Embodiment as Ambiguity: ‘Fatness’ as it is Lived

I know myself only in so far as I am inherent in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in my ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 345).

For Merleau-Ponty, your corporeal schema is never individual: it is fundamentally intersubjective and specific to your social and familial situation. Further, as a corporeal schema is constituted in relation to others, it is ambiguous. Insofar as any body claims absolute self-identity and difference from the other through building a partition between their body and the body of the other, this ambiguity is suppressed (Diprose, 1994, p. 119).

Merleau-Ponty’s last work, published after his death, including many of his working notes for concepts he intended to develop further, was entitled The Visible and the Invisible. In this work, he presents a closer investigation of intersubjectivity as he outlined in The Phenomenology of Perception, making use of a biological term – ‘chiasm’ – to explain the inextricable connection of the self to the other in intercorporeal relations. In other words, his project of dismantling binary structures that have governed Western thought, such as mind/body and self/other, continues in The Visible and The Invisible in a more profound and considered manner than his previous assertions. Whilst, as the story of the ‘mirror-stage’ shows, Merleau-Ponty does not dismiss the boundaries of the subject that make possible such relations as being looked at, and looking, and touching and being touched, he does however stress that the relationship between self and other is essential to the construction of individual identities.

As discussed previously in relation to fat politics, in ‘changing one’s mind’ about one’s body, we insist that the centre of all meaning and
power resides in the individual, and attribute nothing to the world, others and intersubjective relations. The individualistic premise of fat activism that offers agency and emancipation through a privileging of the mind over the body is then mythic, as it discounts the culturally and historically specific discourses that as Alcoff claims, structure for us 'a perceptual backdrop' that mobilises particular ways of seeing. Alcoff argues, as Merleau-Ponty does, that meaning is always bodily, and that dominant discourses and aesthetics that structure our perception always make different bodies mean particular things to us, albeit tacitly. What the liberal humanist logic that fat pride expounds inevitably occludes is the fact that subjectivity is always already an intersubjectivity.

The experiencing body is a fundamentally intersubjective body. One experiences through one's body and the bodies of others. By negating the experiences and bodily responses of others, as fat politics so often urges its members to do, one cannot experience the potentialities and possibilities of one's own 'fat' body. Returning to Regina Williams' essay "Conquering the Fear of a Fat Body: The Journey towards Myself", which I discussed in the previous chapter, the title of Williams' article here is in itself telling with respect to the split she is attempting to live under the mantle of an unambiguous 'fat' political identity. The title speaks to us of a fundamental Cartesian-ness. Williams appears to be advocating an overcoming of the 'fat' body in order to know her self.

Flesh: the chiasmatic reversibility

While Merleau-Ponty acknowledges a fundamental 'dehiscence', or split, that demarcates one body from the next, he argues for a reconceptualisation of intercorporeal relations that are dependent on us understanding ourselves, others and the world as all part of the same 'Flesh' – "the flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 248). He says:

When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroach-