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Zeynep Zeren Atayurt

Excess and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing

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Zeynep Zeren Atayurt

EXCESS AND EMBODIMENT IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

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Introduction

Difference of the Different: Challenges to the Homogenisation of 'Fatness' in Contemporary Western Culture

There has been a specific kind of 'visibility' of the female body since the late twentieth century owing to the dramatic advances in hi-tech visual communication. This 'visibility' constantly projected in advertisements, television reality shows and mainstream women's magazines[1] has increasingly standardised the notion of female beauty which is defined in terms of the attainment of a body that is lightly muscled, toned, and slender. The prioritisation of the lean physique has created a social environment of distress over food and discomfort with one's body size, which has a tendency to equate women's happiness, health and even success particularly with reference to size. The increasing bodily preoccupations with 'fat'[2], diet and slenderness, and the tendency to impose the idea of women's bodies 'as being in need of change, repair or improvement'[3] give rise to the underlying preoccupations of this thesis: How is the representation of the 'fat' female body constructed in women's fictional and non-fictional narratives? What kind of debates could possibly be instigated through an engagement with the representation of 'excessive' female embodiment? How does this construction transform, confront or speak to current perceptions of fatness that have been largely framed and stabilised by popular cultural concerns?

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[1] Cover lines of some magazines continuously prescribe the ways to attain a slender body. For instance: '50 Shortcuts to a Sexier Body' (*Glamour*, January 2007), '6 Ways to Thin – Easy Diets that Really Work' (*Allure*, January 2007), 'Get a Bikini Body by Spring!' (*Shape*, January 2007).

[2] I shall be using inverted commas when employing the words 'fat', 'obese', 'excessive' because these words often represent a subjective viewpoint that tends to assign an individual to a marginalised position.

[3] O. Wayne Wooley, '…And Man Created "Woman"', in *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, ed. by Patricia Fallon, Melanie A. Katzman, Susan C. Wooley (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994), pp. 17-53 (p. 19).

According to the first international survey of how women rate body image, commissioned by Dove, a large company in the health and beauty sector, in partnership with Nancy Etcoff and Susie Orbach, 'only one in five British females consider themselves attractive.'[4] Susie Orbach, who collaborated with Dove's 'real women' campaign,[5] says:

> Having worked for thirty years in the area of eating disorders, I began to think what visual culture was doing to us – the fact we see a minimum of 12,000 images a week; the way that for the generation of women who felt OK about their bodies it has destroyed that. But it really was a hunch until I read a study showing that in 1995, when TV was first brought into Fiji, a country that had no body-image eating problems, three years later 11.9% of the girls were throwing up over the toilet bowl. Visual culture is that powerful. So when Dove approached me, I felt we needed a way to diversify and challenge the digitally enhanced photos that are out there.[6]

As this example shows, the impact of the popular visual imagery is undeniably significant in terms of women's relationships to their bodies. The re-publication of two seminal works, Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*[7] and Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, 10 years after their latest publication is suggestive of their urge to re-address Western cultural obsession with

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[4] Liz Hoggard, 'Why We're All Beautiful Now', *Observer*, 9 January 2005 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/jan/09/advertising.comment> [accessed 15 November 2006] (para. 11 of 21).

[5] In 2004 Dove started a campaign featuring some plus size women against the weight-loss advertisement industry. The campaign was initially launched in the UK, a year later in the US and Canada. It has been reported to have increased Dove sales by 700 per cent.

[6] Hoggard, 'Why We're All Beautiful Now', (para. 14 of 21).

[7] It is significant that Orbach's former controversial title of her book *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* is shortened to *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide* in this edition. The omission of the words 'permanent weight loss' is suggestive of a shift in the writer's position, and a revised ambivalent attitude towards the superficial practices performed in the process of weight loss.

thinness, which has been rapidly increasing since the 1990s. Orbach's and Bordo's works speak to this cultural fixation, voicing in a mordant manner the desire to undo the prescribed body ideal constantly suggested by visual culture. While the pursuit of the perfect body shape is by no means a new phenomenon, the methods used to attain the image of body perfection are becoming more extreme, facilitated in part by new developments in technology and medical science. It is nowadays almost impossible not to read or hear about the new diets, advanced methods of weight-loss surgery[8] (such as gastric bypass surgery or stomach-stapling, laparoscopic bariatric surgery) that are performed in the name of attaining the perfect and supposedly healthy body – the body without 'fat'.

British culture's interest in obesity and its apparent panic over weight gain have been increasingly prevalent in the popular daily press. While there were only 78 newspaper articles on 'obesity'[9] in *The Guardian* between 1996 and 1999, this figure has risen to 3379 between the years 2000 and 2007, with 252 related entries on obesity only between January and June 2008 exploring the issue as a major health and aesthetic concern more than on a daily basis. There is also an increasing number of weight loss shows on British television which portray a cultural, even voyeuristic, interest in fatness as a sign of poor diet and poor health. 'You are What You Eat'[10], 'Fat Club'[11] and its spin-off series 'Celebrity Fit Club'[12], 'Biggest Loser UK'[13], 'Fat Men

[8] The bariatric industry produces many publications which appear in consumer and patient advocacy magazines, and even professional journals such as *Bariatrics Today*, *Obesity Surgery*, *Surgery for Obesity and Related Diseases*.

[9] It is interesting to note that the clinical term 'obesity' appears more frequently than the words 'fat' or 'overweight' in the popular British media. The exploitation of this word on a regular basis tends to magnify the association of 'obesity' with disease.

[10] Aired on Channel Four from 2004 to 2007, and presented by Dr. Gillian McKeith.

[11] Aired on ITV 1 in 2002.

[12] Aired on ITV 1 from 2002 to 2006, and hosted by Dale Winton.

[13] Aired on Living TV from 2005 to 2007, presented by Vicki Butler-Henderson.

Can't Hunt'[14] and its follow-on 'Can Fat Teens Hunt?'[15], 'Fat Chance'[16] are some of the shows that have promoted thinness and, ostensibly, demonstrated the amazing results that can be achieved through diet and exercise. Even though these programmes are seen to encourage healthy eating and fitness as a 'normalizing' strategy to help the 'victim', they also seem to dismiss the fact that 'the attainment of an "acceptable body" is extremely difficult for those who do not come by it "naturally" (whether aided by genetics, metabolism or high activity-level).'[17]

The popular culture, as Paul Campos states, 'exaggerates the health-risks associated with higher-than-average weight, while all sorts of related but far graver risks have been ignored'[18] as 'just being fat does not signify poor health.'[19] More importantly, these kinds of

[14] Aired on BBC 3 in 2007.

[15] Aired on BBC 3 from 2007 to 2008.

[16] Aired on ITV 1 in 2008, and presented by Pete Cohen and Jane DeVille-Almond.

[17] Susan Bordo, 'Reading the Slender Body', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83-112 (p. 99).

[18] Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health?* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. xxv.

[19] The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), one of the most active fat liberation organisations in the United States since its foundation in 1969, asserts that 'the health risks once associated with weight may instead be attributable to yo-yo dieting. Because fatness is most often caused by heredity and dieting history and because 95-98% of all diets fail over three years, it is becoming apparent that remaining at a high, but stable weight and concentrating on personal fitness rather than thinness may be the healthiest way to deal with the propensity to be fat', cited in NAAFA, 'But Isn't it Unhealthy to Be Fat?' <http://www.naafa.org/documents/brochures/naafa-info.html#whatis> [accessed 5 November 2006] (para. 10 of 12). See also <http://www.foodmuseum.com/exfatCulture.html> [accessed 1 September 2008]

In line with NAAFA, Size Acceptance Association UK adopts the notion of 'health at every size', and works to dismantle the tendency towards linking obesity to health problems while overlooking other potential factors: 'There are more than 100 independent risk factors for heart disease such as poor diet, lack of physical fitness, high stress levels, being poor and certain gene variations. But

shows, whether deliberately or not, contribute to the devaluation of the 'obese'. Such portrayals of eating disorders by the popular media, as Susan Bordo argues:

> encourage a 'side show' experience of the relationship of the ('normal') audience and those on view ('the freaks'). To the degree that the audience may nonetheless recognise themselves in the behaviour or reported experiences of those on stage, they confront themselves as 'pathological' or outside the norm.[20]

Popular media's painstaking attempt to bring 'fat' people under the spotlight seems to revive the nineteenth-century circus freak show tradition where 'fat' people are exposed to the public eye. However, in the nineteenth century, 'obesity' had not been viewed in terms of 'deviance', instead, it aroused attraction and fascination. 'Fat' in women had a sexual connotation being seen as 'erotically appealing'[21] and regarded as women's 'silken layer.'[22] Popular 'fat' ladies of the time, known as 'Dolly Dimples', 'Baby Ruth' or 'Jolly Irene'[23] had gained the attention and admiration of their viewers, and their 'superabundant' bodies had not been associated with 'lack of control', 'disease'. However, as opposed to the nineteenth century's response to 'obesity', contemporary Western culture views it as a hazardous, fearful state that should be treated or avoided altogether. The fear that 'obesity' arouses in fact unveils less a physiological than a social anxiety about excess and chaos. It might be argued that this anxiety is the projection of what culture most fears about itself, which can be attributed to the violation of social and cultural norms.

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most studies linking obesity to heart disease lump them all in with being obese', in Jerome Burne, 'Obesity: Size Isn't Everything', 21 June 2005, cited in ISAA UK <http://www.size-acceptance.org/uk/> [accessed 22 April 2008] (para. 6 of 15).

[20] Bordo, 'Reading the Slender Body', p. 85.

[21] Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1981 [1978]), p. 131.

[22] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 192.

[23] Fiedler, p. 129.

'The idea of society' as Mary Douglas defines, 'is a powerful image' which 'has form, has external boundaries, margins, internal structure' whose 'outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack', and anyone who offends against this order has the potential to be regarded as an 'outcast' and embodiment of 'danger.'[24] Arguably, obesity, which is often described in terms of an epidemic that is almost out of control, is seen as a threat to society's order and its control mechanisms. However, according to Charlotte Cooper, 'when we define fatness as a "disease" we are acting within powerful social boundaries which control what we believe to be right and appropriate, or shameful and abnormal.'[25] 'Disease', as Cooper further argues, represents 'disorder, chaos, weakness and badness.'[26] Viewed in this context, the social response to this perceived threat can be in the form of fear and panic. 'Order implies restriction from all possible materials. So disorder by implication is unlimited, and is destructive to existing patterns as it symbolises both danger and power.'[27] It may well be argued that 'fatness' fits into this design of 'disorder', as it is considered as having the potential to disrupt the prevailing order. That is to say, fear of fat unveils an anxiety over the invalidation of the social, political and economic dynamics. This is a double-edged situation: on the one hand capitalism has created a consumerist culture that encourages people to consume in large quantities, which makes people susceptible to increase in size. On the other, 'fatness' is most often associated with a 'physical abnormality' caused by over-consumption, which has to be kept under control.

One way to combat weight gain and to establish an 'ascetic' control over the body is to make the body subject to a new regime of discipline through a vast variety of dietary practices. 'Diet and regulation

[24] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1966]), p. 141.
[25] Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size* (London: The Women's Press, 1998), p. 71.
[26] Ibid., p. 71.
[27] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 117.

of the body', as Bryan Turner points out, 'were related for many centuries to a religious discipline that aimed to control the soul.'[28] As Turner argues, 'within the ascetic tradition of the classical and Christian eras, the body was considered as a threatening and dangerous phenomenon, in that it was seen as a vehicle for the unruly, ungovernable and irrational patterns, emotions and desires.'[29] However, in contemporary Western society, 'ascetism is designed to produce an acceptable social self.'[30] According to Turner's argument, the attainment of 'an acceptable social self' is directly related to having a 'good' body image (one that is visually appealing to others), which is considered to be a major personal asset. However, the move from ascetism as a form of controlling appetite for disciplining the soul to controlling appetite to look desirable and socially acceptable has turned the body into an object of the manipulation of a consumerist society. The regulatory control of the body, which used to be a religious practice, has been replaced by the fashion and diet industries in contemporary Western societies that benefit from making people afraid to be fat. The massive diet industry finds it profitable to nurture and exploit the obsession with the thin ideal by manufacturing both chemical and herbal products that advance unhealthy practices in the name of rapid weight loss. However, it has well been established that when a person loses his/her excessive weight, s/he has a tendency to compensate for the appetite suppressed during the diet by again consuming in large amounts. As Hillel Schwartz has argued, 'the diet is the supreme form for manipulating desire', and 'it is through the constant frustration of desire that late Capitalism can prompt ever higher levels of consumption.'[31] Viewed in this respect, the promotion of diets and the portrayal of 'fatness' as a fearful condition thus serves as a strategy to establish

[28] Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 23.
[29] Ibid., p. 11.
[30] Ibid., p. 23.
[31] Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat* (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 328.

social control and legitimacy in a capitalist society. The media message of 'obesity prevention', therefore, can be seen as a manipulative social and cultural construct that may ultimately lead to social exclusion.

Within consumer culture, 'excessive' embodiment is often subjected to stigmatisation and discrimination. Overweight women are mostly disfavoured, and exposed to discrimination and bias in key areas of their life, including employment and health care. On 31st August 2006, for example, 'fertility experts announced that overweight women should not be allowed to have IVF on the NHS.'[32] In his defense of this measure, Richard Kennedy of the British Fertility Society (BFS) states that 'obese women are less likely to get pregnant and more likely to encounter health problems', however, the same sense of sensitivity to IVF treatment does not apply to smokers as according to the BFS proposals, 'smokers should not be barred from having IVF.'[33] Another example of size discrimination comes from countries such as China and South Korea which have placed restrictions on weight for prospective foreign adoptive parents.[34] The fact that twenty five-stone soprano Deborah Voigt was controversially denied the title role in *Ariadne auf Naxos* because she was considered 'too hefty'[35] and 'too large to wear a little black dress demanded by the director'[36] exemplifies yet another case of discrimination against 'fat' women. More re-

[32] Kira Cochrane, 'Too Fat for a Family?', in *Guardian*, 31 August 2006. <http ://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/aug/31/health.medicineandhealth> [acessed 15 November 2006] (para. 1 of 15).

[33] 'Call for Fertility Ban for Obese' on BBC news, 30 August 2006. <http:// news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/5296200.stm> [accessed 17 October 2006] (para. 12 of 35).

[34] See Leslie Holt, 'China Toughens Adoption Standards' <http://www.icue.com/ portal/site/iCue/flatview/?cuecard=35300 >[accessed 5 September 2009]

[35] Maev Kennedy, 'Only Sing When You're Slimming', in *Guardian*, 8 March 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/mar/08/arts.artsnews> [accessed 12 September 2006] (para. 1 of 10).

[36] Charlotte Higgins, '"Too Fat" Opera Star Makes Slight Return', in *Guardian*, 04 April 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/apr/05/classicalmusic.artnews> [accessed 20 October 2007] (para. 3 of 15).

cently, a British woman, because she was 'too fat',[37] was denied entry to New Zealand on the basis of her being a potential burden on the health care system. Perhaps, the most distinct example that showcases the emerging fat prejudice involves an overweight teenage girl who had to live with a cancerous tumour for two years because of the doctors' prejudiced attitude toward 'fat' that unhesitatingly led the doctors to relate the young girl's health problems directly to her weight resulting in their failure to 'diagnose her problem.'[38] Marilyn Wann, the co-director of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), associates this increasing 'war against obesity' with a similar level of viciousness and discrimination practised in matters of race and gender. She says: 'We are in the middle of a witch hunt and we are the witches.'[39] Even though this analogy may seem exaggerated, it nonetheless draws attention to the current social stigma placed upon 'obesity' which has created a social environment that is extremely hostile toward weight gain and 'fat' people. In this social landscape fat is seen as 'repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean and, more importantly, something to lose.'[40]

The fear and dislike of fat, which tends to characterise Western society's cultural obsession with body size and obesity, inspired my critical interest in the representations of corpulent female bodies in the writings of Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, Claude Tardat, and Judith Moore. Obviously, these are not the only

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[37] Simon Cable, 'British Woman Banned from Entering New Zealand', in *The Daily Mail*, 17 November 2007. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1927165/posts> [accessed 19 November 2007] (para. 1 of 6).

[38] 'How did doctors miss my cancerous tumour?', in *Hull Daily Mail / East Riding Mail*, 15 January 2008. <http://www.thisisyourmail.co.uk/posts/your_patch/view/1805-how-did-doctors-miss-my-cancerous-tumour> [accessed 16 January 2008] (para. 1 of 1).

[39] Marilyn Wann cited in Paul Harris, '"Fat is Fabulous", insist Anti-Diet Protesters', in *Observer*, 8 August 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/aug/08/usa.health> [accessed 12 November 2006] (para.12 of 17).

[40] Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), p. 16.

writers whose works engage with bodily preoccupations and weight issues. Susan Sussman's *The Dieter* (1989), Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size* (1992), Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), Deborah Blumenthal's *Fat Chance* (2004), Liza Palmer's *Conversations with The Fat Girl* (2005), Candida Crew's *Eating Myself* (2006), Grace Bowman's *Shape of My Own* (2006) are some of the women's writings that explore women's problematic and unhappy relationship with food and their bodies in a materialistic society. However, in these works we read about women's dissatisfaction with their weight, and their collusion with attaining the thin ideal at the cost of their health (by becoming anorexic or bulimic) as we see in Shute's *Life-Size*, Bowman's *Shape of My Own* and Crew's *Eating Myself*. These fictional and autobiographical narratives explore the notion of bodily excess as an undesirable personal and social attribute affirming many of the problematic characteristics that Western culture tends to assign to female corpulence. By contrast, the selected texts in this study question the very social, cultural and psychological mechanisms operating underneath the antagonistic contextualisation of fatness. Thus, these works offer an engagement with the representation of 'fat' female body not merely as an aesthetic issue, but as a multi-faceted literary design to explore hidden implications and deeper layers of meaning that hold together various aspects of physical embodiment.

One of the factors that motivated this study is that the rhetoric of fatness in contemporary culture has situated fatness mainly within the contexts of health, aesthetics and morality transmitting the message that 'fatness is not only unhealthy, but also unsightly and immoral.'[41] As Eric Oliver has stated, 'to be overweight is to be, by definition, abnormal or different'.[42] Yet, it is interesting to see that despite the arguable difference ascribed to the 'fat' person, there is a tendency to homogenise the notion of fatness and situate it within narrow confines.

[41] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 2.

[42] Ibid., p. 15.

This process has tended towards the stigmatisation of 'fat' individuals. As a response to this process, we see the embodiment-fixated contemporary Western society preoccupied with fat-abhorring rhetorics and images which points towards '[the] general sense of the body's offensiveness spread[ing] out from the large body.'[43] The different representations of fatness in this study are not limited to these restrictive assumptions. Each text, as I will discuss later, offers a heterogeneous approach to reading 'excessive' female bodies where the representation of fatness becomes the measure of various states and positions, rather than a sole manifestation of a physical condition. In each text, the representation of female embodiment opens up a more nuanced debate for a reappraisal of the 'large' female body where the 'fat' female body not only becomes an integral aspect of the plotline, but also facilitates a multi-layered discussion that prompts intellectual challenges implicit in the social and cultural construction of weight.

At various points in the course of my analysis, I engage with Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of the grotesque and excess, as a useful theoretical framework within which we can examine the disruptive potential of the 'fat' body in dismantling the existing hegemonic idea(l)s of dominant cultural systems and restrictive norms. Through an analysis of my selected texts, I will argue the ways in which these texts metamorphose cultural obsessions with 'excessive' female embodiment into fictional and non-fictional narratives, and promote different responses to corporeality. Below are two quotations that exemplify these different attitudes:

> I had an *alter ego* who was huge and powerful, a woman whose only morality was her own and whose loyalties were fierce and few. She

[43] Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion', in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 292-328 (p. 294).

> was my patron saint. […] Whenever I called on her I felt my muscles swell and laughter fill up my throat.[44]

> The fat person lacks willpower, pride, 'self-esteem', and does not care about friends or family, because if he or she did care about friends and family, he or she would not wander the earth looking like a repulsive sow, rhinoceros, hippo, elephant, general wide-mawed flesh-flopping flabby monster.[45]

In Jeanette Winterson's novel, the glorification of the 'excessive' female body, embodied by the gargantuan Dog Woman, is transformed into the slender woman's alter-ego which furnishes her with an inner strength. Freud spoke of the ego as 'first and foremost a bodily ego', thus regarding the ego 'as a mental projection of the surface of the body.'[46] Nicky Diamond explains the process of the formation of the 'bodily ego' as follows:

> We are simultaneously dependent on a form of identification with fictional images, yet at the same moment set apart from the image we aspire to. […] The idealization of 'ego'-ideals is important, for they are seen as always set apart, more perfect than we can ever be – occupying an impossible place.[47]

In contemporary Western society the 'thin' ideal often becomes the ego-ideal that many women aspire to attain. However, in Winterson's novel, the massive body of the Dog Woman is represented as the ego-ideal for the thin woman who regards the 'fat' woman's physical strength as an inspiration for the power to destabilise the dominant cultural and political codes. Winterson's construction of the Dog Woman's body as the ego-ideal for the modern woman challenges the stigmatisation of 'fat' people in the contemporary world as self-

[44] Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 2001 [1989]), p. 125.
[45] Judith Moore, *Fat Girl: A True Story* (London: Profile Books, 2005 [2004]), pp. 1-2.
[46] Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1974), p. 16.
[47] Nicky Diamond, 'Thin is the Feminist Issue', in *Feminist Review*, 19 (Spring 1985), 45-64 (p. 60).