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### Rebel Heart: Performing Fatness Wrong Online

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#### Abstract

In western cultures, neoliberalism has resulted in a shift from collective risk responsibility to individual risk responsibility; one in which individuals are expected to manage their risks for the collective good (O'Malley 61). A good citizen of the 21st century is one who accepts responsibility for their own personal health, well-being, and success. Individuals who require structural support, or refuse to (re)produce white, cis, able-bodied, and heteronormative, systems threaten the status quo and face marginalisation. Fat people, for example, are viewed as irresponsible citizens. They consume too many resources and fail to uphold the revised social contract (the moral obligation to be healthy).

Furthermore, capitalism, according to Jones (32), relies on the apparatus of desire; more specifically, heterodesire. Fatness, therefore, is considered a threat to this apparatus, as it is excluded from heteronormative desire (Murray 239). Instead, fatness is positioned as a category for regulation (and legislation), that demands individuals to undertake the "uncompensated, unending work of individualist self-improvement...a condition of both the body and of labour under neoliberal capitalism" (Wykes, Queer 7). Fat bodies are monitored by their governments, their families, and their workplaces. They are regulated by friends and strangers alike; fat bodies are public property to shame and scold for the betterment of the individual.

In the intersection of neoliberalism and capitalism, fatness is read "as a moral failing and as an aesthetic affront" (Murray 14). This results in hostile environments in which fat people are exposed to negative bias, hostile attitudes, and legalised discrimination (Puhl and Heuer 941). Living in such a context requires fat people to develop, maintain, and revise, identities in the shadow of internalised oppression. Many fat people, unsurprisingly, experience negative weight and/or body identities that often eclipse other identities held. And these weight identities are spoiled identities; stigmatised identities in which the bearer is held responsible for the stigma (Courtot 201; Kent 368).

Goffman (42, 130) argued that individuals living with spoiled identities engaged in identity management strategies, including withdrawing (removing oneself from public interaction), passing (camouflaging the stigma), and covering (engaging in behaviours that made the stigma less offensive). More recently, scholars have argued that a fourth identity management style of coming out is available to individuals as well. Coming out has been explored in individuals with discreditable (non-visible) stigmas (Sánchez et al 17; Schrimshaw, Siegel, Downing, and Parsons, 143) and those with discredited (visible) stigmas (Howarth 444; Titschkoshy 135). Coming out as fat has been empirically explored by Saguy and Smith (53) and Pause (Coming out, 50).

Individuals in the Fatosphere, an online community of people who have come out as fat, are engaging in anti-assimilationist activism (Cooper 17-18). They queer fat embodiment, disrupting the normative obesity discourse and rejecting the demands of the neoliberal system. They are defiant resisters, performing their fatness in inappropriate ways (Wykes, Neoliberalism). They are, in short, doing fatness wrong.

Consider, for example, Jenn Leyva, of *The Fat and the Ivy*, and her online project aimed at responding to neoliberal messages of responsibility. The project, [But What about Your Health?](#) is hosted on Tumblr, a Web 2.0 tool that allows for user created content to be blogged and reblogged. Tumblr allows for text posts, video posts, picture posts, audio posts, link posts, and quotes. According to information on *But what about your health?*, Leyva uses the site to respond to messages she receives that concern her health. "Every time you tell me I'm unhealthy or ask, I mean concern-troll about my health, you have to watch me eat something 'unhealthy'", the site informs. Some of the questions that Leyva receives include, "Have you had a stroke yet?", "I'm not out to police your body, but how do you not feel sick after that much sugar that fast?" "...what if your doctor told you that should lose weight to have a better life quality or improve your health?", and the old standby, "But what about your health?" Some commenters do not ask a question, but leave a declarative statement instead ("You are so unhealthy").

In the project, Leyva shares the comments she has received, and responds by posting videos and gifs of her eating. And not just eating, but eating junk food such as donuts, hash browns, brownies, chocolate covered cinnamon rolls, and [the ubiquitous McDonald's fried apple pie](#).

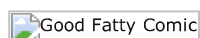
Leyva is pushing back and rejecting the discourse of the obesity epidemic. Similar to those who use the #obeselifestyle tag in Twitter and Instagram, Leyva is flaunting her irresponsible choice; doing fatness wrong by gleefully consuming foods she should deny herself. Fat people are not supposed to take pleasure in their fatness, they are supposed to feel shame. They are not allowed to embrace their size, they are to be burdened with the work of becoming less than who they are.

One commenter felt that Leyva is not only performing her fatness wrong, but performing her fat activism wrong as well,

this is really upsetting to me. its not about 'fat acceptance' this is encouragement of poor and deteriorating health conditions among people everywhere...Please dont encourage people to neglect their health, have respect for your body and nourish it with exercise and healthy clean food.

The commenter is suggesting that Leyva is tarnishing the fat civil rights movement with her unapologetic performance, and setting a dangerous example for others (glorifying obesity, anyone?) Is this commenter seeking for Leyva to engage in a different identity management style? Would they take comfort if Leyva was apologetic, or consuming a salad as a gesture of penance? Maybe satisfaction would only occur if Leyva removed herself from the Internet entirely. Or perhaps this respondent is hoping that Leyva will change her performance to that of the good fatty.

A good fatty is an apologetic fat person who takes "care" of themselves (read: is well groomed, fashionable, and active) and acknowledges that they could and should be pursuing lifestyle choices that are socially palatable. Stacy Bias has suggested that there are many versions of the good fatty in her comic blog, [12 Good Fatty Archetypes](#), including the fat unicorn (a healthy eating, daily exercising, metabolically healthy fatty), the work in progress ("the fatty in the process of becoming not-a-fatty"), and the no fault fatty (the fatty who can trace their fatness to a genetic or biological (pre)disposition, thereby shifting the blame to out of their control).



Each of these performances, notes Bias, seeks to legitimise their existence with the larger fat hating culture. This is the opposite of the performance of the rad fatty, the dangerous fat person who rejects cultural expectation and stigma. In choosing to eat junk food in response to moralising questions about her health, Leyva is performing the rad fatty; she is "engaging in performative displays of behaviours that are discourages or considered stereotypical of fat people but with intention and a tone of rebellion" (Bias).

Bias' comic draws to mind Graham's (178) work on lipoliteracy. Lipoliteracy, according to Graham, is the act in which people read fat bodies, believing the visual inspection of a fat body provides the viewer information about the individual's lifestyle choices, health status, and moral character (Graham 179). In this comic, Bias illuminates how lipoliteracy may operate and the power structures it reinforces. It also highlights the danger the good fatty archetype(s) present to the fat civil rights movement. These acceptable versions of fatness may open the door for those who perform them, but they also ensure that the frame is not wide enough for other kinds of fatness to push through. Bitchtopia argued that in putting good fatties on a pedestal as acceptable forms of fatness, "our media is alienating the bodies who aren't glowing white, able-bodied, smooth-skinned, and only slightly chubby". Because the correct performance of fatness is not just about behaviours and attitudes, but also the privileges attached to race, class, and cis gender, that many recognized good fatties embody.

[It Gets Fatter](#) (IGF) is a group that works to promote the issues of fat queer people of colour by unpacking body positivity and challenging the conflation between weight and health. IGF represents a community that is often ignored or overshadowed in fat activism, people of colour. The creators share, "This project was born out of the frustration and the isolation that a lot of fat, brown queer folks face in their communities, and in an attempt to find a way of feeling less alone in ours. While there is a thriving online community of white fat people, we know that there is something uniquely different about experiencing fatness as a person of colour" (It Gets Fatter).

It Gets Fatter hosts a Facebook page (see above link), a Tumblr, and a series of videos on vmeo. The group also hosts events in Canada, including workshops. Information about the events are posted across the group's social media platforms, making their work a note of difference in the Fatosphere as visible Fat Studies scholarship and activism is dominated by individuals in the United States (Cooper 328). On the IGF Tumblr, individuals who identify as fat and a person of colour are invited to make submissions; submissions may be text, video, audio, and photos. The purpose of these submissions is to provide a repository of fat positive material that highlights the experiences and lives of fat queer people of colour. Sites such as this strive to provide a community for others and allow for representations from individuals who may be marginalised within the larger fat community.

They note, "We will show preference to submissions from queer, trans\*, disabled and poor/working class folks. If you don't fit into one of these categories just be aware of the space you're taking up in the movement and consider submitting something to another fat positivity thingy if it feels relevant!" In this, It Gets Fatter speaks directly to tensions within the fat civil rights movement, as white cis straight fat people often have their voices amplified at the expense of other voices within the movement. One member of IGF, Asam Ahmad, has reflected on this in a piece on Marilyn Wann's blog, *Fat!So?*. Ahmad notes that the media/community organisations usually approach white fat people to speak on the issues of fat politics. He argues that in doing so, only certain kinds of fatness are presented to the larger public; only certain kinds of voices get heard. In these conversations, considerations of how fatness intersects with race, class, orientation, and ability, are rarely brought to the fore. He implores well known fat activists to ask themselves, "Is your voice really that idiosyncratic and fabulous? Or is it more likely that you are benefitting from white privilege and other structural systems of oppression?" (Ahmad).

Fat Studies scholarship and activism are making many of the same mistakes as second wave feminism, as white voices and issues are presented as the voices and issues of fat people. Many scholars and activists also fail to acknowledge and authentically engage with their white privilege; their straight privilege; their cis privilege. For scholars and activists alike to continue to push back against neoliberal responsibility and capitalism's heterodesire, a commitment must be made to do better at recognizing the value of an intersectional lens (Pausé, Intersectionality 83). And acknowledgement that responsibility for highlighting voices of fat people of colour, voices of fat working poor, voices of fat queers, does not fall to those groups alone. The power transferred through white supremacy places the largest burden on white people within Fat Studies scholarship and activism to ensure that spaces are made and held for people of colour. The power transferred through capitalism places the largest burden on middle and upper class people within Fat Studies scholarship and activism to ensure that spaces are made and held for people from working and poorer classes. And the power transferred through the academy places the largest burden on those within academia to ensure that spaces are made and held for those denied entry to the Ivory Tower.

For many outside of the academy, the emergence of Web 2.0 tools have allowed for spaces to be created, maintained, and shared, that amplify voices of disparate individuals across social platforms. For fat people, the rise of the Fatosphere has ensured that oppositional fat politics may be engaged with by anyone with access to the Internet (Pausé, *Express 1*; Pausé, *Commotion 76*). And with the technological advance, the conversation around fatness is changing. It has been argued that spoiled identities, especially visible ones, present a situation where "all other narratives are impossible" (Kent 368). But fat people online have (co)constructed ways to present opposing narratives of fatness. And many are rejecting dominant discourses and appropriate ways of being, delighting in the opportunities to perform their fatness wrong.

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