Since at least the mid 1960s, people on the islands of Zanzibar have talked about being attacked by a creature called Popobawa, “batwing,” who is variously thought of as a djinn, spirit, demon, beast, monster, or an embodied form of witchcraft. Unlike most Zanzibari spirits, Popobawa does not possess people nor form long term relationships with them, but rather sexually assaults them and leaves them to tell their story to others, sometimes even demanding that they do so. Too, unlike majini ya mahaba, “love spirits,” who typically possess and have sexual intercourse with humans of the opposite gender, Popobawa tends to prefer male victims. Reoccurring periodically since the 1960s, Popobawa attacks are shrouded by mystery and speculation and thus are a popular subject for conversation and gossip.

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**Come See CSW’s “YAY Scale”**

**Last week** in the hall outside a lecture room in Dodd, a group of students, faculty, and staff, mostly women, eagerly lined up to step on a weigh scale, as others peered over their shoulder to read the outcome. The “YAY” scale, bright pink and ringed with fur, was a gift to CSW from fat activist Marilyn Wann, the last speaker in CSW’s highly successful series, “Gender and Body Size,” curated by Professor Abigail Saguy. Wann invented the “YAY” scale, and the lack of inhibition it generated among the crowd in Dodd was probably due to Wann’s scalar innovation. The weight results were calibrated not in numbers, but in compliments: “beautiful,” “alluring,” “hot,” “sexy,” “handsome,” and “fine,” among others. As everyone, including me, jumped on the scale, laughing, talking, and clustering around to read the results, I was **Yay! Scale is calibrated in compliments!**
struck by Wann’s ingenuity. The “YAY” scale converts an instrument of self-surveillance and critique to one of pink and fuzzy self-affirmation. I wondered, asking a question Carrie Bradshaw of Sex and the City never would, what would happen to our national self-image if the “YAY” scale replaced the “weigh” scale?

We are a country obsessed with weight, specifically weight-loss. Though the deleterious effects of being too thin far outweigh (sorry, I couldn’t help the pun) those of being too fat (Wann’s term), we don’t have magazines, pills, endless surplus diets, and hypnotic techniques to help people gain weight. Teen magazines are not filled with articles warning of the health risks of a famished body size. Rather, the health, fashion, and media industries collaborate in putting forth an image of a very thin body as the both the norm and the optimum. This body is not the norm, far from it, but it becomes the image, the size to which everyone aspires. This fantasy norm is, of course, the engine that drives the $58 billion per annum (and growing) weight loss industry. In her talk, “Fighting Fat Fear during the War on Obesity,” Wann pointed out that those growing numbers indicate an industry that is not working, because if people lost weight and kept it off, weight loss programs would go out of business. Her comments echoed those of the first speaker, Paul Campos, who detailed the three causes of people having larger body size: genes, poverty, and stress—three causes over which individuals have little or no control. Yet despite the force of these biological and economic factors, we persist in holding individuals exclusively responsible for their body size.

During her talk, Wann used the technique of “speed anthropology” to solicit from the audience our culture’s beliefs about body size and diversity. Putting the words “fat” and “thin” on the board, she asked everyone to call out their associations to each of these words. Everyone reading this commentary can imagine the kinds of dichotomies that emerged—“lazy” versus “energetic,” “ugly” versus “beautiful,” “self indulgent” versus “disciplined,” “dirty” versus “clean.” For everyone, but especially children, these biases are damaging, hurtful, and stressful.

Wann suggested another standard altogether, one that respects natural body size diversity: health at every size. Health at every size is comprised of three principles: love your body; eat well; and go outside and play. And put a “YAY” scale in your closet! You can view all three of the talks in the Gender and Body Size Faculty Curator series on UCLA’s YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/UCLA
“The time has come,” said Barbra Streisand, announcing that Kathryn Bigelow had won the Oscar for Best Director for the Iraq war film, The Hurt Locker. Bigelow became the first woman director to win the award in the history of the academy. Ten minutes later, she made history again, as her film won Best Picture, an award never before given to a film directed by a woman. (Streisand’s film, The Prince of Tides, was nominated in 1991). It was a jubilant moment and richly deserved, as The Hurt Locker was not only directed by a woman, but was also the best film of the 10 nominated features. So it has been fascinating to follow the post-Oscar chatter. Where one might expect at least respectful coverage, instead there has been what could only charitably be called damning with faint praise. John Horn’s front-page piece in the L.A. Times is a perfect example. In the first two sentences, he describes The Hurt Locker as a “gritty, challenging, and little-seen drama,” “an emotionally exhausting account,” and “the lowest-grossing film in modern history to capture Hollywood’s highest award.” Consider the descriptors: little, lowest, and emotionally exhausting. He then gets to the meat of the matter—a comparison of Bigelow’s box office—her “little” film—with James Cameron’s “box-office behemoth” Avatar. Horn could have told any number of stories about the win. The little train that could comes to mind. The Hurt Locker’s production budget ($11m) was less than one-tenth of Avatar’s marketing budget ($150m) and utterly dwarfed by its production budget of $300m. But in that story, bigger is not better, it only costs more. As someone remarked at an Oscar party I attended, Avatar is like McDonald’s. Big Mac’s are incredibly satisfying and millions of them are sold every year, but they don’t deserve a Michelin rating, nor should they be the measure by which fine food or films are judged.

— Kathleen McHugh
Occult Sex, continued from page 1

Conversations with Tanzanians reveal that talk about *Popobawa* allows them to discuss otherwise taboo topics. As Hasaan, a gay man in his mid 30s, told me, “*Popobawa* is many things together...each person speaks his or her version.” Like the vampire stories Luise White (2000) studied in East and Central Africa, *Popobawa* stories are “elastic,” with different meanings in different times and places and meaning different things to different people. People use conversations about *Popobawa* to discuss topics as diverse as perceived attempts by the Tanzanian government to distract its people from real concerns, poverty in certain suburbs of Dar es Salaam, deception by shamans, Muslims who have lapsed in their practice of Islam, and sexuality. It is the latter that I will focus on here.

Research on spirit possession, along the Swahili coast and elsewhere, is filled with examples of possessed people transgressing cultural boundaries, particularly with regard to female sex roles. For example, although a Digo woman is expected to speak politely to her father-in-law, while possessed by a spirit she may lash out at him (Gomm 1975). Both Swahili and Digo women are expected to welcome their husband’s sexual advances, but a woman possessed by a spirit may kick her husband out of bed (Gomm 1975) or be “unable” to have sex with him because of “frigidity” (Caplan 1975: 113, 117). Among Malagasy speakers in Mayotte, a woman is expected to be sexually faithful to her husband, but if a spirit causes her infidelity, she will be forgiven (Lambek 1980). In Zanzibar, all women are expected to marry, but if a male spirit possesses and marries a woman, he may forbid or discourage her from marrying a human man (Purpura 1997). In accordance with the Qur’an, Zanzibari Muslims refrain from alcohol, but those possessed by Christian *kibuki* spirits from Madagascar are expected to drink brandy during possession events and may even do so regularly (Larsen 2008). *Kibuki* spirits also forbid those they possess from covering their heads and wearing black, thus preventing possessed women from wearing the Islamic *buibui* that most Zanzibari women wear in public (Larsen 2008). Spirits can also change conversational norms: public flirtation is frowned upon, but during *kibuki* rituals “the spirits flirt with and express a wish to initiate sexual relationships with the people present” (Larsen 2008: 69).

Even outside of or after possession events or supernatural experiences, talk about the supernatural allows the same sorts of transgression to occur. Lambek, writing about spirit possession on the island of Mayotte, argues that “possession can usefully be viewed as a system of communication,” especially between husbands and wives (Lambek 1980: 318-319). I extend this argument to show that the system of communication created by possession extends beyond the limited timeframe in which a spirit is present; even after a possessor spirit or an attacking djinn like *Popobawa* leaves, talk about these experiences allows participants to

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1. Interview, 4 August 2009, Stonetown, Unguja. All names of participants have been changed.
Occult sex is the only type of extramarital sex about which Zanzibari ideals allow (relatively) frank discussion. As my research illustrates, women take advantage of this relative freedom to talk about their own sexual pleasures and frustrations in ways that disrupt hegemonic definitions of sexuality.

communicate transgressive messages, crossing not only the boundaries of culturally appropriate talk, but also gender roles.

Zanzibar, like other places along the Swahili coast, is a Muslim culture where fairly strict sex segregation is practiced. Heterosexual marriage is one of the few realms in which men and women come together and the marital relationship is therefore both idealized and subject to elaborate societal expectations, especially with regard to sex. Whereas traditionally specialist sex instructors known as somo or kungwi were contracted to teach young women about sexuality beginning at puberty (Mutch 2008; Strobel 1975a), today it is common for a group of women, friends of the bride’s mother, to co-instruct the bride during wedding preparations, adding to the role of weddings as one of few events which offer women “a chance for gossip, discussion and entertainment” (Strobel 1975a, 37). I observed that female sex instructors joke around and laugh raucously while co-constructing the “lesson” they offer a new bride and that women vie to take part in the conversation. Participating in sex instruction is one of the few contexts in which Zanzibari women may talk about sex freely, albeit without self-disclosure of their own sexual practices (see Pichler 2007). Yet, according to Zanzibari values, even during sex instruction, references to sex must not be explicit, concealed through such “implicit ways (njia ya ndani)” (Larsen 2008: 114) as euphemism and innuendo.

Although people believe that both men and women should enjoy sex (Caplan 1975), the emphasis of sex instruction is on how a woman should please her husband rather than on her own sexual pleasure. Moreover, men do not receive any formal instruction on how to please their wives sexually. Thus, although providing sex instruction may be fun for women, Swahili discourse on sexuality naturalizes a definition of sex that serves the interest of men rather than women (see Cameron 2001).

Occult sex is the only type of extramarital sex about which Zanzibari ideals allow (relatively) frank discussion. As my research illustrates, women take advantage of this relative freedom to talk about their own sexual pleasures and frustrations in ways that disrupt hegemonic definitions of sexuality.

The conversation I discuss here took place at a shop in Unguja’s capital, Stonetown, where I interviewed two Muslim women, whom I will call Amina and Zulekha. Both are married and in their 30s. We spoke in the shop where Amina worked, while Zulekha periodically stepped out to check on her own shop next door. Although initially Amina seemed shy, she became very talkative about Popobawa and eventually ruhani, another type of sexual spirit.

Our conversation begins with a discussion of what Popobawa is.

KATRINA: What have you heard about Popobawa?
ZULEKHA: From what I’ve heard about *Popobawa*, I think it’s witchcraft, from what I’ve heard. Some say it’s a beast like a demon. He comes, especially at night, not during the day. When he comes he attacks people, whether it’s a man or a woman. He has sex with them [*Anafanya nao mapenzi.*] At night. Now that’s what I myself have heard.

Following Zulekha, Amina adds other interpretations: *Popobawa* may be a djinn or the work of a witch. While *Popobawa*’s identity is open to speculation, the women agree with the dominant feature of the *Popobawa* myth: he has sex with his victims, both male and female. Of interest here is how, over the course of our conversation, the terms Zulekha and Amina use to discuss sex shift from polite, somewhat euphemistic terms, discussed in the abstract, to more literal terms discussed in reference to the speaker but marked by nervous laughter, to eventually a personal disclosure of occult sex.

In Zulekha’s comments quoted above, she uses the Swahili expression *kufanya mapenzi*, “to make love,” a widespread euphemism for sex and one that is considered respectable in conversation. However, perhaps because the reference to “love” in *kufanya mapenzi* seems inappropriate for the violent actions of *Popobawa*, more people use the term *kuingilia*, “to penetrate.” For example, Amina begins telling us about her sister’s neighbor who was attacked by *Popobawa* but managed to fight him off despite being pregnant. Seemingly surprised that *Popobawa* would attack a pregnant women, Zulekha interrupts her,
asking “So he was– Popobawa was wanting to penetrate [amuingilie] her while she was–, eh?”

In her response, Amina takes up Zulekha’s use of the term –ingilia, with a false start using the related verb –ingia, “enter”:

AMINA: Yes, while she was pregnant, yeah. That’s how it was, I saw this woman with my own eyes. Yes.

KATRINA: And she said he looked like a person?

AMINA: Yeah, she said he looked like a person, a man. And also when he enters [anapoingia]–I’ve heard about people who when he penetrates [anapowaingilia] them in their homes, it’s like he comes with an odor.

Like kufanya mapenzi, kuwingilia, “to penetrate,” is a common Swahili term used for sexual intercourse. However, whereas kufanya mapenzi is a more holistic reference to sex, kuwingilia specifically refers to penetrative sex. Although a bit graphic, it is a polite term used, for example, in Swahili news headlines and in discussions of appropriate sexual behavior within Islamic marriage.

In Amina’s first use of -ingi-, the verb root of both –ingia “enter” and –ingilia “penetrate,” her false start suggests her hesitancy to use the more graphic term. However, she corrects herself and switches to –ingilia, having been given permission by Zulekha’s previous use of the term. By using the term in an abstract way, to refer to unspecified people, Amina is able to discuss a rather graphic sex act in a polite context. Yet a few moments later, when she introduces herself as a topic of conversation, her hesitancy returns, and her words are marked by laughter. (Each pulse of laughter is symbolized by the @ symbol.)

AMINA: Here in the city I haven’t heard of him [attacking anyone]. […] Inside the other parts of town [sehemu za ng’ambo ng’ambo] is where it happens a lot. But me, where I am [kwangu] @he hasn’t @entered [hajaingia] @I can say, eeh?

Here Amina introduces a double meaning that allows her to avoid explicitly stating what she means: Popobawa has not penetrated her.

Amina’s claim that she herself has not been attacked by Popobawa is one I heard from many participants. People were keen to have me know that they don’t speak from personal experience of Popobawa; having been sexually penetrated by a demon is not information one would want to disclose in conversation.

Her use of the locative possessive form kwangu can mean either “where I am” (for example, at my home) or “to/for/at me,” which allows her final sentence to mean both “he hasn’t entered my home” and “he hasn’t entered me.” Perhaps because the latter meaning is considered too direct for conversation, Amina laughs nervously.

Amina’s claim that she herself has not been attacked by Popobawa is one I heard from many participants. People were keen to have me know that they don’t speak from personal experience of Popobawa; having been sexually penetrated by a demon is not information one

2. Kwa hivyo aliikuu popobawa aliikuu anataka amuingilie wakati naye–, eh?
would want to disclose in conversation. Amina goes on to explain that even when people are attacked by Popobawa, they do not openly disclose this information. Having learned from other sources that some victims believe that telling their stories will prevent future attacks, I ask Amina and Zulekha, “If a person is attacked, does s/he like to tell people or is it shameful?”

AMINA: Attacked?

KATRINA: Yeah.

AMINA: Aah, actually it’s not often, in other words, to hear something like, “I’ve been attacked.” Maybe “I did him [nilimfanya],” maybe “you-know-what [kitendo fulani].” It’s not often. More often, a person, you’ll hear him/her, “I’ve been attacked, but he didn’t have time to do you-know-what.”

Yeah. I’ve never heard a person saying something like “I’ve been attacked, he had time,” like “to do you-know-what [kitu fulani] to me.” No way!

Kuvamiwa, “to be attacked,” is a term many others use to talk about Popobawa, yet Amina initially seems surprised when I introduce the word into our conversation, rather than taking up the two terms she and Zulekha had previously used for Popobawa’s activity: kufanya mapenzi and kuwingilia. In her response, she initially claims that most people don’t talk about being attacked. Yet she goes on to give a hypothetical example of reported speech that begins with “I’ve been attacked, but…” and goes on to allude to Popobawa’s interest in kitendo fulani, “a certain act,” or kitu fulani, “a certain thing” (both of which I translate above as “you-know-what”), more euphemistic references to sex. By introducing this term into our conversation, Amina brings the conversation back around to sex, albeit using indirect language. Moreover, she adds to the sense that knowledge of Popobawa is built up piecemeal through bits and pieces of (overheard) conversations, and she suggests that the truth about Popobawa attacks is unattainable precisely because those who are attacked won’t admit that Popobawa successfully did “you-know-what” to them.

ZULEKHA: We here, Tanzanians in general, we like to conceal secrets. We are not open. To say something openly like “I’ve actually been penetrated,” a person conceals. S/he thinks, “Ah! Should I say anything? No way!” S/he conceals. It’s just like someone being raped but s/he conceals: “Ah, should I say that I’ve been raped? As long as I’m not injured, I don’t say anything.” Unless s/he is seen, then s/he will speak. Yeah, that’s how it is. Now it may be that people have had [Popobawa attacks] happen to them, but many conceal it. They don’t like to be—to be open.

Both the hypothetical reported speech Amina uses as examples and Zulekha’s metalinguistic commentary on Tanzanian conversational practices relate to what Larsen has described as a Zanzibari “ethics of concealment” (2008: 51). According to Zanzibari ideals, both men and women should avoid public conversations about “conduct that is considered unchaste” (2008: 51), such as sexual transgressions, as well as talk about their thoughts and feelings, such as sexual desire.
Respecting this “ethics of concealment,” Amina and Zulekha perform Zanzibari conversational ideals both by using euphemisms to discuss sex between Popobawa and his victims, as well as by not individuating those about whom they’ve heard stories. Moreover, their references to how others talk about Popobawa sexual assaults suggest that others also perform these ideals, both by using euphemistic language and by denying their own involvement in a shameful event.

After an extensive conversation about Popobawa, our talk turns to other djinns that have sex with human beings. The women began telling me about ruhani, heterosexual demons that possess people of the opposite gender and can have sex with them. To my surprise, Amina makes an intensely personal disclosure:

**AMINA:** Even I have had those problems.

**KATRINA:** What was it like?

**AMINA:** I was sleeping at night. First I was feeling like every few days I get a fever, again and again. I go to the hospital, I’m checked for malaria, I don’t have malaria. I go home. When I get home and I’m sleeping at night with my husband, but I’m sleeping at night, I feel like it’s my husband with whom I’m doing the act [tendo].

**KATRINA:** Mmh.

**AMINA:** Yeah. I’m doing the act with him. Moreover, you feel pleasure even greater than when you do it with your husband.

@@@ 

**ZULEKHA:** He is— you mean greater? Than him?

**AMINA:** Yeah! So, when you finish and you wake up suddenly from sleep you look at your husband and he’s asleep.

**ZULEKHA:** (H)³

**AMINA:** You just remain in a state of surprise. Especially, like we women of Zanzibar, when we sleep we like—You have gotten a talker! @I will speak @

³. (H) signifies a sharp intake of breath, a Swahili conversational device used to indicate one is listening and interested in the topic.

[... Now on some of the days, I mean, it does this act [hiki kitendo] to me while I am asleep but not completely.]

Amina’s story of the ruhani spirit has several interesting features. She begins the story with the first person “I,” using repetition to illustrate the frustrating nature of her experience. She mentions sleeping with her husband but then clarifies that she really means sleeping, not “sleeping with” as a euphemism for sex. In contrast to her husband, with whom she does “the act,” using an active verb with herself as the agent, the spirit does “this act” to her while she is sleeping, without her permission. She also uses slightly different terms to refer to these acts. With her husband, the act is tendo, while with the spirit the act is kitendo, a diminutive form—the same one she used earlier in our conversation to describe the euphemisms others use for Popobawa sexual assaults. But, volunteering information about her own feelings, Amina switches to the second person “you” even though clearly describing her own experience. In doing so she reveals intensely personal information that could bring shame to her husband without violating here! @@@@@@. [...] Now on some of the days, I mean, it does this act [hiki kitendo] to me while I am asleep but not completely.
Zanzibari conversational ideals. In the final turn quoted above, Amina realizes that she is revealing more information than I’ve actually asked for and makes a joke about herself: “You have gotten a talker!” Both here and when critiquing her husband’s ability to please her sexually, she laughs. Brottman argues that “humor is often utilized as an acceptable social outlet for those frustrations, tensions and hostilities that have no other means of release” (2002: 412); here, Amina laughs precisely at the moment she realizes she has revealed her frustrations, violating the norms of Zanzibari conversations and expectations of women.

Writing about women on the Swahili coast in the 1970s, Strobel remarked that “the paucity of written documents enhances the significance of oral evidence” (1975b: 4). Today much more has been written about Swahili women, but discourse on sexuality is still primarily oral. Moreover, as a heavily circumscribed topic and one that is restricted to the private domain, sexuality is a topic difficult to research. As Strobel found with interviews about women’s associations in Mombasa, approaching sexuality through conversations about Popobawa provides “something relatively impersonal to discuss in our early interviews but a topic that interested and excited the women” (1975b: 5). But occult sex is not merely a conversational resource for the researcher. It also allows the sexually dispossessed—in this case, heterosexual women desiring more equitable sexual relationships with their husbands—not only opportunities to discuss conversational norms but also to violate them. Just as socially deprived groups are more likely to experience spirit possession, so too are they more likely to talk about it.

Katrina Daly Thompson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at UCLA. She received a CSW Junior Faculty Research Development Grant for 2009–10.

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Everyone knows that there is an “obesity epidemic” raging across America, killing our children and straining our health care system. Or, at least, that is what the media, government, and medical profession have told us, and we take it as a matter of faith that what they have said about obesity is true. This fear of fat has led to billions of dollars invested in preventing or reducing obesity. Millions of men and women struggle to lose weight in order to improve their health. But is there really a link between weight and health?
SURPRISING FINDINGS IN RESEARCH ON WEIGHT AND HEALTH

Dr. Katherine M. Flegal, an epidemiologist and senior research scientist at the National Center for Health Statistics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), conducts research that sharply challenges the popular notions about the links between fat and health. She outlined her findings in her talk, “Weight and Mortality,” which was given as part of the Gender and Body Size Faculty Curator Series organized by Professor Abigail Saguy and CSW.

Flegal noted that in 2004, a study by Ali Mokdad and colleagues found that being overweight (BMI 25–29) or obese (BMI 30+) was associated with a shocking 400,000 deaths per year. Mokdad and colleagues claimed that obesity would soon kill more people per year than smoking. The CDC publicized the study, and the media pumped out hundreds of news reports on the study for over a year. Tommy Thompson, the head of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, declared that “Americans need to understand that overweight and obesity are literally killing us.”

But something about these findings didn’t sound quite right to Flegal. Based on her years of research on obesity, the numbers seemed too impossibly high to be believed. Flegal and her colleagues took a look at the dataset that Mokdad had used and realized that there had been serious statistical errors in the article. Flegal re-analyzed the data using better statistical methods. She found that obesity (BMI 30+) was associated with 112,000 deaths per year, much lower than what Mokdad reported. Further, over the past several decades, the link between obesity and dying became weaker, and most of these deaths were associated with being in the very heaviest weight categories.

But she also found something that surprised many researchers: There were 86,000 fewer deaths per year in among “overweight” individuals (BMI 25–29) than among “normal” weight individuals! This means that people who are classified as "overweight" are actually more likely to live longer than thinner individuals. So, in total, if you combine the higher number of deaths associated with being obese (+112,000) and the lower number of deaths associated with...
Flegal went on to point out that correlation does not equal causation—just because there is an association between obesity and dying does not mean that obesity causes death. Poverty, physical inactivity, poor diet, lack of access to fresh food, and denial of health insurance are associated with both weighing more and dying earlier.

being overweight (-86,000), the number of deaths associated with overweight and obesity combined is only 26,000. Flegal published her study in the prestigious Journal of the American Medical Association.

Flegal went on to point out that correlation does not equal causation—just because there is an association between obesity and dying does not mean that obesity causes death. Poverty, physical inactivity, poor diet, lack of access to fresh food, and denial of health insurance are associated with both weighing more and dying earlier. Each of these factors could cause a person to be heavier and to die earlier. For example, we know from other research that fat men and women who exercise regularly have better health than slender men and women who do not exercise, suggesting that activity level is a far more important predictor of health than weight. Each time you take into account these other factors, the link between weight and mortality shrinks even more.

THE CONTROVERSY BREWS
The CDC admitted that the Mokdad study was flawed, endorsed Flegal’s study, and gave Flegal an award for her research. But the controversy did not end there. The results of the study created a firestorm of criticism and outrage from the scientific and health community.

“It’s just rubbish,” states Walter Willet, professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, in the Washington Post. The Harvard School of Public Health website featured an article titled, “Flawed Obesity Study Minimizes Health Risks of Excess Weight.” The article claims that there were “serious flaws” in Flegal’s study and that the findings grossly underestimate “the link between overweight and mortality risk.” As of March 1, 2010, the website does not mention that the CDC retracted their support of the Mokdad study and supported Flegal’s study.

In her talk, Flegal addressed each one of the counterpoints raised by critics, showing that the relationship between weight and mortality remains small even when taking the criticisms into account (see sidebar on page 15).

Clearly, the results of Flegal’s study created a great deal of concern from some public health authorities. There are people
Responses to Flegal’s Critics

Isn’t Flegal’s study unusual? Is hers the only study showing that overweight people live longer?
No. Flegal gave citation after citation showing that that overweight men and women live longer than “normal” weight individuals. This is true in dozens of studies from many countries. However, many of these studies fail to mention in the text of the article that overweight people are healthier—you have to look in the tables to see the statistics showing this is true. There tends to be a bias in obesity research: When researchers find that obesity is linked with poorer health, they announce it prominently in the text. When they find no link or that heavier people are healthier than thinner folks, they often present the finding as part of a larger table and don’t mention it in the text.

Maybe the problem is that you are using BMI, which is an imprecise measure of body fat. Wouldn’t the results be different if you used a different measure of body fat?
No. You get the same results whether you use BMI or a variety of other measures of percentage of body fat.

Could it be that very sick people and older people lose a lot of weight, and that’s why it appears that thinner individuals die earlier than overweight individuals?
No. In the case of wasting diseases, many people do lose weight. But Flegal did a variety of analyses where very sick individuals were either included or excluded from the sample. She still found the same pattern of results. Overall, there is a robust relationship between being overweight and living longer.
who have invested entire careers in the notion that even a little bit of extra weight is harmful. If obesity does not significantly increase the risk of mortality, what happens to funding that researchers are receiving to reduce the number of overweight and obese men and women? How will this affect current public health policies and interventions? Flegal argues that the widespread belief that fat is bad and the existing public health policies lead scientists to look for evidence that obesity is harmful while ignoring evidence that it is not.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR WOMEN’S STUDIES?
From the publishing of the books Unbearable Weight by Susan Bordo to The Beauty Myth by Naomi Wolf, feminists have long been critical of the pressure on average weight women to become very slender. But, until recently, many feminists had been silent about the pressures on overweight and obese men and women to lose weight.

Over the past several decades, more and more feminists have suggested that the preoccupation with body fat is just one more way that people try to control men’s and women’s bodies. They argue that there is a long history of science being used to argue that stigmatized groups are in some way inferior to “normal” people, whether it is using “science” to “prove” that Black men and women are genetically inferior or that fat men and women are undesirable. It wasn’t until decades after the Civil Rights Movement that we saw how science was influenced by the social beliefs of the previous era. Flegal suggests that there may be parallels in terms of how social beliefs affect the “science” of “healthy” weight.

Many feminists might argue that even if being fat does elevate somewhat one’s risk of dying, it is still important to celebrate the diversity of body shapes and sizes that we see. Trying to eliminate an entire class of people—the nearly 70% of men and women who are classified as overweight or obese—is not a desirable or acceptable social goal. But knowing that the link between obesity and poor health is weaker than people commonly assume may make it easier for people to shed some of the prejudices they have towards fat men and women.

Diana Nguyen is an undergraduate pre-med student at UCLA. She is conducting research on prejudice and discrimination against fat men and women and is serving as an undergraduate teaching assistant for a seminar course on body dissatisfaction and dieting. She also assists with research examining the genetic factors that correlate with sexual orientation.

David Frederick is a PhD student in psychology. He conducts research on the evolutionary and social factors that shape the experiences of men and women. He has published research looking at non-Western cultures where fat men and women are believed to be healthy and very attractive. He studies how sexual objectification of men and women leads to body dissatisfaction and dieting and how body weight, ethnicity, and sexual orientation influence one’s comfort with one’s sex life. More about his research can be viewed at http://dfred.bol.ucla.edu
AXIS DANCE COMPANY

The Anxiety and the Afterglow

BY DORAN GEORGE
When I invited a friend to the performance by AXIS dance company, an “ensemble of performers with and without disabilities” (1), it was shocking when she confessed to being too sensitive to watch people “who’d suffered such misfortune.” Naively, perhaps, I’d assumed there would be general consensus that this was one of the more conventionally beautiful pieces of dance to be performed in Los Angeles this year. As disability performance scholar Petra Kuppers, pointed out in the panel before the performance, AXIS presents “people who are in very different power relations traditionally” (2), and people’s conceptions of beauty are intimately tied up with power.

As the lights went up on dancers Rodney Bell, Janet Das, Sonsheree Giles, and Alice Sheppard, the question of whether their performances would “change the way [we] think about dance and the possibilities of the human body forever” (3) was front and center. How satisfying it would be to witness AXIS Dance Company in rehearsal:

**AXIS Dance Company in rehearsal**: Dancers Sonsheree Giles, Rodney Bell, Alice Sheppard, Judith Smith, Lisa Bufano. *Photo courtesy the Maggie Alleesee National Center for Choreography.*
choreography smash through the discourse of disability as pathos. Historically, concert dance has constructed an idealized body to the exclusion of the disabled subject and in fact depended upon that exclusion to shore up the circumscription and idealization of “ability” (4). This construction is what makes companies like AXIS so exciting but also what makes the fulfilling of their revolutionary claims so difficult.

In the three works—“Room with No View,” “Vessel,” and “Point to Something”—that the company presented at a performance in Glorya Kaufman Hall at UCLA on February 17, different strategies in movement language were deployed to engage both the dancers who do and those who do not use wheelchairs. In Sonya Delwaide’s “Room with No View,” points of contact between the performers were explored, through unison and duet, achieving a certain subsuming of “difference” within the compositional meter of the dancing: truncated upward retractions of the dancer’s downward extended arms,
pulsating in rhythm with a horizontal sliding forward and backward of the head, as they were carried in profile across the stage by all company members; time, perambulation, space, and soundtrack were all informed by the conformity of beat passing through body. Two walked and two wheeled in a simple equanimity that was reflected in the arm gestures, which may have been an aesthetic reference to locomotion of the chairs’ wheels. Yet when Das and Giles broke away to execute floor work and handstands engineered from their legs, Bell and Sheppard appeared bound to their wheelchairs and restricted to movement of the upper body. The percussive section, which had felt like common ground before, now seemed like choreography that was limited, in service of integration, by what the wheelchair users couldn’t do. This led to a reading of the piece in which those who were “fully abled” were placed in comparison to those who were “dis-abled,” and the former were found to excel. Entering the modern dance stage, as it has in the latter part of the twentieth century, the “disabled subject” is too easily viewed as imitating its able-bodied counterpart in work that recapitulates traditions of virtuosity.

AXIS artistic director Judith Smith suggests that after multiple viewings of the company’s performances, however, “ability” is what audiences see rather than disability (5). This suggests that other readings of the choreography are possible and that the wheelchair users are contributing to the vocabulary of movement in a way that would leave the dances sorely impoverished if they were not there. This was evident in sharp turns the wheelchair users made and a daring tip Sheppard executed a number of times in which her whole weight—including her chair—balanced delicately on her toes and the tips of her foot plates. At another point in the performance, Bell was out of his wheelchair and maneuvered his pelvis in unison with Giles. The clarity of weight falling through his pelvis, compared to the more “held” maneuver Giles made, was admirable. At times Bell and Sheppard tipped their chairs such that the undercarriage faced up into the audience and their chests were splayed open on the floor. In making this motion, as well as subsequent twists in this position with upturned chair following torso, both dancers enacted authority over not only their body/machinery but also their social significance. A fallen wheelchair and a body struggling within it became a conscious articulation of skill and aesthetic, both referring to and superseding the distress this action would signify within a discourse of disability as pathos. Because bodies never materialize under only one axis of identity, the potential for this kind of resignification entails a tricky navigation of identity politics, as a more detailed reading of a moment in Giles’ choreography of “Point to Something” indicates.

Following a romantic rift, Bell pushes Das away and tracks downstage leaving her behind, and seconds feel like hours as he looks blankly (?) or defensively (?) into the
audience. In the encounter between male and female, gender, power, and vulnerability are unsettled by the insertion of a carriage of metal and rubber into the narrative. It is a relief when she approaches him and Screamin’ Jay Hawkins begins crooning “I Put a Spell on You.” Despite Hawkins authorship and the presence of his voice, the song is also Nina Simone’s signature song, and so, there’s a feeling of the reversal of gender here. A lamentation of feminine vulnerability is now sung by a black man ventriloquized through the body of a Maori in a wheelchair.

Reluctantly but powerfully, Bell grasps Das’s reaching wrist. She maneuvers herself onto the floor and he picks up his wheelchair in a wheelie—with his and the chair’s weight both falling through the delicate axis of the larger wheels at the back. The front stabilizers are now at the height of his chest, and he begins to wheel his way over her supine body. The vulnerability of her flesh beneath him is brought into sharp relief by the several audible intakes of breath in the audience. Some spectators aren’t sure he’ll make it and indeed, the weight tips that bit too far on either side of the delicate well-oiled fulcrum—this could never be a smooth passage. Images of metal falling on and penetrating flesh are vivid in the mind’s eye, and an imaginary act of coitus is achieved. However, this symbolic coitus occurs not between these two bodies (for if I say body, I’m sure you’ll separate out the man from the chair), but between prosthetic and flesh, between able-bodied and disabled subjects.

The potentially disturbing restoration of Bell’s masculinity against Das’s femininity is complicated by the political and cultural racialization and disabling of his gendered identity. The historical racialization of the “male gaze” between black men and white women in the US upsets any easy dichotomization of the operations of power in this representation of desire, an upsetting which is redoubled by the simultaneously castrating and penetrating prosthetic of the wheelchair. This moment provokes political anxiety about Das’s passivity and Bell’s (exotic?) virility, but simultaneously bequeaths a palpable afterglow from the reversal due to his “misfortune.” In a sexual reading of this dance “repetitions of hegemonic forms of power” in his penetration of her “fail to repeat loyally and, in that failure, open up the possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims” (7).

It is the skills developed while maneuvering through the world in a wheelchair (when the world has historically been imagined as an obstacle course for the disabled) that makes possible the slalom of resignification for the wheelchair user as disabled subject. The work AXIS presented demonstrates how these skills can be re-deployed in new dance vocabularies that can both contribute to and rework existing techniques developed for the idealized “able body.” To the degree that this practice undermines canonical modern dance vocabulary, it quite literally “enables” a new space for dance, and a reconfiguration of
bodily relations within it, working against the historical exclusion of the disabled subject. In Alex Ketley’s “Vessel,” wheelchairs are directed at times by users Sheppard and Bell with a transparent discernment of the relationship between tire traction and weight, such that elegant shifts in their body/machinery support spins and lifts in the bodies of Das and Giles. Similarly, in Delwaide’s “Room,” Das and Giles deftly counterweight Sheppard and Bell and their chairs, at times creating moving acts of balance.

Such moments of mutual interdependence between dancers who do and do not use wheelchairs complicate the terms “able-bodied” and “disabled,” for they produce a collaborative body which neither subject can achieve in isolation. Dance might be understood here as creating a new bodily ideal, even a new identity, based in a hybridization—or at the very least destabilization of—the previously bifurcated terms. Moreover, there are myriad moments, too many to mention here, throughout the repertory of AXIS that upset, reverse, or otherwise disturb the binaries between the “abled” and “dis-abled” subject.

Doran George has been funded, commissioned and presented as an artist in Britain, Continental Europe and the US. Doran regularly curates cutting edge performance and events, has danced for a diversity of choreographers and is published in several print and web based journals and art publications. Doran has taught at major Universities, Art Colleges and Dance Centers in the UK, US, the Netherlands and Portugal and is currently reading for a PhD in Culture and Performance in the department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA looking at the impact of somatic practice on modern concert dance.

Credits for photos on page 17: from left to right, “AXIS Dance Company dancers Sonsheree Giles and Judith Smith,” photo by Trib LaPrade; “AXIS Dance Company dancers Judith Smith and Sonsheree Giles,” photo by Trib LaPrade; “AXIS Dance Company in ‘Vessel’ choreographed by Alex Ketley, with dancers Sonsheree Giles and Rodney Bell,” photo by Andrea Flores.

NOTES
1. AXIS Dance Company: prepare to leave all your preconceptions at the door, Glorya Kaufman Hall, February 17, 2010.
3. Here I’m borrowing Judith Butler’s notion in Bodies That Matter (London: Routledge, 1993) of “the construction of the human” [as] a differential operation that produces the more and the less “human,” the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable” (8), where the dancing body has signified the ideal against which the subject of disability operates as one of the “excluded sites” that “come to bound the “human” as its constitutive outside” (8).
4. Interview with Susan Foster, Professor, World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, February 17, 2010.
5. In the post-show discussion, Sonsheree Giles mentioned feeling that explicit reference to the sexuality of people in wheelchairs is important considering the way they are configured as unable to be sexual.
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CAMPUS ADDRESS  
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MAILING ADDRESS  
UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN  
Box 957222  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-7222

PHONE/FAX  
310 825 0590 / 310 825 0456
EMAIL  
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