle with Kate and instead I could observe her looking at the clothes on her body whilst looking in a free standing mirror and adjusting the position of her body in the clothes. Kate was having immense difficulty deciding which ‘numerically’ sized t-shirt suited her.

She had on the sixteen top which I said fitted her better. She walked over to the mirror to look at herself in the top. She looked at the top on her body from the front and the side. I said it didn’t pull as much as the fourteen. She touched the flap at the bottom of the top each side and said that it was very snug. I said it was better to have it fitted than falling off. She didn’t seem sure. She said she hated it when you could see rolls of flab at the back. She decided to try on the eighteen.

Kate came out in the eighteen and asked me what I thought about it. She was pulling the material under her arms and I said it did look a bit baggy. She agreed but said that it felt more comfortable around her middle and she could move more freely. She said that obviously if she lost a few pounds then the sixteen would fit better and if she bought the eighteen she would have to take in the arms if she got slimmer. Here again she was imagining her future body after further weight loss! She went back into the cubicle and came out with the size eighteen on again. She said she felt more comfortable in the

eighteen and that She also felt that the other top showed too much flesh and was more clingy. She could always alter the eighteen.

Shopping with Kate July 31st 2001

From this empirical extract I would firstly like to highlight the ways in which past and present body images are materialised which premise that “previous body images remain accessible and can be re-enacted in a moment” (Weiss 1999 p.35). It is obvious from this extract that Kate has difficulty reconciling her body with the sizing of the tops she tries on. Size fourteen was ‘pulling’ on her body, size sixteen was ‘clingy’ and showed ‘too much flesh’ and size eighteen was a ‘bit baggy’ but ‘comfortable’. Here the immediacy of the body as a reflection in the mirror is intensified with the materialisation of her body in different sizes of clothes and the significance that these numerical indicators have as a reminder of the weight she has previously lost and then regained. The size sixteen would fit better with weight loss but the size eighteen could be worn immediately and then altered as she lost weight in the future. This represents the dialogical nature of past and present body images within a consumption moment as a reflection in the mirror, as articulated though the proximity of bodily flesh with sized fabric, as the activation of bodily size through movement in clothing (‘the under arm flaps for excess fabric didn’t show unless she flung her arms in the air as she showed me’) and most importantly, as felt through the embodied sensations of past weight loss and gain.

Secondly, it is apparent that particular areas of Kate’s body are more invested as a body image than others. In this example Kate is wary of what she calls ‘rolls of flab’ that can be materialised through wearing a sized top that is too small for her body. Kristeva’s (1982) notion of abjection is especially useful here for understanding the significance of what Grosz (1994) calls the ‘regions’ in which we invest our ‘psychical interpersonal and socio-historical relations’. Abjection refers to the ways in which particular bodily matter is disavowed as a threat to the boundedness of bodily coherence. This abjected matter includes flesh, spit, mucous, faeces, vomit, urine, pus and other bodily fluids which “attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, it’s liability to collapse into this outside, to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and outside” (Grosz 1994 p.193). Despite the othering that is implicit in the recognition of these bodily substances, Young (1990) commenting on how people still feel a limb that has been amputated, argues that we always try to maintain bodily equilibrium or integrity even though this may be an illusion. Whilst the abject, threatens to destabilise body images, as Kate affirms she hates it when you can see rolls of flab, it can also work towards maintaining a bodily stability. Weiss (1999) refers to the abject as a ‘spectre’, matter which haunts the body and for Kate, the materialisation of flab in small clothes would embody past weight loss and subsequent gain. However, the

abject is a necessary part of body images because in order for us to maintain a sense of stability, the abject 'is not eliminated altogether but continually "erupts" and therefore disrupts the privileged sites of inclusion" (Weiss 1999 p. 90). It is the threat that the abject or the 'rolls of flab' have for a coherent sense of self that provides Kate with the capacity to experience her body differently through trying on bigger sized clothing.

In an interview that we carried out later in the afternoon over lunch, Kate talked in more detail about how she negotiates her bodily weight gains and losses when looking at photographs of herself. This brings me onto the third articulation of body image as materialised representation within this particular moment of consumption

Kate: I was just saying I was looking at some photographs when I was about...yeah I was at my lowest I was about eleven eleven which for my height is within the BMI you know the Body Mass Index you know it's sort of the top end of it but um it's OK and I felt really good and I was looking at these photographs and I could SO TELL and I was looking at it and thinking about the time frame it was from sort of October through to December and I put some weight on towards the end of December and those taken in October November time I looked at it and thought yeah that's exactly what I'd like to look like in my clothes

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001

When looking at photographs of herself when she was slimmer ('at my lowest') Kate talks about how this was time when she felt really good. It is as if the image of clothing on her body has a material significance for her present body because she wants to feel in the present how she felt at the time the photograph was taken. Young (1990) states about fashion photography that it "freezes the conventional into the natural" (p.177). I would argue that this representational image of Kate's body is a body image that naturalises her past weight loss as the body she is most at ease with and the one she would 'like to look at in her clothes'. This set of body images is framed within her own investment in the Body Mass Index¹ which indicates healthy weight/height ratios when Kate decides that her 'October/November' body is the one that she would like to look like in clothes. However, this temporal and spatial body is not just a representation to be aspired to or 'a reading disorder', as Brain (2002) has said in her critique of similar accounts of anorexia. Instead, it is better to consider the affective experience of body images 'which relies on an introceptive body without relying on

biological determinism' (Brain 2002 p.157). Body images which are still embodied and can be brought into being within the context of a present consumption moment. Again as Weiss (1999) maintains body image "is itself an expression of an ongoing exchange between bodies and body images" (p.3)

Within this section I have outlined three potential ways that body image can contribute towards an argument for an understanding of the body as a series of absent presences within geographies of consumption. This involves recognising the simultaneity of past and present body images, the role of the abject body image in maintaining a bodily coherence and the materialisation of representational bodies that can be re-experienced rather than re-read in the context of a particular moment of consumption. This multiplicity of body images highlights that what is missing from accounts of the body and consumption is not necessarily materially 'there'. But is central to how a particular consumption moment comes into being. As Weiss (1999) highlights body images allow us to negotiate "the turbulence of our corporeal existence, a turbulence that cannot and should not be abjected from our body images, since it is precisely what enables us to meet the vicissitudes of our bodily life" (p.102).

7.4. Comparative Bodies

In this section I will focus on the intricacies of the 'gaze' as it is articulated within women's narratives on clothes shopping. My intention is to utilise work on the gaze as it has been articulated in work on consumption and on representations to illustrate the multitude of ways of what it actually means and feels like to look at oneself and others, and to be looked at. In particular, I want to draw out the significance of women looking at each other beyond the dominant theorisation of the gaze as reinforcing patriarchal relations between men and women. In short that men act and women appear.

Within work on women's embodied consumption practices, such as dieting, cosmetic surgery and dressing, Foucault's (1977) work on the changing nature of surveillance and power in the 18th Century has been most readily used to support the process through which women's bodies are disciplined within particular normative regimes of bodily ideals and practices. (See Chapter Four) for a discussion of Foucault's (1977) work within the context of slimming practices). Within the penal reform of the 18th Century particular technologies of power were used to punish offenders which did not involve direct contact with the physical body. The most used example of this is Bentham's Panopticon prison through which its circular design meant that prisoners could be watched and surveyed by prison staff at all times, thus

enforcing a form of self-surveillance with the personal knowledge of constantly being watched. For Foucault (1977) then, the power of the gaze is “absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade’ (p.177). Moreover, he states that “it is the fact of always being seen, of being able to be always seen that maintains the disciplined individual in his (sic) subjection” (p.187).

Within the context of feminist work on consumption, the gaze is manifested through women’s confirmation to a homogenised ideal of femininity, as displayed in women’s magazines and medical literature, for example. This is actualised through the practices of dieting and dress for example, so that bodies become ‘docile bodies’ in Foucault’s (1977) words or “bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, “improvement”” (Bordo 1993 p.166). However, this mode of power ‘from below’ is not one of repression, impediment or submission but is constituted of/by subjects. As Bordo (1993) states:

“Where power works ”from below”, prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion () but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms” (p.27).

Recent work on power and surveillance has challenged the silences and invisibility of the gaze as implied by Foucault’s (1977) work and instead asks that we consider surveillance as ‘noisy’ (Robinson 2000). By this, it is suggested that we consider ‘speaking subjects and moving bodies’ involved in surveillant practices and the ‘interference’ that the gaze experiences. Robinson (2000) describes this ‘interference’ as follows:

“The originator of a particular surveillant gaze brings her own interpretation to the principles of observation involved, and is always in specific contexts which will shape the context of the gaze. And the multiple mis-recognition which accompany the journey of the gaze from the gazer to the subject and back make the content and internalisation of power far from predetermined, as the Panoptical tale seems to imply” (Robinson 2000 p.68).

I wish to add to this reformulation of Foucault’s (1977) ideas, an inclusion of the nature of the female surveillance of other women for as Young (1990) reminds us Foucault “tends to gloss over the problems of inequitable power relations between women” (p.187). Therefore in the remainder of this chapter I will focus on the nature of looking and surveillance within the context of women looking at other women. I suggest that this provides another dimension with which to understand the nature of contemporary consumption, which positions women as coercers within patriarchal notions of social control but also able to produce alternative viewing positions which in fact connect with and support other women. As Kruks (2001) asks

“Are there...certain grounds that might generally predispose women toward a mutual and non-appropriating recognition of other women?” (p.155)

7.4.1 The ‘skinny blond’

I will now focus on the role of other women’s bodies when understanding the looking relations implicit when trying on and talking about clothes shopping. There were in fact particular bodies whose presence was narrated most when trying on clothes. That of the ‘skinny blond’. Although this may sound like a cliché, this term came up numerous times in many interviews and acted as the epitome of aestheticised feminine perfection for women. The ‘skinny blond’ may never have actually been present in the moment they were describing but was always an embodied presence when women described their experiences of trying on clothes in a changing room.

For example Jill describes the experiences of trying on clothes in a communal changing room.

Jill: it was basically a free for all we didn't have cubicles and I used to HATE standing there getting undressed next to this STICK THIN BLOND.....

Rachel: yeah

Jill: girl (laughs) I mean she probably wasn't looking but I always used to feel so self conscious where at least now you do get a cubicle

Interview with Librarians 10th July 2001

Trying on clothes ‘next to the stick thin girl’ was an uncomfortable experience for Jill and proved a visual means of comparison to her own body which presented her with the potential of her body not ‘measuring up’. Moreover, she also implies that it wasn’t necessarily the body of the ‘skinny blond’ that unsettled her but a potential return of Jill’s gaze by ‘the skinny blond’ (“she probably wasn’t looking but”). A double return of a look was occurring here: Jill was looking at herself in clothes whilst looking at the ‘skinny blond’ who then was then perceived as looking back at Jill. Berger (1972) states

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as being the success of her life” (Berger 1972 p.46).

For Jill it is not only how she appears to others but in particular how she appears to other women, in particular the skinny blond who epitomises bodily perfection. Whilst she does not articulate why she is bothered by this return of gaze I suggest it is a means of reinforcing Jill’s

own judgement of her body through assuming that the skinny blond will compare herself favourably in relation to Jill. The 'skinny blond' acts as a material symbolic presence for representing everything Jill is not as well as everything Jill wants to be.

In relation to this, the skinny girl' makes another appearance in Claire's narrative of trying on clothes in a communal changing room.

Rachel: what about communal would you ever?

Claire: oh it's such a nightmare in communal changing rooms because you should be able to go in and try the clothes on and go you can't do that you have to think before you go in am I wearing matching underwear, have I shaved my legs have I shaved my armpits

Rachel: laughs

Claire: um and it's I think for me it really puts you down in the mouth when you see some really really skinny girl you know who just looks perfect and it's like well I don't like my body particularly...ur and I just hate it and I can't be like you know I mean I have been in a couple and I'll just try it on and look in the mirror and decide there and then and either buy it or go

Rachel: yeah

Claire: but I just avoid them now

Interview with Claire 13th December 2000

Within the surveying space of the communal changing room Claire feels coerced into presenting her body as 'feminised' which she does by engaging in bodily practices such as shaving her legs and wearing matching underwear. By moving into this space, she becomes concerned with the presentation of her body to other bodies, so that removing hair and wearing suitable underwear makes her more presentable to other bodies. This reiterates Bartky's (1991) observation that women are estranged from their bodies "in a permanent posture of disapproval" (p.40). Not only is she seeing herself but imagining how she will be seen by others, as with Jill and her experience of the 'skinny blond'. As Weiss (1999) states in relation to the practical functioning of body images "many women meditate their own relationship with their bodies by seeing their bodies as they are seen by others and by worrying about what they and these (largely invisible) others are seeing as they are acting" (p.55).

However, despite engaging in bodily practices that makes her body 'presentable' looking at a

'skinny girl' makes her 'down in the mouth'. Again the 'skinny girl' has no identity or embodied presence but through looking at this body, Claire experiences the look as a in-body affect. She compares her body to the 'skinny girl' and says "I hate it I can't be like you".

To avoid these feelings of bodily-dissatisfaction, Claire develops a coping strategy which involves looking in the mirror, making a quick decision, spending as little time in there as possible or avoiding communal changing rooms completely. Therefore, whilst the presence of 'the skinny girl' materialises her own body as not presentable, she is able to re-orientate her looking practices to the more mundane practices of deciding whether to buy the item of clothing and then diving out of the changing room space before feeling dissatisfied with her body. This suggests that there are alternative ways of looking at bodies which do not necessarily subscribe to the oppressive patriarchal looking relations identified above.

The thesis has thus far represented examples of the multiple ways that women narrate and experience their bodies, thus illustrating the plurality of female embodied experience. Therefore, it seems important that when understanding looking relations this plurality should feed into debates concerned with the possibilities of alternative female or feminist looking at other and their own bodies. Young (1990) states that "Experiencing one's own subjectivity as a mass of contradictions is a process that must be familiar to all women". (Young 1994 p.188), the premise of which I will now explore in the remaining sections of this chapter. These empirical accounts hint towards alternative accounts of how women look at themselves and other women and the potential for movement beyond women's only look being that carved out by a masculine objectifying viewing position.

7.4.2 Evaluating 'other' bodies

In the previous two sections I have documented the significance of the practices of looking in the mirror for women's embodied subjectivity and also the role of the perception of or presence of other embodied gazes for women when trying on clothes. However, it is also critical to consider the ways in which women evaluate the power or affect of these looks. In the following extract Star talks about the reasons why she prefers to try on clothes at home rather than in any form of changing room:

Star: yeah I.....the best thing about that I suppose is as well is like if it doesn't fit I haven't got to face anybody and be embarrassed

Rachel: laughs

Star: like when you take them out the changing rooms and no no I don't want that it don't fit you know and you can see the the people glance at the size label and you think go on then you know

Rachel: laughs

Interview with Star 3rd August 2001

Star, like Claire, is wary of a specific form of surveillance from other people which she articulates through feeling 'embarrassed' about an item of clothing that doesn't fit. Trying on clothes in front of others has the potential to produce a body which does not 'fit' the clothes in a variety of ways be that too big, small, long or short. The body which does not fit the clothes becomes a body out of place. In Chapter Five I talked about the emotional significance of numerical sizing and in this moment, the sizing labels of her clothing would display her size to her 'perceived audience' in the changing room as too big. As with Foucault (1977), it is the power from below; the surveillance of the self in the proximity of the judgement of this audience that means that she regulates her body practices by trying on clothes at home. However, what is different here, as with Claire, is that both women are not regulating their behaviour in a move to conform to bodily ideals but more to protect themselves from a potentially threatening and judgmental gaze.

Iris Marion Young (1990) has also attempted to tap into alternative accounts of clothing by looking at the pleasure women have with clothes; one of them being bonding. Through bonding over clothes 'Women establish rapport with one another by remarking on their clothes, and doing so introduces a touch of intimacy or lightness into serious or impersonal situations (Young 1990 p.181). For example she talks about the how women look after each other in changing room and therefore, know when to be critical or discouraging, supportive or praising. Whilst she and I are at pains to maintain that this is not the same for all women, this account does provide at least the possibility for accounts of women looking at themselves and each other to "liberate the liberating and valuable in women's experiences of clothes from the exploitative and the oppressive" (ibid).

In relation to this I want to present to you a lengthy extract from an interview with two young mothers, Bo and Scarlet. What is important to take from this narrative is the significance that different looks are given as they are placed within the changing context of these women's lives.

We enter the discussion as Bo and Scarlet talk about looking at other women when in a changing room.

Scarlet: (interrupts) NO I WOULDN'T LOOK cos I really kinda I've got my own worries

Bo: I always look at the ways other women look but it's not like before with the

Rachel: the competition

Bo: it's not a competitive thing now I look and say oh she looks nice oh she looks good

Scarlet: mm (unsure)

Bo: she looks a bit ill she looks a bit stressed or I'll look at what other women are wearing it's not a competition anymore

Scarlet: yeah

Bo: it's more like an appreciation or curiosity but I think I still make comparisons cos I look at other women and think 'oh I'm not as big as that' or

Scarlet: mmm yeah (laughs)

Interview with Young Mums 13th March 2001

The dynamic between these two women is interesting in this interview. When talking about looking at other women in changing rooms, Bo is very confident in expressing the ways that she does look at other women. She talks about looking at other women not as a means of weighing up how her body compared to theirs but more in a mode of appreciation ('she looks good') or concern ('she looks a bit ill'). However, Scarlet does not seem so sure and instead says that she does not look at other women because she's got 'her own worries'. I feel that Scarlet is not as confident in how she feels about herself. However, towards the end of the interview, Bo admits to the contradictory nature of her looking because she still does look at women to see if she is as big as them. These bodies provide a material source for comparative practices of looking and both women laugh at the inevitability of looking at other women in this way. Moreover, later on in the interview, Scarlet talks about the 'typology' of looking when describing the way that men look at women.

Scarlet: yeah like some women I don't think you get that with men if all you are is a pair of tits and you act like that that's all they're treat you as and that's all they'll treat you as

Rachel: mmm

Scarlet: but then part of me is jealous of that sometimes like if you're out at night like in a bar and everyone's like got their boob tubes on and they all look fantastic and you're

sitting there and you're thinking OK I know I'm intelligent (laughs) but still I'd like to have those tits you know

Rachel: yeah it's really really

Scarlet: cos the rational part of your brain tells you you know you don't want that male attention but still you know it's actually. (laughs) I want a bit of that attention (tearful voice)

Interview with Young Mums 13th March 2001

Scarlet, identifies the primary ways that men look at women as a 'pair of tits' is through sexualising and objectifying specific parts of her body. Earlier in the interview she describes this as 'like you don't even have to have a face if you come out with a shirt that shows your tits'. However, in the above extract Scarlet talks through the difficulties she has with recoiling her disgust of an oppressive male gaze and her desire for male attention. She evaluates this desire in relation to her intelligence which she introduces as an ironic counterpoint to that which should provide her with self-esteem. She wants the 'tits' yet her brain tells her it is not important. Again an example of the complexities surrounding any interpretation of looking relations for as Young (1994) states "there are no solid boundaries between the feminist and the feminine, the female and the feminist gaze" (p.188).

7.4.3 Connective Embodiment

In the final section of this chapter I want to bring together the findings from the two main sections of this chapter; those concerned with body image and 'the gaze. I want to suggest that both of these re-theorisations of visual practices point towards a new articulation of female embodied subjectivity which I have called 'connective embodiment' which allows for consideration of the multiple embodiments of looking relations which constitute women's experiences and narrations of clothing consumption.

In terms of connection, I mean the way by which women look at other women and themselves which does not result in a form of alienation as suggested by Bartky (1990) and instead produces a bodily proximity between women and their own and other embodied presences. This proximity may not necessarily lead to feelings of inadequacy through which a body doesn't measure up to feminine norms, as experienced in the presence of the skinny blond. and instead women narrate feelings of concern, empathy, compassion, affinity, for example. This connectivity can be related to what Gail Weiss (1999) calls 'bodily imperatives' which can be summarised as "an embodied ethics grounded in the dynamic, bodily imperatives that

emerge out of our intercorporeal exchanges and which in turn transform our own body images, investing them and reinvesting them with moral significance” (p.158). Not only does this depend upon interactions between bodies but presents the transformative potential of body images, therefore suggesting more dynamic looking relations which open up women’s possibilities for alternative ways of understanding their own embodiment. Kruks (2001) calls this “an affective relationship of recognition”, when discussing the political capacities of these practices of connectivity for the women’s movement. She continues:

“to sustain any kind of long-term or broad feminist movement in the face of the multiplicity of distinctions in power and privilege among women, forms of recognition that are grounded in affect are also necessary. Feelings of concern for others must develop, and forms of intersubjective embodied experience that are not discursively thematized may be important in the development of such feelings” (p.155).

This is not an argument for the solidarity of all women against the oppressive nature of consumption and bodily ideals and instead is more a subtle rejoinder to the means by which women’s position within consumption has been understood previously. What is important are the simple acts of connection that take place, the means by which women ‘look out for each other’ within the potentially oppressive regimes of consumption. For example, Kate and Scarlet both evaluate what it means to look at a specific women in quite different ways:

I mean you can see sometimes when we look at older women and we think look at her do you know what I mean what do you think you’re doing dressing like that but we don’t usually think maybe she can’t fit into or can’t find something that’s a bit more covering for her age or flattering

Interview with Kate 31st July 2001

(in their) trousers with their guts hanging out and their tits hanging out and I’m here trying trying to keep these bits locked in and people have got like twice as big tits as me and they’re hanging out and they’re so comfortable with their bodies out right and I find it amazing sometimes cos I think I couldn’t do that like it would kill me

Interview with Young Mums (Scarlet) 13th March 2001

Kate re-evaluates a dominant way of looking at an older woman dressed by moving from a gaze that is judgmental about the way that she dresses to instead recognise the difficulties that

woman may have in actually finding clothes that are flattering for her body. Looking here has the potential to position the woman's body as unsuitably dressed but is reoriented to take account of the difficulty that woman may have in dressing her body. In terms of feminist politics, this solidarity can be defined as "an action-orientated concern for the well-being of others where one's own survival is not directly at issue" (Kruks 2001 p.154). Moreover, Scarlet, describes looking at the ways that some women expose parts of their body that she doesn't feel comfortable in showing ("here I am trying to keep those bits locked in"). Instead of judging these women and their bodily parts as disgusting as discussed in the previous chapter, she finds it amazing because that form of bodily exposure would 'kill her'. Here Scarlet aspires to have a similar body confidence rather than a particular body shape, as insinuated by body image literature. Grosz (1994) calls this identification 'psychical vampirism' (p.86) whereby, body images are informed through the identification, incorporation and introjection of other bodies. In addition, Kruks (2001) identifies this process of looking as a 'respectful recognition' which "allows others space of their own and recognises a distance between us that is not the distance of unconcern" (p.154-55) which recognises the contradictory nature of distance and proximity that are involved in the practice of connective embodiment.

7.5 Conclusions

Within this chapter I have developed an empirically driven account of the significance of looking practices within the context of women's experiences of and narrations of clothing consumption. Work on 'body image' and 'the gaze' within Geography and beyond have both recently hinted at alternative accounts which move towards a recognition of the multi-faceted nature of female embodied existence so that new subject positions can be opened up and reformulated within work on the female body.

Firstly it is important to highlight the role that theorisations of body image can have for understanding the embodied nature of body images which are reliant on the interconnections between bodies and images rather than a definition which relies upon body image as representations which are carried internally within bodies as a means of comparison. It has been made evident through exploring the intricacies of mirror practices that there "are ways of living out bodies which generate bodily memories, demands and expectations that are in turn expressed through our body images" (Weiss 1999 p.158). Body images have creative as well as destructive capacities which is documented within the empirical examples shown. For example, Kate looks in the mirror, touches her body in clothing, remembers her body in the past and Elisabeth places moral responsibility in the mirror itself as to how she will look and

takes action i.e. avoids rear view mirrors, in order to prevent her from feeling dissatisfied with her reflection.

Secondly, it has been essential to highlight the significance of 'the gaze' for understanding the specificities of female looking relations. Little work has been done on what it means for women to look at themselves and each other and there has been a tendency for work within art and film theory to place 'the gaze' within the context of reinforcing patriarchal relations of power. Some of my empirical work does indeed support the surveillant power of bodily ideals i.e. the skinny girl, to affect bodies in proximity to it. However, more interestingly, some of my empirical work hints towards alternative trajectories and outcomes of looking relations which take account of what Kruks (1999) has called an 'affective relationship of recognition' and what Weiss (1999) names 'bodily imperatives'. Here connections are made between women through looking practices which need not be reliant upon practices of comparison, bodily dissatisfaction and disavowal. Instead my examples hint towards a concern and care for and affinity with other women's well being and a sense that women are attempting to reconcile feelings of dissatisfaction with what is going on in their wider lives.

This conclusion has huge repercussions for how we should understand women's positionalities within the realms of consumption which, as predicated upon earlier in the thesis, tends to victimise and paralyse women's actions within the pains and tyrannies of bodily ideals and fashionable discourses. My work suggests a shift in understanding embodied subjectivity which allows for alternative accounts of women's experience of consumption that rely on a connectivity rather than estrangement with other women and themselves. Whatmore (2002) identifies this shift in ethical practice which should consider the inter-corporeality of human conduct which is concerned with "ethical praxis and the corporeal register of connectivities which secure the well-being of those least mobile and most vulnerable, not as discursive subject-positions but as kindred –mortals" (p.155).

Therefore, looking practices, within the context of women's narrations and experiences of clothing consumption indicates a need for a reconsideration of women's actual involvements in consumption rather than meaning being attributed from above to their very decision to engage in such practices. Such a subtle shift in reconfiguring the female looking consumer opens up our understandings to more ambiguous subject positions so that, in Young's (1990) words, we can mine traditionally female social practices and experiences and find in them specific ways that we as women relates to one another and to ourselves, female specific intrinsic values" (p.181).

Closures
Chapter Eight

“I don’t do or have theory but use it!” (Bordo 1998 p.85)

**“This mind, this body, and this voice cannot be stifled by your deviant ways.
So don’t forget what I told you, don’t come around, I got my own hell to raise”
(Fiona Apple 1996 Sleep to Dream (taken from the album *Tidal*))**

8 Introduction

My conclusions can be articulated through four main thematics which I will now discuss in turn. In *Closures*, I attempt to draw together my research findings, as set within the literatures on 'the body', clothing and consumption. I am hesitant to conclude because this thesis does not really end in the same way that I have placed the indeterminacy of the female body as central to my interpretations and analysis. Instead I offer potential trajectories through which my work can travel and suggest possibilities for further work in this vein. These trajectories are focused upon four main themes: women consuming, clothing matters, doing/bodies/geographies and empiricalising theoretical bodies. Although this chapter does in affect mark the end of this thesis I am keen to reinforce the very difficulty of achieving this ending in practice. I have only offered *an* account of female embodied experience and it should not be read as the only means through which female consuming bodies can be understood. Indeed what I have attempted to illustrate is what embodied geographical knowledges may look/feel sound like as set within a piece of research which takes as its theoretical and structural basis as well as its empirical interest in the fluidity of female embodiment. As Grosz (1993) comments in relation to the value of post structural theory to feminist work on the body "This knowledge is prerequisite to or perhaps the necessary accompaniment of the development of alternative accounts, accounts able to articulate other points of view" (p.53). Therefore, those women's embodied experiences, organised as bodily doings, included in the chapters still continue to exist in a manifold of ways and through a variety of consumption practices beyond the pages of this thesis. What I have done therefore, is to capture these bodies in specific empirical and theoretical moments which means they do not begin and end here.

8.1 Women Consuming

The basis of this research has been the narratives and experiences of women's clothing consumption as situated within recent work in geography on the practices of consumption (Gregson et al 2002). Moreover, my research has demonstrated, through a qualitative approach to consumption, a need to consider the role of these practices in the production of female embodied subjectivity and how the very spaces of clothing consumption¹, for example the shop floor and the changing room, are active in this productive process. As Probyn (2003)

¹ Whilst here I focus on the spaces of clothing consumption, it is clear from my empirical chapters that my research participants' talk and practices also spilled out into the spaces of wearing clothes such as the nightclub, the home, at weddings and in the workplace. This only reiterates further the nature of consumption work to make links with wider social relations and therefore women's embodied lives.

comments “the space and place we inhabit produce us” (p.294). Therefore it is important to note that the spaces of clothing consumption are far more than vessels through which bodies move and meaning is read off. Changing rooms, for example, are spaces in which women’s bodies can be produced as inadequate when compared to other bodies trying on clothes, as discussed in relation to the ‘skinny blond’ in Chapter Seven. They can also be a ‘relational space’ (Ganetz 1995) producing friendships, sharing and intimacy between women as they try on and comment upon each other’s clothes (see Young 1990). These spaces can be related to what Moss and Dyck (1999) name ‘corporeal spaces’. They are defined as follows:

“Corporeal space consists of context, discursive inscriptions, material – economic and matter-based – inscriptions, the biological, and the physiological...These spaces are fluid, congealing from time to time around the body, only to be destabilised with new boundaries forming when any part of the context, the discourse or the materiality shifts” (Moss and Dyck 1999 p.389)

Defining consumption spaces, as ‘corporeal spaces’ identifies the myriad of ways through which women’s bodies come into being in a consumption moment taking account of the co-constitutive nature of different articulations of female embodiment (as will be discussed shortly) as well as the productive nature of space. What is important for geographies of consumption is that these spaces become less sites to study for the contributions they can make to understanding the nature of consumer culture and instead this work has much potential for eliciting accounts of embodied subjectivity. Therefore, I am calling for a reconsideration of consumption spaces for their corporeal significance or in Csordas’ (1999) terms analysing culture and self from the standpoint of embodiment. In a sense this means using consumption as a vehicle for understanding embodiment rather than simply understanding consumption and consumers as inherently embodied.

The practices of consumption seep across my empirical chapters and work to exemplify not only how women shop for clothes but also the significance of these ‘hows’ to the production of particular embodied relationships with themselves, clothing and other bodies. The specificities of practices of clothing consumption include looking and touching clothing on hangers, holding clothing up to the body, trying on clothing, looking in the mirror, smoothing fabric over body contours and looking at other women’s bodies in relation to their own. These corporeal practices produce the female body in particular ways that have significance beyond the consumption moment. For example, a woman tries on a bra that is too big for her breasts after looking at the bra on a hanger and imagining the potential of her body to become ‘feminine’ and sexy. However, the reality of trying it on produces her body as flat chested, ‘unfeminine’ and leaves her unable to reconcile her embodiments with those produced by the

practices of trying the bra on her body. In addition, when Carol and Jan (in Chapter Four) describe shopping for clothes for their 'before' bodies, they describe it as part of a postponement process in preparation for their 'after' bodies. The experience of bodies consuming, therefore, slips into a wider non-material realm beyond the physical body and hints at the wider emotional and physical significance that clothing purchases have beyond the consumption moment. Moreover, the practice of acquisition now becomes an unpredictable end product of a range of practices that have the potential to result in a delay or rejection of purchasing of an item of clothing. For example, in Chapter Five, Star holds off buying a knee length skirt until she has lost further weight and in Chapter Six Claire dives out of the changing room to avoid feeling bad about clothes not fitting her when she tries them on.

A focus on practices also makes clear the inherent problems with typologising women's engagement with shopping as fun, frivolous, functional, (Campbell 1997) damaging and oppressive, for example. When working with empirical shopping bodies, it is not so much the signification of specific shopping practices that becomes central to an account of consumption and instead it is important to note the productive capacity of these practices to produce specific corporeal relations. This observation builds upon Miller's (1998) work that identifies the social relations of love and sacrifice as produced through family grocery shopping. However, I am more interested in the corporeal nature of these relations whereby social relations are produced and experienced corporeally through consumption. Future work, which has been hinted at in some of my own research, may seek to understand the embodied relationships between mothers and daughters who shop for clothes together and for each other, focusing in particular on the transference of bodily (dis)satisfaction between bodies and the intimacy and honesty of embodied looking relations when trying on clothing.

A final observation that I wish to make in relation to the value of practice based accounts of consumption is related to how we consider the female embodied subject. I have discussed in depth (see Chapter Two) the means through which women have been pathologised in relation to embodied consumption practices such as clothing and fashion, as victims of patriarchal normative bodily ideals or as resisting those ideals, such as experienced in the context of fat activism. This tendency with feminist literature on the female consuming body is summarised as follows:

“(there is) a passive tendency to ignore or misrecognise the social nature of the body, and the multifold ways it is constituted by relations with other bodies, in favour of a reified conception of the body as bounded individual; and second, a propensity to ignore the primary character of the body as material activity in favour of an emphasis on the body as a conceptual object of discourse” (Turner 1999 p.28).

This tendency towards solidifying consumer subject positions the affect of particular discourses means that the intricacies of women's experiences of those discursive realms of consumer culture are not considered. Instead, my research has indicated the ways that women engage with these discourses that do not pin them down to any one subjectivity. Chapter Four (Slimming) notes the realities of the slimming body(s) beyond conforming to bodily ideals of slenderness (Chernin 1983) within the context of knowing and coping with the inevitability of weight gain and 'weighing' up the benefits of weight loss with being healthy. Moreover, Chapter Seven refigures the nature of the 'masculinist' gaze which places women in oppressive looking regimes to instead take account of what it means and feels for women to look at each and feel empathy and connected or what Kruks (2001) calls "respectful recognition". She states that:

"intersubjective embodied experiences – the ways we tacitly "know" the experience of others through our bodies – warrant far fuller consideration than they generally receive (or indeed can receive) within the discourse-oriented, post-modern paradigm that now predominates feminist theory" (p.56).

All of the above empirical observations realise the messy and fluid realities of female embodiment, as advocated by Grosz (1994), which are produced and experienced through the practices of consumption. It also recognises that the consuming body is not simply a physical presence that is acted upon but is remembered, re-enacted, re-experienced and sometimes plurally activated in any one consumption moment. I do not use this notion of fluidity to ignore the pains and frustrations of female consuming bodies but to reorientate the means through which we come to understand female shopping subjectivities. For example, Scarlet, in Chapter Six, comments on crying when looking in her body in the mirror and seeing the scarring and fleshy remains of her of post pregnant body but simultaneously feels shallow for this emotional response and upset that her child nearly died during childbirth. The point is that women are able to reflect and act upon, within and against those discourses that some feminists seem to apply so easily to women consuming. It is here that empirical bodies can animate such accounts and identify alternative consumer subject positions.

My recognition of these alternatives is not unique and Davis' (1997a, 1997b) work on cosmetic surgery, for example, has informed my work with her reconsideration of women's engagement with bodily practices rather than reading meaning off them. In conjunction with Bordo (1993) she moves towards the creation of new discourses that encourages us to imagine the possibilities and close our eyes to the limits and consequences. As Grimshaw (1999) reiterates:

The kinds of interventions that women make and the practices in which they engage () may indeed at times need analysis and critique. But their effects and the motives for which women undertake them cannot be adequately understood simply in terms of capitulation to ideological pressures to conform to a particular norm of the feminine body (Grimshaw 1999 p.115).

However, this work is not fully appreciated within work on the geographies of consumption and I suggest a more rigorous engagement with the literature that is based upon the fluidity of female subjectivity is required in order to 'get at' the multiplous nature of women consuming. As Crouch (2001) suggests "Approaching practice from the different embodiment theories may be a less competitive than complementary means through which it may be possible to get closer to the constitution of spatialities. Space may be considered a site of subjective exploration" (63). Research needs to be carried out on women's engagement with those bodily consumption practices and corporeal spaces which are often condemned as oppressing women, such as cosmetics, bodily grooming, beauty treatments and sport in order to prevent their bodies from being pushed into any one particular discursive realm. This not only embodies consumption but it makes explicit the need to take the fluid nature of female embodied subjectivity seriously within consumption work. As Probyn (2003) reminds us "Subjectivity is a process that is continually in play with 'reality' and 'ideology', dominant representations and our own self-representations" (p.294).

8.2 Clothing Connections

The second thematic, 'clothing connections' highlights the role that clothing has for (re)materialising the body in its proximity to the flesh of the body and in particular its role in the production of bodily doings. Clothing is intimately connected to women's experiences of their bodies, their embodied subjectivities, and in a consumption moment particular practices, for example, trying on, touching and looking at clothes and other clothed bodies, offer the potential for a body to be experienced in a number of ways. For example, experiencing your body as reduced in a size ten pair of jeans after a period of dieting or as 'big' in relation to shopping for clothes in an outsize store or as 'wobbly' in clothing which squeezes your flesh into rolls of flab. Whilst the connections between bodies and clothing seem obvious i.e. bodies wear clothing on their skin and flesh, there has been a notable absence in the literature to focus upon the relationships between them. Indeed this neglect and reluctance to engage with such 'matters' is summarised in a quote taken from a recent edited collection on clothing. Bruzzi and Church Gibson (2000) state:

“Image and body have generally been rather unexpectedly marginalized by many of our contributors, not because they do not have a place within the discourse of fashion but because they are no longer perceived as the definitive factors they were once thought to be” (Bruzzi and Church Gibson 2000 p.3)

This ‘unexpected marginalisation’ is not wholly unexpected to me because the body has been predominantly an absent presence in clothing which is typically read as a text in fashion theory. And indeed there is an underlying assumption by those highly invested in fashion as ‘art’ that debates concerning women’s bodies and clothing will all too easily denigrate clothing as an unworthy topic of study or which positions clothing as having a damaging affect on women’s self esteem and ‘body image’. However, I situate this bodily absence as the conceptual and empirical space that I can begin to fill with my theoretical and empirical bodily doings.

I noted earlier (see Chapter Two) that recent interventions in fashion theory have begun to put the body back into clothes. Most significant has been Entwistle’s (2001a; 2001b) understanding of dress as ‘situated bodily practice’ which recognises dress as both a social and personal experience and a discursive and practical phenomenon. Her work focuses on the wearing rather than the consumption of clothing, but neatly highlights that “The body and dress operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress” (p.327). On paper, therefore, these words give credence to the connectivities of bodies and clothing, but these words do not extend to material bodies wearing or consuming clothing. Instead, this account remains distanced from bodies and therefore dress as ‘situated bodily practice’ becomes another body-less understanding of clothes.

Therefore, I have taken the situated nature of her account by locating clothing within the spaces, practices and narratives of consumption, which does in a sense limit my own account of clothing. However, I have presented empirically what actually happens to bodies when they look at and try on clothing and rather than theorise about clothing as separated from these practices, I have instead taken the practices of consuming clothing to animate theoretical accounts of the body. There has been a tendency to apply performance based theorisations of the body (for example Entwistle (2001a) utilises Goffman’s (1972) work on bodily practices) to understandings of clothing which unintentionally or otherwise places clothes as a surface layer of fabric from which meaning about the body is discerned. Little attempt has been made to begin from the body in clothes as a set of messy and fluid corporeal presences which thus situates clothing as produced in indeterminate number of ways by bodies in similar ways that clothing materialises the body as multiple and fluid. Clothing,

therefore, has become a medium through which to make sense of women's embodied subjectivity.

Clothing does not just lie on the surface of the body but materialises the flesh in particular ways that talk to other bodies and discourses. For example, the numerical sizing of clothing presents a woman with a disjuncture between being a size, for example a size twelve and feeling a size, i.e. knowing your body is cheating the sizing regime, as Elisabeth experiences in Chapter Five. Clothing also materialises particular bodily bits and pieces so that women do not experience their consuming bodies as an entirety and particular bodily parts such as flabby bits, stomachs, arms and bottoms take on emotional and social significance beyond the consumption moment (see Chapter Six). Moreover, the capacity of the style of clothing to produce bodies is also important to note. For example, oversized clothing produces bodily bignesses as simultaneously covered up and hidden and simultaneously as exposed and unsightly. These are not simply surface readings of the body through clothing and in fact are felt and corporeally based experiences of the body as mediated through clothes.

Talk on the practices of clothing consumption has also spread out to narratives of women's wider life experiences such as Scarlet's reflections on the clothes in her wardrobe in relation to a failing marriage in Chapter Six and the significance of Chris' wedding day when she fitted into a size ten and felt good about herself. Moreover, in Chapter Five, Rosa describes buying her first pair of jeans as central to how she was beginning to come to terms with her body after a long period of bodily dissatisfaction. Buckley (1999) in her study of women's experiences of dressmaking in the 1920's and 1930's concluded in a similar way to myself in that "For the women that I have spoken to for this study, making clothes marked out different stages of their lives, connecting feelings and memories with family and friends" (p.67). However, it is not just that clothing invokes memories but they have the potential to bring past and future bodies into being. Clothing is intimately connected to the body literally in its proximity to flesh and conceptually in its capacity as a commodity to be re-experienced in relation to absent present bodies. It marks changing bodily boundaries as well as re-orientating new ones. This is what makes clothing central to the production of bodily doings. Its uncertain position as both productive of and produced by bodies indicates that a messy articulation of women's bodies is possible.

It seems that a possible research agenda to follow from my thesis' engagement with clothing is to take the materialising capacities of bodies and clothing seriously. Sweetman (2001) indeed states that "fashion operates at an affectual as well a symbolic level, helping to construct and reconstruct individual subjectivities whilst simultaneously forging an affectual or experiential relationship between the various actors involved" (p.73). Central to this approach to clothing is adopting an ethnographic approach. This involves embodying clothing rather than read meaning off the fabric in order to understand not only how clothing

is used but how it affects and is affected through bodily wearing. Clothing, also has specific bodily capacities as a commodity because of its proximity to the body and therefore its productive capacities to make and re-make bodies cannot be applied to all commodities. However, it does suggest the means through which commodities become enmeshed in bodies and is a valuable methodological and theoretical through which to research with female bodies as fluid and indeterminate corporealities. As Grosz (1994) states:

“It is crucial to note that that these different procedures of corporeal inscription do not simply adorn or add to a body that is basically given through biology; they help constitute the very biological organisation of the subject – the subject’s height, weight, colouring, even eye colour, are constituted as such by a constitutive interweaving of genetic and environmental factors” (Grosz 1994 p.142).

8.3. Doings/Bodies/Geographies

By contextualising my research findings at first through consumption and then clothing, I now want to turn more specifically to the implications of my thesis to work on the body in Geography. As a geographical thesis, my research has not only focused on the productive nature of consumption spaces, as mentioned above, but also the very nature of the spatiality of the female body. This has meant reconsidering the place of bodies within consumption but also questioning how to make sense of the female body and embodied subjectivity through an inherently geographical lens. The means through which I have represented my empirical and theoretical work has been through a consideration of fluidity. This involves recognising the fluidity of the matter female bodies to extend beyond their bodily boundaries and material form and secondly, the fluidity of my theoretical approach to the body in utilising work which highlights the fluid nature of female embodied subjectivity. My intention was to animate this theory with my empirical work with an account of female embodiment that is organised as ‘bodily doings’. These ‘bodily doings’ present the indeterminacy of the (consuming) female body through the interweaving of empirical and theoretical bodies which leak across chapters and are positioned as the intellectual spaces through which embodied knowledge is produced. In terms of work on the body in geography this has a number of implications. Firstly, I work both with and against Longhurst’s (2001) need to recognise the ‘weighty materiality’ of bodies in geography that have been ignored as a result of the masculinist nature of geographical knowledge production. For Longhurst (2001) “The leaky, messy awkward zones of the inside/outside of bodies and their resultant spatial relationships remain largely unexamined in geography” (p.2). My research follows this process of inclusion by focusing on the female body by taking into account movement of bodily boundaries and the ambiguous

nature of the slimming body as it exists on the borderline between before and after bodies and the role of 'flab' which hangs and rolls; an 'it' that moves beneath the surface of the skin and fabric but is not separate of from the body and can be 'worn' in a way that is not necessarily disavowed (see Chapter Six). However, it is problematic to simply insert these weighty bodies into geography which, as I have argued risks reifying particular bodies as more embodied than others. My attempt has been to see how bodies come into being, in their material and discursive forms, through practices rather than as a predetermined physical reality. This provides the space to consider all bodies as materially significant. My recruitment of bodies for the research (see Chapter Three) did not begin with any pre-requisites. I entered the research instead by situating consumption as mediating the production of these embodied identities rather than positioning particular bodies as a starting point from which to begin my research. Therefore I research with bodies whereby "the body is neither brute matter nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification and representation" (Grosz 1994 p.18).

In light of this focus on flesh, I feel geographers also need to take into consideration bodies which are not weighty or fleshy, such as those women who were 'small'. The absence of flesh need not be typologised as reinforcing particular bodily ideals or body disorders such as anorexia but needs to be redefined for the significance that these absences make to the particularities of their bodily existence. For example, women narrated the difficulties of their bodies not mattering in relation to breast size and of being surveyed and judged as 'too thin' and therefore pathologised as disordered and/or non feminine. Moreover, it is important to recognise the material body as not necessarily physically present (see Chapter Seven) when understanding women's embodied subjectivity. Marshall (1999) states that "when we try to name our bodily experiences, we are always involved in a dialogue. So when researchers try to describe women's experiences in particular situations, we need to ask about who else is there – literally or in imagination" (p.71). For example, throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis it has become obvious the ways that bodies haunt and are absent presences within consumption moments. This included the re-enactment of body images in Chapter Seven when bodies were not simply reimagined but re-experienced within the context of looking at clothes on the body in the mirror whilst remembering bodily pasts. Moreover, it is easy to see the haunting of past weight gains and losses in the context of slimming (see Chapter Four) whereby women constantly reflect on their present embodiments in relation to the bodies they were and the bodies they want to be. Bodies, therefore do not have to be materially present to matter which suggests bodily geographies need to shift their focus from weighty materiality to consider bodily absences.

What the findings of my research maintain, therefore, is the need to consider the intricacies of what can be considered to be the spatiality of the female body. This has been defined by Grosz (1994) as follows:

“Spatiality, the space surrounding and within the subject’s body, is crucial for defining the limits and shape of the body image: the lived spatiality of endogenous sensations, the social space of interpersonal relations, and the “objective” or “scientific” space of the cultural (including scientific and artistic) representations all play their role” (p.80).

Taking the spatiality of the body seriously does not just mean understanding the space that bodies take up nor does it mean placing discourses upon the surface of the body in order to elicit meaning. Instead, it provides the space for multiple articulations of the female body in geography as well as the constitution of the body itself. For example, Moss and Dyck (2003) mention the difference between social geographies of the body, a more empirical led approach which studies the place of bodies in space and embodying social geography, which “theorises *from* bodies, privileging the ways in which bodies are constituted, experienced and represented (p.60). I feel this recognition of the different forms of bodily geographies is important to recognise as geographers rarely reflect on the capacities of their empirical and theoretical approaches to produce particular spatialities of the body. For example, it has been noted (see Chapter Two and Four) that particular engagements with Foucault’s (1977) work has compartmentalised bodies as products of particular discourses. Therefore, my approach seeks to make explicit the means through which bodies are entangled in the conceptual practices of my thesis and presents fluidity as the means through which these bodies are produced and experienced. Bodily geographies therefore become uncertain and require an openness to the fluidity of bodies as material entities as well as the need to think carefully about the places from which we conceptualise bodies.

Secondly, therefore, the fluidity of my approach works in relation to those feminist geographers which seek to free the female body from dualistic thought which positions the body in relation to that which it is not, such as nature/culture, mind/body and Self/Other. Much of the thesis has recognised the potential of accounts of the female body to move between material and discursive articulations of the body (Moss and Dyck 2003) as stated above in relation to the role of this repositioning of the body when understanding female embodied consumption. Bondi and Davidson (2003) have conversely highlighted the dangers of moving beyond binary thinking because it risks letting go of the ways that gender in particular has been powerfully active in producing the female body in particular ways. When I state beyond binary thinking I do not simply mean avoiding the role that dualistic thought has had in producing the female body and instead hint at the possibilities that a consideration

of bodily practices can make in order to produce a new space(s) from which to theorise from. For myself, dualistic thinking is empiricalised and embodied through women's narratives and experiences which also suggests that the space from which we theorise has at its basis a fluid and messy indeterminacy. I deliberately interweave what could be termed abstract theories of the body with empirical bodies in order to make closer the links between different forms of knowledge production. This does not make the body absent under the weight of theory but allows empirical bodies to animate that work which seeks to define it. In short we theorise from what Rose (1996) described earlier as 'paradoxical space' or a 'multidimensional geography' "which is structured by the simultaneous contradictory diversity of social relations. It is a geography which is multiple and contradictory and different as the subjectivity imagining it (Rose 1993 p.155).

This spatial imperative therefore, allows for the production of bodies as bodily doings; an epistemology which begins from the body in its indeterminacy and as simultaneously a theoretical and empirical entity. For as Moss and Dyck (2003) state:

"in grounding the abstract subject/body in the materiality of everyday lie such unsettling, and the success or otherwise of its myriad implications, provides room for multiple and wide ranging audiences, places and cultural contexts"(p.69).

8.4. Empiricalising Theoretical Bodies

Finally, 'empiricalising theoretical bodies' illustrates the potential for a fluid approach to the female body both theoretically and empirically by situating the role that 'bodily doings' have in animating contemporary post-structuralist theories of the body. By animating theory with my empirical bodies, the very bodiliness of theory can be explicated which means that theory is not simply applied to the body but that 'the body' can become the very basis of the conceptual work. The messiness of bodily categories is highlighted through each bodily doing which suggests that it is too easy to pick a body and to simply study the geographies it produces. Instead by focusing on bodily practices the body can be considered as active and productive in itself and will allow us to get closer to and more intimate with what geographers all too easily call 'the geography closest in'.

It has been central to this thesis to approach empirical and theoretical bodies within a framework of fluidity, as mentioned above and thus to present the bodies in my thesis as bodily doings. The inspiration for these bodily doings is Grosz's (1997) concept of body morphologies defined (again) as:

“Body morphologies are the results of the social meaning of the body. The morphological surface is a *retracing* of the anatomical and physiological foundation of the body by systems of social signifiers and signs traversing and even penetrating bodies. Morphological differences between sexed bodies imply both a traced ‘biological’ difference which is transcribed or translated by discursive, textual representations and corporeal significations. It implies a productive, *changeable*, non-fixed biological substratum mapped by a social, political and familial grid of practices and meanings. The morphological dimension is a function of socialisation and apprenticeship, and produces as its consequences a subject, soul, personality or inner depth” (Grosz 1997 p.245 my emphasis).

For myself, this conceptualisation of ‘the body’ makes explicit the very nature of fluidity that I have advocated throughout this thesis. The co-constitution of material and discursive bodies, working beyond dualistic thought, the significance of the matter of bodies beyond a purely inert biological entity and the capacities of bodies to extend beyond the material realm to account for those bodies that are retraced and are placed beyond the moment of consumption i.e. hauntings and absent presences. Therefore, it allows me to consider theory from the vantage point of what bodies do rather than what bodies are. I do not use her work as an exemplary model but as a strategy from which to approach the body; thus beginning with fluidity rather than finding fluidity in bodies which are researched. Moreover, this understanding provides the space for a body as a productive force in the creation of knowledges which means that my empirical work is positioned as animating theoretical interventions. Bodily doings, therefore provides the framework for what these knowledges become in that “new terms and different conceptual frameworks must also be devised to be able to talk of the body outside or in excess of binary pairs” (Grosz 1994 p.24).

These doings, slimming, sizing, zoning and looking act as an organising tool for my empirical work within the writing regimes of a thesis. However they should not be viewed as typologies of the body and instead each chapter works to exemplify the messy, discursive and materialities of female embodied existence. The formation of these doings is reliant of course on the consumption context in which they were produced so that it has become necessary in *Slimming*, for example to exemplify the capacities of bodily practices to provide a commentary upon the (re)positioning of the female consumer. However, these doings also highlight particular absences within the geographical literature on the body and suggest alternative figurations of what an empiricalised theoretical body may look/feel/sound/like. For example, the notion of the grotesque (Russo 1994) and the monstrous (Shildrick 1997) introduced in Chapter Five, exemplifies how bignesses need not be conceptualised for what they are ‘not’ but as a site of ‘disruption’ and an openness or ‘protruding’ into the world. This

does not mean working within discourses of celebration and resistance, as much of the fat activist literature serves to do, and recognises instead the messiness of all bodies and their potential to exceed their representations. For example, for Jude, her bignesses are inescapable but that does not necessarily position her as an abject body. Instead it places her as reflective upon those medial, moral and political discourses that seek to define her and her bignesses become her own to be simultaneously reviled and accepted. She states “I suppose deep down I’d like to be thin but then it’s never gonna happen it’s not the end of the world”.

I have also been keen to make explicit what can be considered to be the specificities of female embodied subjectivity², based upon Grosz's (1994) idea of ‘psychic corporeality’, which centres subjectivity in the body and its corporeal capacities. This an inversion of mind into body and body into mind which allows for women to think and live, and feel and be through their bodies in proximity and immanence (Young 1990) rather than at a regulatory and discrete distance. Weiss (1999) reminds us that sexual specificity should not be read off the body which is an “artificial, decontextualising and therefore decorporealizing process that fails to do justice to what it means to be an embodied subject” (Weiss 1999 p.162). Therefore, I have built upon Young’s (1990) work on female modalities of embodied existence by suggesting not necessarily how women experience their bodies within a dualistic framework of i.e. transcendence and immanence but in relation to the multiplicity of their embodiments and those of other women. Chapter Seven, Looking, concentrates on debates in geography concerned with the gaze but suggests ways that women look at their own bodies and the bodies of other women. Geographers have not engaged with what it feels/means for women to look at each other’s bodies as a material entity and not simply as a representation of that material form. The gaze has been conceptualised as a masculinist gaze through which men are conceived as bearer of the look (Berger 1972) and the woman to be looked at, unable to return to gaze and exist beyond the patriarchal visual registers of that gaze. Instead the looking practices in my thesis suggest the ‘intercorporeal’ nature body images whereby “To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies (Weiss 1999 p.5). Therefore, it is important to realise the significance of bodies and images of bodies in the constitution of female embodied subjectivities. For example, I suggest that women look to evaluate other women's bodies in a changing room not only to compare themselves but also to produce connections between bodies. Connecting, therefore, directs us towards a different articulation

² I have often been asked whether my research can be related to men’s embodied experiences of consumption and I am hesitant to apply my findings to differentially sexed bodies. However, I would say that one approach would be that rather than simply consider men’s bodies as fluid (Longhurst 2001) it may be necessary to approach all bodies from a position of fluidity, placing the constitutive nature of material and discursive embodiment as central to the research agenda.

of looking relations that suggests we consider relations of care and concern between women. Looking at one's own body need not be damaging to the self in terms of bodily dissatisfaction but may be a practice of evaluation of the body within the context of a woman's relationship with her own body. For example, Kate decides not to judge women on what they look like because they may not be able to buy clothes which 'flatter their body' and Scarlet rethinks the alternative potentials of her own negative relationship to her body when looking at women who have their 'guts and tits hanging out'.

I feel that my approach to bodies moves towards what Weiss (1999) has named 'bodily imperatives' as a way of describing the ways through which bodies are produced in relation to other bodies and images of bodies in the form of particular embodied ethical practices. She states:

"The ground for this ethics is not a categorical imperative, nor is it the transcendence of consciousness as a nihilating activity that refuses too close an identification with any given action, relationship, or situation; rather it is an embodied ethics grounded in the dynamic, bodily imperatives that emerge out of our intercorporeal exchanges and which in turn transform our own body images, investing them and reinvesting them with moral significance" (Weiss 1999 p.158).

Therefore, women consuming, should not be positioned in space as discreet entities and instead it is important to highlight the personal and embodied nature of their ethical decision making; how they look at themselves and other women and what this feels like; how to consider the importance of having a slim body within the context of being healthy; how to be big and not become defined solely by discourse which limits your bodily possibilities and how to 'wear your flesh well' and not to disavow it from the body as abject. In this light, I feel it may be useful for us engage with recent work on emotions that embodies the processes of how we come to feel and act into the world. This work seeks to identify the productive capacities of emotions to enable a body to 'act' into the world differently. For example, Williams (2001) states "confronted with a difficulty or impasses of some sort, for example, emotion transforms the situation, making it somehow more 'tolerable', 'liveable' or bearable'" (Williams 2001 p.58). In practice, this involves a degree of embodied reflexivity amongst women and results in practices of getting by and making do, as evaluated within the context of their wider lives. This marks a considerable shift in empirical and well as theoretical accounts of geographies of the body which too easily slips into categories of resistance, freedom and conformity. As Weiss (1999) reiterates:

“To be moral does not require, as the Platonic model holds, separating my conscious “self” from my body and its desires, it involves developing a moral agency that can only be experienced and enacted through bodily practices, practices that both implicate and transform the bodies of others” (Weiss 1999 p.158).

Before concluding this thesis, I want to dwell for a moment on the empirical doings of this thesis; the methodological practices or attitude towards methodologies that have been crucial to the elicitation of body doings as an account of female embodied subjectivity. I advocated a messy (Parr 1998) and open approach to my methodologies in Chapter Three that requires a flexibility and bodily reflexivity on the part of the researcher and research participants. Bailey (2001) states in relation to qualitative research that “we need to speak of the shaky ground, of the unknown, of possibilities, potential outcomes, maybes and simply don’t know (Bailey 2001 p.109). For example, in relation to the previous discussion, my own body became central to how women produced and experienced their own embodied selves as did I also feel looked at and embodied in particular ways throughout accompanied shopping and interviews. Moreover, this approach suggests a need to work with bodies rather than on bodies to avoid compartmentalising their materiality before the research begins and instead to discern how those bodies come into being through the narratives and practices of consumption. As Dyck (2001) states “there is no one good way to do feminist research – every project must create logical and practical links to approaching a specific topic in a particular context” (p.244).

The context of this research has been fluidity as an empirical and theoretical approach to the body in order to ‘get at’ the multiplous nature of female embodiment. For example, such practices involved talking about clothing consumption in order to gain access into in-depth accounts of the female body which relied conversely on a narrative distance in order to ‘get closer’ to the bodies in the research. Bodies extend beyond the spaces of the interview or shopping situation to the experiential realms of women’s wider embodied lives. Therefore, if empirical bodies are to animate rather than be constrained by theorisations of the body we need to advocate approaches such as that presented in this thesis which “provide ways of producing knowledge that creates space for embodied knowledge to emerge from bodily being, experiences and activities form a plurality of voices and places” (Moss and Dyck 2003 p.69).

7.4 Closures/Openings

And so to the final words of this thesis. They are not however the final words that should be written on the subject of the body in geography and instead I end with what I hope is the beginning of how bodily doings and indeed understandings of embodied female subjectivity

can contribute to debates in geography concerning the body and consumption. Firstly I suggest that there needs to be movement beyond an inherent defensiveness within feminist geography, in particular, that positions the body as somehow absent and neglected. This process has itself contributed to the ways that the body has become an “‘Other’ to masculinist knowledges defined in terms of reason, rationality and transcendent visions (Longhurst 2001 p.132). I feel that to be taken seriously, we need to stop adding in bodies to geography and start thinking about the potential of our work to produce new spaces to theorise and research from. We should not simply consider the fluidity of bodies and instead I advocate that geographers need to take a fluid approach to their research per se in order to make sense of the multiple and fluid nature of female embodied subjectivity itself. This involves a closer engagement with theory that need not subsume the body to a conceptual entity. Instead, “If women are to have epistemic credibility and authority, we need to re-configure the role of bodily experience in the development of knowledge” (McDowell 1996 p.17).

Moreover, the fluidity of embodied existence needs to be deepened to account for what has been illustrated to be a myriad of ways that bodies come into being through practices and talk; this messes up the signification of bodily categorisation and takes into account both material and non-material presences of bodies in research. Ultimately, this approach moves beyond binaries but seeks to understand the material implications of this move rather than just the epistemological nature of these theoretical innovations. Grosz (1994) posits that “the body is neither – while also being both – the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined” (p.24) and I would add to this are neither and both materially and discursively. I am concerned with how this observation is embodied in and through the spaces of consumption practices which I feel can only be achieved by paying attention to the corporeal negotiations of these binaries by those we attempt to theorise. The body, therefore, is both a product and productive of these particular theoretical frameworks.

Secondly, it is important to consider theory in its capacity to be animated by bodies rather than applied to them. This not only centres the role of the body in the production and reproduction of knowledge but also avoids an inherent empiricism which seeks to track bodies in spaces rather than placing the spatiality of the body as central to our theoretical concerns. Grosz (1994), Weiss (1999) and Young (1990), for example, have been placed in proximity to my empirical bodies which not only help to make sense of the body within the discipline and consumption specifically but also suggest what a fluid epistemological place which seeks to move beyond binary thinking may constitute: As Rose states:

”some of founding antinomies of Western Geographical thought are negated by feminist subjectivity; its refusal to distinguish between real and metaphorical space; its refusal to separate experience and emotion from the interpretation of places. All of these threaten the polarities which structure the dominant geographical imagination. They fragment the dead weight of masculinist space and rupture its exclusions. Above all they allow for different kind of space through which difference is tolerated rather than erased (Rose 1993 p.155).

Thirdly, I think it is important for geographers to reflect upon how they ‘get at’ bodies. The approach articulated in this thesis sought to achieve an account of female embodied subjectivity through the practices of consumption and the particular medium of clothing. This not only allowed me to reconsider the position of the consumer within the spaces of consumption, but made room for theorisations of the body to make sense of those consumer subjectivities. For example, Weiss’s (1999) notion of ‘bodily imperatives’ is important for considering not just how bodies are produced and experienced in relation to other human and non-human bodies but how the female body can be elicited less as product of discourse and more as an embodied reflective agent. These bodies are capable of moving out into the world as mediated by discourse but also act in proximity to their own bodily needs and desires.

Finally, I end with a beginning. Moss and Dyck (2003) state that “The strength of geography’s contribution to theorising the body as well as to embodied knowledge is through attention to the spatiality of embodiment and materiality” (Moss and Dyck 2003 p. 67). My intention, throughout this thesis, has indeed been to present particular spatialities of the body as produced through the practices of clothing consumption. I have done this by not only placing bodies in spaces but by making sense of how they are produced and re-produced, experienced and re-experienced through the lenses of poststructuralist theory of the body. It is now that we should begin to work with bodies rather than upon bodies so that reciprocal relations of knowledge production become possible.

Appendices

Appendix One

A List of Research Participants

Focus Groups

Bodies	Location	Age Range in Group
University Women's Group I	Sheffield	19-21
University Women's Group II	Sheffield	19-21
National Women's Register	Sheffield	25-55
Women's Institute I	Sheffield	45-75
Women's Institute II	Sheffield	50-70
Cleaners	Sheffield	35-60
Slimmers I (Dietdays)	Sheffield	50-60
Slimmers II (Dietdays)	Sheffield	40-55
Sizenet (BBW)	Sheffield	35-40
Young Mums	Sheffield	28-33
Playgroup Workers	London	55-80
Women's Institute	London	50-70
Friends	London	23-28
Fashion Designers	London	30-35

Interviews

Bodies	Location	Age
Jude	Sheffield	40-45
Debbie	Sheffield	35-40
Fiona	Sheffield	35-40
Carly	Sheffield	25-30
Rosa	Milton Keynes	35-40

Accompanied Shopping

Bodies	Location	Age	Occupation
Sarah	Manchester	24-30	Student
Star	Reading	25-30	Counsellor
Zoe	Sheffield	25-30	Student
Joanna	Sheffield	35-40	Student
Harpreet	Birmingham	45-50	Retired Nurse
Rachel's Mum	Reading	55-60	Pre-school Teacher
Charlotte	Nottingham	35-40	Artist
Kate	Nottingham	35-40	Lecturer

Appendix Two

FORM OF CONSENT

I..... consent that my contribution to the focus group/interview may be used by Rachel Colls in her PhD thesis and any subsequent publications arising from her research.

Signature.....Date:.....

The utmost of confidentiality will be upheld throughout the research process.

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