

Fringe Fat

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Abstract

This paper questions the liminality of fatness as an identity. A deeply personal and reflective piece of autotheory, "Fringe Fat" contests that identifying as fat may, in fact, have nothing to do with weight. DiGiammarino considers how disability activism and fat activism intersect, and how creating a hierarchy of body types might be both the antithesis of fat activism and, yet, the most accessible way to identify with and express fatness.

Keywords

Fat Studies, autotheory, body liberation, disability, fat activism

It's vulnerable to speak from personal experience within academia and among experts. I currently research and study fatness as it is related to Physical Education and Critical Disability Studies. I continue to brush up against my own vulnerabilities in this research and my writing only to discover that perhaps my story is worth offering.

In 2015 I started an academic exploration of fatness as a disability, having learned the social model of disability (Oliver 2013) in my undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto. Understanding fatness through this lens was exciting and empowered me to view fatness without shame. In fact, I wrote a paper at the time entitled, "Diet Dropout: I'm Fat and It's Okay." In this paper, I criticized the medical community for fat-shaming me and for incessant and gendered weight-loss advertisements in the media, and I dreamt utopian dreams of a world where fat bodies were accommodated and honoured. I sought out opportunities to draw people into my understanding of Critical Disability fundamentals while establishing my body's fatness as the ultimate rebellion against a society that hated fat people. I found a "Health at Every Size" (HAES) counselor and met with her every other week. At first, the lessons were about unlearning weight loss rhetoric, healing from traumatic weight loss attempts and "failures," and finding movement that I enjoyed. It was phenomenal.

Less than a year into this journey I had gained over 60 lbs. I had newly trained myself to look at every external factor as a reason for my weight-gain: stress, applying to graduate schools, working full-time, clothes being made smaller as a capitalist agenda against fat people. The HAES philosophy separates negative connotations around gaining weight, so initially I did not perceive this as a negative thing, nor do I now think that weight gain is inherently negative or proof of personal failure. But my underdeveloped activist rage, not at all thoroughly informed or adequately interrogated, allowed me to ignore my body altogether and use HAES to scapegoat the reality of my weight gain. When I started

experiencing prolonged amenorrhea, the absence of my menstrual cycle, and received a diagnosis of pre-diabetes, I went to my HAES counselor and broke down. This wasn't supposed to happen to a liberated fat person! Much to my chagrin I had not truly accepted my fat body, but merely thought I had transcended beyond the physical form. This version of body positivity left me more confused and desolate than before. When my counselor had no data-driven answers or "solutions" to provide for my diagnoses and the medical community offered yet another diet regime, I felt I had been duped into believing that fatness could ever move the needle of systemic change.

I continued to struggle with weight as a subject; feeling tricked by the body positive movement while knowing that I couldn't emotionally or mentally put myself through another rigorous calorie-counting diet. I met with an endocrinologist who suggested I research gastric bypass surgery as an option if I wanted to have children. She spoke plainly about how this could be a tool to get me to a place where I could have regular periods and possibly conceive without significant fertility interventions or medically complicated pregnancies. Motherhood was not something I thought lightly about; in fact, I thought very deeply about motherhood and becoming a mother. I lost my own mother at age 17, and having children was a core value of mine—and one I had not considered to be in jeopardy. Needless to say, as the endocrinologist suggested, I started researching.

Eight months after that appointment I was accepted to Humber River Hospital Bariatric Center. After seven months of phone calls, appointments, interviews, classes, blood panels, counseling and group therapy I was given a surgery date: March 13, 2019. Since then, I have maintained a total weight loss of over 150 lbs, I am no longer pre-diabetic, and delivered a healthy baby last July. I don't mean to gloss over my recovery or the challenges of having a stomach the size of a walnut, but I will say that during my short and fiery time within the online body positive community prior to surgery, weight loss

surgery was demonized. It was akin to mutilation, a sign of self-hatred or internalized fatphobia. It was just something you did not do if you truly loved your fat self. My reality is that it is exactly what I needed to do to effectively love my fat self. I was never mistreated in my experience with the Bariatric Center. I met medical professionals that understood the complexity of fatness and talked to me with compassion and interest in my personhood. Some of the nurses I met are still my biggest sources of confidence. In learning of my pregnancy, they made themselves available to me beyond the program scope. This could be in part because I have other privileges, such as being white, cisgender, and heterosexual. It could also be because Bariatric Medicine and doctors are not always the enemy and medically supervised weight loss does not have to be inherently evil or oppressive.

My story is not meant to promote gastric bypass. Rather, it is meant to extend the idea that once you are fat you are never not-fat. The experience of fatness, even for a limited time, is so unique and so powerful in its embodiment of othering, that despite the presence or lack of fat itself, the identity “fat” posits the ability to shape one’s worldview. Fat, less-fat, and not fat enough are all categories applied to my body. As an academic that writes about fatness and wants to engage while honouring my own fat identity, it is challenging to take up this liminal space without feeling like a fraud; I am genuinely wary of cancel culture. Can I truly speak to fatness after successful gastric bypass surgery? Does Fat Studies scholarship largely consider gastric bypass treasonous? At what point do I need to visually prove my fatness or risk being “cancelled?”

A spectrum of fatness now permeates popular culture and academia with terms to describe the diversity of fat bodies. Terms like “infinifat,” “superfat,” or “deathfat” were born out of identifying specific oppression faced by the largest or most marginalized people within the

fat-identifying community, and a way to embrace and reclaim the medicalized language of fatness. Begetting a more encapsulating spectrum, it also includes “small, mid, and large-fat.” While this spectrum can be helpful in identifying the varying degrees of experiences of oppression, and who within the fat community faces the most significant and possibly life-altering discrimination, it also inherently posits a hierarchy; the more extremely fat you are, the more radical your experience of fatness is and, therefore, more legitimate. Our social desire to structure and categorize bodies is longstanding and represents an effort to make sense of what diverges from a norm. In considering fat bodies divergent and categorizing them invites its own reflexive oppression, pushing “less radical” experiences to the wayside. To this model I offer the term “fringe-fat” to identify bodies that do not fit within the codified spectrum of fatness, who desire not to be categorized by size, who may desire to change their bodies—whether to become more or less fat for a variety of reasons. “Fringe-fat” bodies can indeed be fat, but the inhabitant of that body may not agree to the tenets of body positivity or Fat Studies.

As the academy continues to explore new critiques and critical discourse at the intersection of fatness, disability, gender, race, class, and economics, fat identity must be considered and explored without a numerical hierarchy, in understanding the root of internalized fatphobia and nuance of size history, or we as an academic community risk leaving many bodies and voices on the outside of Fat Studies all together. Even without empirical data or a perfectly coiffed thesis to offer, I do have meaningful questions that I am asking of myself and of the academy at large. If nothing else, I hope to offer you an invitation to turn the monologue of my story into a dialogue should you wish to discuss any of these ideas or concepts further.

References

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Author Biography

Olivia DiGiammarino is an educator, artist and Master's student in Critical Disability Studies at York University. She is interested in creating inclusive learning experiences for disabled students. Her current research is about the experiences of fat-identifying teachers and students and how they navigate Physical Education spaces and curricula. www.odigiammarino.com