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STARING BACK: A RESPONSE TO BODY SHAMERS IN HALEY MORRIS-CAFIERO'S SELF-PORTRAITURE

Sitting alone in the throng of Times Square, Memphis-based photographer and performance artist Haley Morris-Cafiero hoped to document a moment of physical isolation in a public setting as part of her series, *Something to Weigh*. Upon developing the film that she had taken that day she discovered that a man posing for a photograph on the stairs above her, as she sat alone below, overshadowed her moment **(fig. 1)**. His expression as he gazed down on her appears smug and mocking. This catalytic encounter in 2010 led Morris-Cafiero to produce two series: the first, *Wait Watchers*, sought to capture the stare of on-lookers in public spaces in order to examine how people perceive others and how the gaze can be a factor in a person's determination of self-worth. The second series, *In the Time of Trump*, attempts to confront the ubiquity of body-shaming in social media and the false sense of anonymity that online bullies use to mask their vitriolic remarks. Here, I will examine the intersection between Morris-Cafiero's two series and the fields of disability studies and fat studies[1] through disability theorist Tobin Siebers's concept of disability aesthetics (2010), which will offer insight into how Morris-Cafiero's work successfully embraces unique corporeality and challenges socio-cultural distinctions of the 'outsider' body.



// Figure 1
Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Anonymity Isn't For Everyone*, 2010. *Wait Watchers series*, New York, NY

The recent field of fat studies recognizes that the concept of *fat* is a historically dependent social construction and it offers a critique of negative assumptions and stereotypes placed on the fat body. The stigma associated with the fat body has been perpetuated by mass media that maintains unrealistic beauty standards and idealized body types, the medical profession that identifies fatness as a personal health problem, and public health policies that frame fatness as an obesity epidemic (Kirkland 2011: 464; Lyons 2009). Fatness has been defined in negative, oversimplified terms and linked to moral failings, poverty, ill health, and disease, yet the actual lived experience of people who are fat is mostly overlooked (McCullough 2013: 3). The view of the fat body as abject,

1) For the scope of this paper, discussion of the fields of fat studies and disability studies is primarily centered on research conducted in the U.S.

uncontrolled, or defective has paralleled similar discriminatory attitudes faced by people with disabilities. Though people who are fat are not typically considered disabled, recent scholarship in the fields of fat studies and disability studies suggests that this distinction may not exist in the future.[2)] If fatness were considered a disability in the U.S., the rights of people who are fat would be protected under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) of 1990. The ADA defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment" and impairment as "any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following systems: neurological, musculoskeletal, special sense organs, respiratory (including speech organs), cardiovascular, reproductive, digestive, genito-urinary, hemic and lymphatic, skin and endocrine" (Kirkland 2006; Herndon 2011: 247). Some individuals, such as fat activist Marilyn Wann, take issue with fatness being identified as a disability because they do not want to label fatness as an impairment or are concerned that this label will lead to further stigmatization of fatness as an illness in need of correction (Goldberg 1997). Others, such as fat studies scholars Charlotte Cooper, April Herndon, and Hannele Harjunen, believe identifying fatness as a disability will increase awareness of discrimination, further a collective identity, and offer legal protection (Cooper 1997; Herndon 2011; Harjunen 2004).

Within the social model of disability studies, the impaired body is seen as disabled by society's built environments and discriminatory attitudes. This model can be extended to the disabling physical barriers and biased mindsets the fat body also confronts. Similar to a person with a disability, the person who is fat is blamed for his, her, or their body; the social construction of the concept of fat is ignored. Though the social model of disability took shape nearly 50 years ago, the medical model has remained a primarily method for examining and understanding the disabled body. The medical model seeks to identify and correct the individual's disability, locating the problem within the person and not in the larger social systems. The medical model has treated fatness in a similar fashion by faulting the individual for deviating from the 'normal' body type. Yet, the medical field often fails to question the standard by which a 'normal' body is measured as well as overlooks other contributing factors such as how each individual's embodied experience intersects with one's gender, sexual orientation, race,

2)
Scholars such as Anna Kirkland (2006), Charlotte Cooper (1997), April Herdon (2011), Anna Mollow (2015), and Hannele Harjunen (2004) have discussed the possible significance and outcomes if fatness is considered a disability.

class, education, and religion (Barnes / Mercer 2013).

Fat bodies and disabled bodies have been othered by the long-held belief that the harmonious, idealized, complete, and beautiful body is the primary determinate of aesthetic value. Siebers claims that it is necessary to recognize that our aesthetic response is based on an embodied experience derived from sensations and feelings one person has in the presence of other bodies or objects (Siebers 2010: 1–3). Though broadening our definition of aesthetics to encompass new conceptions of beauty beyond the established norms may allow for physical variations to also be considered beautiful, it is necessary to not simply operate within a traditional understanding of aesthetics. Instead Siebers argues that it is necessary to embrace an "aesthetics of disability" which will complicate our current aesthetic views and "elaborate disability as an aesthetic value in itself worthy of future development" (ibid: 3). Siebers suggests that works by many Western artists from the 20th and 21st century have embraced an aesthetics of disability.[3] It is his discussion of contemporary artists such as Marc Quinn, Chris Ofili, and Jenny Savillle who are associated with the 1999 *Sensations Exhibition* that provides a distinct explanation of how an aesthetics of disability can be critically employed: "First, the work of art makes individual subjects aware of the fact that things exist beyond their control, challenging political ideals that imagine mental competence, physical health, consensus, economic efficiency, and the prevention of accidents, disease, and death as easily achievable goals. Second, the beauty of disability compels the imagination of political community on the basis of accessibility rather than exclusion. It tutors individual subjects in new affective responses, asking them to incorporate rather than reject unfamiliar ideas and physical forms, to tolerate mixtures of greater varieties and kinds, and to broaden their understanding of human beings and their behavior" (ibid: 68).

Morris-Cafiero has sought in her artistic practice to create work that challenges viewers' perceptions of the 'outsider' body.[4] She uses her body as a tool of communication to create socially engaging work that directly engages viewers, questions how the construction of identity is located in the physical body, and potentially produces empathetic responses. Early in life she found herself in a relentless cycle of dieting and over-exercising as she attempted to manage her body. When she was diagnosed with hypothyroidism, she realized she had been exhausting herself over something out of her control. In 2003 Morris-Cafiero produced

3) To support his discussion of an aesthetics of disability, Siebers cites modernists such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Emil Nolde, and René Magritte alongside contemporary artists such as Marc Quinn, Andres Serrano, Chris Ofili, and Jenny Savillle.

4) Descriptions of Morris-Cafiero's different series and her artistic process were largely drawn from conversations between the artist and the author held between January 2015 and January 2017.

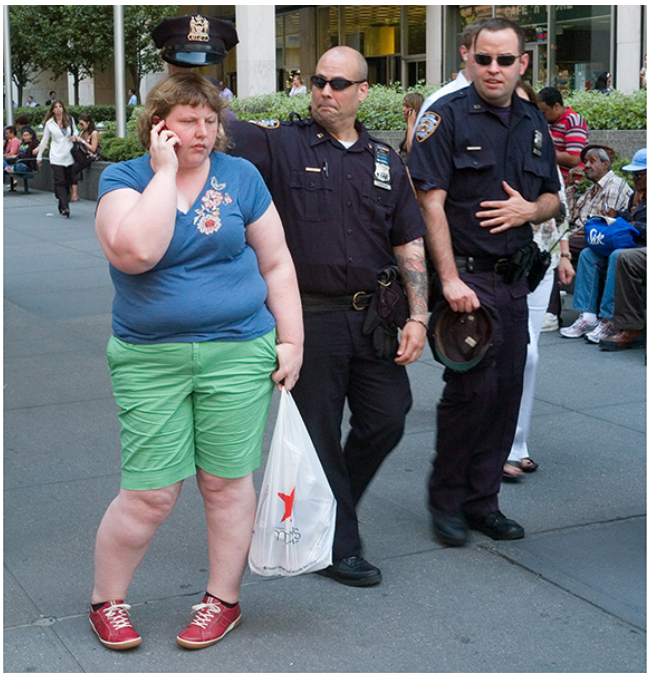
the series *Shape to Fit* for her graduate thesis; this series analyzed her attempts to manipulate her body by losing weight in order to use a standard public bathroom and her inability to do so. She captured her efforts to fit within a space designated for all people by photographing herself over a ten-week period endeavoring to enter a public bathroom stall **(fig. 2)**. She used a daguerreotype process for these self-portraits because of how the image is imbedded within the mirror-like surface of the polished-silver plate, speaking to both the physicality of her weight and the narcissistic-connotation that is implied in the reflective surface. These daguerreotypes were placed on the inside lids of hand-made rawhide boxes that had been placed on their sides. To the left of each image, Morris-Cafiero filled the bottom of each box with an amount of paraffin wax that weighed the same amount of weight she had lost that week. Some weeks only consisted of a splash of wax while for other weeks the boxes were over filled.



// Figure 2
Haley Morris-Cafiero, ***Shape to Fit series***, 2003, daguerreotype, paraffin wax, and rawhide

Morris-Cafiero continued to explore the challenges she faced in public spaces and the stigmatization of her body in a five-year long project documenting herself standing in public locations situated around the globe. She would place a camera on a tripod or a nearby surface, sometimes utilizing an assistant or stranger, to photograph herself in highly populated public spaces. After establishing who would hold the camera or where it would be placed, the shoots lasted only a few seconds. Morris-Cafiero would capture dozens of frames from each shoot during which she would briefly pose in the manner of a tourist or carrying out everyday actions such as talking on the phone, examining a map for directions, or applying sunscreen. Morris-Cafiero would never know the types of images she would discover until she viewed them after the event, as was the case in an early performance entitled *Cops*.

In this work, Morris-Cafiero was standing on a busy sidewalk in New York City talking on the phone to her mother when two New York Police Department (NYPD) officers passed by; the man closest to Morris-Cafiero raised his officer's hat above her head with a smirking expression on his face while the other officer to his left looked in her direction and patted his stomach **(fig. 3)**. This gesture was captured again while Morris-Cafiero was waiting at a crosswalk on a busy street in Barcelona in the work *Gelato* **(fig. 4)**. A young girl standing behind the artist appears to be slapping her stomach as she watches Morris-Cafiero enjoy a gelato on a hot summer day in July.



// Figure 3
Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Cops*, 2011, *Wait Watchers series*, New York, NY

Morris-Cafiero felt that she had the most success capturing stares directed at her body when she went to the beach. While on the same trip to Barcelona she shot *Bikini* on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea **(fig. 5)**. Dressed in a floral one-piece bathing suit with a black swim skirt beneath, Morris-Cafiero walked along the edge of the sandy shore as water splashed against her ankles. A few feet behind her was a young girl dressed in a pink bikini who twisted her head 90 degrees, and with her mouth open, stared at the artist. For her performance in *Sunscreen*, Morris-Cafiero traveled to Cocoa Beach, Florida. The artist stood at the edge of the water dressed in a one-piece black bathing suit while she applied sunscreen to her chest **(fig. 6)**. Behind her, a young man and woman also dressed for the beach walked past; the woman leaned forward laughing and appears to gawk directly at Morris-Cafiero.



// Figure 4
Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Gelato*, 2011, *Wait Watchers series*, Barcelona, Spain

Out of hundreds of frames, Morris-Cafiero will find momentary or sometimes lengthier encounters in which she captures the various stares of passersby; she then selects the images with the most striking micro-expressions of what may be judgment, aggression, or disgust on the faces of the strangers. Morris-Cafiero does not believe that looks directed at her may necessarily be about her weight. It could be the color of her skin or hair, the way she is dressed,

or because she is a woman. It is possible that the passersby are not even looking at the artist. The indeterminability of the stare is apparent in *White Stripe* in which a man passes the artist from behind as she poses for a photograph on the side of a road during an outdoor event in Memphis, Tennessee **(fig. 7)**. He clearly stares in her direction and seems to be evaluating her figure, but his expression is unclear. The intention of the stares in *Progress* are much more explicit **(fig. 8)**. As the artist stands reading a map on Charles Bridge in Prague, two men walking in her direction from behind clearly stare at the artist. The individual on the right has an expression of contempt as he tilts his head towards his friend who grins with ridicule at the artist's back.



// Figure 5
Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Bikini*, 2011, *Wait Watchers series*, Barcelona, Spain

In both the public spaces and in the photographic images, Morris-Cafiero is presenting her body as a site to be stared at openly. Some critics dismiss her work claiming that she fails to capture the stare of passersby clearly. Morris-Cafiero believes that viewers of her work will draw different conclusions about whether potential glances can be discerned. Not interested in definitively identifying what was captured in the images, Morris-Cafiero is more concerned with the conversation that emerges from viewers who interpret her work. This conversation reveals how viewers aesthetically experience the artist's physical appearance and understand her status within society. This dialogue has been both affirmative and negative, but in all instances it raises consciousness about inherent social biases and the pervasiveness of aesthetic disqualification (Siebers 2010: 21–28). According to Siebers, aesthetic disqualification has long been tied to an established aesthetic model that is used "to qualify some people and disqualify others" (ibid: 21). Individuals who are disqualified for not achieving or being endowed with normative aesthetic qualities are as less than human, their rights are violated, and they are discriminated against. In order to foster a positive identity for all body types we must examine



// Figure 6
Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Sunscreen*, 2015, *Wait Watchers series*, Cocoa Beach, Florida

and critique the conceptual and discursive constructions of identities and the manner in which prejudicial attitudes often inherent within these constructions can lead to societal systems that marginalize, oppress, and victimize.

What is significant about Morris-Cafiero's series is that it creates an opportunity to consider how we examine, evaluate, and treat one another based on aesthetic principles. The dynamic act of staring that occurs during the artist's public performance and when the viewer scrutinizes her photographic works generates deeper knowledge about our assumptions and larger societal attitudes. In her 2009 book, *Staring: How We Look,* disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains how the interaction between the starer and staree is based on a desire for knowledge: "Triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds. Because we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies and behaviors, stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations. Seeing startlingly starable people challenges our assumptions by interrupting complacent visual business-as-usual. Staring offers an occasion to rethink the status quo. Who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not" (Garland-Thomson 2009: 6). Our identities are shaped by the interaction between starer and staree and in this process we gain knowledge that "can offer an opportunity to recognize one another in new ways" (ibid: 15). Bodies considered different than the normative body disrupt established aesthetic assumptions that are culturally reinforced. For defying societal norms, these unique bodies are often shamed, segregated, and ignored. Whether or not the strangers that Morris-Cafiero captures in her images are staring at her or something else, and no matter what they may be thinking when they look at the artist, the conversation generated about her body and the fat body in general offers a potential space for reconsidering traditional aesthetic standards.



// Figure 7
Haley Morris-Cafiero, ***White Stripe***, 2015, ***Wait Watchers series***, Memphis, Tennessee



// Figure 8
Haley Morris-Cafiero, ***Progress***, 2013, ***Wait Watchers series***, Prague, Czech Republic

In 2014, a few years after she began the *Wait Watchers* series, Morris-Cafiero received international attention when numerous media outlets began to publish her work online. She embraced the attention given to her work for the benefit of sharing her art with a broad audience of people who may not often go to museums or galleries. This experience also led to adverse consequences with individuals publishing her work on blogs, forums, and news outlets without her permission and in many cases framing her work through inflammatory, attention-grabbing headlines. The reception of Morris-Cafiero's work was found within the comments pages, emails directly sent to the artist, and postings on social media sites. Some individuals would comment on the experiences they had in public spaces and thank Morris-Cafiero for her work that had helped them to embrace their bodies positively. Several disclosed very personal feelings dealing with suicidal thoughts and depression caused by a societal rejection of their figures. Others contacted the artist to advise her on how to exercise or how to apply make-up and dress in order to appear more attractive. Some used much more cruel language describing how much her body disgusted them and in a few instances threatened her with physical violence because of her appearance.

It was the hateful comments in particular that interested the artist the most. Instead of directing their criticism at the aesthetic qualities of her work, these critiques focus entirely on her physique. Morris-Cafiero does not take the comments personally and instead finds them very amusing. She is amazed by the time and energy a person would take to hate someone so vehemently who they have never met and based solely on the person's appearance. She began to archive these comments in 2015. Whereas she never presumed to know what the passersby in her *Wait Watchers'* series were thinking, the online comments now provided the artist with a direct insight into the thoughts of many viewers. Numerous commenters expressed outlandish opinions based on their conclusions drawn from their evaluation of her body. Some declared that she was unemployed, had diabetes, or would die young. Others described Morris-Cafiero in derogatory language often used against people with disabilities by calling her 'retarded,' 'deformed,' and 'circus-freak ugly.'[5)] Many commenters vied online to explain that it did not matter that Morris-Cafiero was fat; they blamed her posture, her clothing, her facial expression, or her lack of make-up. Some of these writers prefaced their argument with a disclosure that they too were fat, but that they knew better than to appear in such an unappealing manner in public.

5) Some of the comments about Haley Morris-Cafiero's *Wait Watchers* series can be found on the following sites: Haley Morris-Cafiero (2013): Pictures of people who mock me. In: Salon, http://www.salon.com/2013/04/23/pictures_of_people_who_mock_me/ (July 2016); Fatpeoplestories, https://www.reddit.com/r/fatpeoplestories/comments/1r4irx/tp_is_not_assuming_people_who_happen_to_glance/ (July 2016); /r/fatlogic, https://www.reddit.com/r/fatlogic/comments/2lf1yw/haley_morriscafieros_stunning_photographs_show/ (July 2016).

In her current series, *In the Time of Trump*, Morris-Cafiero investigates the ubiquity of cyberbullying in the 21st century. The recent election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, a man accused of using Twitter to disparage and intimidate his opponents, has helped to validate and encourage the cyberbullying community. As with her previous series, Morris-Cafiero has created *In the Time of Trump* to generate a conversation and raise awareness about the prevalence of body shaming and aesthetic disqualification. She has taken inspiration from the most hateful comments made about her body in the *Wait Watchers'* series. Not interested in personally attacking the specific individuals, she seeks to critique the anonymity people believe they have online, which enables them to feel free to attack others verbally. To create this series, Morris-Cafiero began by building profiles of the bullies who posted the most vicious comments about her body by collecting online public information such as photographs, posts on social media sites, and other openly available material. Morris-Cafiero then constructs a character that she performs before her camera that is loosely based on each profile through the use of prosthetics, clothing, and an environment that often closely resembles original images. The finishing touch to these works is the incorporation of the online bully's own spiteful language used to attack Morris-Cafiero, which she cleverly places within the image.

Although these characters are Morris-Cafiero's own fabrications, she seeks to rattle, through her personifications, the security of the online bullies who inspired them and who would be able to recognize themselves. She has transformed their personas into starable bodies. Morris-Cafiero humorously embodies the blatantly artificial constructed character in order to expose how self-representation on social media platforms is fabricated, edited, and performed for an audience. In this series, Morris-Cafiero more pointedly uses photography to create a mirrored reality in which a person's anonymous hate speech is now presented to viewers and becomes more clearly part of the embodied experience. The prejudicial and heartless language of online comments that can often be quickly forgotten by the general reader takes on a physical, visible presence that cannot easily be ignored and that is now directed back at the original author.

Morris-Cafiero has developed approximately 60 character profiles that she plans to photograph. To date she has completed nine works and plans to officially release this series within the year. The first work produced for this series is entitled *ShortBus*;

the character is based on a professional photographer who emailed Morris-Cafiero to advise her on how to present herself properly in public. Morris-Cafiero based this character on a single image she found of the person online, which struck her as the exact opposite of the ‚professional appearance' the individual professed was necessary for public images. She wears a black t-shirt, a plastic BBQ apron, and plastic, yellow cleaning gloves. She altered her facial features with a large prosthetic nose, artificial facial stubble, and a scruffy black wig. She selected his most offensive comment to include on a scroll of paper that she holds up to the viewer: "I would dare say they were more likely staring at you because you look like someone that got off the ShortBus™ [sic] a few stops too soon. There seems to be a noticeable self-deprecating tone in your perfunctory and unkempt appearance. I bet people wouldn't stare or make issue of your appearance if you just cleaned it up and wore professional looking clothing [...]."[6)]

Other characters created by Morris-Cafiero are composites of many photos she collected of the person online. In *Steamy*, the artist poses in a classic bathroom selfie before a mirror just as the online bully had done in numerous photographs of himself. She wears a prosthetic nose and prosthetic chest with washboard abs; around her waist is a towel, suggesting that she just got out of the shower. In front of her is a mirror covered with steam and in this steam is written the words of the bully who fat-shamed Morris-Cafiero online: "You're fat and gross. Your arms make me want to puke." In *Wet T-Shirt*, Morris-Cafiero adopts the persona of an online bully who posted numerous photographs of herself in wet t-shirt contests at nightclubs. For this character, Morris-Cafiero dons a long brunette shag wig with fringe bangs and wears bright red lipstick that matches her six-inch high platform heels. She stands provocatively in the center of an empty disco nightclub with her long, nude legs exposed beneath an almost translucent, white shirt; on the shirt are written the words of the online bully: "You never heard of whale watching, lady?"

Morris-Cafiero's work is important in interrupting commonplace ideas and attitudes about the fat body and negative stereotypes that are often embedded within visual representations of fatness. Whether using her body as a prop to provoke an open conversation about the presence of the fat body in public or by playing with the artifice of identity constructs by performing the role of an online bully, the artist directs our attention to how identity is regularly performed within public and private spaces. Morris-Cafiero

6) This email message was sent to the artist on Thursday, February 6, 2014 at 12:24 PM.

embraces her embodied experience and resists the stigmatization placed on her body by a culture that predominantly celebrates a thin, able-bodied physique. She defies the body shamers who would tell her to lose weight, dress differently, or not occupy a public space and in this way she critiques the negative connotations assigned to her body. Her humorous performances create a space to confront animosity and question the assumptions held by many individuals about the fat body. If aesthetic disqualification is to be dismantled, it is necessary to examine our aesthetic assumptions exhaustively. Ablelist and anti-fat attitudes based on aesthetic biases can still be found in current visual studies scholarship, mass media, public health policies, and the medical field. Instead of disregarding our preconceptions or 'politely' diverting our gaze from the fat or disabled body, it would be best to directly encounter, engage, and celebrate the diversity of our human community in all its forms (Garland-Thomson 2009: 9).

// Image Credits

Fig. 1: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Anonymity Isn't For Everyone*, 2010. *Wait Watchers series*, New York, NY, 2010, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 2: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Shape to Fit* series, 2003, daguerreotype, paraffin wax, and rawhide © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 3: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Cops*, 2011, *Wait Watchers series*, New York, NY, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 4: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Gelato*, 2011, *Wait Watchers series*, Barcelona, Spain, 2011, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 5: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Bikini*, 2011, *Wait Watchers series*, Barcelona, Spain, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 6: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Sunscreen*, 2015, *Wait Watchers series*, Cocoa Beach, Florida, 2015, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 7: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *White Stripe*, 2015, *Wait Watchers series*, Memphis, Tennessee, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.
Fig. 8: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Progress*, 2013, *Wait Watchers series*, Prague, Czech Republic, archival digital photograph © Haley Morris-Cafiero.

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