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**BOUNDED BODIES: THE EVERYDAY CLOTHING  
PRACTICES OF LARGER WOMEN**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**Sociology**

**Massey University, Albany,**

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# Abstract

The field of dress studies currently emphasises dress as an embodied practice, but surprisingly scant attention has been awarded to the fat fleshy clothed body. This thesis addresses this lacuna, and is concerned with the everyday clothing practices of larger women. Theoretically, I draw on and integrate literature from material culture studies, as well as from the politics of fatness, the latter serving as the socio-cultural foundation for the research. In doing so, my research contributes to and extends the current body of literature that considers dress as material culture.

This thesis offers further extension of the field through the methodological focus of the research. Employing multiple inter-related methods allows the complex social processes of larger women's clothing practices to be revealed. Often these processes are embedded within the seemingly habitual, mundane, everyday things that people do while operating within a particular social milieu. With this in mind, I employ an ethnographically-inspired, multiple-method research methodology to explore the everyday clothing practices of ten self-identified larger women in Auckland, New Zealand. The five research methods involve asking the participants to: keep a clothing journal; rummage through their wardrobe with me; go shopping for clothes with me; take photographs of their 'clothed worlds'; and take part in a group discussion with other participants.

Employing an integrative analytic process, I reveal the numerous ways that larger women enact their agency at the same time as being bound within structures of socio-cultural corporeal and clothing norms. My research shows that the boundaries between fleshy fat bodies, clothing and culturally-bound geographical spaces are experienced by my participants as tension-filled and ambiguous. Ultimately, they are perpetually provisional; the boundaries fixed yet potentially permeable. Using space as an organisational and analytic framework, my research explores the boundaries of four distinct spaces: spaces of consumption; public spaces beyond consumption; private spaces; and the spaces *between* fat bodies and clothes. I argue that, despite structural barriers that create 'fat' bodies as 'matter out of place' and, as such, beyond

the bounds of possibility, larger women enact agency in creative and resourceful ways. In doing so, they challenge the boundaries of dominant Western constructions of fatness and ultimately, transform places of exclusion into spaces of inclusion.

# Acknowledgments

It is often said of doctoral study that it is a solitary process. That was not my experience. While certainly, the act of writing was conducted alone, I never felt isolated as I had numerous family, friends and colleagues who walked alongside me, offering unwavering support, encouragement, and faith that I could ‘go the distance’. I was fortunate to complete this project under the careful and sure hand of Associate Professor Ann Dupuis and Professor Kerry Chamberlain. Their enthusiasm for the project never waned and I am the grateful recipient of their intellectual generosity. I have directly benefited from their wealth of methodological, empirical and theoretical knowledge. To offer thanks seems inadequate; it fails to fully capture the support they offered as I progressed through the research. Their interest, guidance, diligence, and good humour have made this research project an enjoyable one and it has been a pleasure to work with them both. I feel privileged to call them my colleagues and friends.

I would like to thank the ten women who participated in this research. There is no doubt the research was enriched by their knowledge, their enthusiasm and their stories. Although I fear not, I hope this thesis does some justice to those stories.

I am deeply grateful to my husband, Shawn Cain, and my children, Josh and Ruby. Together, they have provided my sustenance throughout this four year journey. They endured my on-going absence, particularly in the latter stages, and Shawn tirelessly assumed full responsibility for the well-being of our family. To Shawn’s credit, he never tired of hearing me talk, protest, or despair about my progress and, perhaps most importantly, he never stopped believing I could finish it.

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# Corpulent Beauty

Naked she stands

Before the mirror

The Other woman glares back

The roll of flesh around her waist

Slicing her body – north, south

Hips, thighs

Studded in dark and light

She sees a glimmer of beauty

But a thousand men remind her

Renaissance woman is history

Dressed she straps her body

In binding cloth

That wraps around her

Like a vine on a tree

But her body fights back

Tired of hiding in blackened

Fields of wall flowers

Thirsting for light

Her body spills its excess

Flesh pouring through the fissure

Of unsuspecting material

Cloth rides, slides away

Revealing a fragment of corpulent beauty