

# The modeled and gendered body as a mirror of contemporary society: considerations from the queer theory

## O corpo modelado e generificado como espelho da contemporaneidade: considerações a partir da teoria *queer*

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### Abstract

The aim of this theoretical study is to make some reflections on the relationship between eating behavior and gender in contemporary times. We believe that queer theory provides a useful theoretical model to develop this approach. Our central argument is that eating behavior and our body care are performances and also products and producers of gender. Consequently, they are products and producers of individual identity. After a brief explanation of key concepts of the queer theory, we discuss the influence of social discourse engendered by the media, social networks and health sciences on human bodies, highlighting its effects on the subject. At the same time, we demonstrate that the exposure to these discursive practices does not have a direct cause and effect relationship, hence one should consider the transformation that these discourses undergo when they are appropriated in each process of subjectivity, which produces greater or lesser capacity of individual agency in social life.

**Keywords:** Gender and Health. Feeding Behavior. Lifestyle. Nutritional Transition. Esthetics.

### Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo teórico é tecer algumas reflexões sobre a relação entre comportamento alimentar e gênero na contemporaneidade. Consideramos que a teoria *queer* oferece uma vertente teórica profícua para responder a essa proposta. Nosso argumento central é que o comportamento alimentar e

os cuidados em relação ao corpo são performances e também produtos e produtores de gênero. Consequentemente, são produtos e produtores da identidade do indivíduo. Após uma breve explanação de conceitos-chave da teoria *queer*, discutiremos a influência dos discursos sociais engendrados pela mídia, redes sociais e ciências da saúde nos corpos, pontuando seus efeitos sobre o sujeito. Ao mesmo tempo, demonstraremos que a exposição a essas práticas discursivas não tem uma relação direta de causa e efeito, sendo necessário considerar a transformação que esses discursos sofrem na apropriação que deles é feita em cada processo de subjetivação, o que produz maior ou menor capacidade de agenciamento individual no tecido social.

**Palavras-chave:** Gênero e Saúde. Comportamento Alimentar. Estilo de vida. Transição Nutricional. Estética.

## Introduction

Queer theory is not exactly a theory, in the strict sense of the word, but a contemporary theoretical movement that has been gaining strength in the field of gender studies. Queer theorists have devoted particular attention to bodies' importance in constructing subjectivity in the contemporary era.

Butler,<sup>1</sup> a leading philosopher in this area, states that gender identity is performatively constituted. The author contradicts the widely held thesis that gender is a cultural construct on biology or an attribute that people possess. For Butler, genre is a doing, a performativity that, as it is the result of existing gender norms, at the same time it itself produces genre.<sup>1</sup> Thus, assuming this perspective, gender is produced and produces itself. For Preciado,<sup>2</sup> another key name in the context of queer studies, gender is given in the materiality of bodies.

One can think that, being genre a doing, it bears something abstract, but it also has something concrete, since it can only be in bodies. In this way, gender is a relational category that happens on both the symbolic and the material planes.

Butler states that bodies are sexually divided and are only understood from the moment when gender gives them meaning. "Identity would be ensured by concepts stabilizing sex, gender and sexuality"<sup>1</sup>. Thus everything that pertains to the body, whatever is performed by individuals, shall be understood in terms of gender and in terms of identity.

Literature shows that contemporary society is extremely influenced by the appreciation of individuals' performances by means of their bodies. Eating habits, cosmetic surgery procedures, tattoos, body piercing, scarification modification and various other features that result in changes in physical appearance are strategies increasingly used in search of an idealized body.

The Apollonian cult of the body is a reflection of contemporary society.<sup>3</sup> After enthroning this ideal of body shape, a profusion of services was created in the fields of medicine, nutrition, physical education, aesthetics and cosmetology, introducing an implacable commodification of the body. This “physical well-being” industry spreads the idea that it is possible to buy the desired body in a market of diversified offers. Following the logic of supply and demand in an increasingly competitive market, numerous possibilities of altering bodies are made available to those who have sufficient purchasing power to afford them. Such interventions are some kind of commodity of contemporary narcissism made available to individuals. Being a target and privileged locus of transformations, bodies can thus be continually remodeled, reeducated, corrected and perfected, following an aesthetic of bodies that can be modified. Then what the authors call “drawing the body built” appears by means of plastic surgeries, miraculous diets and frenetic fitness workout routines at gyms, which promise to sculpt bodies according to stereotypes in effect in our time.<sup>4</sup>

Eating is part of this strategy, consisting of a variety of interventions that are available in the contemporary world to outline the ideal of the body exalted. It is true that eating habits follow established gender norms<sup>5</sup> and that these result, as such, from the time period in which one lives and can be reinvented in each historical period. Also, what each social context and historical framework choose as the ideal body shape are subject to transformations.

Ideals of body shape and weight vary enormously throughout history, since long established aesthetic standards are conditioned by characteristics highlighted as appreciable in each period.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the growing ostentatiousness of a fit, muscular, emaciated, and toned body, shaped by the apparent use of bodybuilding, anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) or silicone gel implants, is closely associated with the time and society in which we live and the hyper valuation of image to the detriment of content.

We start from the notion that a highly idealized body in contemporary ways of life is one that is made generic, that is, influenced by history and the normative imperatives that are granted by its gendered condition/insertion. And one would ask: to what extent the fact that this ideal body is impracticable for the greater part of the population does not contribute to high levels of body dissatisfaction to which we are exposed today, producing a propitious basis for the occurrence of psychopathologies having, in their roots, severe body image distortions such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, or morbid conditions linked to binge eating, such as obesity, which has been taking on alarming pandemic proportions<sup>6-8</sup> in the last decade?

Considering such assumptions, this study aims to provide some reflections on the relationship between eating behavior and gender in contemporary times. We intend to offer the reader contributions to reflect on the relationship among eating habits, the care given to the body and gender. Thus, the aim is to reflect, from a queer theory perspective, on how the body, food and gender are related, producing subjectivities.

## Method

In order to reach the objective proposed, we shall establish a theoretical-reflexive route based in the literature targeting the subject investigated.

### Understanding diet as a process made generic

Superficially looking, human bodies would apparently belong to nature, since their physiological functioning is similar to that of many animals. Indeed, there are points of approximation in their metabolism, physiology and ergonomics. Nevertheless, adding to these dimensions, human body is the result of social relations and cultural appropriations.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, also speeches (adjectives, praise, valorization or refusal of certain body parts) and the various related knowledges (such as medicine, biochemistry, anthropology, psychology, history, feminism) constitute bodies.<sup>9</sup> Seen from this perspective, bodies result from force vectors and are products generated by a discursive network. For Foucault,<sup>10</sup> bodies are the primary place for actions of power and social control.

Margaret Mead,<sup>11</sup> as early as 1936, would mention the differential mode, within the same culture, as boys and girls would be raised with the contribution of distinct body techniques resulting in differences in the use of physical strength, skills and their meanings. We shall look at this aspect of bodily experiences. We shall emphasize the fact that the body is also made generic, that is, it is affected and forged by the network of processes included in gender dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

If bodies acquire social significance from genre and if genre occurs in the bodies' materiality<sup>2</sup>, everything that is done to modify them, to change their functionality, to compensate their limitations, to care for their physical appearance and to hide their so-called imperfections is a gender-related issue.

In contemporary lifestyles, we massively invest in our bodies. We build bodies in order to adapt them to aesthetic, hygienic and moral criteria of the groups to which we belong. Impositions from health, vigor, vitality, youth, beauty and strength norms are signified in different ways in different cultures and also attributed in different ways to men's or women's bodies. By means

of differentiated processes, such as physical care, exercises, clothes, accessories, perfumes, corrective surgeries and diets, we imprint on our bodies marks of identity and, consequently, of differentiation.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that the desire for differentiation, linked to processes of subjectivity available in today's world, runs counter to the imperative tendency to standardize and bring into uniformity bodies and minds, a capitalism requirement in its contemporary and neoliberal phase known as globalization.

Bodies have different influences according to the genre that governs them. It is known that the valorization of "perfect" female bodies is not a recent phenomenon, although the imperative of the "perfect" body is variable in relation to time, place and culture. The valuation of extremely thin and slim aesthetic standards as normative requirements for a body to be considered beautiful is recent. In this context, bodies have a symbolic value, representing a password for women's full acceptance and social insertion in a society stratified by classes and hierarchized by gender, where thinness has been considered a prerequisite for this to happen.<sup>14</sup>

Social conditions precede bodies and form the conditions in which they develop, gaining visibility or invisibility, flexibility or stiffness, health or morbidity. Thus, bodies surpass strict limits traced by their biological nature and are reified and made generic in the plane of social relations, transforming itself into an object and a tool of social recognition. It is precisely for this that it is incessantly built, shaped, forged and carved.<sup>15</sup>

The balance from the exhaustive exercise of worshipping perfect bodies is a change in the dominant morality: if in the Victorian era morality had the goal of regulating sexuality, it is now a discourse on diet.<sup>16</sup> The eating morality retains the same characteristics of the sexual morality, handling human condition's basic elements, such as susceptibility to guilt, sin and atonement.<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud was one of the beloved heirs of Victorian conservatism who, in the plane of intellectuality, began to reflect on subjectivity under a new perspective. More than a century has passed since the advent of psychoanalysis and the so-called science of desire still seeks to understand contemporary malaise.

### Body is the marker of identity

In the processes of contemporary subjectivity, bodies are the subject's identity itself. And appearance, behavior and silhouette designate less and less social origins and more and more the personality and personal particularities.<sup>15</sup> Fat people become socially perceived as slovenly, careless and incapable of taking care of themselves, since they refuse to change their pernicious habits.<sup>7-8</sup> In fact, aesthetic hyper valuation suggests that bodies are perfectly adaptable by means of personal will strong deliberations, conveying the moralizing message that subjects can have the

bodies they desire simply by using resources available such as the knowledge acquired about the effects of eating combined with well-planned physical exercises.<sup>18</sup>

In this sociocultural context, the idea that it is necessary to take the contemporary individual to a progressive awareness that their eating habits are one of the main determinants of their health has gained strength, creating the mentality that prevention of chronic conditions is in each one's hands and that it is enough to want ("to have willpower") to ensure a long and quality life. The slogan, "You are what you eat," is the most perfect translation of this Manichean thought, which in the end endorses the belief that food also designates the subject's essence, that is, it defines their identity.

There is no doubt that food is an individual responsibility and a social and collective issue, besides being a factor of good health. A social question because a complex relationship is drawn between food and all the rules and cultural codes built for the act of eating. In the issue of individual responsibility is embedded the notion that what people eat becomes part of them by incorporation, since something from the outside that is placed inside becomes part of the subject's body because it shapes the body.<sup>16</sup>

The so-called "healthy eating" can be understood as a political and social institution, which claims to be a way of promoting health and preventing obesity, among other chronic health conditions. It is a concept that has been changing since the beginning of modernity, starting from a preoccupation with nutritional deficiencies and the scourge of hunger, until reaching fears of excessive nutrients and calories consumption, which is tied also to the country's economic reality, that has been seeking to strengthen the economy, advance agriculture and reduce poverty. The concept of healthy eating is concerned not only with individuals' biological aspects but also with the proper relationship of the food consumption pattern with nature and social characteristics: consumerism, immediacy, individualism, concern about appearance, beauty and cult of the body.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to look at this question from a historical perspective. Improving the body to achieve perfection or getting as close as possible to the rules of beauty prevailing in the contemporary era, such as remaining eternally young and thin, have become the feminine ideal of today.<sup>14</sup> In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, body image building became an obsession, an authentic cult of the body, at least among urban middle-class women. In this time period, fashion modeling was acquiring celebrity status and becoming a desired career for Brazilian adolescents and youths, deluded with supposed advantages of becoming clones of top models, such as Brazilian Gisele Bündchen, an icon of the world catwalks. Thus, with eyes hypnotized by the mirage of sculptural bodies, the combination of body and prestige became a fundamental element of Brazilian culture.<sup>19</sup>

Technological advances, especially in the field of biomedicine, are a remarkable tool for body modification. Today human ingenuity is capable of operating great transformations on the nature that determines bodies' designs, previously seen as an insurmountable limit. Creams, lotions, pills, diets, injections, resources advertised as universal panaceas, along with devices reducing body measurements, miraculous medications and rejuvenating plastic surgeries are resources that can be used to almost instantly modify bodies' architecture, making them more flexible or hardening them, which has increasingly reduced the gap between the dreamed body and the possible body. In this crucible, bodies take on some that is characteristic of an almost infinite plasticity<sup>14</sup> insofar as they can easily conform to human whims, also serving the imperative of the Mephistophelean delusions of immortality.

The cultural industry teaches women that caring for the body is the path leading to individual happiness,<sup>14</sup> a teaching that can cause frustration in most people, since the body considered beautiful is reserved mainly and more easily to those who have sufficient financial means to model it. In other words, an idealized body is for the few, although advertising sells the idea that it is accessible to all, as long as they strive. Therefore, a body desired by all but accessible to few.

The media is in fact an important tool for the promotion of beauty standards and the association of these standards with ideas of success and happiness. However, one can not dismiss people's responsibility in view of such stimuli and the seductive appeals received from the media. If television, film, advertisement, and social media convey certain contents, we must be aware not only of what is broadcast by these means but also of people's reaction to them and the way they act in view of them. Thus, we escape from falling into the dangerous speech that conceives the media as essentially manipulative and people as passive receptacles of the contents to which they are daily exposed.

We agree with Connell & Pearse<sup>12</sup> when they state that one should not exaggerate in considering bodies docile. The authors state that bodies participate in disciplinary regimes, such as the media's, not because they are docile but because they are active and seek pleasure, experience, and transformation. The authors exemplify with the use of stiletto heels – we shall appropriate this analogy to refer to diets (“slimming regimes”).

No one forces women to undergo regimes or other aesthetic procedures to achieve their ideals of thinness and prolonging youth. Food restrictions are sometimes difficult and painful processes but they are also pleasurable because they provide benefits<sup>12</sup>. It is up to health professionals to investigate what kind of pleasure is gained and what it has been bringing about in people's lives. An example is when individuals who establish goals and diets impossible to fulfill can in fact be creating a context for a possibility of transgression of their food reeducation process in searching to maximize pleasure that shall be very intense when finally achieved by means of transgressive acts.<sup>20</sup>

We must bear in mind that bodies are not only objects of social processes but they also act as active participants in social processes<sup>12</sup>, which opens a loophole so that we can use bodies' capacity for responsibility in favor of their health and well-being. It is necessary to consider that performance-driven eating behaviors may be hostile to physical well-being and to investigate what personal and social variants would be behind this performance.

Having said this, we wish to point out that an extreme case of how culture builds its members' bodies is the somatic and psychic pathologies that this construction causes. Each society produces its own pathologies and psychopathologies, such as Victorian era hysteria and contemporary depression. In Sigmund Freud's time, hysteria, which resulted in blind, disabled, emotionally unstable, and easily fainting women, would evidence an unbearable situation of subordination to gender norms by women. Anorexia and bulimia, life-threatening eating disorders, can be interpreted as the physical expression of social coercion over female bodies, commonly subject to idealized patterns.<sup>16</sup>

## Final thoughts

Eating habits, besides being a socio-historical construct, are processes made generic. Care for the body is a performance that, being related to gender, reaches men and women in different ways. Media and social networks are instruments that socially influence valued standards of beauty and care for the body, but one can not ignore individuals' active participation in interpreting and practicing information received. Subjects are able to receive information, digest it, transform it and act according to their individuality, in a complex relationship between cultural conditions and subjective aspects, consumption culture and eating habits.

When one considers weight loss practices as related to gender, it is necessary to consider that, since gender performances involve bodies, performance-driven behavior can be hostile to physical well-being. Thus, in an intervention aimed at modifying eating patterns, one must consider that one is touching the intersection among several factors, such as patterns of gender, sociocultural contexts and subjective aspects.

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