



Varied Experiences of Fat Bodies

This essay argues that the varied experiences of fat bodies are not reflected in the media or public spaces of our society. In creating a world that physically has no room for fat bodies and is socially unkind and unwelcoming, the varied experiences cannot be told let alone be allowed to be understood. Voices of those who are fat need to be uplifted to create more accessible spaces for all.

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Fat bodies have a varied experience of moving and existing through the world. These experiences are not a monolith but exist on the fringes, leaving the world hostile and unaware of its existence and needs. In creating a world that physically has no room for fat bodies and is socially unkind and unwelcoming, the varied experiences cannot be told let alone be allowed to be understood. This has reduced fatness into small boxes that are poorly represented in our media, and the causes and reason for fatness completely become an individual moral failing. This allows for fatphobia to be an accepted practice in our homes, on our TVs, in doctor's offices, or anywhere else a fat person dares to be. There are growing movements to change societal views on fatness, but as the experience of being fat is not a monolith, not everyone can find a space there. Fatness is an identity and therefore intersects with and is informed by all other identities a person carries. That changes and creates lots of nuance in how one experiences the world and how the world experiences them. As there slowly becomes more acceptance of fatness, some fat people, those who can most conform to beauty standards built from white supremacist ideas, are being allowed into the mainstream while others are continued to be shut out. This small

acceptance, while welcome, does not break the oppressive structural forces that deny fat people access and so cannot be truly acceptance. To fight this and to create space for fat people, we must break the ideas that beauty is required to see someone's humanity and make them worthy of acknowledgement or conform to specific beauty standards that are tied to historically racist ideas and practice. In this essay I argue that there must be a concerted effort to allow for space and an active consumption of the stories and experiences of fat people.

The Morality of Being Fat

Fatness in the United States has a history of being tied to the moral character of a person. Society, dominated by white Christian values, thinks if a person is fat it is personal choice. Personal failings have caused them to overeat and be lazy. In not conforming to traditional beauty standards, a fat person is a visible sign of immorality that can be tied to traditional White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) values. In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings (2019) examines popular women's magazines from the 1800s that extolled the virtues of Anglo-Saxon women. The articles instruct on the correct amounts to eat to please God as well as describe how "overeating was not just immoral and unhealthy but it could

also destroy their beauty" (Strings, 2019, p. 125). Strings places these magazines in context of the historic movements, two of the most prominent being the Second Great Awakening and the Temperance Movement. While these were predominantly led by men, women were the forces behind them, converting at greater rates and extolling the virtues of temperance the loudest (Strings, 2019). These popular magazines used the media to propel the ideas of Christian morality and the body. They also were able to uphold whiteness as the desirable beauty type, stating that fatness is only a beauty type "in some parts of Africa" (p. 134). From this we see how being fat was considered not only undesirable, ugly, and having poor moral judgment and self-control, but also made them only attractive to the subclass of Black people. By not staying thin you would be going against the values of the times and the will of God.

Since White Christians are the dominant culture, its values inform how, not just society, but government and corporations determine what is right or acceptable. When medical journals such as the *American Journal of Medicine* wrote about what was a healthy weight, it took its directions, not from doctors or scientific research, but from insurance companies such as MetLife that use its

insurer information to determine the scale of adult height and weight (Strings, 2019). This excluded bodies of those who insurers wouldn't insure (non-whites) and those who couldn't afford insurance. These medical journals were read and trusted by medical professionals who not only practiced medicine but held offices of influence. This informed doctors on how they practiced and instructed their patients on what was a healthy body. Also, it shaped what was and is promoted by the medical establishment as the ideal body type as these scales are the basis of the Body Mass Index (BMI), which medical professionals still use today to determine whether a person is overweight or obese.

In more contemporary times these value judgments on a person's character based on their weight can be seen in our popular media. In *What We Don't Talk About When we Talk About Fat*, Aubrey Gordon (2020) discusses how fat characters in books, movies, and television fit a narrative created by thin people for thin people. A few assertions Gordon writes as being the lens through which we see fat people are:

1. Becoming thin is a life accomplishment and the only way to start living a real, full, human life.

2. All fatness is a shameful moral failing.
3. Thinness is a naturally superior way of being.
4. Fat people who stay fat deserve to be mocked (p. 130).

Using these guidelines, there are limited narratives that a fat character could have. Collapsing the experiences of fatness, it becomes wholly who the characters are, similar to the title characters from television shows *Mike & Molly* or *Kate Pearson* from *This is Us* (Roberts., 2016). These character's stories are told from the perspective of failing at controlling their weight and therefore failing in their lives. In both these stories, the characters' narratives are started and propelled by their participation in weight loss groups. Gordon explains how the character, Fat Amy, from the movie *Pitch Perfect 2* (Banks, 2015), is characterized as sexual and her sexuality is played for laughs, as if the idea of a fat person being sexual or having any sort of sexuality and desirability is seen as a joke. There are lines played for laughs about Fat Amy having multiple exes, the idea being that a fat person having one ex let alone multiple is hilarious. When her body is accidentally exposed in the story, it is seen as undesirable and mocked openly (Gordon, 2020). Gordon also tells us

how fat characters are often villains of stories if a fat person is even to be included in a story at all, with fatness being an outward characteristic and sign of immorality in a person. These characters are played against thin protagonists who are afforded narratives with complicated character development, while the fat character is just a foil.

The idea of fatness as a character flaw lies deep in American culture as it has been threaded through our media. Consideration of the thought that fatness is just a simple physical characteristic of a person requires greater representation. Without it we are left with the assumption that fatness is inherently tied to who a person is and their moral fiber. Any moral failings they may or may not have would permeate thoughts and influence social interactions with fat people. By creating the space for fat bodies to be seen and their stories to be heard we allow who they are and how their experiences formed them be the basis of how folks interact with fat people.

The Many Sizes of Being Fat

The experiences of fat people, like many oppressed peoples, vary on their closeness to the standards of the oppressor. The more a person can blend

in or “size down” their being to fit the mold of the experiences of those in the dominant group, the greater access that person has to public space and validation within that space. In this case, the closer one is to thinness, the more likely that person is shown in public spaces and many of their experiences outside of the norm are acknowledged. This creates a different experience of being fat for those who are different sizes that allows some more privilege than others. Individuals in many fat spaces use a spectrum to help describe the relative privileges some fat people have over other fat people. This spectrum was inspired by an interview Glass (2016) conducted with author Roxanne Gay on the podcast, *This American Life*, where Gay talked about her experiences of being fat and the ways this differs from another fat activist due to her size:

And then you have people who are-- I like to call them Lane Bryant fat, which means they can still buy clothes at Lane Bryant, which goes up to 28 in size. And they're the ones I find that are often the strongest cheerleaders of, this is who I am, and, you have to take me as I am and respect me because of my body not despite of it. And I admire that a great deal. But I think that it's easier to feel that way when you have multiple places where you can buy clothes and feel

pretty and move through the world (45:05).

Gay is explaining how there is a disconnect when comparing the lived experience of various sized fat people when there is limited access, or none at all, to the same spaces. For Gay, it becomes difficult to have self confidence in her and her body and reject any norms that her body doesn't conform with because it becomes hard to move through a world that rejects you.

It is easier to have confidence when you feel pretty if you have choices in clothes that are designed to look beautiful and not just cover your body. The clothing store concept of "Lane Bryant Fat " has grown more categories to help describe variances of fat bodies and the spaces they have access to occupy. Fat activist Ash of the Fat Lip podcast, created more categories to help name the differences in fat lives. Gordon (2020) breaks the categories down as this:

- Small Fat- 1X-2X, sizes 18 and lower, Torrid 00 to 1. Find clothes that fit at mainstream brands and can shop at many stores.
- Mid-Fat: 2X-3X, sizes 20 to 24, Torrid 2 to 3. Shop at some mainstream brands, but mostly dedicated to plus brands and online.

- Super Fat: 4X-5X, sizes 26-32, Torrid 4 to 4. Wear the highest sizes at plus brands. Can often only shop online.
- Infinifat:6X and higher sizes, size 34 and higher, some Torrid 6. Very difficult to find anything that fits, even online. Often require custom sizing (p.9).

Using clothing sizes creates a more universal understanding of the sizes (everybody wears clothes) and helps give visuals to the body sizes that society talk about. Just by breaking the category down based on where one is able to get clothes, you can see a difference in privilege in ease and accessibility offered to those whose bodies are closer to the oppressing standard of thinness. So, while all folks who fit in these categories could be considered fat, the difference in experience between a small fat and an infinifat person can be more clearly demarcated. It gives space to recognize the experience of a small fat person while acknowledging how the experience of another fat person, like an infinifat, would be completely different.

Existing as Fat in Public

While one might think that having a larger body would demand space in public, fat people find it difficult. From the availability of clothes above straight

sizes (plus-sized people have 2.3 percent of the clothing options straight-sized people do as of 2018), to seats in public spaces like at restaurants or theatres or classrooms, it is difficult for fat bodies not only to be comfortable in public but to exist (Gay, 2017; Gordon, 2020). In not having access to the public, fat people are pushed out of spaces. Simple things such as travel become physically and emotionally arduous as well as costlier for fat folks than for their thin counterparts. For example, airline seats have been shrinking for years as airlines try to maximize profits by fitting more seats on to planes. Since 1985, airline seats on the four major carriers in the United States were a spacious 19 inches, but this has steadily gone down to 17 inches as of 2018 (Spinks, 2018). This comes at the expense of not only the comfort of passengers, but the ability for fat people to even travel, as not only can they not physically fit in an airline seat, the solution that airlines have come up with is to have fat people buy a second ticket, doubling the already high cost of airline tickets. This makes air travel even more inaccessible. So, while fat folks have to contend with not being able to physically fit into public spaces, there is also the reaction of others who have to share the same space. Gordon (2020) describes one experience on an airplane

where the person seated next to her was visibly annoyed and upset at having to sit next to a fat person and complained to the flight attendants. The solution was for the flight attendants to ask another passenger to switch seats with the disgruntled passenger. The experience left Gordon's "body in a knot of tension, forever tightening, while I willed it to shrink" (p. 15).

Roxanne Gay (2017) writes of similar experiences of desiring her body to become smaller. She says, "I am hyperconscious of how I take up space. As a woman, as a fat woman, I am not supposed to take up space" (p. 171). Gay being not only of a marginalized gender but a fat person as well shows us how society reacts poorly to her being seen. She continues describing her experiences of being in public as trying to fold into herself so her "body doesn't disrupt the space of others... as if I have less of a right to be in the world than anyone else" (pp. 171-172). These negative experiences of being fat in public are not always as passive as not being able to fit in a chair, but the unwelcoming messages often come from the reactions of people to a fat body being in the same space as them.

Like Gordon's (2020) experience with the person seated next to her on the airplane, poet Rachel Wiley also writes of

harsh confrontations when being seen in public. In her poem, “But they say I will not Make it,” Wiley (2017) writes, “When you are fat (and I am fat) the streets are full of/ soothsayers/ telling you how you will die” (p. 1). Wiley writes how comments are seemingly invited just by the virtue of being fat from strangers on your health and specifically how, because of your size, your health is obviously not well. When your body is not welcomed into spaces (and by not creating seating for a certain sized body, you are creating the message that a body is not welcomed), it is difficult to want to or willingly to be in those spaces. If one were to invite fat people in, they would be asking fat people to allow themselves to be at the mercy of uncomfortable spaces as well as the moral judgment of others.

If seats were made larger and clothes beyond size 12 became widely available, there still would need to be a change in societal reactions to fat bodies. It is common for those familiar with or strangers to fat people to allow themselves an opinion on a fat person’s body. It is often couched in concern for health, or sometimes just an open expression of disgust. This can be seen in Gordon’s (2020) experience with her fellow passenger on the plane, or Wiley’s (2017) experiences in public. Fat people

don’t just need access to spaces, they need acceptance to being in that space.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that to create space for fat people, we must break the ideas that beauty is required to see someone’s humanity and make them worthy of acknowledgement or conform to specific beauty standards that are tied to historically racist ideas and practice. There must be a concerted effort to allow for space and an active consumption of the stories and experiences of fat people. Without hearing the stories or creating space for fat people, there can be no justice for them. We increasingly marginalize fat folks even as the percentage of those considered obese in the United States increase. Limiting the amount of space one occupies blocks fat people from fully participating in life beyond their house. It is not only marginalizing but also it paints a false picture of what the world looks like. If there are no fat people in our media (and the few are there only for mockery, villainy, or to prove their worthiness by becoming thinner), and none allowed in public spaces, we actively paint over the existence of fat people. This means any contributions they have given to society

are not acknowledged or credited, and worse, we take away their humanity.

Fat acceptance cannot be tied to the racist beauty standards that have been with us for centuries. Fat people must have space created for them and by them to break the systematic oppression that tries to erase their existence. By listening to their experiences and then actively making changes to the spaces around us the lives of fat folks can move beyond the margins. In exploring how fat bodies

have been marginalized and excluded from public spaces, this essay shows the need for the dismantling and destruction of all societal beauty standards that uphold the oppression and marginalization of fat people as well as others in marginalized identities. We must make a concerted effort to allow for space for an active consumption of the stories and experiences of fat people to truly create a world that welcomes and values all bodies.

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