

On Learning to Teach Fat Feminism

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As a feminist theorist who frequently teaches theorizing that starts from embodied experience, I have begun to incorporate fat feminism into my teaching.¹ As a neophyte and a relatively thin woman, I have been self-conscious about broaching issues related to fat bodies in my teaching, even though they clearly raise important issues about size bigotry, thin privilege, and body acceptance. Why should a feminist teacher want to teach about fat bodies? Why might she (and why did I) find it scary and intimidating to do so? What approaches did I take to teaching fat feminism, and what approaches will I take next time I teach thinking from the body? By sharing my fledgling efforts, misgivings and breakthroughs alike, I hope to encourage feminist teachers to explore work on fatness and integrate it into their teaching.

Why Would Feminist Teachers Want to Teach about Fat Bodies?

One enormous draw to teaching about social constructions of bodies, especially those related to body size and weight, is that it's *interesting*: students are drawn to the topic. We live in a society that incessantly

discusses size and weight, idealizing trim, toned bodies and simultaneously marketing tasty, high-caloric foods at every turn. We have bodies, we eat and diet and binge, and many of us worry about whether we have the right balance between the calories we eat and those we burn, whether we're too fat, whether we're acquiring unsightly bulges, and so on. And in most classes there are a few students who have had, or still have, eating disorders, and many who do not have normative slender (or buff) bodies.

Students find deeply resonant arguments that bodies are cultural artifacts, socially constructed by the particular expectations and practices of the time and place in which one lives. I recently taught a graduate theory seminar in which students read chapters from Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, which deals with social constructions of the body. The half dozen reader reports from students demonstrated that the issues she discusses are crucial to their lives. Many of them shared intensely personal reflections and stories as well as more academic ones. Clearly, relating to their bodies is a charged issue, and this was so across

multiple differences, as this group of writers included men and women, people who are white, African American, Hispanic, disabled, working class, young, middle-aged, straight, lesbian, gay, thin, fat and in-between.

In passage after passage, Bordo explains how thin and fat bodies are “read,” focusing on the credit that thin-bodied people get and the blame directed at fat-bodied folks. Small wonder people obsess about their body size when controlling one’s weight and developing a taut, muscular body are read as having mastery over one’s impulses and appetites. Those who succeed in the constant watchfulness and self-discipline of appetite control and strenuous exercise feel good about themselves, and are happy, confident, and upbeat, simply on account of having succeeded in controlling their weight and body size. Conversely, we’re told repeatedly that if we’re fat, we’re weak, unable to exercise control, continually caving into the insistent demands of our bodies and appetites.

Such readings of thin and fat bodies reflect mind-body dualisms that go back to ancient Greece and to Augustine and other early Christian thinkers. These dualisms cast the body as the enemy of one’s higher purposes, reinforcing the idea that a fleshy, corpulent body reflects unrestrained appetite, a body that has slipped the control of the mind or spirit. It is a point that Elizabeth Grosz makes, too (5). Not only have traditional dichotomies read bodies, the flesh, carnality, and nature as feminine and opposed to mind, intellect, self-control, discipline, and culture, which are read as masculine, but female bodies are held up to different standards than male ones. A fat girl or woman is more likely to be held in contempt than a fat boy

or man, and to be blamed for her size and shape; likewise, a slender girl or woman is valued on that account and is more likely to be seen as beautiful or desirable. Advertising and media images in movies and TV shows, for example, reinforce standards of body size, look, and shape. They push many to hold themselves up to, and try to approximate, idealized images of thinness and beauty.

Bordo asks what our widespread preoccupation with the size and shape of our bodies reveals about larger cultural anxieties (140, n. 12). She wonders if we have turned our attention toward problems that seem to be within our own control (like the size and shape of our own bodies) because we feel helpless to tackle global or social problems that seem too big and complicated to have any hope of bringing about change, like the arms race, terrorism, environmental degradation, or global warming (140–41). This focus on individual redemption and change reflects a powerful tendency in contemporary American culture to understand people’s problems or situations as fundamentally their own responsibility or fault, and open to choice, control, and change provided they are sufficiently disciplined and put enough effort into transforming themselves. Consider, for example, makeover and reality television shows like *The Swan* or *The Biggest Loser*, which demonize the fat body as out-of-control, ugly, and unkempt, but see it as amenable to change and intervention via individual effort—and the services of the weight-loss, diet, exercise, and beauty industries.

Recounting explanations of mind-body distinctions, how thin and fat bodies are “read,” and reasons for caring so deeply about body size, it seems like fatness is a juicy, ripe topic that resonates with

just about every body, something that *any* feminist should want to teach. I'm also struck by how odd it is that someone like me, who has long been intrigued by approaches to feminist theory that take bodies seriously, would be reluctant to explore the corporeal experience of being fat (and how it affects one's educational, romantic, and professional prospects), thin privilege, and the blame and ridicule that get heaped on fat women. Why all the hesitation and resistance? What does this say about me, what does it say about the topic and the fraught character of talking about being fat? Putting all the scary stuff on the table might help me understand why I've avoided this topic, and it might encourage others to be less afraid of addressing fat feminist issues.

In recent years, I've taught both undergraduate and graduate feminist theory courses that take embodied experience to be central and problematic, considering transgendered or ambiguous bodies (Fausto-Sterling), cosmetic surgery (Morgan; Gagné and McGaughey), breasted experience (Young), how women move and take up space (Young), eating disorders, how thin and fat bodies are "read" (Bordo), body building, exercise addictions, makeover TV (Weber), portrayals of bodies in advertising and other media, and relationships to food. Since work that theorizes bodies often appears to assume white, straight, middle class women, I ask students whether particular theories presuppose certain kinds of bodies and exclude or ignore others, and I include readings on lots of "other" (poor, old, disabled, Black, Hispanic, Asian-American, bisexual, lesbian, and trans) bodies too.

I also find these topics interesting because of my personal interests and investments, especially my own life-long

addiction to exercise and discipline in monitoring my body's weight and size, adjusting my diet and exercise regimes to keep everything tightly controlled, my perception that my own self-image and self-confidence are connected to maintaining a physical body that I like and keep toned and slender. At the same time, I have a "hot" relationship with food: I eat out of boredom, I binge, I consume food that isn't good for me, sometimes in quantities that are out of control. My appetites aren't easily controlled, which makes maintaining an acceptable body image hard work.

Given these interests and investments, why have I been reluctant to incorporate issues related to fat bodies into my teaching about embodied theorizing? Partly I worry about standpoint epistemology. I worry that I don't know enough about fat oppression to explore it sensitively with my students, and I worry that fat students will find my interest suspect and my actual knowledge about their situation thin. Linda Bacon, like me a thin woman who teaches fat feminism, recounts the story of a fat woman who raised her hand at the back of the class during one of her lectures, obviously enraged. When called on, the woman said, "I don't trust you. You're just another skinny bitch telling me and everyone else what it's like to live in my body. It's not okay that you get to define my experience" (Bacon 10). Bacon writes of the encounter, "it was like my worst fears confirmed. I do feel like an imposter in my role sometimes—and I do recognize the dangers inherent in being seen as a spokesperson for fat people" (10). I share her fear, only more so, since unlike Bacon, I'm not an authority on nutrition or fat feminism: I'm a beginner who is bound to make mistakes and faux pas. I worry that others will find me uninformed and perhaps inauthentic.

Bacon describes a riot that occurred in the hallway outside a lecture she gave on weight regulation at her school because there was too little space in the lecture hall for all the people who wanted to attend. Observing the rioters, her department head commented: "And they didn't even have a weight problem" (Bacon 3). Echoing his surprise at the large number of thin people wanting to get into Bacon's lecture, several of my friends and colleagues have expressed surprise, even a trace of ridicule, asking me, "Why are *you* interested in teaching that? You're not a fat activist, you're not even fat!" It seems one has some explaining to do, to colleagues, department heads, and students, about why this is a topic that merits general attention and not merely a special interest. For that matter, will *my* department head think this article on fat feminism is a serious contribution to pedagogy? I wouldn't have to worry about that were my focus on Socratic method, devising policy planning exercises, or some other mainstream disembodied topic.

Another reason one might feel nervous about teaching fat feminism is the perception by some that fat studies is a marginalized and stigmatized area of academe, one that aims at consciousness raising or fat pride, and is more connected to advocacy and proselytizing than to serious scholarship. A recent blog on *The Daily Beast* suggested that some see fat studies as "part of a dangerous dumbing down of liberal education in which the pursuit of knowledge is replaced by frantic social programming," which instead of encouraging open debate, "brands as a bigot anyone who disagrees" (Binder 3). Of course comments about "dumbing down" are not reserved for classes that are fluffy or poorly constructed, but often are enlisted

to attack positions that are regarded as pushing a political line. It isn't fair to assume that any course that deals with body size issues will necessarily adopt lax academic standards or serve as a venue for shouting down "size bigots."

Fatness scholars sometimes attack the dominant discourse about fat people on the grounds that public health professionals exaggerate the harm to health from being fat, and have constructed the "obesity epidemic" as a moral panic (Campos). Although I grant the point that we have medicalized the increasing percentage of Americans who are fat, at the same time I think it's important to acknowledge that there *are* some genuine health risks associated with being fat. For example, at some point, being grossly overweight as measured by BMI or according to life insurance actuarial tables or doctor's hand-outs seems to be associated with being at greater risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, and certain cancers. Being heavy makes mobility and exercise harder, creating a downward spiral for health/fitness outcomes: if one is too fat to easily walk or do other forms of exercise, one is apt to stay fat or gain more weight and become even less able and mobile, etc.

However, this line of argument is complicated. Even if being fat by some objective measure presents greater health risks, such fears are probably exaggerated by those who identify the "obesity epidemic" as one of the key social problems facing America, and fat people are convenient scapegoats for social concerns about the increase in chronic diseases and the increasing cost of health care. Further, the increasing number of fat people in the United States is not merely a matter of individual choices made in

an unconstrained social context, but is related to a complex of government policies and social practices. Access to high quality food in the United States is skewed by money and housing patterns, due in part to the pattern of government support for corn growers and, indirectly, the production of soft drinks and processed foods as well as cheap beef and pork containing corn syrup, coupled with the *lack* of government support for vegetable farmers. Prices matter in a society with huge disparities in income and wealth, and many poor families fill their bellies with calorie-laden fatty and sweet foods because they are cheaper and more filling than more nutritious foods. It's not just a question of agricultural subsidies: schools have cut spending by eliminating or decreasing P.E. classes and raised money with soft-drink machines; latch key children return home from school to play indoors because their parents are still at work; people are pressed to find time to cook nutritious meals after working all day; and in some neighborhoods people cannot easily travel to find affordable produce and other high quality foods and consequently rely on local stores that don't stock a good selection of fresh vegetables and fruits. Advertising, marketing, and regional and family traditions also influence people's tastes, establishing certain foods as tasty or satisfying and others as unappetizing. If all these things are the roots of America's eating and weight problems, perhaps *they* should be the focus of public attention, not the individualized discourse we so often hear that lays the blame on the consumption patterns and tastes of fat people. But that said, I think it's important not to dismiss the health concerns related to being fat if one wants to be taken seriously.

My last reason for being nervous about teaching fat feminism is more personal. I am beginning to realize that taking on fat feminism is a little like standing on the cliff about to dive into the surf below: what am I getting into? If indeed thin privilege only exists because fat oppression exists (Bacon 2), then I have to examine my complicity with a system that insists on degrading and disciplining women's bodies, making them fit the image of what is considered attractive and normative by the male gaze. As an exercise- and diet-obsessed thin woman who buys into disciplining the body, I help perpetuate this system. And I have to confront the immense amount of time and energy I've thrown into crafting an appropriately feminine body and my anxieties about becoming fat myself. I have to admit the tradeoffs I've made in order to pursue this bodily ideal—to swim several times a week on my lunch break and to spend hours cycling or running rather than making and deepening friendships, contributing to the world by doing more and better writing or political work, or being active in community organizations. I've spent a lot of time on fundamentally narcissistic endeavors that revolve around staying thin, all in order to approximate the body ideal dominant in this society. Why not (as Bacon puts it) fight fat prejudice rather than the fat on my body?

At the same time, this hesitation is the most important reason *to* teach fat feminism. It's scary and embarrassing to confront the extent to which I am obsessed about policing my own body and the sacrifices I've made all my life to exercise and maintain a trim, lithe appearance. But when I think about the fact that good friends deal with hostility every time they go outside the house, confronting preju-

dice and bigotry every time they go for a consultation with a new physician or meet a new group of people, my anxieties seem petty. So even though I've had to overcome some hesitations and uncertainties, I am working to incorporate fatness issues into my teaching. I turn next to outlining how I did this in a recent course.

Teaching Fat Feminism

As I frequently do, last semester I taught a graduate seminar on feminist theory and methods that focused in large part on bodies and embodied experience. Early on we talked about our physical bodies in the classroom: how they look, what surmises we make about one another from physical cues related to appearance (age, gender, race, ethnicity, clothing, body language, how people attend to one another and to the professor in class discussion, size, fitness and disability, how people move). We began to acknowledge how inescapable and important bodies are. Unavoidably, others take stock of us and form value judgments based on our appearance: they notice what we look like, infer things about our sense of style, use of cosmetics or jewelry, body art, how we wear our hair, and so on. They don't just notice how we walk, sit, stand, establish eye contact, and speak with others; they also "read" our bodies as reflections of attitudes, consumption patterns, lifestyles, and so on.

We didn't push hard on the politics of appearance or gender performance in those early days of the seminar, but focused on learning to hear one another, establishing trust, and beginning to reveal more of our selves to one another. One woman came out as bisexual, another as lesbian, another as Mormon. A student wrote about being disabled in a reaction

paper. I talked about my personal and pedagogical reasons for not revealing to my undergraduates that my ex-husband is gay and that my interest in same-sex marriage is fueled by passionate personal engagement—but thinking that such a revelation *is* appropriate in a graduate seminar. We read essays by Iris Young about female bodily comportment and breasted experience, and Sandra Bartky's fierce analysis of—and attack on—feminine bodily regimes as self-imposed discipline and punishment. We talked about interventions like cosmetic surgery, dyeing hair, Botox, dieting, and exercise regimes, considering what kinds of interventions, if any, we thought were unethical or anti-feminist. Readings and discussions in this part of the class addressed social constructions of beauty, how they are reinforced, performed, and internalized, and how they might be challenged (see Morgan; and chapters collected in Weitz and in Young).

We then turned to readings that focused on body size and weight, beginning with several chapters from Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* that started us thinking about what it means to be read as fat in this society. I asked students to write reader responses three times during the semester, and the largest number were in response to chapters about weight in Bordo. It was apparent that several of them had been "saving up" in order to write on this, and they were looking forward to these readings and discussions. These reader responses were a blend of personal and more "academic" responses to the readings; everyone who wrote made personal connections to the readings, writing about themselves, their own bodies, and their feelings about being fat. One student's response to Bordo particularly

illustrates the powerful and negatively internalized social norms about the fat body:

the readings for this week spoke to me on a level that shattered any detachment I might have erected between myself and the material. It is troubling to write this, but I really do hate my body. I see my heavy bear very much as Bordo describes it as he [who] “continually misrepresents my ‘spirit’s motive,’ my finer, clearer self; like an image-maker from the darkness of Plato’s cave, he casts a false image of me before the world, a swollen, stupid caricature of my ‘inner’ being” (Bordo 3). I had some idea of how I had bought into the norms of a “perfect body” in regards to my own flesh, but the extent to which I identified with this imagery is more than a little disturbing. . . . When Bordo reiterates the perceived separation, the conceptual enmity between the mental/spiritual and the physical body in describing the dualist axis, I again see myself. My body is other, my body is a jail, my body holds me back, it keeps me from having the things that I want. And yet, despite these feelings, I am well aware, intellectually, that these feelings have been inscribed into me by decades of social conditioning. It is simply hard to reconcile the two.

My student’s sophisticated reflections speak to the gulf between recognizing intellectually that fat bodies are socially constructed as lazy, gross, and out-of-control and actually being able to let go of such constructions and accept one’s own body as it is. This response was remarkable in terms of taking up the invitation to think deeply about what the reading meant, and how it resonated with his experience. But there were several moving and revealing moments in discussion

and in reader responses where students recalled what being fat felt like: one student talked about what it’s like to be fat and working class, prompting an intense and concrete set of reflections by all on how fat people are often read as poor or working class and how wounding this assumption can be. At this point in the semester, we all knew that this woman cared about dressing well and being stylish; she was willing to build on this self-revelation by addressing the tension between her desire to create a feminine, sexy, funky look and her concerns about how to dress and comport herself in order to establish her authority in the classroom when she teaches, noting that she struggles to be taken seriously on account of her age, gender, and weight (see also Fisanick). She also shared her worries about how she should dress and act in order to be taken seriously when she goes on the job market in a year or two, given her disdain for the “dress for success” formula, which would feel like selling out and also suit neither her body nor her sense of style. A couple of women talked about what it felt like to be fat, then lose weight and inhabit a thin or “ordinary” body, experiencing both fat bigotry and thin privilege at different moments in their lives. Another talked with a mixture of self-acceptance and chagrin about how she feels about being a fat, middle-aged African American lesbian, who earlier in her life had been in a heterosexual marriage with a serviceman and who currently has a daughter in college. Without explicitly casting her comments in terms of intersectionality, she talked how she experienced her body differently as a young Black wife and mother and as an older, fatter Black lesbian mother, so that we glimpsed how race, class, age, and

sexual orientation modulated her experience of living in a fat body.

Maybe because of the honesty and courage of many students in revealing how they felt about the size and shape of their bodies, this group readily grasped Bordo's analysis of fat and slender bodies. They agreed that she describes something real and important that circulates in their experience of daily life and popular culture, and they were able to articulate the pain of living in non-normative, recalcitrant bodies. The stylish fat student summed up our discussion of Bordo by commenting, "Yeah, she's right, this is still commonplace, and it's incredibly difficult to live with."

At this point it was clear that we needed to take a more activist approach that would expose the pervasiveness and falsity of social constructions of fat bodies, the damage they do, and the fact that they can be criticized and changed through collective social action. We did this by engaging in several forms of consciousness raising in order to empower my students to recognize and deal with the constant bombardment of negative messages about bodily appearance in their own lives, and eventually, in the lives of the students *they* teach, the articles and books they publish, and the tasks or projects they choose for themselves for future scholarly, teaching, and activist work.

We pursued several trajectories: finding positive role models as a key to consciousness raising; identifying thin privilege and recognizing its connection to fat prejudice; trying to understand the diversity of experiences with fatness; discussing the role of teachers, whether fat or thin, in teaching fat feminism; and acknowledging the care all of us need to take with respect to standpoint issues and "speaking for" others.

Coping with Fat Bigotry

Having talked in detail in class about fat self-hatred and social constructions of fat people as lazy, undisciplined, in thrall to their appetites, and so on, and having elicited responses via reader reports (written responses or journal entries give students the opportunity to reflect on their personal stakes in body size issues without taking as many risks as speaking up in class), we needed to find ways to challenge and counteract these powerful negative messages. I invited a graduate student at my university, Michaela Null, who is an "out" fat activist and scholar to come and speak to our class (if the idea of being "out" as a fat person sounds funny, consider Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's comment in *The Epistemology of the Closet* that she "came out" as fat, meaning that she took being fat to be constitutive of her identity, something she named as a political position). Michaela gave a well-prepared twenty-minute presentation that used visually interesting PowerPoint slides to present fat-positive ideas and images. She asked us important and provocative questions: suppose we used the word "fat" as a physical descriptor rather than a dismissive put-down? What happens when you say "fat"? She quickly made us realize that we're afraid to talk about fat people in direct, non-euphemistic terms. It makes us nervous to hear someone use "fat" repeatedly without flinching or softening her statements; we're not used to "fat talk," and that tells us something about contemporary American society and the extraordinarily anxious, "can't say this to her face" character of thinking and talking about weight. She also showed us several witty and funny YouTube videos that discuss fat bigotry, and then she answered

our questions. Throughout Michaela modeled active, thoughtful resistance to fat phobia as well as poise and pride in her own appearance.

Thin Privilege

Anyone who teaches at a large public university in the Midwest wrestles with how to teach students about the ways they are implicated in systems of power and privilege when relatively few have had much experience with being the target of bigotry, and many are defensive about social norms (e.g., of femininity or beauty) that they have internalized and perceive as chosen, not coerced. For example, when I teach about the systemic character of racism, sexism, class, or homophobia, I want students who think we live in a tolerant, post-feminist, post-racist society to understand what it means to have a stigmatized identity. Sometimes I do this by asking students to keep track of how many “yes” replies they make to a list of invisible privileges that white people enjoy (McIntosh). One can do the same thing with fatness, inviting students to consider questions that point out how the world has been constructed to reflect the body size, tastes, and needs of thin people:

- “I can easily find seats in theaters and restaurants that fit my body”
- “It is easy to find clothing in my size that is becoming and fits my sense of style”
- “When I order food in a restaurant, no one associates my food choices with the size of my body”
- “People take no notice of my size when I sit down beside them in an airline seat”
- “There are lots of characters in prime time TV shows whose bodies resemble

mine in size” (see Bacon for additional examples)

As with the hidden privileges of whiteness, such a survey can be a good opening for a discussion about why and whether size matters, and whether discrimination on the basis of size is fair. Many students may have given little thought to what it would be like to be regarded as obese or fat, and they may think about size as a matter of choice, rightly a focus for teasing or humor, and different in kind from other kinds of visible but immutable characteristics like race or sex. Eventually someone is bound to blurt out, “But it’s their fault! If they don’t want to feel embarrassed, they should eat less!”—and we’re off, thinking and talking about how and why weight and appearance matter, and whether fat discrimination is fair.

Diverse Experiences with Fatness

Work about fat feminism often addresses the issue of being fat as specifically a woman’s issue, related to notions of appropriate female body size and norms of beauty from the point of view of the male gaze. One writer, for example, suggests that all women are urged to take up as little space as possible, and all men are urged to be expansive in their body gestures (Hartley). But my male students reminded us that fatness is an issue for them too, noting that fat men aren’t so likely to sit with their legs wide apart and their arms flung to the side. Furthermore, fatness is a different issue for gay and straight men, with gay men internalizing and imposing more stringent norms about appealing bodies than heterosexual women expect of men (e.g., expecting attractive partners to be athletic and

slender). But there are variations within this group too, such as the “bear” sub-community whose members prefer large hirsute men. Similarly, being fat is less stigmatized and more likely to be viewed as sexy or voluptuous among African American men and women (though this is offset by *white* judgments of fat African American men and women, which are often even harsher than those leveled at fat whites). Hispanics are also more likely to find curvaceous, well-endowed (female) bodies sexy and attractive than whites. Clearly we need to consider how different aspects of identity and experience, like race, sexual orientation, class, and age inflect experiences with fatness. More work attending to how fat bodies are viewed and experienced in groups that differ by race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation is needed: a lot of what has been written to date seems to center on the experiences of middle class white people, straight and queer.

The Role of the Thin Professor Teaching about Fatness

One decides to teach courses oriented around bodies and embodied experience at one’s peril, and I have worried about my position as a thin woman teaching about fatness. As I noted earlier, it seems presumptuous for someone who is not fat and has not been stigmatized on that account to speak about these issues, especially when there are others who understand full well what it means to be fat in a fat-hating culture. It’s not simply a matter of lacking authentic, first-hand experience with fat phobia: my thin privilege is the flip side of fat-phobia (Bacon 2ff.). If people weren’t stigmatized for being fat, no one would enjoy the relative safety or invisibility of

thin privilege. If bodies were just bodies, some bigger and some smaller, then body shape and size would not be privileged or stigmatized—it would be irrelevant to one’s moral worth or the quality of one’s ideas. But we are unfortunately a long ways off from such a situation. What I get to take for granted is related to the hostility, aversion, and critical scrutiny that fat friends, students, acquaintances, and colleagues have to deal with all the time. Thinness contributes to my privilege in the classroom: issues related to fatness are not *my* soapbox, so no one will criticize me on course evaluations for letting my own pet issue take center stage in the course. Indeed, I’m privileged in a variety of academic settings, taken on the basis of my appearance to be alert and hard working, more likely to get interviews and positions, to be invited to speak, to be taken seriously, and so on.

I think being thin is a problematic vantage point from which to address issues related to being fat. But I don’t regard that as a sufficient reason for refusing to address the issues that face fat people, like stereotyping, fat bigotry, legal and social discrimination, and self-hatred. Standpoint theorists tell us that there is a problem with speaking for others (Alcoff)—but there is also a problem with *not* speaking for others. As a professor I have a position of power in the classroom, and because of this the issues and arguments that I present for my students’ consideration carry weight. When I authorize particular topics and perspectives as important, my students are likely to take them seriously. If I shy away from broaching the experiences of groups of which I am not a member—for example, racial minorities, lesbians, poor or fat people—then I am derelict in my respon-

sibility to address, along with my students, issues related to injustice, and we are all worse off for it. So I am convinced that one should not refuse to go beyond one's own lived experience on identity politics grounds. But, like Alcoff, I think one has to proceed reflexively, thinking consciously about one's own position of power and privilege, and acknowledge that one doesn't always fully understand the experiences of the Other, or the critical theoretical analyses derived from experiences of marginality one does not share. One must learn to listen and to engage the language and points of view of the various subaltern groups, including fat people, whose experiences one wants to understand and address. When they can speak for themselves, then one needs to back off and give them the stage. That means, as much as possible, letting fat feminists explain their own positions, letting *their* words and arguments do the speaking, not mine (Alcoff). A good example of not ducking the responsibility to teach about an experience one does not oneself share, and of reflexivity in doing so, is Linda Bacon's ability to explain the stake that all of us (fat and thin) have in fat oppression. When confronted by the objection, "I don't trust you, you're just another skinny bitch telling me what it's like to live in my body," Bacon made the move to defer to her student's experience with being fat, to ask if she would like to speak to what it's like to be fat, making a teachable moment out of a tense encounter.

What about Next Time?

The next time I teach feminist approaches to body size issues (including what I've called "fatness" throughout this article), there are lots of new approaches I'd like

to take and themes I want to address, so much so that the course could easily become a fat studies course. Here briefly are some ideas. First, I would like to focus on individualized, blaming ways of talking about size and personal responsibility. When we adopt the language of choice, responsibility, and fault, we reinforce the idea that being fat is completely volitional, one's own fault, something that the individual can and should control. Blaming people for their body shape by referring to "bad choices" or lack of self-control is part and parcel of personalizing the issue. This is misleading and false, as I suggested in the earlier discussion of industrial agriculture, government subsidies, differences in wealth, and so on. Finding collective, structural ways to explain forces that are leading to wider girths, rather than demonizing fat people, could be a helpful move.

Medicalizing fatness or obesity is related to this: it's an odd move, unprecedented in medical history, to treat the increase in the percentage of the population that is overweight as a problem that is fundamentally medical, in the sense of being connected to, or a form of, illness, and in need of treatment. Next time I teach this material, I propose to deconstruct the "obesity epidemic" trope, which fatness scholars use as a shorthand for the personalized, blaming approach of considering fat bodies to be the product of individual behavior, as though that behavior occurred in a vacuum and could be understood solely in terms of personal choices.

Another approach I will try the next time I teach body size issues is to address the similarities and differences between size and other identity groups that have been stigmatized, like racial minorities, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans people,

and the poor. Why do we still often hear “fat slob,” fat jokes, and other ridiculing or hateful language directed at fat people even though slurs on the basis of race are no longer acceptable? It would be helpful to make body size a clear and explicit focus for discussion and to compare and contrast it to other visible (and not so visible) differences that have also given rise to opprobrium and discrimination, like race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. This could lead into legal and constitutional discussions of equal treatment under the laws and notions of immutable conditions that have nothing to do with the individual’s ability to contribute to society. Although sexual orientation is now generally included with other groups that are protected from discriminatory legal treatment, a generation ago many argued that being gay or lesbian was a changeable and largely invisible condition, and therefore not protected from discrimination under the 14th Amendment. Where are fat people in relation to such thinking? How should bias on the basis of body size and shape be treated as a social, constitutional, legal, and policy matter?

The next time I teach issues related to body size, I would also like to consider techniques and technologies of weight loss, including bariatric surgery and the proposal to loosen requirements for undergoing such procedures; the weight loss industry (e.g., Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, spas, clinics, gyms and fitness centers, purveyors of diets, pre-packaged meals, appetite suppressants and other drugs), attempts to educate children and control what they eat at school (e.g., banning junk food or soft drinks in schools, adopting new standards for school lunches), and individual efforts to lose weight and sculpt bodies (e.g., exercise,

dieting, bulimia, and tummy tucks). There are entire markets for services, clothing, food, cookbooks, and medical care based on the fact that people are perennially trying to control their weight—and the ongoing nature of such efforts makes them perfect capitalist ventures because the demand is never-ending. The ethical, political, and economic issues connected to the weight loss industry are both thorny and legion, and (depending on the course) I could see making them a focus for study, discussion, and writing assignments.

Finally, I would like to consider what it would take to change norms about what we consider healthy and beautiful/good-looking bodies. Fat bodies have been idealized in different cultures and historical epochs (perhaps when it was much harder to gain weight), but in the last fifty years or so, the globalization of beauty norms has made thinness the worldwide ideal. How can people resist the power of such images? The Dove soap ad campaigns (and the accompanying “movement for self esteem”) that feature varied body types suggest some possibilities for resistance, but they also have generated a lot of controversy in the United States. (“Dove”). Can or should anything be done to change the dominant norms about slender and fat bodies?

Conclusion: Bodies are Key

I have discussed here some of the reasons I have been hesitant to teach issues related to fat bodies, and I have argued that feminist considerations of fat bodies and how they are “read” make important contributions to social justice and philosophical treatments of embodied experience. I have suggested that reflexivity and foregrounding the voices and experi-

ences of fat people is a way to address the problem of speaking for others, and I have taken the stance that teachers ought not to limit themselves to only teaching experiences that fit their own identities. I set out the approach I used to teach “fat feminist” issues in a recent seminar, and I proposed some ideas for other ways I might approach these issues the next time I teach an embodied theory course. I close by explaining why bodies matter.

Whatever our bodies look like—thin, fat, young, old, male, female, black, white, able, or disabled—they are fundamental to our experience of the world. As Iris Young puts it, “our bodies are ourselves. We move and act in this flesh and these sinews and live our pleasures and pains in our bodies” (80). I walk around in this body; it goes with me everywhere, and it is the conduit for carnal pleasures of every sort, as well as unpleasant sensations. I cannot forget about my body; it *is* me, at some fundamental level, and not just as the sensory extension of the “real” interior me. People see me, and what they see is my body, and they read that body in certain ways that are largely beyond my control. The experience of being elided with one’s body reminds us that bodies are culturally constructed—that is, they come to convey messages and be read by others according to meanings specific to this time, place, and culture. They can sometimes give rise to readings that are unfair, that rob us of autonomy or dignity or merit simply because of how we look. All of us can “get” these dimensions of bodily experience, even if we ourselves walk around in bodies that are seen as unremarkable. We can grasp that fatism means one is assumed to be less competent and acceptable, just because of how one *looks*, and that such assumptions get

under the skin and become part of the self one carries around in the world. Fat oppression hurts all of us, in much the same way that racism does. It takes a visible, obvious characteristic as the basis for reading—and dismissing—another’s worth, accomplishment, and dignity.

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