

Melvin Mapple's Scheherazade: Body Shaming and Redemption in the Fiction of Amélie Nothomb

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Amélie Nothomb's fiction often features characters with remarkable bodies or faces (Caine 71), and Nothomb has openly written on her own battle with anorexia. Given Nothomb's concern with the body, its functions and limits, many of her texts can be seen to lend themselves to analysis through Critical Disabilities Studies. Although Disability Studies is an emergent interdisciplinary field in the US, overall it has not been much studied in the French-speaking world perhaps due to the French academy's predilection for a universalist approach and traditional disciplinary over interdisciplinary studies (Thompson 243-4). Nevertheless, the work of disability studies scholars, in particular Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Staring: How We Look*, and her concepts of the stare and stare-management relate directly to a number of Nothomb's characters. Garland-Thomson and the social model of looking at disability show how physical differences can be understood in new ways by changing society's perspective on them. Coupled with feminist scholarship, disability studies can help explain Nothomb's preoccupation with bodily excess and how it relates to social anxiety over the body.

In *Beginning with Disability: A Primer*, Lennard J. Davis points out that determining whether someone is considered disabled is in many ways social. The decision may include whether to take into account vision or hearing issues, being overweight or underweight, or psychological issues such as depression (Davis 3). The ways people considered to have disabilities have been treated throughout history can be summarized with three models. The earliest is the "charity model" wherein the person with the disability was taken care of by a religious group; the origin of the disability was sometimes linked to sin, and it was proposed that prayer and alms giving could be efficient in effecting a miraculous change (Davis 8). The next model was the medical model whereby disability was seen as a scientific problem that needed to be remedied with a cure or prosthesis (Davis 8). The 20th century introduced the social model which is more focused on accommodation, access for all, and eliminating stigma (Davis 8). According to this model, the problem is less the impairment itself than how society discriminates and creates barriers.

These models can be used to help analyze Nothomb's novels. *Une forme de vie* is the story of a correspondence between a somewhat fictionalized version of Nothomb herself and a reader of her novels, Melvin Mapple. Mapple announces that he is an avid fan of Nothomb and that *The Stranger Next Door*, the translation of *Les Catilinaires* particularly interests him (Nothomb, *Une forme* 21). The book features an obese couple whose visits perturb two retirees in their new home. Not coincidentally, Mapple confesses that he too is obese. He claims to be a soldier in the American army in Iraq. In a way, *Une forme de vie* is a look at American shame because it exposes poverty and want in American society. Melvin admits: "Je suis entré dans l'armée tard, à 30 ans, parce que je n'avais plus de perspectives d'avenir. Je crevais de faim" (Nothomb, *Une forme* 17). Once in the army, Mapple describes his eating as a kind of sabotage, resistance, and self-hatred tied to the American involvement in the war (Nothomb, *Une forme* 31). He indicates that his overeating is a kind of suicide, perhaps linked to his own feelings of guilt (Nothomb, *Une forme* 30). Thus, the

novel is framed by American politics. Mapple hopes to be sent home from Iraq with the election of the then new president Obama (Nothomb, *Une forme* 16). Like the advent of the social model of disability, the election of Obama promises changes for Mapple and America. First, Mapple perceives a renewed openness to talk about and expose problems: “Sous l’administration Bush, on cachait notre pathologie, vue comme dégradante pour l’image américaine. Depuis Obama, les journaux commencent à parler de nous” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 22). In fact, Nothomb has indicated that part of the idea for the novel came from an article by Gregg Zoroya she read in *USA Today* about obesity increasing among US troops during the war in Iraq (Chevillot 23). Mapple inscribes the obesity epidemic in a succession of manifestations of American shame indicating that an unhealthy relationship to food is like the napalm or drug addictions of the Vietnam War (Nothomb, *Une forme* 60). Although the obesity of the US troops in the war appears based in reality, Mapple eventually reveals that the report of his service in the US army was merely a fiction he invented to get the writer’s attention. Mapple indicates that he has not in fact left his home since 2008, precisely when he went out to vote for Obama; it is a chore for him to walk in the heat, yet the true suffering comes from the stares of others. “A quand un président de 150 kilos?,” he asks (Nothomb, *Une forme* 118). Mapple inscribes his disability in the social model, referring to how Obama seemed to have broken the race barrier in presidential elections, and Mapple hopes for a rehabilitation of social views on persons with other kinds of physical differences. He laments that the weight barrier has perhaps yet to be lifted, implying that the ultimate sign of success is when a country’s leader embodies difference.

In fact, the fictionalized Nothomb in the novel proposes to accept Mapple’s difference as a form of creativity and individuality, along the lines of the social model of disability. Nothomb as narrator suggests that Mapple exhibit a series of photographs of himself as an art project in a gallery portraying his obesity as an act of creation (*Une forme* 52). Mapple delights in the idea and decides that his obesity can become a form of protest against the war in Iraq. He accepts the utility of his form at least as testimony and rejects the medical model which would suggest a transforming cure rather than acknowledgement of his different body, stating: “Au pays, avec les copains, on trouvera facilement un moyen d’attirer l’attention des médias, et, pourquoi pas, des galéristes. D’où l’intérêt de ne pas maigrir” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 60). Still, the narrator is torn between the medical model and the idea of rehabilitating Mapple’s image socially. Eventually, she doubts the possibility of Mapple’s gaining attention from the media, acknowledging that society will maintain its biases, and states: “Je fournissais à cette bande d’obèses le prétexte qu’ils cherchaient pour se confier dans leur gras. Ils allaient en crever. Et ce serait ma faute” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 62). Ultimately she sees obesity as a medical issue which will ruin Mapple and his friends if untreated.

Nevertheless, Melvin convinces her that, due to her correspondence and consideration for him, he feels more like a person (Nothomb, *Une forme* 114). As Garland-Thomson explains, it is an engaged look that people with different faces and bodies request, one that recognizes their humanity (117). This recognition of his personhood is significant for Melvin and much more rewarding than the medical model’s attempted cure. He adds: “Des psys, il n’en manque pas ici. J’en ai essayé plusieurs. On leur parle trois quarts d’heure dans le plus profond silence et puis ils vous prescrivent des Prozac. Je refuse d’avalier ça. Je n’ai rien contre les psys. Seulement ceux de l’armée américaine ne me convainquent pas. Ce que j’attends de vous est différent. Je veux exister pour vous” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 44). Nothomb, as represented in the text, takes pity on Mapple and plans to travel to Baltimore to meet him and cultivate their relationship. However, in a last-

minute realization, she decides she cannot overcome her disgust for his form and refuses the meeting. She situates her reasoning within the charity model; her visit would be out of pity and a desire to somehow cure Mapple's obesity: "La vérité, c'est que tu n'as pas changé depuis l'âge de 8 ans: tu te crois investie de pouvoirs mystérieux, tu t'imagines que tu vas toucher Melvin et qu'il sera guéri de son obésité," she thinks to herself (Nothomb, *Une forme* 119). Referring to her earlier belief in her own divinity as a child, described in *Métaphysique des tubes*, Nothomb can see how she was attracted to the idea that her presence would in some way cure or improve Melvin's condition. Nothomb finally accepts her limitations. She will be unable to look past her own disgust for Melvin's unusual form, which was perhaps easier to neglect in writing. She says to herself: "Ça va être l'enfer. Vu l'absence de conversation, tu ne pourras éviter de regarder sa graisse, il s'en rendra compte, vous souffrirez l'un et l'autre" (Nothomb, *Une forme* 120). Nothomb describes here what Garland-Thomson might call hostile staring. Nothomb realizes that her pity results from a profound disgust she would be unable to contain. Indeed, as Garland-Thomson relates: "A block to mutuality, pity is repugnance refined into genteel condescension" (93).

Nothomb's perceptions of Melvin Mapple can be seen as a mirror image of herself, a part that she rejects, the ab-ject or thrown-off, in Kristeva's sense, as Rogers has shown in her analysis of Nothomb's "anorexic sensibility" (52,57). Chevillot (20-21) and Amanieux (16) have also studied the doubling of Nothomb's identity in her characters, explained perhaps by an inner crisis Nothomb experienced during her early adolescence resulting in a fracturing of her identity into acceptable and enemy parts. It is not insignificant that Mapple calls his obesity Scheherazade. Nothomb and Mapple both are troubled by what they perceive to be a female body, in the author's case her own, through her anorexia, and Mapple is plagued by excess weight he deems emasculating. Considering that he has gained the weight of at least another person, Mapple gives this body a human and particularly female name: "Je préfère néanmoins l'identifier à une personne plutôt qu'à deux, et à une femme plutôt qu'à un homme, sans doute parce que je suis hétérosexuel," he explains (Nothomb, *Une forme* 24-25). Mapple feels the extra corpulence feminizes him, and he senses a need to distance himself from the tinge of homosexuality. Thus Nothomb's novel seems to fit in with a pattern of 1980's popular films critical of the American war in Iraq and of a perceived American imperialism (Rancourt 188). Especially in films criticizing the war in Vietnam, soldiers are presented as vulnerable, and the films tend to show the soldier as wounded and passive (Rancourt 189). Rancourt adds that the ableism in these films may be linked with homophobia in that the wounded soldier also represents a perceived shameful domination of a paragon of American masculinity (194). However, Rancourt suggests that by criticizing the wars, and not the soldiers, American viewers can avoid experiencing shame and the perceived threat to American masculinity (195). Since Belgium did not initially endorse the war in Iraq, Nothomb can be less conflicted than the American public in her open criticism of the war through her portrayal of the obese American soldier.

Yet, in her personal anorexic sensibility about her own body, Nothomb mirrors Mapple's critique of his supposed excessive "feminized" body. Catherine Rogers and Barbara Brooks have described the anorexic as seeing the body as indeterminate in boundaries and perceiving dieting as a way to establish more rigid contours (Rogers 57). Various reasons can be found for the rejection of the fat body, many of them cultural. Catherine Rogers theorizes Nothomb's conception of the body may be influenced by Japanese ideas of beauty (61). However, obesity is also clearly rejected in the West.

In *On ne naît pas grosse* journalist Gabrielle Deydier gives a portrait of life in France, describing her own experience being heavy as being related to a hormonal syndrome and an unhealthy relationship to food; she finds that a major part of the perception of obesity involves shame (Deydier 99). Deydier attributes this stigma partly to 19th century ideology which made it distasteful to show women eating (99). Even fat admirers are stigmatized, Deydier reports (112). What needs to change is the meaning attributed to the fat body. Following the social model of disability, feminist fat activist Daria Max states “Avoir un *gros* compte en banque ou une *grosse* voiture n’est pas péjoratif. Alors, être une personne grosse non plus” (qtd. in Deydier 141). Views on the obese female body and Nothomb’s anorexia can also be correlated with Naomi Wolf’s exploration of the effect of patriarchy on women’s eating in *The Beauty Myth* (Rogers 60). Wolf points out that, until the early 20th century in the Western world, women’s beauty was represented by an ample figure. However, with the 1920s, thinness and dieting came to be part of female preoccupations, not coincidentally at the same time as women were getting the right to vote in the US (Wolf 184). As a means of restricting women, the thin body became idealized.

With the obsession over thinness, anorexia has arisen and can be seen as an attempt to gain a sense of control over the body, image, and sexuality. Wolf explains the thinking: “Having no fat means having no breasts, thighs, hips.... which for once means not having asked for it” (Wolf 199). Nothomb herself describes coming to this logic in one of her more autobiographical novels, *Biographie de la faim*, where she explains that, at the age of 13, while her family was in Burma, she developed breasts and attempted to burn them (Nothomb, *Biographie* 162). She also describes restrictive dieting in her efforts to control her growth as a woman and presents this as an act of isolation: “Je fermai mes frontières” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 162). Nevertheless, Nothomb’s attempt to live a life with clear boundaries, free of the interventions of the outer world, is disturbed when she experiences attraction to a male. Pursuing the military analogy, she relates: “Mon corps était un traître” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 163). Eventually, she succeeds in reducing her body and its desires (Nothomb, *Biographie*, 166-7), and she attempts to compensate with an increase in mental activity, seeing a zero-sum opposition between body and mind (Nothomb, *Biographie*, 168). However, substituting words for things, and reading for eating, does not satisfy her, and instead Nothomb senses only the loss of her mental acuity. She explains: “Plus je maigrissais, plus je sentais fondre ce qui me tenait lieu d’esprit. (...) l’ascèse n’enrichit pas l’esprit. Il n’y a pas de vertu aux privations” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 169). She discovers she needs to develop a durable relationship with her body rather than neglecting or killing it and its desires. Nothomb eventually allows food to sustain her corporeal existence because of the mental activity it allows, in particular writing, which gives her so much pleasure.

Nothomb is in this way the opposite of her character, Bernadette, in *Les Catilinaires*, who appears to live only for bodily pleasures. Bernadette and her husband, Palamède Bernardin, are both obese and trouble the narrator and his wife, retirees who look forward to a new life of relative isolation in the country. The narrator describes Bernadette as an excrescence, a cyst (Nothomb, *Les Catilinaires* 66). In fact, Bernadette seems no more than a digestive tube, the image Nothomb holds in horror from *Métaphysique des tubes*. Bernadette says very little, but she appears ecstatic when given chocolate or soup (Nothomb, *Les Catilinaires* 74). However, Bernadette’s husband refuses her the taste of chocolate. The narrator wonders why Bernardin deprives his wife of that pleasure (Nothomb, *Les Catilinaires* 75). The logic goes back to what Bordo describes in

Unbearable Weight: Western society restricts women's appetites, of all kinds, as dangerous and terrifying. Instead, women, and especially mothers, are idealized when they deny themselves (Bordo 118). Bernadette is unconventional in that, rather than her nourishing her husband, he cares and cooks for her. This goes against society's unwritten rule that women are supposed to be most satisfied by feeding others (Bordo 118). Instead, Bernadette finds pleasure in her eating and sleeping, and this is ultimately sufficient reason for the narrator and his wife, to justify Bernadette's existence: "Peu importait que ces activités fussent nobles ou non: la volupté élève, quelle qu'en soit la source," we read (Nothomb, *Les Catilinaires* 117). On the other hand, Emile, the narrator protagonist, judges Bernadette's husband's life not worth living. Emile describes Monsieur Bernardin as simply waiting for his death as an escape from his prison (*Les Catilinaires* 143). In fact, after first saving the old man from his attempt at suicide, the narrator seems to understand the futility of his neighbor's existence and eventually smothers him with a pillow in an apparent mercy killing. "Je commis mon acte de compassion," he states (Nothomb, *Les Catilinaires* 149). It seems that this outcome confirms Bordo's analyses in the extreme in that the narrator determines that the life of a husband of an overweight wife who devotes all his time to feeding her cannot be pleasurable or even worth living. In his views condemning Palamède for his lack of pleasure, the narrator is the polar opposite of the eugenics movement which justified the killing of disabled citizens, many by starvation, on the basis of their lack of productivity (Evans). Instead, in *Les Catilinaires*, Nothomb justifies the individual's life through the capacity to experience pleasure rather than through the utility to others.

In her work, *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson also explores the dynamics of encounters with others, particularly those with different bodies, and shows how staring is way of establishing social relationships: sorting out how who we are addressing and creating a relationship of engagement or avoidance (14-15). Garland-Thomson delineates a hierarchy of staring beginning with baroque staring which she defines as being "wonderstruck" (50). She draws the term from the period of baroque art which illustrates the strange and exaggerated and attempts to confound reason with the marvelous (Garland-Thomson 50). The baroque centers on unintelligibility while society since the Enlightenment has relegated wonderment to the lower levels of perception (Garland-Thomson 51). Finally, modern capitalist culture starting in the 19th century created the concept of the norm. Through it, society compels individuals to conform to standards of behavior and appear normal, including in the aspect of their very bodies, and this has aided the development of large-scale capitalist industry (Garland-Thomson 31). Any deviance from the norm disrupts anonymous and effortless viewing (Garland-Thomson 37). However, the stare can be objectifying and a source of discomfort for the de-humanized staree.

One of Nothomb's characters who most engages with and manages the stare is Ephiphane of *Attentat*. The 1997 novel is centered on a man with an unusual face, one that resembles an ear, he states (Nothomb, *Attentat* 11). In the early pages of the novel, Epiphane recounts how he earned the nickname "Quasimodo" and enjoys confounding onlookers confessing: "j'adore celui qui détourne le regard tant il est gêné, j'adore la fascination enfantine de ceux qui ne peuvent me lâcher des yeux. Je voudrais leur crier: 'Et encore, vous ne voyez que ma figure!'" (Nothomb, *Attentat* 10). Garland-Thomson describes this perspective on others as hostile staring (116), the kind of staring that results when there is no element of identification between the viewer and the person viewed (Garland-Thomson 186). In response, Epiphane engages in what Garland-Thomson describes as stare management where the staree looks back and establishes eye contact in order to

demonstrate a mutual humanity which in a sense relieves the starrer of some anxiety (87). However, Epiphane rather seems to take pleasure in the discomfort he causes, and, furthermore, he rejects the medical model or cure through esthetic surgery considering how much our identity is linked to our original body (Nothomb, *Attentat* 53). In fact, Epiphane discovers an identity in his self-described ugliness. When he accompanies his beautiful friend Ethel to an interview at a modeling agency, he notices that the recruiters pay more attention to him (Nothomb, *Attentat* 74). He becomes a celebrity and is able to respond to the public's "baroque stare" by inventing a life suitable for their desire to know. He has fun adding to the public's preconceptions and curiosity, and he begins to invent convoluted origins for his different appearance offering that he was rejected by his mother and raised by bohemians who put him into the circus (Nothomb, *Attentat* 77). However, Epiphane's goal is not to be seen as beautiful in another way. He opposes his case to that of fat activists who want to point out the beauty of the large body saying of himself: "Mon cas est radicalement différent. Il ne s'agira pas de clamer des slogans du style : Ugly is beautiful. Regardez-moi.... Il s'agit de me montrer tel que je suis" (Nothomb, *Attentat* 68). Nothomb's character, Epiphane, learns to profit from his difference and even proposes to become a fashion model. His pitch for his presence on the runway is that his unusual appearance will accentuate the beauty of the other models (Nothomb, *Attentat* 69). Epiphane sees his value as being able to shock the viewer into attention by setting himself and the models apart from the banal bourgeois human landscape the conforming public has presented since the Enlightenment.

However, Epiphane is unable to declare his love for Ethel despite his philosophical views. Instead, he speaks as a modern Cyrano (Rogers 55) exalting his own love through the relationship of Ethel with his rival, Xavier (Nothomb, *Attentat* 128). When Epiphane indirectly confesses his love to Ethel, he veils his emotions by projecting them through the perceived experiences of his rival. Delighted, Ethel describes to Epiphane her perfect happiness with Xavier prompting Epiphane to explain that it was his words that had seduced her (Nothomb, *Attentat* 130). Yet, Nothomb's text does not end with the fairy tale rehabilitation of physical difference or the acknowledgement of the superiority of inner beauty or beautiful language. When Ethel's lover Xavier criticizes a film Ethel is featured in, Epiphane sees an opportunity to make his move on Ethel, hoping she will simply forget his ugliness in her moment of vulnerability (Nothomb, *Attentat*, 156). Thus, while Epiphane rejects the ordinary or normal in his tastes in entertainment, food, and even women, he is far from fully embracing his own exceptional appearance. In a fax to Ethel revealing that he was in fact describing his own love for her through Xavier, Epiphane exhibits relief in speaking the truth: "il me semble ... que, pour la première fois de ma vie, je suis normal (Nothomb, *Attentat*, 188). In fact, although living in an extraordinary body, Epiphane's desire is merely normal. As Rodgers has indicated, "the ugly desire the beautiful" (53). In response, Ethel eventually rejects Epiphane pointing out to him the hypocrisy in his thinking; like Quasimodo, Epiphane chooses an acknowledged beauty for his love object, not a woman deemed unattractive but with a beautiful soul. Ethel signals: "Mais comme par hasard, quand notre Quasimodo-Epiphane tombe amoureux, ce n'est pas d'une fille laide à l'âme admirable." (Nothomb, *Attentat* 201). Although Epiphane capitalizes on the value of his own unusual body for the advancement of his public life, he remains conflicted about it, and his estimation of the female body, as Ethel demonstrates, seems to remain largely traditional and superficial.

In this way, Nothomb can be seen to investigate the effects of physical difference on interpersonal relations in her novels. Melvin Mapple may hope to gain social acceptance and

recognition of his personal struggle with the human condition through an autobiographical photo exhibit, but the fictional Nothomb in the novel cannot get past the medical model of disability and her desires to cure Melvin of what she perceives to be an ill body. The value of Bernadette Bernardin's assisted life in an unusually large body is reaffirmed in *Les Catilinaires*, but that of her caretaker husband is deemed a pointless suffering. Epiphane manages the public's view of his life in an extraordinary body in *Attentat*, yet he fails to be accepted as a romantic interest, and he remains patriarchal in his evaluation of the female body.

The reading of Nothomb in this way through critical disability studies theory and feminism can lead to nuanced discussions about the double standards for men and women, the definition of the good life, ideas about gender roles, and how our concepts about the body are shaped by culture. Useful as a follow-up or pre-reading discussion, Meghan Green's *Body Image and Body Shaming* offers a list of related discussion questions for the classroom concerning body modification, body image, and how they are affected by media (98-99). Thus, paired with readings from Critical Disability Studies and reflections on body image, the novels of Nothomb can serve as examples of how the stigmatized body might be redeemed through art, politics, and social thought, although her novels do not gloss over pain or resolve into fairy tale endings. Rather, Nothomb explores the realities and complexities of life with a non-normative physique fulling engaging with embodiment as a universal part of the human condition. Reading Nothomb thus through the lens of disability studies allows for an investigation of the meanings assigned to physical differences and how these meanings can be understood and negotiated.

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