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The body and sexuality in cultural representation: an interview with Susan Bordo

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ABSTRACT

According to Zita, Bordo's *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* is 'one of the most thorough and focused feminist critiques of the masculinization of western philosophy that has been written thus far' (1990, pp. 647–648). This interview focuses on Susan Bordo's works and views on body politics with respect to gender, class, colour, sexuality and shape. It highlights the critique of the cartesian notion of western philosophy, the masculinized view of female and also the socially constructed perceptions of body and weight. The conversation references Bordo's prominent works such as *The Flight to Objectivity* (1987), *Unbearable Weight* (1993), *Twilight Zones* (1997) and *The Male Body* (1999) to contextualize arguments on the body, sexuality and social stigma. The views of Bordo presented here are also based on recent political developments and the rise of women of colour in the global political arena.

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Goutam Karmakar (GK): With regards to *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (1987), how far do the gender dynamics and components of Cartesian thinking play a role in formulating our conception of culturally constructed subjectivity and objectivity?

Susan Bordo (SB): *The Flight to Objectivity* was written as a very particular intellectual shift, which might be described as the confluence of feminist thinking and post-structuralist criticism. When I was an undergraduate in philosophy, we were instructed to leave everything concrete and embodied about our lives – from our gender, race, and class, to our emotional reactions and political leanings – outside the classroom and engage, whether in an analytic or a phenomenological mode, in 'pure' examination of arguments and ideas. Detecting 'flaws' in each other's thinking was the highest form of sport. And our teachers had no interest whatsoever in discussing the racist or sexist stereotypes and biases that littered the texts of the Great Men we studied. This was the sixties. *Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which introduced the notion that science was guided by accepted paradigms rather than a glimpse of unfiltered Reality had only just been published. The post-structuralist revolution, which would have us deconstructing all claims to universal, objective, timeless truths, was barely beginning. The disciplines were still chugging along, blithely dispensing their racial and gender biases in the name of 'methodology,' 'reality,' 'greatness,' 'canon,' 'clear thinking' and so on. Disciplines, for the most part, were not yet even conscious of themselves as having disciplinary idiosyncrasies or blind-spots.

That was academia. Outside, however, a storm of social and cultural revolutions was occurring, both in the US and Europe, which would ultimately invade all the disciplines, challenge their canons, demand the reconstruction of the curriculum (and also set off a ferocious backlash among those, like Alan

Bloom, who were dedicated to 'tradition'.) Feminism was an important part of that transformation, although (as I argue in 'The Feminist as Other' in *Twilight Zones*) it has never received the credit it deserves, particularly in bringing the body into the centre of philosophical thinking. (In our philosophical histories we tend to give the honour of making the body matter to Foucault and other European male thinkers.) In any case, I was lucky to have been a part of the generation that entered the graduate school just as everything was cracking open in the discipline, and to be mentored by teachers who were curious (if still somewhat sceptical) about the then-bizarre notion of doing a feminist, cultural reading of Descartes.

The most controversial – and, happily for my career, influential – aspect of the book was the heretical notion that reason, far from being 'pure', had gender, and indeed had become 'masculinized' in the West during a particular period in history. That idea was strange enough, but possibly even more heretical was that I looked at the Cartesian texts not as part of a conversation among philosophical talking heads but as exemplars of a constellation of social and cultural changes – changes that created new anxieties, challenges, and opportunities. That methodology was more radical, at the time, than simply looking at the sexism of various philosophers (e.g. in their notions about women), because it directly challenged the idea that thought could ever be understood or critiqued in abstraction from the broader historical context. Although it may be difficult to imagine nowadays, in those days 'doing philosophy' and 'doing history' were seen as mutually exclusive, and most of the philosophers I knew, while intrigued by my work, didn't regard it 'as philosophy'. Of course, doing history of philosophy itself was fine. But 'deconstructing' the work of a philosopher as the *product* of history was another thing altogether.

I have gone into all this because it's important to see *The Flight to Objectivity*, too, as located within and answering the needs of a particular time. It is itself now an artefact within the history of philosophy, and we are living in very different times than when I wrote it. In the 1970s, the philosopher king needed to be knocked off his exalted perch. In 2020, those of us who still believe in the power of reason (while acknowledging its embodied nature) are struggling to assert its value in the marketplace (no longer a metaphor) in which ideas are branded, sold and bought like any other products. Like Descartes, we are living in a time when an old order of knowledge is breaking down, but unlike Descartes, there is no new model on the horizon, and the Cartesian question 'Could this all be an illusion?' has layers of meaning – existential, cultural, political – for us that go beyond a philosophical thought experiment.

The media has played a huge role in this. For, while academics challenged the notion that there is one version of history, Oliver Stone and others were producing fictionalized accounts of the history that are such an inseparable stew of fact and fantasy – all meshed together through the verisimilitude of film – that our students enter history class entirely befuddled about the most basic elements of 'what happened'. As the technology of image-making has become more and more sophisticated, the films look more and more like documentaries, as careful attention to the details of historical accessories has made revisionist cinematic history much more seductive and powerful. (No, Anne Boleyn never was raped by Henry VIII, nor did she attempt to seduce her brother. But the gardens around the castles look so real, and Natalie Portman curtsies with such historical accuracy! How can a teacher challenge all that vibrantly simulated reality with boring old documents written in an outmoded English?)

Ours is thus a very different intellectual culture to be deconstructed than the reign of the dispassionate Philosopher King. In this culture, we don't need to learn to honour 'subjectivity'; it's been ascendant for quite a while. I recall how in 1995, after the O.J. Simpson verdict, I was astounded how often impressions rather than factual evidence were offered as 'argument by the jurors'. Detective Philip Vannatter, as one juror explained, didn't look them in the eyes and thus couldn't be trusted. But criminologist Henry Lee's warm smile made him a thoroughly dependable witness. And the dismissal of scientific evidence – which by now we have become quite accustomed to via climate-change and evolution-deniers – was rampant among the jurors. One shrugged off the DNA

evidence: 'To me, the DNA was just a long string of numbers . . . it was just a waste of time. It was way out there and carried absolutely no weight with me'.

At times during the past four years, it really has felt as though demonic forces are in control of our reality. The current POTUS (just voted out, but as of this writing refusing to concede) and his minions are pure power-seekers for whom the persuasiveness of reason and fact has been displaced by the irrational appeal of the advertisement, for whom the distinction between appearance and reality is not something to be constantly interrogated (as for post-structuralism) but simply irrelevant, and who argues (if you can call it that) whatever will benefit them at the moment.

Tracing how we went from that moment in time when the rejection of science could still be seen as shocking and anomalous and a culture within which nearly half the population put a science-denier in the White House is a very different project from one which explores the moment when knowledge had to reconcile medieval epistemologies with the emerging scientific order. It's our own crisis of knowledge that I've been concentrating on over the past twenty years or so, still considering the role of gender, but also giving prominence to the influence of the media – both of which we can see operating, for example, in the 2016 election and the years since. I can't possibly) condense my arguments about that into this answer; I refer interested readers to *The Destruction of Hillary Clinton: Untangling the Political Forces, Media Culture, and Assault on Fact that Decided the 2016 Election* (2018) and *Imagine Bernie Sanders as a Woman and Other Writings on Politics and Media 2016–2019* (2020), as well as my forthcoming TV (a volume in the Bloomsbury 'Object Lessons' Series).

GK: In your *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, you have also expressed your anxiety that the 'postmodern body is no body at all' (Bordo, 1993, p. 229). What do you mean by this statement?

SB: I was exploring two ways of erasing the body's role in thinking. One is the old philosophical dream of a 'view from nowhere' – a God's-eye ideal of transcending the limitations and (racial, ethnic, gendered, etc.) particularities of embodied existence. Another is what I call the 'dream of everywhere' – that strand of contemporary thought that dismisses any insights that lack sufficient attention to the diversity that the 'dream of nowhere' imagines it can transcend. That's fine as a regulatory idea; the problem is that it has often been used to discredit analyses that aren't 'inclusive' enough. And given the multiple intersections of human identity, experience and history, it's as hubristic as the fantasy of achieving the 'view from nowhere'. Yes, it's valuable as a guiding principle of conversation and collective thinking, but it's not something that any one person should be expected to achieve on their own. For me, recognizing our inevitable embodiment means acknowledging that no matter how many 'differences' and intersections we take account of, we always see from 'somewhere,' i.e. are limited – by history, by both biology and the power-positions we occupy, and by their significance for others. This means, therefore, that we have to continually count on other people to expand and educate us, but without that being seen as an embarrassment or reflective of a failure to be adequately 'woke' (a current bit of annoying jargon.) None of us are fully 'woke'; that's the nature of being human rather than God-like in our knowledge.

GK: Black and minority women are doubly marginalized and demand more awareness of an embodied subjectivity. What can you think of this context?

SB: I find that Black women already have a very deep awareness of the effect of power, both directly on the body, and also on embodied subjectivity. A great contemporary example is poet Carolyn Williams, who in the middle of controversies about the taking down of Southern monuments glorifying the Confederacy, published a piece called 'You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument.' It begins: 'I have rape-colored skin. My light-brown-blackness is a living testament to the rules, the practices, the causes of the Old South. If there are those who want to remember the legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument' (Williams, 2020). 'Rape-colored skin': there couldn't be

a more perfect example of displacing the 'objectivity' of the conventional colour palate (black, white, brown etc.) by the skin as 'written' by history – in this case, a history that is both racist and patriarchal. I could produce many other examples – there are terrific books written about the cultural history and meaning of Black hairstyling, the classification of 'good' and 'bad' hair, etc. And going back to the 'second-wave,' Audre Lorde stands out for her work on sexuality and eros.

GK: You have also said that 'under an oppressor/oppressed model which theorizes men as possessing and wielding power over women – who are viewed correspondingly as themselves utterly powerless – proved inadequate to the social and historical complexities of the situations of men and women' (Bordo, 1993, p. 23). In this context what can be the approaches for dealing with the historical and social complexities of men and women?

SB: If you look at the state of 'theory' you would think we had gone beyond an oppressor/oppressed model, because currently prescriptive 'intersectionality' cautions us to think of identity as modified by and entangled in different streams of power/powerlessness. But ironically, on both social and mainstream media, we often think in generalities of gender and race, for example, in speaking about 'white women' as responsible for Clinton's loss in 2016, when in fact education, region, political affiliation (e.g. whether or not one identified as a feminist) age, marital status, and other aspects counted significantly in how white women's votes were distributed. Similarly, our collective failure to deeply examine and address important dimensions of sexual violence and male dominance has resulted in the bubbling up, once again, of intense anger and frustration about 'misogyny' – a word I rarely use myself because it's such a blunt tool. "White privilege," "male dominance" and "mysogyny" are all immensely valuable when describing the functioning of institutions. But I would hesitate to apply any of them to the actions of individuals without a good deal of specificity. Yet these terms are flung around on Facebook and Twitter ('racist' is as well) very casually, often with the point of shaming and bludgeoning others and demonstrating ones own "wokeness."

GK: According to Bruch, often, women 'grow up confused in their concepts about the body and its functions and deficient in their sense of identity, autonomy and control' (Bruch, 2001, p. 39). In this context can you point to ways of deconstructing unhealthy practices of body-weight management?

SB: I wish I could give advice along these lines, but for me as for millions of women (and increasingly men) this is an ongoing struggle that doesn't permit of a clear 'solution.' I applaud the many body-acceptance movements that have arisen since I wrote *Unbearable Weight*, and I also appreciate the greater diversity of body size and shape that we see now in fashion magazines (consumer culture having discovered that 'plus-size' women have money, too, and don't really enjoy being singled out as 'plus-size,' either.) But when I look around at the girls and women I know personally – as well as numerous celebrities – it's clear that artist Barbara Kruger's famous 'Your Body is a Battleground' still holds. It holds in my life as well. I didn't discuss this much in *Unbearable Weight*; at the time I believed that to be taken seriously as a work of cultural analysis and theory, I had to leave my personal experience out of it. I regret that now. If I were to do a new edition, I'd include more autobiographical material about my own struggle with weight, which has been ongoing. It started when I was four and my baby sister was born. First, I'm told (it may be a family myth), it was her toe, which they say I tried to bite off the first night she came home. Then it was chunks of white bread, gauged from the middle of the loaf, compressed into chewy lumps and dunked in mustard. I got fatter and fatter, and more and more afraid and ashamed of my body. At some point, I decided that if I was going to be at all happy in this life, I needed to remake myself. So the summer before high school, I began the endless cycle of dieting – losing weight – gaining weight – dieting – gaining weight that has been a constant in my life. After a summer of cottage cheese and hamburger patties without the bun, I started high school on the hottest day of the year in a form-fitting rust-coloured wool dress that I had chosen for the reveal and wasn't going to give up no matter how sweaty and scratchy it felt. Since then, there have been long periods in which I was relatively slender, Once you have been fat, however, the shame never really leaves you. At seventy-three, of course, getting my weight down has become

a necessity for the control of blood pressure and avoidance of diabetes. But I know that little Susie Klein is still there as I step on the scale. She knows that my pleasure and pride at pounds recently lost are not just about concerns for my health and longevity.

GK: How would you like to study and analyse the trajectory of our ‘modified bodies’?

SB: Doing contemporary cultural criticism involves analysing a particular time and culture-zone that inevitably will pass. When I first started writing about cosmetic surgery and other forms of body modification, they were in their infancy both technologically and as cultural practices. Today, the scope of the transformations and ‘corrections’ that are possible has increased dramatically, and many procedures (e.g. Botox) have become so normalized that people look on them as little more than another form of make-up. When I first started writing about body-transformation, I was often challenged: ‘Aren’t you just talking about a handful of rich, over-privileged people?’ My reply then was: ‘Perhaps for the most part, now; but this is where we are heading.’ I was right. In barely twenty years, we went from cosmetic surgery as a ‘lifestyle of the rich and famous’ to breast implants as middle-class graduation gifts. And it seems useless to protest any more. When a tenth-anniversary edition of *Unbearable Weight* was in the planning stages, I was asked to write a new preface, an update. I agreed, feeling very much that it was the last gasp of the cultural critic in me. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reprinted a large chunk of it, and I got many appreciative emails. I was thankful for every one of them, but the issue, for me, was no longer about being ‘right’ as an individual writer. It was about recognizing the impotence of cultural criticism against the overwhelming power of consumerism and its expanding global tentacles. The business of self-transformation is too lucrative, too technologically advanced, and too personally gratifying for those who do find their lives changed because of it.

In 2020, too, technology has made possible transformations that are not only about defying age or becoming more aesthetically appealing; they extend to surgeries that allow trans-individuals to realize the dream of having a body that conforms with subjective identifications with gender and sexuality held since childhood. That, for me, is in a totally different category than, for example, anti-ageing surgery. I realize some would put them on a continuum; for me, however, there is a world of difference between the consumer-mediated quest for a ‘perfect’ ageless body and the possibility of realizing a deeply held conviction about oneself. Something else that is different in 2020 from when I first criticized cosmetic surgery as facilitating racial and ethnic ‘normalization’ is how diverse our aesthetic ideals have become vis a vis race and ethnicity. We’re still age and fat phobic, but skin colour, lip and nose shape, hair all now exist on a much broader spectrum of beauty than even just ten years ago. I don’t have statistics on this, but I’d bet surgeries to make eyes more ‘Western’ or noses more narrow, (or less invasively, skin bleaching products) have been declining. This isn’t because the cosmetic industry has become more ‘progressive’ in its politics; it’s because it’s discovered, in a rapidly changing demographic landscape, that it’s no longer so profitable to cater to a mythical white, heteronormative ideal.

GK: The ethics of weight management leave a devastating impact on those fat transgendered people living in a society that often fails to accept the space outside of normative sex/gender relationships. Rude faithfully projects the experience of a fat transwoman who says: ‘Not only do I have to deal with the crippling dysphoria that comes from having a body that I often don’t even recognize as my own, I also have to deal with the cultural misogyny that tells me that a woman can’t be as big and fat as I am and still be desirable’ (White, 2014, p. 89). Fatness enhances and magnifies the trans-phobic outlook of our culture that believes that ‘normative gender is slender’. Can you comment on the relationship between fatness and trans and cisgender people?

SB: It would be amazing and totally anomalous if trans people did *not* have to deal with the same regulation of the size and shape of their bodies as cisgender people. There was a time, concurrent with the first few decades of the ‘second-wave,’ when gender non-normativity (at least among

lesbians) permitted greater freedom to be both fat and desirable; I can remember friends of mine coming out and being relieved that ‘now I can be myself – including not having to be skinny.’ Among lesbians at that time, there was a certain appreciation for the power and solidity connoted by the stocky female body – as well as a general resistance to being dedicated to the culture. Of course, I’m generalizing here. I’m doing so in order to draw a contrast with the pressure to normalize – whether you are LBGTQ or cis—that exists today. In some ways, I suspect it’s even more demanding of transwomen, because femininity is so identified with slenderness.

A stocky transman, gay man, or cisman can all still be viewed as manly (although perhaps not as aesthetically desirable as once might have been the case) but a stocky transwoman probably is likely to be thought of as ‘butch’ unless she accentuates the makers of femininity in our culture (make-up, high heels, etc.). I haven’t done a study of this, these are just impressions. In any case, it’s really quite remarkable, when you think about the greater racial, sexual, and gender diversity that we’ve managed to honour in popular culture (though not without struggle, of course) that weight continues to have so much power to define us.

GK: In your *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J.* (Bordo, 1997), you talked about the ways appearances are manipulated and stated that “without toppling into absolutist conceptions of truth, we need to rehabilitate the notion that not all versions of reality are equally trustworthy, equally deserving of our assent” (Bordo, 1997, p. 12). How far do visual elements and virtual reality project the advertising and cultural images of the male and female body?

SB: Wow, was that warning prescient (if I do say so myself!). In fact, *Twilight Zones*, which is not among my best-known work, was predictive in many ways of our current epistemological morass. But you asked specifically about visual imagery—which I argue in that book has become the means by which we learn what is normal, desirable, admirable (or repulsive, unworthy, needing ‘correction’) about our bodies (despite the fact that the images themselves are of celebrities and models with personal trainers and multiple surgeries, and on top of all that, have usually been radically modified digitally). That’s a conundrum, isn’t it? Our bodies are flesh; they resist being turned into digitalized perfections, no matter how much we diet, exercise, or make use of cosmetic surgery. I call the reign of imagery an “empire” because it is always expanding its reach. This is consumer culture, after all, and it is largely amoral; if a market can be exploited (or created) and it can produce profit, ‘it’ doesn’t care whether we are trans or cis, Black or white, young or old. And it’s global in its reach. Fiji is the classic example. Because of their remote location, the Fiji Islands did not have access to television until 1995, when a single station was introduced, broadcasting programmes from the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. Until that time, Fiji had no reported cases of eating disorders, and a study conducted by anthropologist Anne Becker showed that most Fijian girls and women, no matter how large, were comfortable with their bodies. In 1998, just three years after the station began broadcasting, 11% of girls reported vomiting to control weight, and 62% of the girls surveyed reported dieting during the previous months (Synderman, 2002, p. 84). Becker was surprised by the change; she had thought that Fijian cultural traditions, which celebrate eating and favour voluptuous bodies, would ‘withstand’ the influence of media images. Becker hadn’t yet understood that there are no protective borders in the empire of images.

Men, as I argue in *The Male Body*, are another example. Twenty years ago men tended, if anything, to see themselves as better looking than they (perhaps) actually were. And then the menswear manufacturers, the diet industries, and the plastic surgeons ‘discovered’ the male body (Bordo, 1999). And now, I wrote, “young men are looking in their mirrors, finding themselves soft and ill-defined, no matter how muscular they are. Now they are developing the eating and body image disorders that we once thought only girls had. Now they are abusing steroids, measuring their own muscularity against the oiled and perfected images of professional athletes, bodybuilders, *Men’s Health* models.”

It’s important to keep in mind, though, that images of the body are ‘never just pictures’ (the title of a piece in *Twilight Zones*). Not only do they construct our ideas of the ‘normal’ and perpetuate

disappointment in the actual but also they carry fantasized solutions to our anxieties and insecurities, and that's part of the reason why they are powerful. Images are not imprinting devices, and those who respond to them are not passive 'dupes'. Rather, the culturally successful image – the one that advertisers and designers reproduce endlessly – carries values and qualities that 'hit a nerve' that is already exposed. As such, they are not just about the attractiveness of a certain body size and shape, but about how to become what the dominant culture admires – and/or how to escape the pain caused by that culture. To girls who have been abused, for example, the abolition of 'loose' flesh through diet or exercise may speak of transcendence or armouring of a too vulnerable female body.

When feminists used to talk about "objectification," the word itself suggested a draining of subjectivity from the female body, a reduction of women. I see images of the body as the body as far more expressive – and for that very reason, often more harmful than. At the same time, recognizing that imagery carries meaning opens up certain important conversations. Here I'll quote from *Twilight Zones*:

"Often, features of women's bodies are arranged [e.g. in ads or pornography] precisely in order to suggest a particular attitude – dependence or vulnerability or seductiveness, for example ... Even the pornographic motif of spread legs – arguably the worst offender in reducing the woman to the status of mere receptacle – uses the body to "speak" in this way. 'Here I am,' the pose declares, 'utterly available to you, ready to be and do whatever you desire.' ...

Clearly, [this interpretation] won't make pornography less of a concern to many feminists. But it situates the problem differently, so we're not talking about the reduction of women to mere bodies but about what those bodies express. This ... opens up the possibility of a non-polarizing conversation ... that avoids unnuanced talk, e.g. of 'male dominance' in favour of images of masculinity and femininity and the subjectivities they embody and encourage. Men and women may have very different interpretations of those images, differences that need to be brought out into the open and disinfected of sin, guilt, and blame."

GK: African-American culture and gay culture have redefined and reintroduced the concept of beauty in the context of the male body, and you have also pointed this out in *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999). Can you elaborate on the multifarious nuances of beauty found in the gay and African-American male body?

SB: Consumer culture, as I've noted several times in this interview, is essentially amoral. It's less interested in being ethical or politically 'correct' than it is in developing as wide and diverse a consumer group as possible. In the fifties, the targeted audience was assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual and Christian, and the advertiser was a draconian dictator of content, not just of ads but of the shows themselves. Westinghouse, the sponsors of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* insisted on lots of kitchen scenes, to show off the sparkling appliances made possible by the postwar productive capabilities. Who cared whether Black families didn't see their lives reflected in this mythical family? The assumption was that they couldn't afford to have a house like the Cleavers, with their gleaming appliances. Working women? The postwar period, as has been well-documented, was intent on getting them into those kitchens – or carrying a Budweiser into the suburban backyard, where Dad was snoozing on a hammock; in that world of ads, single mothers didn't exist.

But there is another side to the amorality of consumer culture and its empire of images than the advertising of mythical ideals. The paradox of the amoral profit motive is that while it can create habits that make people ill and can certainly reinforce (what is perceived as) 'traditional' values, it needs to remain alert to emerging trends and previously ignored demographics. And those discoveries can promote progressive changes. Whenever my students complain about 'capitalism', I remind them that the beautiful Black models that now fill the pages of *Vogue* are not the product of progressive-minded executives, but the recognition that bypassing the needs of Black women was to ignore a potentially huge market. And thanks to Shondra Rhimes, creator of *Grey's Anatomy* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, little Black girls have learned that they don't have to be a Tyra Banks or

Beyoncé Knowles into order to have a love life. Consumer culture can be tyrannical in advertising mythical lifestyles; but it can also act as an affirming mirror for the previously ignored or denigrated – and, in the bargain, create a more inclusive world of representations.

In *The Male Body*, I discuss how the recognition there was actually well-heeled gay men with lots of money to spend (duh!) opened the door to more erotic representations of the male body in mainstream publications. These, catching hold in the empire of images eventually transformed what straight men wanted to look like. No more was ‘vanity’ seem as the province of women, and cismen were less afraid of being branded as ‘gay’ if they presented themselves as erotically desirable bodies. The increasing prominence of Black male hip hop artists and sports icons also played a huge role in widening aesthetic possibilities for all men. Bringing Black aesthetic ideals into the mainstream of male fashion culture, fashion-conscious Black men made all men less afraid to appear ‘too feminine’ if they wore jewellery or colourful clothing.

You can see this all as the voracious maw of capitalism swallowing up everything in its sight. Or you can see the amorality of consumerism as a chief route by means of which the previously marginal acquire centrality in our culture, and in the process act as agents of transformation. In the end, it’s both.

When the first mixed-race family appeared in a 2013 Cheerios commercial (the little girl spills Cheerios over her snoozing daddy’s chest to ‘help his heart’) the fact that the Daddy of the adorable little girl is revealed to be black was met with applause by some but outrage by others. Some viewers wrote on FB that they found the commercial ‘disgusting’ and that it made them ‘want to vomit’. Today, it’s hard to spot a commercial – from cereal to cars – that doesn’t feature multiracial and, increasingly, gay families. In fact, it’s hard to spot an all-white family anymore in a tv ad. The deliberateness of it is laughable – and may create the illusion that we’ve come much farther than we have. Nonetheless, representation matters. And the fact is that when my daughter watches television, she sees many families that look like hers (except for the advanced age of her parents!)

GK: Your statement that ‘we do not yet live in a post-gender age’ (Bordo, 1997, p. 150) signifies that gender will remain central to the capitalist world of consumption. What is your take on this?

SB: My perception of this is always changing. I frequently feel intellectually out of breath as I try to catch up with what’s going on in my daughter’s generation (she’s 22) and younger. My perception, up until now, is that sexuality and race as have been far more fluid than gender, insofar as despite racism, homophobia, and transphobia we’ve seen the proliferation of racial and sexual diversities. But this isn’t as true of gender, which still serves so many rigid sexist notions about men and women.

So, while we’ve seen the blossoming of multiple forms of being ‘sexed’ (the answer to ‘is it a boy or a girl?’ is no longer settled by some doctor assessing genitals at the moment of birth, and can include ‘neither’) and biologically mixed-race people like my daughter are gradually becoming the norm, ideological notions about what kind of behaviour, social roles, division of labour are appropriate to the gender one is either given or identifies as are far more resistant to change. As the 2016 election showed, there are still deep currents of sexism that we’ve yet to confront, and at times it seems as though we are going backward rather than forward. You have to remember that I belong to a generation that has witnessed several surges of feminist challenge that excited me enormously, only to find that the same protests had to be repeated again and again, as backlash and discomfort with gender change reasserted themselves. ‘We’ elected a ferocious misogynist in 2016, and both the GOP and the ‘progressives’ left derided Hillary Clinton for ‘playing the woman card’ and saddled her with every vicious projection about her generation of feminists. The “too ambitious” woman still creates shudders among many; when Kamala Harris was being considered for the presidential nomination, she was criticized for having presidential ambitions. Yet this time around, we were more prepared to call out sexist and racist projections, and Kamala ultimately was chosen, to enormous celebration among women. We are always in flux, but this moment is particularly hard to assess. I’m waiting and watching!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on the interviewee

Susan Bordo is an internationally known cultural historian, feminist scholar, and media critic. Her first book, *The Flight to Objectivity* (1987), is considered a classic of feminist philosophy. Other well-known books include *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993); *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999); *The Creation of Anne Boleyn: A New Look at England's Most Notorious Queen* (2013) and *The Destruction of Hillary Clinton: Untangling the Political Forces, Media Culture, and Assault in Fact that Decided the 2016 Election* (2017.) Forthcoming in 2021 is *TV*, a volume in the Bloomsbury's 'Object Lessons' series. Susan lives in Lexington, Kentucky with her husband Edward Lee, daughter Cassie, three dogs, a cat, and a cockatiel. She recently retired from her position as Singletary Chair in the Humanities at the University of Kentucky.

This interview was conducted largely through email, with additional points being discussed over the phone in between 16th August to 9 November 2020.

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