

'PUNK WILL NEVER DIET': BETH DITTO AND THE (QUEER) REVALUATION OF FAT

by Curran Nault

Over the past few years, there has been a remarkable increase in lesbian visibility within popular culture. From comedienne-turned-television-star Ellen DeGeneres's talk show success, to actress Lindsay Lohan's much reported relationship and breakup with disc jockey Samantha Ronson, to Showtime's celebrated drama series *The L Word*, to Katy Perry's hit single "I Kissed a Girl," lesbianism seems to be everywhere these days. Given these developments, when independent music magazine *NME* named Beth Ditto, the lesbian lead singer of The Gossip, the "Coolest Person in Rock," in 2006,¹ it was possible to view this as just another example of what the press has labeled "new lesbian chic."² Yet, there is something that sets Ditto apart from the other lesbians, real and fictional, who have recently found their way into the limelight. Standing at just over five feet and weighing approximately two-hundred and ten pounds, Ditto's large frame is at odds with the sleek and slender bodies that have dominated contemporary lesbian representation. As a self-identified "fat dyke,"³ Ditto's acclaim is unprecedented and, for reasons explained in this paper, has been beneficial to both the fat activist project of promoting fat visibility and the queer⁴ project of reclaiming and revaluing stigmatized bodies.

As this essay will demonstrate, through her songs, performances, videos, public comments and magazine cover appearances, Ditto has challenged dominant conceptualizations of beauty, gender and sexuality and, in the process, has constructed an alternative to conventional standards of attractiveness. More specifically, through a variety of recuperative strategies, Ditto has staged a critique of normative iterations of the body and rescued fatness from its representation as revolting and worthless. She has done this, first of all, by embracing her body in its current form, thus serving as an example of what I term "embodied corpulence." Embodied corpulence is about taking pride in the fat body in its existing state and refusing to change, shrink or disappear. Second, Ditto has been a major figure in the struggle to reclaim "fat" as a term of positive self-identification, taking away its power to injure. Third, and finally, by foregrounding her various identities as a fat lesbian femme, Ditto has brought attention to the commonalities between these identities, including the fact that they can all be contested via performative acts that disrupt their fixity and recast them as sites of strength, complexity and renewal. In the rest of

¹ "The Cool List 2006: Winners Revealed," *NME*, 26 November 2006, <<http://www.nme.com/news/gossip/25186>> (31 May 2009).

² For example, see Sally Brampton, "Lesbian Chic," *Times Online*, 20 July 2008, <http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/fashion/article4343457.ece> (7 June 2009).

³ See Beth Ditto, interview by Laura May Coope, "Hot Gossip - Beth Ditto on Fat, Fame and Feminism," *Diva*, April 2007, <<http://www.divamag.co.uk/diva/features.asp?AID=2456>> (7 June 2009).

⁴ Here I am using "queer" in the sense of the "anti-normative." This usage of "queer" has been popularized within queer theory. As Anna Tripp explains, "queer theory offers an understanding of sexuality not as something god-given, natural or innate, but instead as a series of culturally and historically specific classifications, definitions, moralizations and contestations. Modern Western cultures produce a notion of the 'deviant' or 'queer' in order to shore up a sense of heterosexual 'normality', a 'queerness' which the 'straight' must then simultaneously deny and depend on for its constitutive difference. One of queer theory's most effective strategies is to work the contradictions and anxieties inherent in these constructions." See Anna Tripp, "Introduction," in *Gender: Readers in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Anna Tripp (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 15 (emphasis in original).

this essay, I will explore each of these points further, ending with an analysis of Ditto's now famous nude cover for *NME* magazine that will pull together several of my principal arguments. Prior to moving into my main discussion, however, I will begin with a brief sketch of Ditto's life and career.

I. BETH DITTO, THE GOSSIP AND QUEERCORE

Beth Ditto is the lead singer of the Gossip, a Portland, Oregon-based rock band comprised of herself, guitarist Brace Paine and drummer (and fellow lesbian) Hannah Blilie. The band's four full-length studio albums – *That's Not What I Heard* (2001), *Movement* (2003), *Standing in the Way of Control* (2006) and the soon-to-be-released *Music for Men* (2009) – combine the rhythmic tempo of dance with the raw energy and confrontational posturing of punk. As an “out” gay band, the Gossip is considered a descendant of queercore, a subcultural movement that began in the mid 1980s as a queer variation on mainline punk, and which overlaps with riot grrrl, a type of underground feminist punk with which the Gossip has also been linked. Queercore is powered by a do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) ethos that has produced queer-themed music (Tribe 8, Sister George, Huggy Bear, Pansy Division, Limp Wrist, Gravy Train !!!!, etc.), zines (*JDs*, *Homocore*, *Holy Titclamps*, *Outpunk*, etc.), and films (the movies of Bruce La Bruce, G.B. Jones, and Sadie Benning, to name a few).

As a musical movement, queercore professes to be fiercely independent and anti-normative. The music aggressively foregrounds queer identity (e.g. Mukilteo Fairies' “Queer Enough for You?”) and tackles such verboten topics as girl-boy insurrection (e.g. Huggy Bear's “Her Jazz”) and polymorphous perversity (e.g., Gravy Train's “Double Decker Supreme”). Queercore also aspires to combat narrow-minded views through active, innovative, self-made and non-commercial artistic production. This mission entails an antagonistic relationship with what artists in this subculture consider to be the values of mainstream straight and gay culture. For, as Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman explain, “establishment of an inside and an outside, an ‘us’ versus a ‘them’” is essential to “the term ‘queercore.’”⁵ Accordingly, queercore sets itself apart from not only bourgeois ideologies and practices (as mainline punk does), but also to the masculinist and homophobic tendencies of the wider punk movement, and the assimilationist bent of the mainstream gay and lesbian community. In other words, queercore stands in opposition not only to dominant heterosexual values in both punk and society at large, but to the so-called oppressive agenda of the mainstream gay and lesbian community, which, in the eyes of queercore enthusiasts, has in recent years become more and more exclusive (beholden to the values of the white, middle-class) and commercialized (co-opted by corporations who see gay and lesbian people as distinct “markets” to be exploited).

The Gossip is considered a queercore band, first and foremost, because Ditto is so up-front and unapologetic about her sexuality in both her music and public life. Second, much like the queercore community at large, Ditto has not only expressed her disagreement with the narrow-minded views of straight society through such anti-homophobic songs as “Standing in the Way of Control,” but to those of the mainstream gay and lesbian community as well. For example, she recently accused gay men within the fashion industry of placing undue pressure on women to be skinny, stating, “If there's anyone to blame for size zero, it's not women. Blame gay men who work in the fashion industry and want these women as

⁵ Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman, “Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture,” *College Literature* 24:1 (February 1997): 47.

dolls.”⁶ Third, the band is associated with Kill Rock Stars, an independent record label with a commitment to antiestablishment feminist and queer music. Kill Rock Stars has released all of the Gossip’s albums to date, except for the forthcoming *Music for Men* (a point I will return to in the conclusion of this essay). Finally, Ditto’s lesbianism, which puts her at odds with the male-dominated punk scene, and her fatness, which puts her at odds with a mainstream gay and lesbian community that is just as image-conscious as society at large, has made her an ultimate figure of identification for queercore audiences who are attracted to her readily identifiable outsider status. Accordingly, the Gossip has developed a loyal following among queercore fans. In point of fact, Ditto is a featured performer in *Queercore*, a documentary about the movement made by *Queer Youth TV* in 2007, which also features Martin Sorrondoguy from Limp Wrist and Hunx from Gravy Train!!!!, among others.

However, The Gossip’s fan base reaches beyond just the queercore subculture. The band has obtained a modicum of mainstream success, particularly in the United Kingdom, where creative musical expression is not quite the barrier to stardom it is in the United States, and where their last album peaked at #22 in the charts. Moreover, Ditto has been a source of fascination and speculation among independent music fans and media outlets of all stripes. Her powerful vocals have been compared to everyone from rhythm and blues legends Tina Turner and Aretha Franklin to punk icon Poly Styrene of the band X-Ray Spex (a singer that Ditto herself has cited as a source of inspiration), and Ditto’s high-octane performances are renowned within independent rock circles.

Ditto credits her powerful “soulful singing style” to her Southern Baptist, Pentecostal upbringing, a key component of her story.⁷ As one of seven siblings raised in the Bible Belt, Ditto’s childhood was far from easy. In her large family, there was little money to go around and in her hometown of Searcy, Arkansas, there was little tolerance for homosexuality. To make matters worse, she had to deal with a religious uncle “who made childhood horrible” (an experience that she recounts in the song “Holy Water”) and life on an old-fashioned farm, where the violence and sexism of everyday life did not mesh with her budding pacifist and feminist beliefs.⁸ Yet, Ditto also credits her childhood with teaching her to be independent and to create things for herself, including clothes, which set her on the path to becoming a D.I.Y. artist.⁹ Furthermore, although she has been critical of her home state in songs like “Arkansas Heat” (“Tell the preacher in case he asks/We ain’t never ever coming back”¹⁰), on occasion she has also embraced her Southern roots (“Honey, ain’t no woman like a Southern girl”¹¹). In addition, Ditto has been known to weave colourful tales about her small-town, working-class upbringing, like the following anecdote about eating squirrels from *The Independent*:

⁶ “Beth Ditto Blames Gay Men for Women’s Poor Self Image,” *The Insider*, 30 March 2007, <<http://allieiswired.blogspot.com/2007/05/beth-dito-blames-gay-men-for-womens.html>> (8 June 2009).

⁷ Beth Ditto, interview by Matt Gonzales, “Fat with an ‘F’: Talking to Beth Ditto of the Gossip,” *PopMatters*, 14 March 2006, <<http://www.popmatters.com/music/interviews/gossip-060314.shtml>> (7 June 2009).

⁸ Beth Ditto, interview by Chris Muga, “The Gossip’s Beth Ditto Speaks Out,” *The Independent*, 29 March 2007, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/the-gossips-beth-ditto-speaks-out-442273.html>> (7 June 2009).

⁹ Beth Ditto, interview by Chris Muga, “The Gossip’s Beth Ditto Speaks Out,” *The Independent*, 29 March 2007, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/the-gossips-beth-ditto-speaks-out-442273.html>> (7 June 2009).

¹⁰ The Gossip, “Arkansas Heat,” *Arkansas Heat* (Kill Rock Stars, 2002).

¹¹ The Gossip, “Southern Comfort,” *That’s Not What I Heard* (Kill Rock Stars, 2000).

I remember this one time, I was 13 and had been smoking pot with my cousin for the first time. He got the munchies so bad that he just took out his BB gun and started shooting at them [squirrels] out the window, and then he just skinned them and fried them, and ate them just like chicken. We used to play with the tails afterwards.¹²

In “Life in the Fat Lane,” Laura Kipnis notes that, despite the fact that the poor are the least able to over-consume, within the popular imagination poverty and fatness are firmly linked by way of stereotypical images of welfare mothers receiving more than their fair share and working-class families gorging themselves on fast food. As such, “the phobia of fat and the phobia of the poor are heavily cross-coded” and “the fear of an out-of-control body is not unrelated to the fear of out of control [working-class] masses.”¹³ Ditto’s tale of improper working-class consumption quoted above, which even incorporates the suggestion of overeating (getting “the munchies”), is capable of evoking not only the horrors of working-class life, but fatness as well. In other words, Ditto’s working-class and fat identities cannot easily be separated within a culture that sees the two as mutually implicated. What’s more, the way in which Ditto so bluntly recounts this tale of “redneck” consumption, including her provocative reference to playing with squirrel tails, is similar to the way in which she has brazenly highlighted her fatness and gastronomical practices in her music, performances, videos and interviews. It is Ditto’s determination to foreground her body within her work that I now turn.

II. EMBODIED CORPULENCE

Ditto’s decidedly present embodiment, which I will discuss in greater detail below, has been made possible by three decades worth of fat activism. That is, since the 1970s, fat activists have attempted to render fat bodies visible and welcome within the public sphere: to bring fatness out of the shadows and into the realm of societal respectability. However, over the same period of time, there has been a nationwide movement, self-servingly propelled by the multi-billion dollar diet and fitness industries, to rid the world of fat and, by extension, fat people. In contemporary popular culture, as evidenced by countless magazine articles and talk show episodes dedicated to the “problem of obesity,” fat has become a social affliction worthy of profound contempt. Within this cultural climate, fat people are told to make a choice: get rid of your excessive body or face a life of shame, unhappiness and certain premature death.

In other words, there is little room for fatness in today’s cultural domain. Le’A Kent has argued that within dominant representation, the fat body functions as the abject: that which must be expelled in order for the good (i.e. thin) body to be set free. In this way, the fat body is rarely allowed to be embodied and present, as it is continually represented as either false (the body in the process of becoming thin) or past (the body that has been left behind).¹⁴ This discursive containment of the fat body is observable in the before and after pictures of weight loss advertisements:

¹² Beth Ditto, “Meet Beth Ditto: The Coolest Woman on the Planet,” *The Independent*, 23 November 2006, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/meet-beth-ditto-the-coolest-woman-on-the-planet-425458.html>>, (10 June 2009).

¹³ Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 101.

¹⁴ Le’A Kent, “Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 136 (emphasis in original).

In this scenario the self, the person, is presumptively thin, and cruelly jailed in a fat body. The self is never fat. To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as a fat *person*. The before-and-after scenario both consigns the fat body to an eternal past and makes it bear the full horror of embodiment, situating it as that which must be cast aside for the self to truly come into being.¹⁵

This “casting aside” of the fat body can also be witnessed on weight loss television programs such as *The Biggest Loser*, in which fat bodies are made skinny over the course of the show. On these programs, the fat body is done away with only to return in the form of flashback images that merely serve to remind the viewer of what has been erased.¹⁶

As Kent argues, this has an effect on the way in which fat people live their lives: as connected to bodies believed to be without value in the present.¹⁷ Yet, not all fat people have surrendered themselves to this negative self-image or acquiesced to the demand for body disavowal. In opposition to the view of fat as something to be exterminated, fat liberation groups such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and the (now defunct) Fat Underground have demanded that fat bodies be affirmed, not as entities in the process of becoming thin and, therefore, valuable, but as powerful and desirable in the present tense.

As suggested, these occurrences have paved the way for Ditto, who has taken the affirmation of fat from the formal political realm to the realm of popular culture. Ditto has been a model of what I term “embodied corpulence,” which entails a refusal of fat abjection and an acceptance of one’s body in its existing state. In interviews, Ditto has expressed contentment with her body, confidently asserting that she accepts herself the way she is and is “not trying to change.”¹⁸ She has also rejected the pressure to alter her body through dieting, going so far as to wear a t-shirt with “Punk Will Never Diet” scrawled across it in permanent black marker for a *Diva* magazine photo shoot. These actions have made her a heroine to many within the fat liberation movement, as Ditto’s acceptance of her here-and-now body has produced a rupture in a representational regime that has continually portrayed fat women as either grossly unhappy or happily on their way to becoming thin. To use Kent’s words, by rejecting the process of abjection, Ditto has found “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.”¹⁹

III. FAT RECLAMATION

In addition to rejecting fat abjection and taking pleasure in her present-tense body, Ditto has also challenged discursive constructions of fat as ugly, disgusting, obscene, funny, unclean and other such

¹⁵ Kent, 135.

¹⁶ There is currently a new reality television program entitled “Dance Your Ass Off” set to air on the Oxygen channel in the summer of 2009. The title of this program is illuminating, as it quite literally denotes the theme of bodily erasure at the heart of weight loss reality shows. It is also worth noting that after losing large amounts of weight, individuals are oftentimes left with loose folds of skin that can only be removed through surgeries designed to remove all traces of the former fat body. Thanks to *NeoAmericanist* editor, Karen Foster, for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁷ Kent, 131.

¹⁸ Beth Ditto, interview by Louise Carolin, “Beth Ditto: Sexiest Woman of the Year,” *Diva*, 2008, <<http://www.divamag.co.uk/diva/features.asp?PID=43575>> (7 June 2009).

¹⁹ Kent, 130-1.

negative appellations. Again, this action has its roots in fat activism. Fat advocacy groups have long contested hegemonic understandings of fat by insisting on fat visibility and, thus, forcing “the spectacle of fat as fat, rather than as an array of [negative] connotations”²⁰ In other words, against the taboo of silence, fat activists have claimed the right to speak of their experiences, and in terms not culled from the language of fat phobia. The use of the word “fat” within an emancipatory framework has been crucial to this project of connotative reinscription. Sari Dworkin maintains that, “Part of fat pride is reclaiming the word ‘fat’ ... in the same way that lesbians have reclaimed the word ‘dyke.’”²¹ This act of reclamation means not only embracing a once derogatory term, but also imbuing it with new meanings. As Kate Harding contends:

Thin women don't tell their fat friends 'You're not fat' because they're confused about the dictionary definition of the word, or their eyes are broken, or they were raised on planets where size 24 is the average for women. They don't say it because it's the truth. They say it because fat does not mean just fat in this culture. It can also mean any or all of the following: ugly, unhealthy, smelly, lazy, ignorant, undisciplined, unlovable, burdensome, embarrassing, unfashionable, mean, angry, socially inept, just plain icky. So when they say 'You're not fat,' what they really mean is 'You're not a dozen nasty things I associate with the word fat.'²²

Thus, Harding has made a deliberate decision to use the word “fat” to describe herself – rather than euphemisms like “plus-sized,” “big-boned” or “voluptuous,” which obscure the fat body under a pall of politesse. As a course of action, this gives new life to the term and envisions a different social reality in which “fat” is no longer a dirty word. As Harding asserts, “I am a kindhearted, intelligent, attractive, person, and *I am fat*. There is no paradox there.”²³

Importantly, Ditto has also participated in this strategy of connotative resignification by consistently using the word “fat” as a term of positive self-identification on stage and in interviews. In doing so, Ditto has impeded the power of “fat” to shame and has disturbed its conventional use as a term of insult. Moreover, in using “fat” to describe herself, an artist known for her considerable talent, Ditto has furthered the project of attaching positive meanings to the word. These may seem to be insignificant linguistic acts, but as Kathleen LeBesco reminds us “speaking builds subjects,” and, thus, fat people “can begin creating and regulating a new social reality through the use of words.”²⁴ From this perspective, the inventive salvaging of the term “fat” is an essential and strategic component within Ditto’s recuperative body of work.

²⁰ Kipnis, 121 (emphasis in original).

²¹ Sari Dworkin, “Not in Man’s Image: Lesbians and the Cultural Oppression of Body Image,” in *Lesbianism: Affirming Non-Traditional Roles*, ed. Ellen Cole and Esther D. Rothblum (New York: Routledge, 1989), 34.

²² Kate Harding, “You’re Not Fat,” in *Feed Me!: Writers Dish About Food, Eating, Weight, and Body Image*, ed. Harriett Brown (New York: Ballentine Books, 2009), 170.

²³ Harding, 174.

²⁴ Kathleen LeBesco, “Queering Fat Bodies/Politics.” In *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 76-7.

IV. QUEER AND FAT/QUEERING FAT

As a fat lesbian producing cultural objects that play on both of these identities, Ditto and her creative output provide an interesting opportunity to think through some of the ways in which queerness and fatness intersect, as well as how the queer practice of subversion through performativity might be usefully applied to the deconstruction of fat. To begin, there are several parallels that can be drawn between queerness and fatness. For one, many early fat liberation groups, such as the Fat Underground, not only shared members with early queer liberation groups, such as Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers, but shared a penchant for turning political issues into spectacles: both fat and queer liberation groups have strategically broadcast their scorned (sexual and gastronomical) practices in public acts of defiance.²⁵ Furthermore, as LeBesco notes, coming out is a process central to both queer and fat existence.²⁶ For lesbians and gay men, coming out means making an invisible identity visible, whereas for fat people, coming out means letting go of denial, refusing to be interpellated by the disingenuous “you’re not fat” comments from friends and family members, and proudly acknowledging the body in its actuality — in other words, engaging in embodied corpulence as outlined above.

There are three categories of “out” fat individuals according to LeBesco: the “out and about” (i.e. those who “publicly acknowledge their own fatness and typically embrace it”); the “silent types” (i.e. those who “typically fail to acknowledge their size or the politics of fatness”); and “traitors” (those whose “drastic dieting efforts or experience with weight-loss surgery front a devastatingly negative view of fatness”).²⁷ LeBesco identifies former talk show host and lesbian comedienne Rosie O’Donnell as an example of an “out and about” figure. In her public life, O’Donnell has exhibited little interest in, and at times outright disdain for faddish dieting and exercise, and has continually asserted her right to be who she is, both as a lesbian and a fat person. Moreover, O’Donnell has been openly critical of fat “traitors,” like former *The View* co-host Star Jones, who in 2006 lost a significant amount of weight, which she deceitfully attributed to diet and exercise, rather than the gastric bypass surgery that she had in fact undergone.²⁸

O’Donnell, perhaps the first “out” fat lesbian within popular culture, is an important precursor to Ditto. Both are “out and about figures” and both have been upfront about their identities and outspoken in their beliefs.²⁹ Likewise, these two women share a passion for progressive politics. Which is to say that, like O’Donnell, Ditto is not only a proponent of fat empowerment, but she is also a feminist and LGBTQI

²⁵ Examples include the “fat-in” staged in New York City’s Central Park in 1967, in which fat activists ate, carried picket signs and burned diet books, and Queer Nation’s highly visible, media-oriented actions, such as same-sex kiss-ins at shopping malls.

²⁶ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolt Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 92.

²⁷ LeBesco, *Revolt Bodies?*, 92-3.

²⁸ Although Star Jones initially denied having gastric bypass surgery, in 2007 she admitted to having the procedure in an interview with *Glamour* magazine.

²⁹ For her outspoken views and unapologetic fatness, O’Donnell has frequently found herself the target of public derision, most famously from billionaire business tycoon Donald Trump who in 2006 referred to O’Donnell as a “fat, ugly slob” on an installment of *Entertainment Tonight*. Although the word “dyke” was absent from Trump’s vitriolic attack, given that “fat,” “ugly” and “dyke” are frequently collapsed into a readily identifiable chain of signification, it was easy to read the “dyke” as implied. Whether or not Ditto will face the same kind of hostility as she moves further into the public spotlight remains to be seen.

rights advocate.³⁰ Ditto's progressive politics are perhaps most apparent in the lyrics to "Standing in the Way of Control," the Gossip's most commercially successful song to-date. "Standing in the Way of Control" is a fiery, albeit dance-club-friendly, response to the anti-gay marriage stance of former president George W. Bush. As Ditto explains, the song is about:

[G]ay men and lesbians waiting decades to show their commitment to each other and then having their marriages annulled. Nobody in the States was that surprised or shocked by what Bush did, but it made everyone I know feel helpless and cheated. I wrote the chorus to try and encourage people not to give up and let one man take control of our lives. It's a scary time for civil rights, but I really believe the only way to survive is to stick together and keep fighting.³¹

It is telling that Ditto envisions this fight for marriage equality as *standing* in the way of control. On a figurative level, the "standing" of the song's title (and repeated chorus) is a call to arms, an inspirational evocation of queer power. But, on a more literal level, Ditto's use of "standing" suggests that the (upright) body is itself crucial to acts of queer resistance. This latter reading is especially apropos considering the way that Ditto has wielded her body as a weapon of power and protest through her performances.

This is another way in which the queer and the fat collide in Ditto's oeuvre: through her artistry, both Ditto's gender and fat identities have become the object of performative reinscription or what might be called revision through "queer performativity." To explain queer performativity, it is necessary to turn to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. In this key queer theory text, Butler argues that, rather than being something innate or natural, gender is an act that patriarchal society compels us to perform. That is, according to Butler, we are coerced into performing gender reiteratively through an array of "acts, gestures and desires" and that these "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core."³² In other words, through reiterative acts, gender and, in turn, sex categories become naturalized such that they appear to be stable and foundational, when they are "in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices [and] discourses."³³

However, Butler also suggests that these categories can be destabilized through stylized performances that expose sex and gender as "regulatory fictions" that uphold "regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression."³⁴ For example, Butler points to drag as a practice that, through exaggerated performance, calls attention to the fact that gender is an unnatural construct that requires a great deal of work to sustain.³⁵ In addition, drag performances enable their audience to think about gender differently, as they displace settled conceptions of male/female and masculine/feminine, provoking productive uncertainties about their status as natural and normal.

As LeBesco has observed, Butler's ideas are useful for thinking about the ways in which fatness,

³⁰ LGBTQI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and intersex.

³¹ Beth Ditto, interview by Sarah-Jane, "Are The Gossip Control Freaks?," *Diva*, <<http://www.divamag.co.uk/diva/features.asp?AID=577>> (5 April 2009).

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173.

³³ Butler, xxix (emphasis in original).

³⁴ Butler, 43.

³⁵ Butler, 174-5.

like gender, is a fabricated identity and one that can also be disrupted and queried via performative acts that allow us to view fatness anew. She notes that, like gender identity, fat identity is “open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and ... hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural.’”³⁶ Moreover, through playful performances, fatness can be “repositioned in the cultural imaginary.”³⁷ Ditto provides one such example of the “repositioning of fat” through performance, and one that is particularly relevant to Butler’s arguments, as Ditto’s work not only rewrites the fat body, but the gendered body as well. To say this another way, in her stage performances and in her music videos, Ditto performs her identities in ways that threaten to undo the meanings normally ascribed to them.

For example, in opposition to the previously discussed dominant representations of fat bodies as false (the body in the process of becoming thin) and past (the body that has been left behind), Ditto’s performances foreground her body as delightfully, and even confrontationally, present. In her energetic stage performances, Ditto confidently struts and dances across the stage, defiantly taking up space and challenging the prevailing view of fat bodies as sedentary and weak. When she is not wearing tight-fitting outfits that call attention to the largeness of her frame, and especially her sizeable breasts and buttocks, Ditto is stripping down to her underwear, exposing her hairy crotch and armpits, and otherwise transgressing the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour by flagrantly offering up her soft flesh and flabby stomach to the gaze of her admiring audience.³⁸ This bodily deployment flies in the face of conventional notions of how women are supposed to inhabit their bodies:

Modern American standards require that the ideal feminine body be small. A woman is taught early to contain herself, to keep arms and legs close to her body and take up as little space as possible. This model of femininity suggests that real women are thin, nearly invisible.³⁹

In counter distinction to this “invisible woman” of ideal femininity, Ditto delights in making a spectacle of herself, and in the process troubles the boundaries of appropriate female behavior and transcends the imposed limitations of the fat body.

This same type of performative reinscription can be observed in the Gossip’s music video for “Listen Up!”⁴⁰ At the onset of this video, Ditto sits on a couch engaging in a stereotypical female pursuit, crocheting. This image of tranquil domesticity gives Ditto a maternal air, but one that does not ultimately last. That is, midway through the video, Ditto puts down her crochet needle and picks up some fried

³⁶ LeBesco, “Queering Fat Bodies/Politics,” 79. Original quote in Butler, 146-7.

³⁷ LeBesco, 83.

³⁸ When Ditto is not half-naked, she is often dressed in ultra-hip outfits designed by her personal stylist, Johnny Blue Eyes. In making a conscious effort to be fashion forward, Ditto demonstrates that fat girls are not the slobs that they are stereotyped to be, and that plus-size women can be style icons just as easily as skinny girls. In fact, it is worth noting that Johnny Blue Eyes is also a stylist for super svelte model, Kate Moss, which means that the clothes the two fashionistas wear share some similarities.

³⁹ Cecilia Hartley, “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 61.

⁴⁰ Note: The Gossip have two videos for the song “Listen Up!” The one that I am describing is their first video, which they made in 2006. The second video, made in 2007, features a woman and man, both dressed in drag, who walk around Portland, Oregon before meeting at a nightclub and sharing a dance. This second video demonstrates the Gossip’s interest in queer modes of gender play.

chicken, which she proceeds to scarf down in a very unladylike fashion.⁴¹ This theme of voracious consumption continues into the subsequent shots, which include images of Ditto rhythmically swaying back and forth in a hallway while holding a take-out pizza box and, later, passionately dancing with/eating a slice of pizza, which she uses to fan herself in-between bites.

Thus, rather than hiding her illicit eating practices, Ditto places them in full view, confronting the notion that a large appetite, especially on the part of women, is something disgraceful. Ditto foregrounds her excessive and unfeminine practices of consumption, combining them with images of stereotypical femininity, forging a sensual amalgamation of bodily and culinary pleasure that prohibits any simple or fixed reading of Ditto and her embodiment. Again, this has the effect of allowing us to understand fatness and femininity differently. By consistently performing the role of a non-stereotypical fat woman, one with complexity and a diversely embodied subjectivity, Ditto troubles our orthodox views of fatness.

V. THE *NME* COVER

Everything discussed thus far concerning embodied corpulence and the resignification of fat and gender through performativity is observable in the now infamous June 2, 2007 *NME* magazine cover that features a taboo-busting, full-body image of Ditto in the nude. Identified as the “Queen of Cool,” Ditto stands with her right side facing the viewer, her left hand cupping her right breast and her right arm positioned seductively on her right buttock. The folds in Ditto’s flesh are clearly visible, as is her protruding stomach, the roundness of her buttocks and the hair from her unshaved armpit.⁴² On her right thigh is a pair of painted-on bright red lips that match the lipstick and nail polish that she also dons (Ditto identifies as a femme and these cosmetic embellishments mark her as such). The accompanying text in bold ransom-note style lettering exclaims, “Kiss My Ass!,” which can be read as either a statement of enmity or a sexual come-on, a fact that is reinforced by Ditto’s facial expression, which appears both alluring and vaguely threatening.

In this image, Ditto is an example of embodied corpulence: unashamed, in touch with her body and with no mention of dieting or the “problem of obesity” in sight. What’s more, in her placement on the front page of the magazine, Ditto takes up a space normally reserved for thin and perfectly air-brushed models, rock stars and celebrities. Yet, Ditto is anything but your typical cover girl and, as such, the *NME* cover subversively deconstructs dominant traditions of gendered representation. It utilizes the image of Ditto’s big and beautiful body to modify norms of magazine-style attractiveness and to situate the fat body as a new object of desire. Or, rather, as both an object of desire and as an agent of desire, Ditto’s sexual agency is being demonstrated by her seductive gaze at the viewer and the sexual innuendo of the phrase, “Kiss My Ass!” This construction of Ditto as a desiring subject is significant given that fatness is commonly viewed as a “form of physical protection against sexual demands,” a perspective that suggests that all fat women are fleeing from sexuality.⁴³ On this cover, Ditto is anything but fleeing from her sexuality.

The reaction to the *NME* cover has been mixed. For example, the on-line response has included such derisive comments as “thats eww. She should totally cover that up. Being fat is not ok,” and, “i hope that

⁴¹ I do not mean to suggest that this action implies a rejection of crocheting. In fact, Ditto is an avid fan of the craft. Rather, I am arguing that this act undercuts a straightforward reading of Ditto as “taking up” stereotypical femininity.

⁴² Ditto customarily does not wear deodorant or shave her armpits. This is an example of how Ditto’s violation of bodily norms often goes beyond just her size.

⁴³ LeBesco, 86.

is some kind of sick joke. seriously who gives a shit if she's proud of her body just do us all a favour and keep it hidden."⁴⁴ These comments demonstrate the type of intense sexism and fat phobia that Ditto so bravely opposes. They also make it clear that not everyone's opinions will be changed by Ditto's art and activism. That said, the reaction has not been completely negative. In fact, in 2008, the *NME* cover was nominated by *Magazineweek.net* for the honour of "Best Magazine Cover of All Time," and in early 2009, new style magazine *Love* decided to mimic *NME* by featuring another naked photo of Ditto on its front page, including her in a list of "Icons of our Generation." Other magazines have followed suit (*Dazed*, *Urb*, *On Our Backs*, *Div*a), suggesting that Ditto, despite the criticism, is having a positive effect on media representations of fatness. Indeed, this may be the first time in history that a queer fat body has been so highly coveted by the magazine industry.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is no mystery that being fat in the contemporary United States is difficult. In a nation obsessed with thinness, fat represents all that our culture despises and wishes would just go away. This difficulty is perhaps even more pronounced for fat women, as they are taught from an early age, by a seemingly never-ending barrage of cosmetic and diet advertisements, that their worth is measured by their appearance. Arguably, even more difficult still is being a fat lesbian who must face a society hostile to not only her weight, but her sexuality as well. Although these challenges have been reduced thanks to the grassroots efforts of organizations like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, the groundbreaking work of scholars such as LeBesco, and the courage of "out and about" pioneers like O'Donnell, it still takes an especially strong and determined individual to stand against the strictures of society and to claim happiness as a fat person, let alone as a fat lesbian. This is precisely why Beth Ditto, who in the various ways described above has revalued and reimagined the fat lesbian body, is so important. By refusing to be humiliated or defeated by a fat-phobic and image-obsessed society, Ditto provides hope for all those who feel too fat, too tall, too short, too gawky, too effeminate, too masculine, too scarred, too hairy, too bald, or otherwise beauty deficient.

How long Ditto can sustain her assault on societal beauty ideals remains to be seen. As I write this essay in early June 2009, the Gossip's new album, *Music for Men*, is set to be released in the next few weeks. This will be the Gossip's first album to be produced by a major label, Columbia Records, which has upset some of her hardcore fans who assume that this switch to a major label will result in an album that is less creative and more beholden to the banal tastes of the mainstream. As a result, some have started calling Ditto a "sellout," a sentiment that has only been exacerbated by recent reports of Ditto rubbing elbows with the likes of elite designer Karl Lagerfeld and editor-and-chief of *Vogue* magazine, Anna Wintour. The argument seems to be that Ditto is no longer a complete outsider and is, therefore, not the countercultural force she once was. Yet, against this attack, I submit that Ditto's (and the Gossip's) increasing notoriety and fame may be a cause for celebration. That is, if Ditto stays true to her philosophy of fat lesbian pride and brings her tactics of embodied corpulence and recuperative fat performativity into the mainstream, she will have the opportunity to not only challenge the beauty system from without, but to do so at its very core.

⁴⁴ As quoted in response to Shannon Kelley, "Beth Ditto's Nude *NME* Cover!," *Papermag*, 30 May 2007, <http://www.papermag.com/blogs/2007/05/beth_dittos_nude_nme_cover.php> (5 April 2009).

Whether or not this mainstream media infiltration will actually occur remains to be seen. Furthermore, the results of such an infiltration are, as of yet, unknown. Will Ditto be able to secure a space for the fat, lesbian body within dominant culture? If she does, will she succeed in altering societal attitudes toward fat people? Or, will it be the mainstream media that will alter Ditto? Will she lose her edge? Will she no longer be an outsider and, therefore, cease to be a figure of inspiration and identification for those on the margins? These questions clearly cannot be answered at this time, but demonstrate the need for continued scholarship on Ditto and other fat figures within popular culture. Yet, whatever the future holds for Ditto, it is clear that she has already carved out a space within the independent music scene in which the queer fat body is valued and welcomed. Given our society's disdain for fat and intense desire for its absence, this is no small accomplishment.

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