

Fed Up With Split Subject-Hood: Redeeming Size Acceptance

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Any brief foray into the world of Fat Studies will offer individuals countless arguments for why the fat subject should avoid dieting. Fat Studies is an academic domain that deals with the political, cultural, and ethical consequences of pathologized fatness in discourse. There are articles devoted to debunking medicalized discourses that encourage weight loss and to discussing the harmful effects of yo-yo dieting. Fat Studies is also ripe with contentions that dieting and the promotion of dieting are actually catalysts for other kinds of oppression including racism, classism, and sexism. In addition, many publications are devoted to articulating the problems with practices of ‘not-dieting’, or size acceptance. These articles often suggest that dieting and size acceptance have structural similarities that entail troublesome constructions of subjectivity. So first the fat subject is encouraged to diet by popular media and medical discourses, then she is instructed to not diet and instead accept her fat body, and *then* she is informed that actually size acceptance has its own structural problems so she really ought to be suspicious of that too. What is a fat subject supposed to do if she can neither change nor accept her fat flesh?

In this paper I will argue that despite the structural difficulties associated with fat politics and size acceptance, trying to alter these forms of resistance is not a simple task because the discourses that inform these movements are ingrained in the ways that contemporary subjects understand themselves. In addition, the sense of community that is fostered in size acceptance groups is invaluable to the lives that fat women live, as these communities foster safe spaces where fat women’s bodies literally fit in, which is an aspect of size acceptance that simply cannot

be ignored. The framework that I will approach this argument from is modeled loosely off of the argument for the redemptive qualities of dieting espoused by Cressida Heyes in her article “Foucault Goes To Weight Watchers.” She argues that despite the structural challenges that dieting poses for women, there is some compelling aspect in that women continually participate in normative body modification procedures, wondering if this is necessarily a bad thing. It is my contention that the same sort of argument can be made for the size acceptance movement. Samantha Murray and Talia Welsh have argued that the size acceptance movement mirrors dieting in the ways they each create respective subjects. If they are correct in their analysis, I further argue that there needs to be a similar analysis of size acceptance in the way that Heyes analyzes dieting.

In this paper I will assume that within popular media and medical discourse, fat women are constructed as failed subjects because they cannot control their bodies. Further, in order to be considered properly fat, these women need to be consciously engaged in weight-loss projects, the most common of which is dieting. Popular media and medical discourses claim to possess knowledge about fat women, especially those fat women who are not actively engaged in a weight-loss project. Popular media and medical discourses also construct the ways in which others understand fat subjects, and further, how fat subjects ought to understand themselves. Le’a Kent writes that “it is all too easy to find images of fat shot through with warnings about one’s impending death – images of revulsion, images in which fat bodies are fragmented, medicalized, pathologized, and transformed into abject visions of the horror of flesh itself” (Kent 132). These revolting images inform the fat subject that the only way to make herself marginally visible as a fat subject is to engage in a process of abjection of her fat flesh. She has to use her mind

(willpower) to change her body. Kent goes on, “In the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat women’s bodies in particular, are represented as a kind of abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible” (134). The properly fat subject must understand herself as distinct from her fat body in order to make sense of herself, and she must understand her fat body as that which needs to be lost in order to ‘save’ not only herself, but all bodies as well.

Before going into a discussion of the ways that size acceptance groups construct fat subjects, there is an important distinction to be made about the kinds of fat people there are. This distinction is important because I do not want to problematically assume that all fat subjects necessarily support size acceptance or fat activism. Kristin Rodier suggests that there are fat people, who either self-identify as fat or not, Fat Studies scholars, who offer research methods and critiques, fat activists, whose political action forms a part of their identity, and the size acceptance community, which can include members of all of the above groups (Kristin Rodier, personal communication). This distinction is significant because of the risks of attributing beliefs and attitudes to people who do not necessarily possess them, the most obvious example being conflating a person who merely identifies as fat with a fat activist. These subjects can have entirely different projects. These people may or may not possess the same understandings of themselves and it is unfair/incorrect to assume that they do. This paper is largely concerned with the ways that dieting and anti-dieting discourses construct fat subjects who do or do not identify as fat. Fat activists and the size acceptance community most often espouse anti-dieting discourses. Furthermore, Fat Studies scholars are responsible for, as I will argue later, making

various critical interventions into the ways that dieting and anti-dieting discourses construct fat subjects.

Popular media and medical discourses contend that the ideal fat subject must abject her fat flesh and engage in a process of trying to lose that which does not make up a meaningful part of herself. By contrast, the fat activist and size acceptance communities contend that this is not correct. Instead, the properly fat subject must engage in a project of embracing or accepting her fat body, whatever that might mean. In the concluding paragraphs of their book, *Lessons From the Fat-O-Sphere* Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby demand that upon completing the book if the reader is still committed to the allure of the potential efficacy of dieting, then the reader's best option is to simply read the book once again. They seem to argue that (re-)reading a book filled with facts debunking the effectiveness of dieting and advice on how to live (happily) as a fat woman will suffice to convince the fat subject that she ought not diet.

While fat activists and size acceptance communities cannot be characterized as one homogenous group that has unified ideas about fat, Samantha Murray suggests in her book *The Fat Female Body* that “political change via a resignification of ‘fat’ bodies and an end to fat phobia is a shared concern of all size activists” (Murray 88). Fat activists and the size acceptance community thus in contrast to popular discursive structures demand that fat subjects not use their minds to change their bodies, but rather change their minds about their bodies. They call for an end to the abjection of fat bodies and instead demand respect and admiration for fat bodies. As Harding and Kirby suggest, dieting is the absolute wrong way to go about fat acceptance. Instead the fat activist/size acceptance communities construct fat subjects as simply needing to change the way they experience their bodies as abject, for example. Fat activists are often highly critical

of discourses that encourage dieting for the reasons suggested above – they construct subjects that necessarily see themselves as needing to alter their bodies in order to become marginally visible.

In order to develop the argument I wish to make for size acceptance further on, it is necessary now to draw attention to the intervention into the fat activist critiques of dieting made by Cressida Heyes in her article “Foucault Goes To Weight Watchers.” In this article Heyes suggests that people need to consider “weight-loss dieting not only as a quest for the ideal body, but also as a *process* of working on the self, marketed with particular resonance and sold to women, clearly deploys the discourse of self-care that feminists have long encouraged” (Heyes 126, emphasis author’s own). She seeks to draw attention to the complex entity that dieting truly is. In doing so she endeavours to problematize the traditionally critical “docile bodies” and “false consciousness” accounts of dieting, arguing that dieting has “enabling moments” that exist outside of these explanations (126). What Heyes does here is problematize the strategy of refusal that many fat activists (including Harding and Kirby) endorse with regard to dieting. Because “weight-loss dieting needs to be understood from within the minutiae of its practices, its everyday tropes and demands, its compulsions and liberations,” Heyes suggests that it really does not make sense to resist normative discourses of dieting purely through refusal (127). She instead contends that dieting is a project composed of habits that entail a Foucauldian “care of the self” (127). The practices involved in dieting are very much focused on disciplining the self, in particular, disciplining what and how much food one consumes. Heyes seems to construe these kinds of practices as a way of cultivating a disciplinary capability, which “is not an indulgence, or a distraction from the affairs of the polis, but rather a necessary condition of effective citizenship

and relationships” (139). In summation, Heyes endeavours to construct a picture of dieting that supplements the existing ones. She contends that it is important to understand the highly complex ways that dieting constructs fat subjects and that the ‘docile bodies’ and the ‘false consciousness’ pictures cannot fully account for this. In conjunction with these explanations, fat activists and size acceptance communities need to take into account the cultural resonance that dieting has in the lives of fat subjects. The psychic attachment to dieting cannot adequately be resisted by a strategy of refusal. Fat activists and size acceptance communities are on the right track when they suggest that dieting perpetuates harmful stigma, however Heyes points out that one of their methods of resistance (refusal) might be flawed given that it does not fully take into account the complexities of dieting.

In drawing attention to Heyes’ intervention I mean to suggest, as Heyes does, that those who adamantly argue that dieting is harmful and fat subjects ought not have anything to do with it need to consider the complex function that dieting plays in these subjects’ lives. Thus far I have endeavoured to characterize how subjects are constructed through the normative discourse of dieting, the fat activist/size acceptance discourse of anti-dieting, and Heyes’ argument for the quality of capability cultivation that dieting entails. The next step is to characterize the fat studies scholarly critiques of both dieting and anti-dieting as they pertain to subject-hood.

Samantha Murray intervenes into fat activist/size acceptance discourses of anti-dieting. In her book *The Fat Female Body* she begins by critiquing one possible way to think about ‘fat’ identity in contrast to the medical and popular discourses on ‘fat’, which is to reject the dichotomy of ‘fat’ and thin. Espoused by fat activist Marilyn Wann, this discursive approach to fat involves consciously altering one’s perception of what it means to be ‘fat’ or thin. In other

words, Wann, like Harding and Kirby contends that fat subjects should simply stop recognizing their fat bodies as shameful. Murray problematizes this line of thought by urging the reader that “Perception is a(n) (inter)corporeal process of *knowing* and *ordering* the meanings of our various ways of being and our interactions: they are constitutive of our bodily being-in-the-world” (87, emphasis author’s own). She argues that rejecting this dichotomy is not as simple as Wann makes the process seem because as subjects we are actually constituted by this dichotomy of fat and thin. Murray worries that fat activists are simply engaging in the “liberal humanist logic of ‘feel good’ discourses” that function to reinforce the structures they seek to resist (88). What I take from this is that in Murray’s view, fat activists who engage in a project of fat acceptance by merely trying to change the way they ‘see’ themselves are not meaningfully resisting stigmatic structure of power and knowledge; Murray constructs them as unaware of the constitutive power of discourse.

A second critique Murray levels against the general school of size activists (which, as suggested earlier, she admits are not at all unified in their objectives) is that they reify “the humanist logic of self-authorship and bodily autonomy” that enables medical discourses in the West to construct fat as pathological (88). These discourses also enable subjects to see themselves as responsible for their health and their bodies and that the ultimate consequence of this is a stunted liberationist politics that cannot allow for an ambiguous identity (Murray 89). Murray seems to be arguing that like the anti-‘fat’ discourse, size activists fail to take into account the way that identities are constructed through interactions with others. Instead they rely on the individualistic notion that, in the anti-‘fat’ story, one is responsible for one’s fat body, or, in the size activist story, one is responsible for changing one’s mind about one’s body. These

endeavours are wholly individualistic and Murray posits that they do not accurately reflect that way that subjects constitute themselves.

Liberationist politics is often a large component of fat activist resistance strategies. It is a tactic appropriated from queer politics. Instead of ‘coming out’ as LGBTQ, fat subjects are encouraged to ‘come out’ as fat in a non-pathologized/medicalized sense. Murray explicates the politics of liberation by incorporating Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon’s essay “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion” and goes on to criticize this approach to fat as well. Murray argues that Sedgwick and Moon are interested in critiquing the systems of knowledge/power that constitute subjects as homosexual and fat. They posit that these stigmatized identities are somewhat analogous to one another (Murray 96). Murray points out that while it might be possible for a fat subject to “refuse normative ways of *knowing*: the knowledge others believe they have of her,” these normative ways of knowing are prioritized over and above the ideas one has of oneself (96, emphasis author’s own). She argues that these individual acts of resistance (‘coming out’, for example) cannot meaningfully affect the way others perceive the fat subject. In contrast, Sedgwick argues that by voluntarily introducing oneself as fat at the beginning of every interaction, one can “[renegotiate] *the representational contract* between one’s body and one’s world” (Sedgwick quoted in Murray 98, emphasis Murray’s). Murray goes on to cite many reasons why Sedgwick’s strategy is an ineffective way to think about fat, including characterizing rationality as useful in body politics, which Murray argues reproduces a dualistic conception of the subject (98). Another debilitating problem for coming out as fat on Sedgwick’s account is that she does not take into account the role that pathologizing discourses play in constituting the subject. She assumes that it is possible to

become less invested in that which makes bodies knowable (98). Murray does not believe it is possible to ‘renegotiate the representational contract’ as Sedgwick argues because these constitutive knowledges are what make not only our bodies, but also other non-pathologized bodies intelligible. Another problem Murray levels against liberationist politics is that it operates on the assumption of an unambiguous identity that does not meaningfully reflect the lived experiences of those who endeavour to ‘come out’ (99). In concluding this section of the chapter Murray quotes Michael Moon from his and Sedgwick’s “Divinity” essay where he articulates what a successful politics of liberation might seek to accomplish. Murray agrees with him and argues that “Size will always be imbued with meaning, however the project of fat liberation requires a critique of the systems that *produce* size in certain ways” (Murray 100, emphasis author’s own). She writes that this is precisely what her project seeks to accomplish as well. In short, Murray worries that fat activism/size acceptance relies on inaccurate and unhelpful understandings of the self in the quest to end fat stigma.

A second kind of critique of anti-dieting discourses and the ways they construct subjects is espoused by Talia Welsh in “Healthism and the Bodies of Women: Pleasure and Discipline in the War Against Obesity.” This critique is leveled against fat activists and size acceptance communities who specifically advocate for an emphasis on health, fat or not, as opposed to weight loss in a subject. Welsh argues that a supposed focus on health really just mirrors the requirements of dieting because “it too is replete with a set of prescriptions about proper and improper attitudes and behaviours” (Welsh 43). In Welsh’s view, size acceptance projects such as Health At Every Size (HAES) that are aimed at placing emphasis on health as opposed to weight loss are merely masquerading as a contrast to dieting discourses. While Welsh does draw on

Murray's critique of the efficacy of changing one's mind about one's body, her main critique is that dieting and HAES (one specific kind of size acceptance community) have parallel structures of discursive power and as such, HAES is no more effective than dieting as a strategy of resistance. Murray and Welsh are quick to argue that it is impossible for fat subjects to change their minds about their bodies because the ideas that inform fat stigma are ingrained in the ways that all subjects understand themselves. I argue that Murray and Welsh in turn fail to acknowledge that the mind/body split enacted by both dieting and anti-dieting discourses is actually also ingrained in the ways that all contemporary subjects understand themselves. I contend that the split subject and liberationist critiques of anti-dieting discourses are perhaps too focused on the structural challenges associated with fat activist/size acceptance communities. While both Murray and Welsh are rightly critical of discourses that produce dualist subjects and suppose an unambiguous identity, they incorrectly ignore how ways in which the fat subject understands herself are ingrained in a neoliberal subjectivity that takes as a base a dualist subject, striving for a unified identity. They neglect to comprehend that this problematic understanding of the self is not just produced in the fat activist/size acceptance discourse, but in the ways that *all* subjects understand themselves.

I contend that despite the fact that many fat activist/size acceptance discourses rely on a problematic construction of subjectivity; this critique absolutely cannot outweigh the material experiences fat subjects have within size acceptance communities. Similar to Heyes' analysis of dieting, I suggest that fat activist/size acceptance communities allow for a cultivation of capabilities that are ultimately beneficial to the subject, despite the consequence of a split subjectivity. In particular, one might think that the size acceptance community Health At Every

Size cultivates the very same capabilities that dieting does, without the problematic emphasis on weight-loss. And so despite Welsh's argument for the similarities between dieting and size acceptance, which both entail specific behavioural prescriptions, this specific version of size acceptance (HAES) at least fits very elegantly into Heyes' model of practices that encourage attentively relating to the self (Heyes 136).

The more structural critiques of fat activism/size acceptance are more compelling, however I suggest that there is a certain extent to which these structural challenges are irrelevant to the embodied lives that fat women actually live. I mentioned previously the significance of fat activist/size acceptance communities for providing stigma-free spaces where fat bodies can figuratively and literally fit in. Even if this structurally fails to be 'properly' resistant, I contend that it is invaluable to the lives that fat women actually live. The same can be said for the practice of 'coming out' as fat. This practice provides just as much of a catharsis as it does problems of subject-hood and as such cannot be so easily dismissed. Kathleen LeBesco, discussing why people still consume 'unhealthy' foods despite being informed of their unhealthy statuses writes in her book *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle To Redefine Fat Identity*: "The fact that my *knowledge* that a product is bad for me changes neither my *attitude* of love for it nor my long-term *behaviour* of consuming it" (LeBesco 31, emphasis author's own). I suggest that this sentiment can in part account for the persistence of size acceptance/fat activism despite the problematic constructions of subject-hood. Scholarly knowledge of the problems with size acceptance does not meaningfully effect the psychic attachments that fat subjects have to fat activism or size acceptance.

What is clear from the investigation this paper has undertaken is that fat subjectivity is undeniably complex. In this paper I have outlined the various discursive approaches to fat subjectivities. I have also highlighted Heyes' argument for the complexities of dieting in terms of subject formation, which in part explains its continual significance in women's lives. In addition I have argued for the same sort of complexity in fat activism and size acceptance. One large scale conclusion that can be drawn from this investigation is that any strategy of resistance must take into account the possible ways in which oppressive forces participate in the formation of the subject. Thus a strategy of blatant refusal may not always be tenable.

Works Cited

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