

Anorexia and Abjection: A Review Essay

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Abstract

This article draws on a review of Megan Warin's 2010 book, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, to discuss the ways in which a feminist ethnographic approach might disrupt dominant cultural narratives of eating disorders and embodiment. My argument draws on feminist work on figuration and 'body image' to discuss how the anorexic body becomes a figure of abjection, both in media images and in popular feminist discourse. I examine how cultural narratives and images are pathologically capable of both engendering disgust in the non-anorexic spectator and, second (and more threateningly), moving vulnerable, female spectators to imitation – a power to affect and infect onlookers which is central to contemporary debates about what is popularly called 'body image'. By drawing on Warin's work, the article examines how a critical feminist ethnography might move debates on eating disorders beyond the reproduction of tropes of abjection, disgust and discipline which have led to an impasse in the field, and ask whether, by paying attention to the lived experience of anorexia, it might be possible for the anorexic subject to speak.

Keywords

abjection, affect, anorexia, body image, eating disorders, ethnography, visual culture

The anorexic body bears a disproportionate weight in late capitalist culture: it is not for nothing that the radical philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009: 83–105) makes a connection between the representation of anorexic bodies, and those of the victims of the Shoah: in each case, images that are imagined as 'intolerable', incapable of being looked at, are revealed to be deeply constitutive of national and political life. In theories of the body as well as in popular discourse, anorexia is most often invoked in the abstract, as a means of ending

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the discussion, an eschatological end-point – of patriarchy, of capitalism, of media hegemony. Too often, anorexic embodiment and identity is elided in favour of a discourse of representation that aims to fix the ‘meaning’ of something called ‘the anorexic body’ and which in doing so implicitly positions some subjects, in this case young women, as Other. The Other is denied a voice by those very discourses that claim to want to understand and, in doing so, to ‘save’ her.

How, then, to engage with anorexic embodiment? The question is a pertinent one for studies of the body, which have produced sophisticated theoretical accounts of embodiment while (sometimes) reproducing the very figurations of some subjects, some embodiments, that work to erase the lived experience of affliction. As Simone Weil has famously said, ‘the afflicted are not listened to’ (1977: 332). Following Weil, Les Back reminds us that it is precisely through the body that marginalized subjects speak: whole histories of power and resistance, incapable of being spoken, are instead inscribed on the body (2007: 76–7). In suggesting that we listen to afflicted bodies, Back reminds us of the radical potential inherent in Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that ‘we are in the world through our bodies’ as a call to develop a ‘sensual understanding’ of embodiment which overturns the abjecting of the body itself that is inherent in Cartesian dualism (2007: 77). Recent debates in feminism and body studies have centred on the deconstruction of this binary understanding of bodily identity, which has been central to feminism and body studies, with a shifting of focus from what a body ‘means’, to what a body can *do*.

As feminist theorists have noted, the ‘problem’ of anorexic embodiment poses this question in important ways. As Shelly Budgeon (2003: 35) suggests, it is by reading and listening to the self-narratives of marginalized groups, such as young women with eating disorders, that theoretical debates about the body are animated and become meaningful. In listening to anorexia, one is implicated in the far wider theoretical project of undermining and destabilizing the historically situated marginalization of the body. Given the excess of meanings attached to anorexic embodiment, how might it be possible for the subject with anorexia to speak? More to the point, how might they be heard? The question is not specific to studies of eating disorders, but has wider implications for body studies since it raises the question, not only of what bodies are saying, but of *how* they speak to and affect one another. To speak of ‘the anorexic body’,

then, is not simply to describe a minority of subjects who happen to share a common medical affliction. The figure of the anorexic has come to stand in for a series of complex and far-reaching debates – about power, relationality and representation – which are central to body studies as well as to the debates within feminism and feminist theory of which it is most often invoked as a symbol.

An example is perhaps useful in understanding how Megan Warin's timely and important ethnographic study intervenes in the cultural figuring of 'the anorexic' (Warin, 2010). Towards the end of this book, Warin speaks of a telling encounter with a representative of the mainstream media. Warin describes the reporting of her work in the press, in a section that will be grimly familiar to any scholar working on issues of gender and embodiment whose work has had the mixed blessing of media attention (2010: 181–2). The encounter she describes occurred towards the end of the extensive ethnographic study of 44 women and 3 men who had been diagnosed with anorexia, carried out over several years in three locations (Vancouver, Edinburgh and Adelaide), which forms the backbone of this book. Describing the 'intense media interest' that followed the publication of a story about her work in a university newspaper, Warin writes of the demand, by journalists, that she supply pictures of her research subjects looking as emaciated as possible; only a 'really skinny one' will do, she is told (2010: 9). When she refused this request, the story went ahead anyway, with library footage of half-naked and starving young women as a backdrop (2010: 181). Thus her research becomes interpellated into the world of carnivalesque freak-show stories about 'starvation cults' and kitschy images of frowning women gazing into distorting circus mirrors representing 'distorted body image' that make up the whole dreary lexicon of popular images of anorexia and indeed of gendered embodiment more generally. This idea of a negative body image in need of correction is, in fact, a central trope in the stories that get told about bodies, especially female bodies. A central project of body studies is to question this: as Mike Featherstone (2010) has noted, a key contribution of affective theory, for example, has been to question this dominant notion of body image, which presupposes the body as an outer reflection of an inner (healthy or 'disordered') self which can be worked on and transformed through regimes and technologies of self-improvement.

As Warin writes, 'there is no doubt that thinness associated with anorexia holds fascination' (2010: 9). Indeed, Warin's project might be best understood in the context of Merleau-Ponty's (1968: 146) argument that 'the look', far from producing a gap between subject and object, produces an intimate connection, an intertwining between the bodies of she who is looked at, and she who looks. It is Warin's task in this book to track the intimacies which bind anorexic subjects to one another. In doing so, her account of anorexia as a sensual, embodied practice disrupts the much more common positioning of the anorexic as a cultural object of distaste. In a culture saturated with spectacular images of thinness, how can the anorexic subject speak? Indeed, how is it possible to speak of the anorexic as subject when s/he is doubly silenced: first by being positioned as the object of a gaze (and a gaze, at that, which is oriented to the act of turning away) and, second, through a mental health discourse that positions her words as the mere ramblings of hysteria? These questions are pertinent to body studies since – as Back (2007: 77) suggests – 'the look' with which we gaze upon the other's body is central to the production of embodied subjectivity.

Warin argues that coverage of anorexia tends to rely on the 'entertainment of spectacle', drawing readers in with lurid and shocking pictures of exposed, emaciated female bodies (2010: 9). Like Kafka's 'hunger artists', anorexic women are offered up for consumption in a way that privileges a prurient, colonizing gaze. Here, her argument intersects with that of the cultural theorist Maud Ellmann, who sees the hunger artist's performance rather differently, as one that (like Hamlet's play within the play) is 'staged to trick the conscience of its viewers, forcing them to recognize that they are implicated in the spectacle they behold' (1993: 17). Ellmann argues that such a spectacle is both seductive and repellent precisely in that it implies relationality: 'even though the anorectic body seems to represent a radical negation of the other', it still depends on the other's spectatorship 'in order to be read as representative of anything at all': thus relationality is present even in the apparent violence of spectatorship (1993: 17). What Warin suggests, however, is that to read anorexia as performance is to reproduce certain received, and inaccurate, accounts of anorexic embodiment. Warin's project is to undo the representation of anorexics as 'objects for others to gaze on', and to reposition their experiences as central (2010: 185). As such she is

deeply critical of the ways in which this spectacle is reproduced in the mass media, with the desire for a shocking encounter with ‘a really skinny one’ (2010: 9). Warin points out that those dying of cancer are rarely treated in such an intrusive way. Indeed, one could point out that other diseases are treated in similar ways, but *only* those that are constructed as both abject and as ‘self-inflicted’. This is illustrated by the recent ‘No Anorexia’ billboard campaign by the fashion brand Nolita, which graphically depicted the naked body of the terminally anorexic model Isabelle Caro. The images in question referenced the so-called ‘Benetton Pieta’ 1992 campaign by a similar brand, Benetton, which depicted a man dying of AIDS. Both campaigns were shot by the same photographer, Oliviero Toscani, and both spoke in a similar way to an overt narrative of intervention and concern, coupled with an implicit understanding of the bodies on display as capable of invoking a deeply affective response.¹ Anorexic bodies are repeatedly reproduced as spectacle, despite the wide understanding, in the anorexia support community, of the triggering power of images. What is even more extraordinary is that these images are reproduced *despite the continual assurance that the anorexic body is too hideous to look at*.

Such images of anorexia, it is suggested, hold a double affective power: first, in their ability to engender disgust in the non-anorexic spectator and, second (and more threateningly), in their ability to *move* vulnerable, female spectators to imitation. This power to affect and infect onlookers is central to contemporary debates about what is popularly called ‘body image’. The meaning of this term is unclear, perhaps unimportant: what it does is pay lip service to an apparently feminist critique of media images, while obscuring its own normalization of the notion that body image is simply something that one ‘has’, which in its natural state is healthy but which requires constant surveillance and correction. This complex set of assumptions – they are not quite ideas – about body and image is almost universally played out on the terrain of the female body, particularly young women’s bodies. As Rebecca Coleman argues, popular feminist calls for ‘better’, ‘more representative’ images of women’s bodies ‘relies on a separation of bodies and images and a mapping of these distinct entities onto a dichotomy of subjects and objects’. Moreover, she argues, this separation of bodies/subjects and images/objects produces a ‘relatively straightforward and linear relationship of media

effects; young women's bodies are vulnerable to the "powerful effects" of magazine images' (2008: 165).

A significant part of Warin's project is to think beyond the dominant media fascination with the anorexic body as *object* of disgust. Instead, she opens out the notion of abjection in a way that repositions her participants as agents: far from being objects of the 'healthy' gaze, in a relation of looking in which healthiness is constituted through a reaction of disgust to the thin body, she is concerned with the ways in which the disgust experienced by anorexics themselves (whether for food, or for one's own body or those of others) is constitutive of anorexic subjectivity.

The ways in which the anorexic body is constituted as a figure of abjection is explored in detail in chapters 5 and 6, 'Abject Relations with Food' and 'Me and my Disgusting Body'. The effect of these chapters is to restore the sense of the anorexic body as a sensing body. While it may be evoked by the gaze, Warin writes, 'abjection is experienced through the perceptual modalities that evoke emotive responses: taste, touch, and smell' (2010: 185). Anorexics are not simply concerned with the two-dimensional matter of 'body image' (whatever that much-repeated and seldom-explained term means), but are full human subjects, enmeshed in networks of affective and relational body experience. This re-thinking of abjection intersects with a strand in feminist theory that is preoccupied with the social and cultural politics of emotion following from Elspeth Probyn's work on 'gut ethics', among others. Probyn has written movingly of how it feels to be the object of disgust. As she famously notes in her memoir of her adolescent anorexia, 'I spent much of my childhood feeling disgusting' (2004: 125), a feeling which is produced through an objectifying gaze.

Even now my eyes turn in aversion from memories tinged with a mixture of shame, disgust and guilt. At the same time, I do remember the splinters of pride that accompanied the disgust; pride at the beautifully prominent set of ribs, the pelvic bones that stood in stark relief, causing shadows to fall on a perfectly concave stomach. Looking back at my experience, I wonder at the forces of pride and shame doing battle in a body that knows itself to be disgusting. (2004: 125)

The non-anorexic gaze is thus productive of a subjectivity that 'knows itself' to be disgusting. What is more, Probyn's subsequent

recovery, her current status as non-anorexic, is guaranteed as much by her ability retrospectively to 'see' her adolescent body as disgusting as by her having (presumably) both gained weight and ceased to engage in the rituals of the disease. Probyn's project in *Carnal Appetites* is to make visible the powerful structures of feeling that circulate in cultural accounts of food, eating and corporeality. For Probyn, the project of identity politics erases disgust and shame; it also calls for 'better' representations of marginal subjects and involves a declaration that there is 'nothing to be ashamed of' in inhabiting marginalized bodies (2004: 125). The effect of this is to suppress shame; the cultural politics of pride is thus haunted by shame. As she puts it, 'the disgust is pushed underground . . . it is still there but cannot be spoken' (2004: 131).

'The anorexic body', 'the anorexic', 'the anorectic' hence has life in popular representation as a *figure* of abjection, that is, a known and knowable other the sight of whom inevitably engenders a reaction of disgust in the healthy subject. The notion of 'figuration' as productive of social abjection is developed by Imogen Tyler, who uses this term to account for 'the ways in which, at different historical and cultural moments, specific bodies become over-determined and are publicly imagined and represented (are figured) in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways' that are expressive of underlying crises or anxieties in specific cultural contexts (2008: 118). It is through the mobilization of such figures (such as the 'chav' who is the subject of Tyler's analysis) that dominant group and individual identities materialize. The production of legitimate, healthy and normal subjectivities is hence contingent on differentiation from these abject others. Further, affect is central to the work of figuration. Tyler cites William Miller's argument, that 'affects are emotions animated'; that is, they 'breathe life into an inanimate figure so that it takes on a figurative life of its own'. Disgust, being productive of bodily limits and boundaries, is particularly powerful in terms of allowing figures of abjection 'to materialise, to "body forth" and to become meaningful' (2008: 119).

The late 20th century was characterized by what Helen Malson (1998: 188) terms a 'fascination with all things anorexic', which fits with Tyler's reading of over-determined cultural figures as expressive of what is repressed in late capitalist culture. As Liz Eckermann notes, this obsession seems only to have intensified in the early part

of the 21st century, such that the cultural landscape inhabited by young women is dominated by what she terms 'multiple cults of thinness' (2009: 10). Similarly, Foucault's unitary 'normalising gaze' has fragmented into an abundance of often contradictory and multiple gazes (Eckermann, 2009: 11).

One effect of this is that, while the figure of the anorexic is imagined in highly affective ways, as an object of disgust, the emotions experienced by anorexics themselves are obscured. This is the case even when the account of anorexic feeling is authored by the anorexic herself. In Probyn's autobiography cited above, her remembered feelings of intermingled pride, shame and shameful pride stem from 'knowing' herself to be disgusting. These feelings are introjected by the observer as well as projected from the reality of being unobservable, as demonstrated by her absence from family photos (Probyn, 2004: 125). The anorexic's *own* feelings are obscure: and this is doubly the case in media representations of the anorexic as figure of abjection. To be classed as pathological, as figure of social abject in Tyler's terms, is to be a non-subject, incapable of either thought or feeling. Since the anorexic is imagined as mentally ill, she is classed as incapable of rational thought, while her feelings stem from what is termed an 'affective disorder' and are hence imagined as inauthentic, as symptoms merely. In contrast, 'our' disgust in looking at the anorexic and pity at what we imagine to be the waste of her young life, are legitimated and naturalized. The anorexic body becomes the centre of a powerful cluster of affective tropes (a prurient fascination with doomed youth, a belief in the outpouring of authentic and deeply felt emotion as central to selfhood) that, while they owe much to the cultural influences of Romanticism and therapy culture, are imagined as the natural consequence of an encounter with the anorexic body that is always imagined as inherently shocking and intrinsically doomed. The figure of 'the anorexic' works to conceal what we fear to be the inherent narcissism of western culture: she is a mirror that reflects back a flattering image of ourselves as caring individuals, even as it erases and abjects the anorexic herself.

Central to this project is a rethinking of Kristeva's concept of the abject. While it appears late in the text (in chapter 5), her re-reading of abjection is central to her argument and makes a perhaps controversial contribution to theories of the body. Warin draws on Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva, whose writing on abjection, she says,

resonated strongly with the findings of her own empirical research. Participants spoke of ‘embodied reactions’, such as shuddering at the thought of certain foods that were ‘remarkably similar to those described by Kristeva’ (Warin, 2010: 114). Where she departs from this canonical literature on disgust is in her impatience with the detail of psychoanalytic theory. While she is, she says, ‘drawn’ to abjection as a means of accounting for anorexic experience, she argues contentiously that ‘psychoanalysis . . . cannot be constituted ethnographically’ since it hinges upon problematic terms such as precultural, ahistorical and pre-oedipal which, she argues, assume a ‘universalist psychological ordering’ which is antithetical to the aims of ethnography (Warin, 2010: 115). What remains is a practical way of accounting for bodily experience which ‘moves beyond Kristeva’s location of [abjection] in the imaginary . . . to the everyday practices and terms of sociality’:

It explores what was considered abject (objects, spaces and bodies); the embodied, visceral responses to this (simultaneous horror and fascination); and the practices by which people desired, cast out, and removed the abject. Things considered abject, including fats, bodily processes, public spaces, and relationships, were distanced, negated, cleansed, and purged in an attempt to remove their threat. (Warin, 2010: 5)

In a sense, this decoupling of abjection from psychoanalytic theory is potentially liberating; it represents, I think, a re-framing of theoretical concepts as *tools* which are useful, not as an end in themselves, but as a means of making sense of embodied experience. This relates to my earlier point about listening: what Warin seems to suggest is that academic studies that foreground theory risk simply reproducing a relation of academic privilege (rather than allowing the voices of participants to be heard). But this dismissal of psychoanalysis is also frustrating, not least in that it is dealt with very briefly; the reader is left wanting a more detailed critique of Kristeva’s theoretical framework. Without this critique, it is not entirely clear how Warin’s desire to locate abjection in the context of ‘ordinary practices of everyday living’ is *necessarily* at odds with ‘the symbolic, imaginary, psyche and language’ (2010: 117) which, after all, are always at play in and constitutive of bodily practice. To extend the notion of abjection, she suggests, is also to extend the notion of relatedness. As Teresa

Brennan (2004: 25) has noted, medical and therapeutic discourse has normalized the idea of 'boundaries' in a way that obscures its cultural and historical specificity. Specifically, the notion of a bounded subject presupposes a self-contained individual identity: as a result, treatment is likely to centre around 'methods premised on self-containment' and to overlook the fact that 'the traffic between the biological and the social is two-way; the social or psychological actually gets into our flesh' (2004: 25).

A major methodological and practical problem confronting any theorist working on eating disorders, and for body studies more generally, is that of how to avoid reproducing the spectacular regime of looking. Any theorist who has ever shown slides of pro-ana websites, for example, will have experienced the sharp intake of breath from the audience and will know the difficulty of overcoming the deeply ingrained cultural power of such images to inspire shock; this shock reaction is only enhanced by the imagery of pro-ana, which often sets out to beat the mainstream media at its own game by producing the most intense and confrontational images possible. Critique can feel powerless in the face of this apparently 'natural' reaction; there can be an uncanny sense that, for some spectators at least, the visual 'evidence' of starvation renders inaudible the voices of both theorist and subject (who might be precisely being critical of the very narratives of shock and concern that are being reproduced through the screening of the image).

Warin's response to this is not only to refuse to reproduce images of anorexic bodies, but precisely to question the ways in which media images of 'the really skinny ones' work to position thinness as 'the definitive bodily experience of anorexia'. The notion of spectacular thinness denotes a 'static and fixed occupation of space and time' which belies the reality of anorexics' lived experience (Warin, 2010: 10). In this sense, images of spectacularly thin bodies create a narrative of anorexia as what Abigail Bray (1996) terms an 'eschatology of the flesh'; the anorexic is on an unstoppable temporal trajectory which can only end in death. The anorexic body is thus imagined as haunted by her own future ghost, is relegated to the ranks of what Adi Kuntsman has termed the 'dead while alive' (2011: 2). This positioning of the anorexic through narratives of 'ghosting of the present and haunted futurities' (Kuntsman, 2011: 2) works *both* to justify any form of intervention, however violent (since to

intervene is to become the agent of hope, wrenching vulnerable young woman back from the brink of inevitable death), and, by presenting the act of looking itself as an emotionally engaged intervention, becomes a rationale for hopelessness: the woman in the image has made her choice and must now suffer the consequences. Quite apart from the inherent epistemic violence of such affective spectatorship, Warin makes the very salient point that spectacular images of anorexia are simply inaccurate: most of her research participants were not spectacularly thin, or had been in the past but were not at the time of the research, or became very thin but did not stay that way for long. Warin writes of her confusion on being told by Rita, one of her central participants arranging to meet for the first time, to look out for ‘the fat one’ – was this some kind of morbid joke or, more likely, evidence of the kind of self-delusion, the ‘distorted body image’ from which anorexics are ‘known’ to suffer? Warin’s assumptions are confounded when she arrives at the appointed meeting place to find that the woman she met did not fit the stereotypical image of the thin anorexic; although – smartly – she does not describe the participant’s appearance further than that, leaving us as reader to confront our own frustrated desire to know the ‘truth’ of Rita’s statement (2010: 9).

Another original element of Warin’s work is its radical uncoupling of lived experience of anorexia from the narratives of extreme thinness and eschatological doom that structure popular discourses of disordered embodiment. The second major contribution her work makes lies in her critique of the discursive approaches to anorexia, and especially her questioning of the Foucauldian approach that has come to dominate recent academic work on eating disorders. That this is a bold approach is illustrated in the section on ‘Discursive Approaches’. Warin begins with a list of those theorists who have directly or indirectly drawn on Foucauldian frameworks to ‘explain’ eating disorders. The list is an impressive one, encompassing Bordo, Bartky, Malson, Naomi Wolf, Diamond and Quinby, and many others. She argues that Bartky and Bordo, in particular, have been instrumental in setting the tone for feminist research on anorexia as an essential part of the critique and deconstruction of femininity. Susan Bordo’s germinal text *Unbearable Weight* (2003) is perhaps the most influential recent work in this area. In this model, anorexia speaks to the contradictory nature of patriarchal discourses of femininity such

that it becomes 'a way of simultaneously resisting and complying with these ideals' (Warin, 2010: 10). Such a reading positions anorexic subjects as 'caught in a web of discursively produced hierarchical positions in which they are always dominated and disadvantaged' (2010: 11). Power is thus always imagined as domination.

Warin makes a convincing case that it is crucial to make a critical intervention into this hegemonic model of women at the mercy of media and medical discourse, if feminist theory is to have any hope of doing justice to the complexity of anorexic experience. She argues that such an explanation fails to account for the ways in which anorexia might be experienced as 'transformative, empowering, and ambiguous', *or* for the centrality of relatedness to anorexic subjectivity (since it is inherently individualizing). In her fieldwork, she writes, she:

observed the multiple ways in which those with this diagnosis strategically deployed power ... it was not a force either yielded to or coercive. In fact, it was a force taken and transformed into a productive embodied state. (Warin, 2010: 11)

It takes strength to push through the powerful structuring accounts through which 'we' come to 'know' the anorexic body, but this is Warin's project. This is a work in which metaphors of negotiation, complexity, emergence and becoming abound. This is sociology as a 'listening art', as Back describes it, a 'live sociology' (2007: 26) which is attentive to the messiness and contradictoriness of lives that do not always conform to the narratives imposed on them, by feminism as well as by the mass media. In chapter 2, 'Steering a Course Between Fields', Warin traces the emergence of her fieldwork through encountering her participants across multiple, overlapping sites, spaces and experiences. The notion of movement is not simply metaphorical here, but is central to her methodological process. Warin argues that anorexia is a 'complex and dynamic process' which is situated in a 'network of often conflicting perspectives'; as such, it demands a flexible, even a tentative approach which rejects what George Marcus calls the 'traditional, exotic strangeness' of anthropology (1999, cited in Warin, 2010: 21). In surrendering this 'already known' strangeness for the dislocating strangeness of being open to the other, of listening, her approach reminds me of Sara

Ahmed's notion of 'strange encounters' which re-frames encounters with 'already known' others as a form of political activism through 're-encountering those encounters so that they no longer hold others in place' (Ahmed, 2000: 17). Steering a course through the field means literally moving *with* participants as they travel often long distances to undergo treatment, but also a willingness to be moved *by* them; the researcher's privilege is not fixed, rather she herself is open to movement, to dislocation and change. Such a performance of movement is of profound political importance, not because cultural accounts of anorexia portray the plight of anorexic subjects as something that does not move people but because the anorexic body materializes and becomes fixed as an object of abjection precisely through its supposed ability to move others to imitation. Further, to fail to speak of anorexia in culturally prescribed ways is to risk the accusation of being insufficiently moved, where the performance 'being moved' entails the reproduction of ritualistic statements of pity and sympathy that only serve to naturalize and conceal the production of disgust.

In order to move away from this binary model, in which one constantly treads a fine line between excessive identification and excessive detachment, one must acknowledge that researchers are themselves enmeshed in networks of gender, power and embodiment (Warin, 2010: 50). Ethnography is therefore a way of 'knowing through the body', the title of Warin's third chapter. The chapter focuses on Warin's relationships with her participants, posing the question of how one carries out ethnographic fieldwork with subjects for whom relationality itself is problematic. In another section, which (like her work on Kristeva) speaks to the practical usefulness of theory, she explores the different ways in which anorexic and non-anorexic subjects 'know' food and how a willingness to be moved by anorexia entails a making-strange of everyday food practices that for her embody the Heideggerian concept of 'ready-to-handness', of being so familiar as to be utterly taken for granted (Warin, 2010: 53–5). By engaging with what anorexics 'know' about food, she opens up the question of what an anorexic phenomenology would look like: how would a hyper-attentiveness to their food practices disrupt shared cultural assumptions about what is normal, natural and taken for granted? Again, her findings often subvert and disrupt conventional narratives of pathology and recovery, as when one participant, Natalia, appears totally transformed during a meeting in a coffee shop. This

‘angry, shrouded ... physically immobilised’ and self-hating woman appears, outside the hospital setting, as the picture of metropolitan confidence and femininity, dressed in a fitted skirt suit and very much in control of their encounter: ‘[s]he asked me what I’d like to drink, ordered it, paid for both drinks’, Warin recalls, before choosing a seat in the most visible part of the building. This new-found confidence is revealed not to be the result of some revelatory recovery, however, but of a decision not to eat which has left her feeling ‘empty, strong, and confident’ (2010: 34). It is through encounters such as this that a more complex picture of anorexic subjectivity emerges: one which does not follow the binary utopian/dystopian futurities of death versus recovery, but in which ‘emotions tied to eating or not eating’ are constantly negotiated (2010: 55). Food is both performative and performance; indeed Natalia’s dining room at home is compared to a museum exhibit, immaculate and unused (2010: 60). Anorexic subjectivity emerges through tiny acts of consumption: another participant, Bettina, describes the labour that stems from her literal interpretation of the nutritional-pedagogic slogan ‘you are what you eat’, which led her to search through hundreds of apples in a supermarket produce section, seeking the ‘perfect one’ (2010: 61). Anorexia’s implicit critique of taken-for-granted practices extends to language: Warin must learn not to use casually phrases like ‘I’m starving’, and must come to understand that to tell an anorexic woman she looks ‘well’ may give offence, as it can be interpreted as meaning ‘you look fat’ (2010: 62).

Inevitably, her own eating habits come under scrutiny, are made strange, all the more so as her pregnancy becomes visible during the writing of the book. This strangeness is apparent when a group of women decide to tackle the emotionally charged, frightening task of eating ice-cream; not realizing the layered and complex interpretations that may be placed on her refusal of the ice-cream (on the grounds that she is not hungry), Warin is ‘exercising a preference that is not available to the others’, leading one young woman to ask – ambiguously – ‘I hope you don’t have an eating disorder?’ (2010: 63). The ways in which anorexic subjects’ relationship to food is productive of community, in ways that both extend and differ from social rituals in wider culture, are extended in chapter 4, ‘The Complexities of Being Anorexic’, which speaks of what participants themselves called a ‘secret world of anorexia’ (2010: 77), a shared

community which is invisible but which emerges through such affectively charged rituals. This secrecy is intimately tied up with relations of disgust, with a sense of oneself as abject that recalls Probyn's account of 'feeling disgusting'. Warin cites Probyn's idea that disgust is haunted, that it marks the traces of bodily trauma; disgust 'reminds us that we have been too close to things [of] which we prefer not to speak' (2010: 150). This is movingly demonstrated by one participant's account of being raped, an event which it took her many years to feel able to speak about: such is this woman, Estelle's, sense of being disgusting that she recalls returning to school the next day 'to make it look as though I'd just had a sick day'. Natalia similarly speaks of a childhood assault which she kept to herself, concealing it from family and friends (2010: 150). Many described displacing this sense of disgustingness onto food: by making disgust mobile in this way, the women engaged in practices of purging, and managing food becomes a way of restoring and maintaining bodily boundaries, placing them, as Marya Hornbacher memorably describes it, 'out of the grasping reach of others' (cited in Warin, 2010: 151).

'Grasping', here, is an evocative term: it suggests not only the violence of heterosexual desire, against which anorexia is partly a rebellion, but also the idea of knowledge: that in looking at anorexic bodies there is something, some ultimate truth that can be grasped.

With this in mind, Warin's choice of subtitle becomes of profound political importance. Such is the contemporary preoccupation with the relation between bodies and images, that the relation between bodies themselves is almost entirely under-theorized, nor is there any meaningful account of the lived experience of anorexia that does not conform to the overcoming/journey narrative of the misery memoir. The cultural tendency either to reduce anorexia to abject spectacle or to elevate it to heroic myth makes Warin's project, of paying attention to the 'everyday worlds of anorexia', all the more timely. Moving beyond cultural narratives that position the anorexic body as spectacle, that hold out the promise of an encounter with the disgusting body, Warin's book is concerned with what it might mean to allow anorexics to speak as subjects. By keeping her participants 'out of the grasping reach' of those who want only to gaze on the disgusting spectacle of 'the really skinny one', it might be possible for the anorexic subject to speak. Whether s/he will be heard remains to be seen.

Note

1. Another comparable recent example is that of the 21-year-old drug user Rachel Whitear, who died of an overdose in 2002 and whose parents allowed 'horrific' images of her dead body to be published as a warning to others. News coverage of the decision to publish invariably reproduced the images, which in their lurid depiction of a young woman whose face is not visible, are highly reminiscent of media images of both anorexic and obese bodies: see for example <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/1848092.stm>

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