



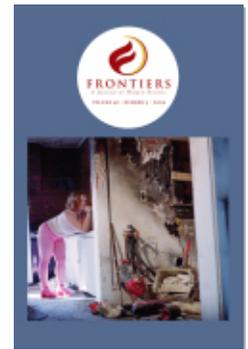
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The Weight I Carry: Intersections of Fatphobia, Gender, and Capitalism

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The Weight I Carry

Intersections of Fatphobia, Gender, and Capitalism

SHAWNA FELKINS

I have been fat for most of my life. A cute, fat little girl with cute, fat not-so-little legs. But there was a point when the fat wasn't cute anymore, when it did not elicit the pinching of cheeks, but the reprimanding clucking of tongues.

And thus, my child's body and I were given a label that I did not and still do not understand—obese. For many fat folks, this word has become a scourge, a plague, an indicator of a lack of morality and deservingness. B. Elbel and colleagues, in a public health study of “obesity,” write that “potential short-term impacts on fitness, social and emotional development (at least partially driven by obesity-related stigma), and academic success” were potential negative impacts related to childhood obesity.¹ What this article—and numerous others in the public health field and medico-scientific literature—fail to grapple with is fat stigma or fatphobia that is present in much of Western society, especially within the United States. Children may experience the aforementioned negative impacts because of external factors, not just the sizes of their bodies, and how they learn to inhabit that body in spaces and around people that are often too small for them.

As my younger brother hit puberty and shot up to 6 feet, 3 inches, his body changed and his fat seemed to disappear. Mine only grew. I watched in horror as new stretch marks spread their tendrils across my hips and breasts, my arms, and the backs of my knees. And I started to realize that with each utterance of concern my family would always hand me that tiny consolation prize, wrapped neatly with the large, distracting bow people place on backhanded compliments: but you have such a pretty face. With each utterance of this seemingly innocuous phrase I began to understand that the only part of me that could ever be pretty was my face, the rest of my body a hindrance, a failure for someone to tolerate.

At sixteen, I tried NutriSystem. When I was seventeen, I started taking cans of Slimfast to school. When I was eighteen, the first signs of bulimia appeared, the result of a life full of people telling me that my body was too much. My un-

dergraduate career was tainted by the taste of vomit and the red streaks that stretched from my knuckles to my wrists. And when I confided in a friend what I was sneaking into the dorm bathrooms to do at night, she looked at me blankly and asked if I was sure I was bulimic because I hadn't really lost any weight.

My fatness has always been seen as the failing of my parents, other family members, and later myself, even in their eyes. I would argue that these major themes of responsibility—on culture, mothers, and individual behaviors—stem from neoliberal capitalist ideology that seems to have permeated the field of public health. Like Kathleen LeBesco and Susan Greenhalgh, the geographer and food studies scholar Julie Guthman draws a connection between capitalism, citizenship, and “obesity.” Guthman argues that to be a (read: good) citizen of the United States, full participation in the capitalist economy is necessary. Therefore a balance of consumption while still staying thin is struck:

We [Guthman and DuPuis] noted a culture of bulimia, where on one hand buying and eating (being good consumers) is encouraged and on the other “deservingness” is performed by being slim, such that the good subject buys more and weighs less. . . . We then made the claim that epidemic talk itself is a form of discipline which uses the extremes as examples to warn the ‘normal.’²

While this comparison to an eating disorder is both blunt and aggressive, it is effective in describing the catch 22 for fat people in the US—you should consume a lot, but never should that consumption cause your body to grow in size. All of these scholars use the framework of “morality” that Abigail Saguy and Kevin Riley identify as a crucial component to the narrative that drives fat activism and the size acceptance movement: “More recent health surveillance scholarship has demonstrated how concerns about health risk can offer a thinly veiled language through which to extend judgments of responsibility, blame, and morality.”³

I couldn't help but internalize these narratives, this framework, that my body, my fatness means that I am inherently a bad person, and a bad person deserves punishment. *And through all of this punishing my body for its existence, food became my enemy and my best friend. I would daydream during classes about the amount of food I would be able to consume in the seclusion of my dorm room, away from the disapproving glances of my family, of strangers' judging looks seeming to say, “But do you really need to eat that?” And what I could not and still cannot understand is that for my family food meant love. That extra serving of carbohydrates heaped onto my plate was supposed to be a kind gesture, an understanding that unlike my grandparents and parents who*

had starved because of their poverty, I would eat too much because they worked hard, because they loved me.

My parents and their concern about my body was and is inextricably tied to class and the pressure to perform respectability both through and on the body. In her foundational work *Health at Every Size*, Linda Bacon highlights the connection between class and size as a method to dismiss fat people, especially those oppressed at other intersections of identity:

It is common for the privileged class [in the US] to view weight as a measure of one's character: People are fat because they are too lazy or irresponsible to take care of themselves. Weight carries a moral judgment, allowing the thin (wealthy) to justify their social position. If the poor and minorities are getting fatter, it is even more proof that they are less responsible and less worthy.⁴

When morality is attached to physicality (which it has been for marginalized people throughout colonial history), the opportunity is created for the dominant classes to be simultaneously dismissive of the struggles of fat people in the world, but also condescending by feigning "concern" for fat people, and even fat children. In her article "Teaching the Politics of Obesity: Insights into Neoliberal Embodiment and Contemporary Biopolitics," Julie Guthman reflexively explores the pedagogy of a class concerning the "politics of obesity" at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In the article Guthman explains: "It is now widely believed that obesity is increasing at an inexorable and dangerous rate, and that the associations with chronic illness and mortality are causally clear and incontrovertible. One of the effects of this heightened attention, among other things, is a new freedom among the general public to demonize fatness under the aegis of 'health.'"⁵ As obesity has been termed not only an aesthetic problem, but a "health" problem, criticizing those who fall into this category has become socially acceptable under the pretense that those policing the bodies deemed "obese" are doing so in their best interest. People involved in policing fat bodies are able to participate in a performative ritual that combines pity and piety without being forced to interrogate their own positionality relative to larger cultural narratives. Larger societal structures and scripts are never implicated. This neoliberal focus on the individual places both physical and health responsibility solely on a fat person's shoulders without considerations for how structural and institutional forces may limit access to resources to be fat *and* healthy.

My body specifically, even with its size, moves through the world with a great amount of privilege. I am white, cisgender, and able-bodied. Throughout the medico-scientific literature on fatness, other marginalized identities

are consistently blamed as the culprit behind “obesity.” Analyzing instances of obesity among children in Hawaii, Claudio Nigg and colleagues insist on intervention at the individual level by claiming that “childhood obesity also increases the risk for negative psychosocial consequences, such as discrimination, stigmatization, low self-esteem, and depression.”⁶ Following an extensive literature review of more than five hundred articles, these authors conclude that environmental changes at the levels of “home, school, and community” are all necessary to help children control their weight. The parts of the environment that are recommended for changes cast a spotlight on the need for adults to change their behaviors that influence the individual behaviors of the child—healthy eating, exercise, etc. This study—like many others throughout public health literature—falls into the trap of neoliberal ideology and places the burden of fatphobia on populations already burdened with other forms of marginalization. Janella Melius and Colin Cannonier fall into the trap of blaming “culture” for health issues and higher rates of childhood obesity in Hispanic populations. They write: “Lower-income neighborhoods have been characterized as *obesogenic* due to their lack of supermarkets and the predominance of convenience stores supplying inexpensive, low-nutrient, and high-caloric foods” (emphasis added).⁷ Such a label carries a lot of weight, some pun intended. Labeling entire areas as obesogenic in medico-scientific literature legitimizes the state-sanctioned labeling of these communities as deviant—through race, class, and size.

I spent much of the first twenty-three years of my life hating myself, hating my body and apologizing for its size to my friends, family, and lovers, making jokes to assuage all of their discomfort about the bulging softness of my stomach and the hills and valleys of cellulite that mark the topography of my entire body. At twenty-four I heard the phrase “fat studies” for the first time and found a collective group of people who deeply knew what it meant to bang your thighs against every arm rest as you walk down an airplane aisle, to hide the junk food at the bottom of your grocery cart so others wouldn’t see it, to be kicked off a ride in your favorite amusement park because you’re “too fat,” to cry alone in your hotel room while your friends go out to dance because you can’t be the fat friend tonight, and the million big and little things that remind us that we are too much . . . or that just maybe the world isn’t big enough.

In her article “What Is Fat Activism?,” Charlotte Cooper contends that there is a “fat feminism,” which she defines as a “feminist activist analysis of fat based on lived and shared experience rather than secondary accounts, theory or research.”⁸ Feminism and fat activism have been and will always be linked in their goals for equality and in their histories. Many fat activists came to fat activism from feminism, seeking a way to articulate their singular ex-

perience of being fat. Cooper argues that “fat people should be recognised as important knowledge producers and that academics and policy-makers of all sizes should support fat people in claiming space to produce that knowledge.”⁹ Feminism is not always supportive of fat studies, however. I’ve stopped being surprised when I hear other feminists, or my own colleagues in my graduate classes, define fat studies as “anti-reality” or roll their eyes while alluding to the trauma of being in a fat body every day. Here, I must assert the importance of including fatness in intersectional theory and praxis. We would be remiss to overlook the ways that fatness puts some bodies at great risk from surveillance and violence from the state and its institutions. Fatness and size must be included in intersectional analyses, because our material bodies are more vulnerable than our theoretical selves. We cannot cry for our humanity anymore. We cannot beg for it. We will demand it.

I’m slowly falling in love with my body for the first time. Brick by brick I will unburden myself from the moralistic arguments that try to constrain my size. My beautiful thunderous thighs will shake the earth with triumph, their strength growing to support me and the weight I will always carry.

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NOTES

1. B. Elbel, S. P. Corcoran, and A. E. Schwartz, “Neighborhoods, Schools and Obesity: The Potential for Place-Based Approaches to Reduce Childhood Obesity,” *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 6: quote on page 1, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0157479>; C. M. Doak, T. L. S. Visscher, C. M. Renders, and J. C. Seidell, “The Prevention of Overweight and Obesity in Children and Adolescents: A Review of Interventions and Programmes,” *Obesity Reviews* 7, no. 1 (2006): 111–36.

2. Julie Guthman, “Teaching the Politics of Obesity: Insights into Neoliberal Embodiment and Contemporary Biopolitics,” *Antipode* 41, no. 5 (2009): 1110–13, quote at 1113.

3. Abigail C. Saguy and Kevin Riley, “Mortality, Science, and Social Inequality: Framing Contests and Credibility Struggles over Obesity,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law* 30, no. 5 (2005): 869–921, quote at 871.

4. Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2010), 256.

5. Guthman, “Teaching the Politics,” 1113.

6. Claudio Nigg, Becky Shor, Cathy Yamamoto Tanaka, and Donald K. Hayes, “Adolescent At-Risk Weight (Overweight and Obesity) Prevalence in Hawai‘i,” *Hawaii Medical Journal* 70, no. 7 suppl. 1 (2011): 4–10, quote at 8.

7. Janella Melius and Colin Cannonier, “Exploring US Hispanic Parents’ Length of Time in the United States: Influences on Obesity Outcomes among US Hispanic Children,” *Social Work in Health Care* 55, no. 10 (2016): 826–842, quote at 826.

8. Charlotte Rachel Mary Cooper, “What’s Fat Activism?,” University of Limerick Department of Sociology Working Paper Series WP2008-02, 2008.

9. Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol, UK: HammerOn Press, 2016), 589.