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# All made-up : the hyperfeminization of fat women

Sarah K. Millimen  
*University of Toledo*

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A Thesis

entitled

All Made-Up: The Hyperfeminization of Fat Women

by

Sarah K. Millimen

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Liberal Studies Degree in the College of Language, Literature and Social  
Sciences.

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Dr. Kim Nielsen, Committee Chair

---

Dr. Sharon Barnes, Committee Member

---

Dr. Allyson Day, Committee Member

---

<Optional: Other Members>, Committee Member

---

Dr. Patricia R. Komuniecki, Dean  
College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

May 1, 2015

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An Abstract of  
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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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“All Made-Up: The Hyperfeminization of Fat Women” analyzes the way some fat women conform to cultural ideals regarding femininity with the goal of having fatness included within that ideal. Fat phobia is used by the dominant culture to oppress women and keep them ‘in-line’ with the heteronormative, white, cultural ideals of beauty in the United States. “All Made-Up” argues that fatness is socially constructed via medicalization, political rhetoric, and mother blame. It argues that hyperfeminization is an important form of fat activism, but one that is narrow in its ability to change cultural ideals. Hyperfeminization reinforces cultural ideals regarding femininity and excludes a vast group of women in the process.

I would like to dedicate this to my daughters, in hopes that their futures are as even brighter than the ones I have imagined for them. To Clifton, you are all right. Also, to my parents for their belief in my abilities, and a huge thank you to the Disability Studies Program at the University of Toledo... I didn't know what I was getting into when I enrolled in my first class, but I am so happy that I did! I have had two of the best years of my life working and learning from everyone here. Last but not least, thank you to the Women's and Gender Studies department, I will miss Wednesday pot lucks and being able to converse with so many intelligent and knowledgeable women while simultaneously eating amazing food!

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## Chapter One

### What is Hyperfeminization?

On Thursday, January 22, 2015 Tess Holliday (also known as Tess Munster) signed to a modeling agency. Holliday is not an average model; she is not even an average plus-sized model. Holliday is 5'5" and a size 22.<sup>1</sup> Holliday grew up being bullied and tormented about her weight her, so much that she dropped out of school because of it. As an adult she moved to LA and began doing make-up; she found that using make-up gave her confidence that had previously eluded her. Holliday became a "positive body activist" with the hash tag #effyourbeautystandards.<sup>2</sup> Holliday began an Instagram account and soon had many followers. With the help of social media and other individuals who were tired of feeling as though they were sub-human because of their weight, Holliday became an internet sensation.<sup>3</sup>

Holliday is not the only plus sized woman to put her body out there. Jes Baker (also known as the Militant Baker) does so also, calling herself "A fiery body advocate, fat model, mental health professional, self-love enthusiast, professional rabble-rouser, crazy cat lady, Tedx speaker, soon to be frreal book author, feminist and total pain in the ass."<sup>4</sup> Both Holliday and Baker argue that fat can be sexy, both are involved in fashion, and both photograph amazingly in their underwear.<sup>5</sup> This form of women's fat activism,

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<sup>1</sup> Most plus-sized models are at least 5'8" and between a size 8-16 according to Eonline.

<sup>2</sup> "About Tess Munster," accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.tessmunster.com/about.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Bruna Nessif, Meet Tess Holliday, the Plus-Sized Model Who Scored a Major Contract and Created the #EffYourBeautyStandards Movement, *Eonline.com*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.eonline.com/news/618686/meet-tess-holliday-the-plus-sized-model-who-scored-a-major-contract-and-created-the-effyourbeautystandards-movement>.

<sup>4</sup> "About" *The Militant Baker*, accessed January 7, 2015, <http://www.themilitantbaker.com/p/about.html>.

<sup>5</sup> It is not my intent to negate in any way the impact that both of these women have had on society. Nor do I desire to be critical of the way that any person chooses to have agency over their own body. My goal is to look at this popular form of fat activism and to question the validity and efficacy of it.

embracing feminine stereotypes while attempting to redefine fat stereotypes, is something I will refer to as hyperfeminization: the act of self-objectification and acceptance of the narrow ideal of what female beauty looks like in order to challenge the ideal that fat cannot be feminine, attractive, or within the cultural ideal of beauty.

Seeking acceptance of the fat female through hyperfeminization, however, raises questions. Does the hyperfeminization of the fat female body assist with the cultural acceptance of fat? Or does it only slightly challenge and widen the cultural ideals of our society, allowing for the continued exclusion of “abnormal” bodies within United States culture? Does hyperfeminization promote the belief that one is either part of the cultural ideal or not included in it at all? I argue that hyperfeminization may be effective for the individual using it as a form of activism, but that it is narrow and problematic.

Hyperfeminization reinforces cultural ideals about femininity and challenges cultural ideals regarding fat while excluding fat women who have no desire to conform to the cultural ideal of feminine beauty

## Chapter 2

### Frameworks for Analysis

In considering whether hyperfeminization is an effective form of fat activism or if it hinders women by confining femininity to narrow and unrealistic cultural ideals, it is important to dispel some myths regarding fat. Understanding fat as a social construction is a vital step in understanding hyperfeminization. The ways by which fat is socially constructed can be easily seen in the medicalization of the fat body, political rhetoric, the blaming of mothers, and also in its representation in fat activist blogs and images (such as those of Tess Holliday and Jes Baker).

Fat can be interpreted through fields of study such as feminist studies, disability studies, queer studies, and above all, fat studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's essay "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory", Alison Kafer's book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, and Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay's "Introduction" from *The Fat Studies Reader* all represent portions of the previously mentioned theories and are applicable to my analysis of fat and of hyperfeminization, each look at different forms of social constructions that allow for oppression. Applying key arguments of these writings, allows for a broader understanding of the social construction of fat.

Fat is socially constructed via the medicalization of the body. Garland-Thomson looks at the medicalization of women's bodies reinforced by surgical interventions. Garland-Thomson argues that a woman's natural body is now considered abnormal in light of medical advancement that allows the body to be surgically altered in order to

become closer to the ideal.<sup>6</sup> “This flight from the nonconforming body translates into individual efforts to look normal, neutral, unmarked, to *not* look disabled, queer, ugly, fat, ethnic, or raced.”<sup>7</sup> I argue that in U.S. culture, bodies that do not fit inside the ideal cause discomfort. In an attempt to alleviate this discomfort medicalization offers solutions and remedies for abnormal bodies.

While medicalization in the form of surgery is often seen as a solution to fatness, it is vital to understand that medicalization begins before conversations of surgical intervention ever begin. Typically the medicalization of fat begins with the plea to care about one’s health, with the automatic and immediate assumption that fatness always is equal to bad health. “The assumption that fat people are unhealthy is so ingrained in western society that it is hard to get people to face the facts.”<sup>8</sup> Rothblum and Solovay address the fact that the myth that weight and health are linked so strongly in the minds of Americans that even when presented with the facts it is difficult for individuals to let go of this belief. This myth also contains within it a false sense of caring for the fat individual’s well-being, or to use the term that Kafer analyses, “‘quality of life’[...] a familiar refrain in discussions of disability, as the term has often been used as a measure of the worth of disabled people’s lives.”<sup>9</sup> I recently met a woman who shared that she would soon be undergoing gastric bypass surgery. The main reason for her surgery was a carefully rehearsed line, “I want to be able to play with my kids more and to improve my

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<sup>6</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory," *NWSA journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 12, accessed March 17, 2015, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa\\_journal/v014/14.3garland-thomson.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa_journal/v014/14.3garland-thomson.html).

<sup>7</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory," *NWSA journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 11, accessed March 17, 2015, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa\\_journal/v014/14.3garland-thomson.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa_journal/v014/14.3garland-thomson.html).

<sup>8</sup> Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, e. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 63

quality of life.” Upon further inquiry, she admitted her reason echoed what her doctor had told her. Presuming that losing weight will improve one’s quality of life is based on the myth that fatness is a sign of poor health for individuals. When parenting is added into the conversation, the fat individual is no longer being pressured to lose weight just for herself, but also for her children’s quality of life. The medicalization of the fat body in the form of gastric bypass is pursued and seen as the ultimate solution. Quality of life is used as a narrative to medicalize a fat person’s body.

As Kafer argues, quality of life is more affected by the access to resources than the state of one’s body.<sup>10</sup> While Kafer gives an example of what this means within the context of disability, I will frame it within the context of fatness. A fat person goes to the doctor for a routine physical; the doctor (prior to any testing or examination) immediately brings up the patient’s weight. The doctor implores the patient to lose weight and makes statements about how the patient’s quality of life could be better if the individual was thinner and that perhaps being thin would help the patient obtain the goal of traveling more. Using Kafer’s claim regarding accessibility to resources, I argue that the individual’s weight hinders traveling less than does the fact that the traveller may have to purchase two tickets to get anywhere due to the inaccessibility of airplanes. Socially constructed medicalization leads to the belief that a fat people’s quality of life, and also the quality of life of the individuals around them, are inferior to the quality of life that thinner people experience.

Political rhetoric regarding child’s well-being also constructs the meanings of fatness. Currently, politicians and media outlets report and make policies based on the

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<sup>10</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 63

“obesity epidemic” and claim that America is the fattest nation (it ranks twentieth). This is used to justify a “war on fat.”<sup>11</sup> Political rhetoric in which child well-being is highlighted is often combined with a political rhetoric regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Linking child well-being, sexual orientation and gender identity is also very common in the discussions around fatness. As in the commentary about Duschesneau and McCullough analyzed by Kafer in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, outside analysis regularly conflate identities. In regards to the political rhetoric of sexual orientation and gender identity fatness is also looked at in a more critical way when not linked to heterosexuality. Jackie Wykes’ statement that the “specious stereotype of the fat lesbian who ‘turns to women’ because she’s ‘too ugly to get a man,’”<sup>12</sup> shows the rhetorical connection between fatness and homosexuality. This rhetoric drives some women to embrace hyperfeminization. Kimberly Dark give an example of how young fat women are often masculinized when describing her experience of being cast as the man when play acting with her childhood friends. Because of her weight, she was seen as masculine because her friends considered fat unfeminine. Dark argues that there is an advantage to the defeminizing nature of fat: “I suppose that the masculinizing of fat girls, ugly girls, and gay girls can have a fabulous side effect. We learn about assertive femininity. We learn about wearing different gender roles. We learn about living in our bodies and being fabulous when we choose.”<sup>13</sup> While it is important to see that

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<sup>11</sup> Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, e. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Jackie Wykes, Introduction to *Queering Fat Embodiment*,. ed. Cat Pause, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 1

<sup>13</sup> Kimberly Dark. “Becoming Travolta,” *Queering Fat Embodiment*, ed. Cat Pause, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 29.

masculinization of fat women can be positive, to fat women who use hyperfeminization it is considered undesirable.

A third, damaging way in which fat is socially constructed is via mother blame. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states that disability blurs cultural expectations of femininity.<sup>14</sup> Fatness also blurs cultural expectations. Kafer argues, “The pervasiveness of prenatal testing, and especially its acceptance of part of the standard of care for pregnant women, casts women as responsible for their future children’s able-bodiedness/able-mindedness; prospective parents are urged to take advantage of these services so to avoid burdening their future children with any disabilities.”<sup>15</sup> From the moment of conception, mothers are the primary parent held responsible for the future child’s mental and physical health. The social construction of fatness via mother blaming is not only a social construction of fatness, but also a social construction of what the cultural expectations are for women. The cultural expectation of women being the primary individual responsible for the well-being of a child is one that is damaging and gendered in a way that is not only harmful to women but to men as well. This type of social construction also has hints of the rhetoric of child well-being, but with a more aggressive blame on the actions of the mother.

The social construction of fatness can also be read in the work of plus sized model, Tess Holliday and blogger Jes Baker. Both of these women participate in fat activism, using hyperfeminization as a form of activism. However, hyperfeminization also contributes to the view of fat women held by society. By conforming to social ideals

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<sup>14</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory," *NWSA journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 17, accessed March 17, 2015, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa\\_journal/v014/14.3garland-thomson.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa_journal/v014/14.3garland-thomson.html).

<sup>15</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 69

of femininity, these women reinforce a socially constructed view that demand fat women be feminine. This desire to be feminine is not universal to fat women everywhere. By representing fat women as hyperfeminized objects, Holliday and Baker place fat women in a very limited category and space in regards to fatness.

When using the phrase “cultural ideal” it is in reference to the beauty ideal that is placed upon women. As scholar Chrisler states, “beautiful women have always been prized, but the defining qualities of beauty have differed from culture to culture and from one historical time period to another...A beauty ideal by definition, can be met only by a minority of women, as its value depends on it being special and unusual; if too many women approach the ideal, then it must change in order to maintain its extraordinary perfection.”<sup>16</sup> This ideal can change; however, the ideal relies on exclusivity to exist. Hyperfeminization challenges this ideal only slightly by challenging the criteria for membership by seeking to open it up to fat women. Hyperfeminization does not fight the existence of the ideal but seeks membership within it. Most American bodies do not even come close to representing to the cultural ideal. These cultural beauty ideals which are easily seen in movies, on magazine covers, in advertisements, or medical guides, are held as the goal for bodies, something for which to strive. Realistically they are hardly ever achievable.

Examining the different ways that fat is socially constructed helps reveal the effects of hyperfeminization on fat women. Hyperfeminization is a very narrow way to fight against fat oppression and one that does so by adhering to the cultural ideal. Meleo-Erwin

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<sup>16</sup> Joan C. Chrisler, “Why Can’t you Control Yourself? Fat *Should Be* a Feminist Issue” *Sex Roles*, 66 (2012): 608-609, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-011-0095-1#page-1>

argues that “seeking mainstream acceptance [...] is unlikely to succeed but that it also leaves behind those most unable or unwilling to assimilate into the mainstream culture.”<sup>17</sup>

In hyperfeminization, fat women appeal to the cultural ideal of what is constructed to be feminine, in attempts for their body size to be accepted as part of the ideal of beauty. This, according to Meleo-Erwin, lacks not only potential for success but also inclusion for different types of fat women.

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<sup>17</sup> Zoe Meleo-Erwin, “Disrupting Nomal: Toward the ‘Ordinary and Familiar’ in Fat Politics”, *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol. 22 No. 3, (2012): 392, accessed January 5, 2015, <http://fap.sagepub.com/content/22/3/388.full.pdf+html>.

## Chapter 3

### Analyzing Fatness

Fat is weighed down by many stereotypes in the current American culture. Analyzing fat through the analytical frameworks of Garland-Thomson, Kafer, and Solovay and Rothblum, fat is revealed as a social construct that is medicalized and incorrectly linked with health. In addition socially constructed understandings of fatness impact different women differently. Ethnicity and culture all impact how fat is interpreted and responded to.

It is no secret that in the United States individuals spend mass amounts of money on different body modifying surgeries and products. ABC News reported that in 2011, the annual revenue of the U.S. weight loss industry (including diet books, diet drugs, and weight loss surgery) was \$20 billion. 108 million people were on diets and 85% of these people were women.<sup>18</sup>

The interesting thing about fatness in the United States is that it was not always considered bad. Up until the late nineteenth century, fatness was considered a sign of wealth and health.<sup>19</sup> Condemnation of fat began in the 1860's and from then onward, "savvy entrepreneurs perceived the growing cultural hatred of fatness and advertised products that both intensified the worries about fatness and promised to shrink the

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<sup>18</sup> "100 Million Dieters, \$20 Billion: The Weight Loss Industry by the Numbers," *ABCNews*. May 8, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/health/100-million-dieters-20-billion-weight-loss-industry/story?id=16297197>

<sup>19</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, (New York University Press, 2011), 27.

corpulent body. The idea that fat is a mark of shame, a stain [...] developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>20</sup> This is also congruent with the time line of the medicalization of fat.

Once these entrepreneurs began to see how much money could be made off of selling anti-fat products, businesses began to perpetuate the negative feelings and stereotypes regarding fat in order to make money, using public forums and advertisements to do so. Fat was made to be undesirable, unhealthy, the result of laziness and lack of control over one’s desires. Perhaps the most alarming fact about these businesses today is that they continue to make more and more money in spite of the fact that most of these products are not effective. Pat Lyons argues, “in the last fifty years [...] the extent to which the diet and managing to dramatically increase its influence and profits without ever increasing product effectiveness. The failure rate for sustained weight loss is has remained consistent at 90-95%.”<sup>21</sup> Americans are throwing money into companies and systems that do not work.

Good marketing is not the only thing that has promoted fat stigma within the U.S. culture. The medicalization of fatness has contributed greatly to fear and hatred of not only fat, but the fat person. Dr. Linda Bacon asserts, “The idea that health will necessarily improve with weight loss is dubious at best. No one has ever proved that losing weight prolongs life.”<sup>22</sup> A 2005 study found that obesity had no effect on life

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<sup>20</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, (New York University Press, 2011), 26.

<sup>21</sup> Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the “Obesity Epidemic”, *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009) 75.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, (BonBellaBooks, Inc. 2008), Pg 124-140.

expectancy in older Americans.<sup>23</sup> The myth that fatness is linked with unhealthiness serves only one purpose, to maintain exclusion from the cultural ideal. As disability studies scholars have argued, when medicalized, bodies that differ from the cultural norm are seen as a “property of the individual body rather than the social environment.”<sup>24</sup> Jeanine Cogan argues, “Perhaps the most widely accepted theory of etiology for obesity is that it is self-induced.”<sup>25</sup> Viewing fat as a medical issue makes fat a medical condition that is the fat individual’s problem. Making fatness a medical problem, not only stirs up frenzy within people, but it also puts even more money into the pockets of the weight loss industry. For example, 1 in 4 hospitals have a diet center and most of them are economically very productive.<sup>26</sup>

Today’s medical field presumes that health and weight are directly associated and that, when out of balance, this defectiveness needs to be fixed. According to the National Institutes of Health two-thirds of the entire population of the United States is overweight or obese and deemed to be “unhealthy.” However, their data is questionable at best. A 2004 study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention stating that 400,000 people die from obesity was full of errors. The actual number sits at around 26,000. While these new findings were reported in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2005, the CDC never changed its

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<sup>23</sup> Sandra L. Reynolds, Yasuhiko Saito, and Eileen M. Crimmings, “The Impact of Obesity on Active Life Expectancy in Older American Men and Women,” *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (2005): 442, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/45/4/438.full.pdf+html>.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald J. Berger, *Introducing Disability Studies*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 26.

<sup>25</sup> Jeanine C. Cogan, “Re-evaluating the Weight-Centered Approach Toward Health,” *Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness*, ed. Jeffery Sobal and Donna Mauer (Aldine de Gruyter, 1999), 231.

<sup>26</sup> Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the ‘Obesity Epidemic’,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009) ,76.

stance on fat.<sup>27</sup> They continue to support the myth of fat unhealthiness and unhealthiness necessitates medicalization. After all poor health requires medical treatment. As Pat Lyons points out, however, “if concern for health is truly the primary motivator, then reducing fat stigma would be at the top of the list of health activism. Instead, research has identified weight bias in virtually all health professionals [...] weight bias has been the cornerstone of public health policies so far.”<sup>28</sup> Fat hatred is so engrained and entangled with medicalization that medical professionals consistently show bias against fat individuals. Dr. Linda Bacon states that the “obesity epidemic” has stopped. The obesity rates for men, women, and children have all leveled off, yet the war on obesity still rages and the stigma still remains.<sup>29</sup> *The Journal of the American Medical Association* confirmed that from 1999-2008 there was no significant rise in the number of women and men who are considered obese.<sup>30</sup>

Even the methods used to diagnose fatness are problematic. Doctors diagnose fatness primarily by using the Body Mass Index (BMI). The BMI is a number calculated from a person’s weight and height. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention refers to this as “a fairly reliable indicator of body fatness for most people.”<sup>31</sup> It goes on to say that the BMI is “used as a screening tool to identify possible weight problems for adults.

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<sup>27</sup> Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, (BonBellaBooks, Inc. 2008), Pg 124-125.

<sup>28</sup> Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the ‘Obesity Epidemic’,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009) ,85.

<sup>29</sup>Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, (BonBellaBooks, Inc. 2008), Pg 124-139.

<sup>30</sup> Katherine, M. Flegal, Margaret D. Carroll, Cynthia L., Ogden, and Lester Curtin, “Prevalence and Trends in Obesity Among US Adults, 1999-2008,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 303, No. 3 (2010): 240-241, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=185235>.

<sup>31</sup> “About BMI for Adults” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed January 14, 2015 [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult\\_BMI/](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult_BMI/).

However, (the BMI) is not a diagnostic tool.” The CDC specifically states that the BMI is so widely used because it compares an individual to the rest of the population. It compares the subject to the average and is inexpensive and easy.<sup>32</sup> The problem with comparing an individual’s body to the rest of the population is that it does not allow for individual differences. It makes assumptions about the health of an individuals based exclusively on weight; and has the potential to cause a health care professional to miss possibly significant diagnosis.

Health At Every Size, an organization started by Dr. Linda Bacon, examined the studies done on individuals diagnosed “obese” and “overweight” based on their BMI results and determined very little link between health and fat. Only 9% of these individuals had health issues related to fat. 91% of the individuals’ health had nothing to do with their weight, meaning that despite their diagnosis as “overweight” or “obese” their weight had no effect on their health.<sup>33</sup> Even in light of this information, doctors continue to make ill-informed diagnoses and assumptions regarding fat people, an example of unethical needless medicalization of weight.

This needless medicalization of weight also results in mistaken diagnoses. I encountered this myself when receiving prenatal care for my second child. After a routine visit, some of my paper work included a diagnosis of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome. With the help of Google, I looked over the symptoms (none of which I had other than being “overweight” and a little hairier than the average woman) and was shocked that no one had ever mentioned this diagnosis to me. Since the risk of ovarian cancer is high if a

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<sup>32</sup> About BMI for Adults” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed January 14, 2015 [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult\\_BMI/](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult_BMI/).

<sup>33</sup> Deb Burgard, “What is Healthy at Every Size?,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 43.

person has POS the diagnosis is important.<sup>34</sup> When asked about this, my current doctor said she had no idea how this diagnosis came to be and that it was incorrect. Her opinion was that my previous doctor had diagnosed me with POC because of my weight and nothing else. This example of how we have medicalized fatness to the point of misdiagnosis is further evidence of the fact that fatness must cease to be looked at through a medical lens and must be looked at as a social issue; a form of “political oppression rather than individual defect.”<sup>35</sup>

When looking at fat in an analytical way, it is important to recognize that fat affects different women in different ways. The social construction of fat is not the same across racial, class, ethnic and other cultural lines. Each woman will have different experiences with fatness. Some of this has to do with the way that individual cultures view fatness and also interacts with the predominant cultural ideals in the United States. Systematic racism and the ways in which the United States views women of different races is also a factor when looking at the way the cultural ideal affect women. A 2014 study done by Germiné H. Awad, Carolette Norwood, Desire S. Taylor, Mercedes Martinez, Shannon McClain, Bianca Jones, Andrea Holman, and Collette Chapman-Hilliard examined the ways that beauty and body image affect African American women in college. It states that African American women were “unlikely to view mainstream standards as appropriate comparison.”<sup>36</sup> Another study suggests that “white cultural

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<sup>34</sup> “Polycystic Ovary Syndrome” *Medline Plus: Trusted Health Information for You*, accessed January 14, 2015, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000369.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Anna Mollow, “Disability Studies Gets Fat,” *Hypatia*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (2015):201, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hypa.12126/epdf.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Germiné H. Awad, Carolette Norwood, Desire S. Taylor, Mercedes Martinez, Shannon McClain, Bianca Jones, Andrea Holman, and Collette Chapman-Hilliard, “Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women,” *Journal of Black Psychology*, (2014): 18, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://jbp.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/07/23/0095798414550864.abstract>.

norms of beauty” are rejected by African American women because they are “seen as discriminating towards them and their ethnoracial group [...] given that mainstream beauty ideal requires not only thinness, but also Casucasoid features and lighter skin.”<sup>37</sup> What both of these studies point out is that African American women are less negatively affected if their body size does not conform to the white cultural dominant ideal. There is also more acceptance of different body sizes within the African American community.<sup>38</sup> Another study by Lisa R. Rubin, Mako L. Fitts, and Anne E. Becker concludes that African American women are more likely to endorse what is termed body ethics which are “values and beliefs regarding care and presentation of the body.”<sup>39</sup> Within these body ethics it is not the size of the body that matters, but how it is presented and represented. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues, “African American culture also assumes that substantial weight is an unremarkable, if not normative, aspect of Black women’s lives.”<sup>40</sup> The acceptance and unremarkable nature of fat within the African American community does not mean that there is not a stigma that comes with being a fat Black woman. Beauboeuf-Lafontant mentions the creation of the Mammy image as one that was meant to be controlling. “The large, dark-skinned, sexless Mammy was central to the

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<sup>37</sup> Deana L. Jefferson and Jayne E. Stake, “Appearance Self-Attitudes of African American Women and European American Women: Media Comparisons and Internalization of Beauty Ideals,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 33, (2009): 40, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2009.01517.x/epdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Deana L. Jefferson and Jayne E. Stake, “Appearance Self-Attitudes of African American Women and European American Women: Media Comparisons and Internalization of Beauty Ideals,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 33, (2009), 398, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2009.01517.x/epdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Lisa R. Rubin, Mako L. Fitts, and Anne E. Becker, “‘Whatever feels good in my Soul’: Body Ethics and Aesthetics Among African American and Latina Women,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Vol. 27 (2003): 55, accessed March 24, 2015, [http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/238/art%253A10.1023%252FA%253A1023679821086.pdf?auth66=1427208028\\_db18d1e0e4012e18c6e8a8d8611294d9&ext=.pdf](http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/238/art%253A10.1023%252FA%253A1023679821086.pdf?auth66=1427208028_db18d1e0e4012e18c6e8a8d8611294d9&ext=.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Strong and Large Black Women? Exploring Relationships Between Deviant Womanhood and Weight,” *Gender & Society*, Vol 17, No. 1, (2003): 117, accessed March 4, 2015. <http://gas.sagepub.com/content/17/1/111.full.pdf+html>.

rationalization of slavery as a ‘peculiar institution’ of human bondage [...] she embodied a deviance, a ‘dark heaviness.’”<sup>41</sup> This stereotype is still dealt with by Black women. In addition to the sexless Mammy image, Black women also experience a hypersexualization, making them “feel like they are sexualized, regardless of their intentions, due to the way others perceive their body” and a belief by men that the “curves of a Black women’s body mean she will be willing to engage in sexual acts.” This hypersexualization leads Black women to “think differently about how they dressed [...] in an attempt to manage others’ perceptions of them.”<sup>42</sup> The self-policing of their bodies by African American women brings to light the fact that hyperfeminization as a form of fat activism is one that is heavy with white privilege. African American women, all too aware of the hypersexualization of their bodies, may be hesitant to participate in hyperfeminization, wanting to distance themselves from the hypersexualized stereotype. Fat white women, however, do not fear this, but would actually desire to be more sexualized in an attempt to shake the stereotype of not being sexual at all.

A study of the day-to-day lives of Mexican American adolescent females indicates that Mexican American girls struggle significantly with weight, and that teasing and bullying is a problem for this community of young women. Both the young women and their parents expressed the belief that if the women were able to lose weight, they

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<sup>41</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Strong and Large Black Women? Exploring Relationships Between Deviant Womanhood and Weight,” *Gender & Society*, Vol 17, No. 1, (2003): 112, accessed March 4, 2015. <http://gas.sagepub.com/content/17/1/111.full.pdf+html>.

<sup>42</sup> Germaine H. Awad, Carolee Norwood, Desire S. Taylor, Mercedes Martinez, Shannon McClain, Bianca Jones, Andrea Holman, and Collette Chapman-Hilliard, “Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women,” *Journal of Black Psychology*, (2014): accessed March 2, 2015, 12-13, <http://jbp.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/07/23/0095798414550864.abstract>

would be happier because they would not be teased.<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that this article only specified weight loss as a way to improve body image for these adolescents. Weight loss was the ultimate goal giving no mention to the social constructions that allowed the bullying or fat acceptance for Latina girls, indicating the existence of white privilege within fat activism.

It is important to note that the medicalization of fat, specifically the use of the Body Mass Index, to judge health is used across all ethnic groups. Medicalization seems to be a facet of fat that is inescapable. An example of this is a study conducted in 2004 that compared differences in BMI and Body/Self-Dissatisfaction in Whites, Asian subgroups, Pacific Islanders, and African-Americans. This study shows that the need to categorize and medicalize fat is embedded deep within the American culture. The study points out differences in BMI across these different groups of individuals, but it concludes that white individuals, specifically white females, have the highest rates of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction out of these different groups.<sup>44</sup>

The exclusion of African American women, Latinas, and additional ethnicities from the cultural ideal is damaging and wrongly implies that their bodies are somehow less desirable. This exclusion, however, does cause more aggressive cultural judgment of fat white women's bodies because so many of the mainstream images we see are white figures. White privilege enables fat white women to have more opportunities and

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<sup>43</sup> Sharonda Alston Taylor, Beth H. Garland, Bianca Sanchez-Fournier, Kaitlyn Florence Allen, Jean S. Doak, and Constance M. Wiemann, "A Qualitative Study of the Day-To-Day Lives of Obese Mexican-American Adolescent Females," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 131, No. 6, (2013): 2&4, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/6/1132.full>

<sup>44</sup> Alayne Yates, Jeanne Edman, and Mara Arguete, "Ethnic Differences in BMI and Body/Self-Dissatisfaction Among Whites, Asian Subgroups, Pacific Islanders, and African-Americans," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 34, (2004): 305, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X03003057>.

platforms for fat activism. Hyperfeminization is not seen as widely in women of different ethnicities which could be due to the threat of hypersexualization of women of color's bodies. What is clear is that the medicalization of fatness is a problem that negatively affects women of all ethnicities. One of the most important ways to combat this is to shed light on the social construction of fat and how it is used as a way to oppress women of all ethnicities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> I recognize that there is room for much more analysis of fat and how it intersects with race. Race and fatness have the potential to be an entire thesis on their own. I realize that I am only scraping a small surface of the analysis that could and should be done.

## Chapter 4

### Fat: A Political Weapon

Oppression and attacks on fat may today be more prevalent due to mass media, but this form of oppression is one that also appeared (specifically in regards to attacking women and feminism) during the first wave of feminism which took place from the mid 1800's to the 1920's. On the covers of magazines, cartoonists drew suffragists as fat, masculine creatures accompanied by headlines proclaiming that this was what the "desire for public citizenship has done." The suffragist was "a primitive coarse beast, too ugly, too big, too fat to be a woman."<sup>46</sup> Not only do these comments make the statement that fat is bad, but they also assert that it is not consistent with the cultural ideal of that time of what a woman should be. Fat was used as a political weapon to discredit women's suffrage. In the same way, "First-wave feminists lampooned the female anti-suffragists as fat, inferior, and resistant to progress."<sup>47</sup> Both sides used female fatness to signify undesirability and unfemininity. Labeling a woman unfeminine was strategically used to discredit the woman's views and opinions.

In response to these attacks, feminists attempted to change the perception that people had about them by using hyperfeminization as a weapon to combat female oppression. White, middle-class, first-wave feminists played up the cultural belief of that time that women were genteel and dainty, emphasizing thinness, soft features, and pale

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<sup>46</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, (New York University Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>47</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, (New York University Press, 2011), 83.

skin.<sup>48</sup> This strategy not only left out a significant number of women who identified as feminists (fat, women of color, poor) it also reinforced cultural ideals of what a woman should be. The right to vote was eventually obtained; however, in the process activists reinforced stereotypical ideals of women, and continued the exclusion of women who did not fit into the cultural ideal of that time.

In the late 1970's, fatness was once again on the feminist radar. However, instead of looking at fat women through a social model, some feminists viewed fatness through a medicalized and pathologized model. Scholars Janna L. Fikkan and Esther D. Rothblum argue that the release of *Fat is A Feminist Issue*, by Susie Orbach did great disservice to fat women during this time period. They state that many critics were questioning her work, and felt that the book argued that "fat was indicative of pathology [...] the resolution of these psychological issues was seen as the pathway to permanent weight loss, thus also leaving unquestioned the assumption that thinness should still be the woman's goal."<sup>49</sup> Orbach does say in her introduction that the approach should not be to blame the victim, but should be to find the underlying reason via psychoanalysis of why women are fat or overeating.<sup>50</sup> However, to state that there is an underlying psychological reason to why women are fat is placing the individual responsible for weight and insinuating that being fat is unwanted and a problem. Using this approach only furthered "the stigmatization of those they purport to help."<sup>51</sup> The interest in fat at this point in time

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<sup>48</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, (New York University Press, 2011), 85.

<sup>49</sup> Janna L. Fikkan and Ester D. Rothblum, "Is Fat a Feminist Issue? Exploring the Gendered Nature of Weight Bias," *Sex Roles*, 66 (2012): 575, accessed January 10, 2015, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-011-0022-5/fulltext.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, London: Arrowhead Books, 1978. Kindle ebook.

<sup>51</sup> Anna Mollow, "Disability Studies Gets Fat," *Hypatiam*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (2015): 202, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hypa.12126/epdf.html>.

was not based on efforts to understand the social constructions that caused fat women to be treated poorly, but to blame fatness on the individual via medical and pathological modes. Fatness became a problem that individual women faced, which allowed for the continued oppression of fat women as whole. This narrow view was a harmful one, and it delayed the feminist analysis of fat that it desperately needed. Because such stigma surrounded the fat body, inequalities that feminists have been fighting against for years are multiplied when fat is added to the equation. Fat women face a higher rate of discrimination and potential abuse than a woman with a smaller body size in regards to domestic violence<sup>52</sup>, employment<sup>53</sup>, and even education.<sup>54</sup>

Not only do the socially constructed ideas of fat negatively affect the public life of a fat woman, it also affects her private life, specifically in terms of motherhood. As one scholar has argued “The weight of one’s children has increasingly become a litmus test of good mothering.”<sup>55</sup> What does this mean? Mothers are judged by the weight of their children, and it starts at an alarmingly young age. Weight is used as a political weapon used to women’s parenting. My daughter, for example, was off the charts for height and weight at her 18 month check-up. The doctor looked at me full of alarm and asked me if I had consulted a dietician and questioned what I had been feeding her. I had actually been

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<sup>52</sup> Tracy Royce, “The Shape of Abuse: Fat Oppression as a Form of Violence Against Women,” *Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 151.

<sup>53</sup>Elizabeth Kristin, “Addressing the Problem of Weight Discrimination in Employment,” *California Law Review*, 90 (1) 57, (2002): 62-64, accessed January 19, 2015, <http://linksource.ebsco.com/FullText.aspx?linkout=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26scope%3dsite%26db%3di3h%26AN%3d6284872%26ErrorURL%3dhttp%253A%252F%252Flinksource%252Eebsco%252Ecom%252Ferror%252Easpx/>.

<sup>54</sup>C. S. Crandall and K.L. Schiffhauer, “Anti-Fat Prejudice: Beliefs, Values, and American Culture,” *Obesity Research*, 6 (1998): 458–460, accessed January 19, 2015, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1550-8528.1998.tb00378.x/epdf>.

<sup>55</sup>Natalie Boero, “Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the ‘Epidemic of Obesity’,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 113.

in contact with a dietician, but not because of her weight. Her main source of nutrition is via a feeding tube and we needed to ensure she was getting the appropriate amount of nutrients. I was not prepared for the question and it made me pause. My daughter was a large child, yes. But it is important to know that her father is also a 6'4" man who is not lacking in body mass. That the questioning of my motherhood in regards to my ability to properly feed my child and that the policing and medicalization of the body starts so young was alarming. Also alarming was the fact that it was gendered. I had just seen my cousin days earlier and her son, who was also off the charts for height and weight, had gotten laughs and comments such as "He's a healthy boy." No doctor questioned the quality of her mothering nor suggested visiting a dietician.

Fat is also used as a political weapon to judge women mothers in the work force. A mother's career is often seen as the cause of overweight children. Scholar Boero argues that, "The blaming of mothers [for fat children] is intimately connected to cultural anxieties around the changing social roles of women [...] cultural landscape is peppered with references to stereotypical 'bad' moms [...] what all of these share is that they highlight the normative conception of good mothering that assumes that good mothers are heterosexual, white, middle class, and do not work outside the home."<sup>56</sup> As a culture, America is moving away from former ideals of a family unit. Women participate in wage work in unprecedented numbers, men take on more roles within the home, and not all family units are heterosexual ones. This shift in cultural ideals is unsettling to some and blame is assigned to women who operate outside of this cultural ideals. April Michelle Herndon states "It is more likely that the mother is blamed for giving her children foods

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<sup>56</sup>Natalie Boero, "Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the 'Epidemic of Obesity'," *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 114.

such as Happy Meals <sup>TM</sup> or, alternatively, for causing the father to have to take his children to McDonald's because mom is working outside the home or just doesn't cook. After all, when people bemoan the demise of the home cooked meal, their concern is that women, not men, aren't fulfilling their role in the kitchen."<sup>57</sup> To state that it is the mother's responsibility to make sure that her children receive proper nutrition even when fathers are giving primary care places no responsibility whatsoever on the father and presumes that men cannot be responsible care givers. This gender stereotype targets working women. Additionally, why is it that these studies seem to be looking only at heterosexual couples? Going by this logic, do lesbian parents have lower rates of obese children and do gay men have higher rates of obese children? The studies specifically target heterosexual partnerships with the blaming of mothers (mainly working mothers) for any deviance from the ideal. Fat, whether it is the woman who is considered fat or her child, is being used as a political weapon in an attempt to keep woman in roles within the cultural ideal.

Hyperfeminization appears to be a common response to fat being used as a political weapon against women. During first wave feminism, attacks were made that fat and woman's suffrage made women masculine, or less of a woman. In response, the cultural ideal of femininity was embraced. In the 1970's when feminist began to examine how fatness affected women, it was medicalized and thinness was reinforced through pathologization. Working mothers are made villains who cause obesity and unhealthy in children, putting pressure on these working mothers to maintain a more domestic role.

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<sup>57</sup> April Michelle Hernden, *Fat Blame: How The War On Obesity Victimizes Women and Children*, (University Press of Kansas, 2014), 21-22.

## Chapter 5

### Does Hyperfeminization Challenge or Reinforce Objectification of Women?

In considering in the consequences of hyperfeminization certain aspects must be addressed. Does hyperfeminization work as a means of activism or does it reinforce the objectification of women and sexism, and is it ableist in nature? Are only some aspects of the cultural ideal being challenged while gender norms are being reinforced?

Hyperfeminization is often a response to fat being used as a political weapon in order to oppress women. While it attempts to fight the cultural ideals it does so in a narrow way, reinforcing myths about womanhood and what it means to be a woman. An example of hyperfeminization and its limited effectiveness can be found in Sarah N. Heiss' critique of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty which started in 2004. Dove's goal in this campaign was to expand the definition of beauty after they had conducted a study that found only 2% of women around the world considered themselves to be beautiful.<sup>58</sup> Dove did this "expanding" by using what they deem as "real women" in their advertisements. Heiss argues that "The campaign's rendition of real beauty simultaneously challenged and reinforced traditional understandings of beauty and the body [...] by omitting certain bodies it excluded the experiences and aesthetic value of many women with very real bodies-primarily those of women with disabilities."<sup>59</sup> Heiss also states that this "represents an ideology of naïve integrations."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty," accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.dove.us/Social-Mission/campaign-for-real-beauty.aspx>.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah N. Heiss "Locating the Bodies of Women and Disability in Definitions of Beauty: An Analysis of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 31/1 (2011): 3, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1367/1497>.

<sup>60</sup> Sarah N. Heiss "Locating the Bodies of Women and Disability in Definitions of Beauty: An Analysis of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 31/1 (2011): 5, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1367/1497>

While the Dove campaign challenges the social ideal of female attractiveness, the company's "Campaign for Real Beauty" does so only marginally. The campaign reinforces the exclusion of disabled and fat women from the ideal, and the bodies of the women in their advertisements remains within the ideal. One image from Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty includes eleven women standing in white bras and underwear. While the majority of the women are white, there are some African American women. The women that are pictured are not the stereotypical models that most advertisements use. The women are all of different shapes and sizes, but all are able-bodied. Some of the women may be considered curvy, however, none are fat. Also, the women have differing lengths and styles of hair, unlike the typical long haired beauty depicted on most magazine covers.

The Dove campaign's image was a response to popular advertisements that depicted only one type of woman. An example of the type of advertisements that Dove's campaign wanted to address in their images can be seen in a popular Victoria's Secret ad, in which seven women are pictured standing in Victoria's Secret bras and underwear. While two of them are African American, their skin is very light and the rest are white. These seven women are all the very thin professional models posed in a way that elongates their bodies. Their long, flowing hair is blown by what the viewer would only guess is a fan that is out of the shot. Similar to Dove's image, there is no representation of fatness or disability.

When comparing the Dove and Victoria's Secret images, it is clear that Dove does challenge Victoria's Secret's very narrow view of beauty, but only to a narrow degree. While the Dove women are bigger and more diverse, they are still all able-bodied and not

overly large. The images both include women who pose in ways that stretch and elongate their bodies. Dove challenges the cultural ideal of beauty so narrowly and weakly that it reinforces the exclusion of body types that are even further outside of the cultural and social ideals. Therefore, the Dove campaign ultimately maintains the cultural ideal that only specific types of bodies are acceptable to be desired.

Hyperfeminization of fat women is, similar to Dove's campaign a weak challenge to feminine ideals. Fat women who use hyperfeminization are stating that the current cultural ideal needs to be more inclusive (which is actually impossible since the ideal is only maintained by exclusion), and maintains and even reinforces cultural ideals of femininity. Hyperfeminization nudges the cultural ideal asking for access into its realm, so long as the femininity ideal is not challenged. This adherence of the cultural ideals is harmful to other fat women who have no desire to be in line with the cultural ideal. Like Dove's campaign, positive body activist and plus size model, Tess Holliday's images challenge the cultural ideals about female beauty as it relates to body size. Holliday's photographs include images of her in dresses, lingerie, and swimwear, just to name a few. Her hair is perfectly cut and colored and her make-up is impeccable. Many of these images are reminiscent of the fifties pin-up girl. They are very sexualized and feminized. In one photograph in particular she is wearing a nautical themed swim suit holding a life preserver over her body with the bold writing "come aboard" on it. In another photograph she is in lingerie and positioned sexually on a bed. These photographs are not subtle in their message; fat girls not only have sex, fat girls are sexy. Holliday's photographs encourage a gaze that is objectifying and encourage staring. Holliday's professional photographs embrace hyperfeminization, a declaration that fat

women are women but the definition of women in this context continues to be rather narrow. Fat women are sexual beings, fat women are attractive beings, and fat women are beings worthy of objectification. All of Holliday's photographs reinforce the cultural ideals of what is attractive by using a very narrow view that assumes feminization a desired trait and reinforces the dominance of the male gaze.

Holliday's work is not the only place where fat women embrace hyperfeminization and objectification. Fat burlesque dancers who perform in over the top, strip-tease like variety shows have stated that they find the stage to be a place where they are "allowed to be a sexual being"<sup>61</sup> In the atmosphere of the burlesque show, fat performers show their sexuality in "new and satisfying ways" and seek to "support the work of positive identity formation for fat women."<sup>62</sup> Seductive movement, parading around in minimal clothing, being covered in make-up; while in some cases it could promote positive identity formation, in most instances it encourages hyperfeminization. Is fighting for the recognition of sexy by hyperfeminization and self-objectification a valid way to abolish the cultural ideals of beauty within the United States? "I have learned that fat liberation occurs only when we embody it physically as well as accepting it politically and theoretically." claims Heather McAllester, the founder of the first fat burlesque troop in 2002, "This experience has proven to me that the fastest way to fat liberation is physical. We will never have our freedom if we live only 'from the neck up', yet that is the way that many fat people live, even, or especially, the activists and academics among

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<sup>61</sup>D. Lacy Asbill, "I'm Allowed to Be a Sexual Being: The Distinctive Social Conditions of the Fat Burlesque Stage," *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 300.

<sup>62</sup>D. Lacy Asbill, "I'm Allowed to Be a Sexual Being: The Distinctive Social Conditions of the Fat Burlesque Stage," *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 300.

us. Embodiment just works, and as a fat activist of nearly twenty years now, I want to use the most effective tools. Sex sells [...]”<sup>63</sup> According to McAllester hyperfeminization is effective because of the fact that heterosexual sex grabs people’s attention and allows fat women to become visible. Like Holliday, these performers seek the stares of others, using hyperfeminization as a way to obtain the desired attention.

That fat bodies, even hyperfeminized ones, do not fit into the cultural ideal shows similarities to the popular freak shows that are a part of the United States’ past. The freak show was a place where abnormal bodies were the source of entertainment. In the display of what our culture deems “abnormal bodies” we again see the link between fatness and disability. The body displayed or performed is “transformed into a unique and curious object and becomes a freak.”<sup>64</sup> Because a body is different, it is deviant.

Hyperfeminization and fat burlesque seek to defy the deviant nature of fat, but do people respond to these forms of activism because they agree or because they are intrigued? As McAllister states, “People were intrigued [...] Audiences went wild [...] the visual impact of five to fifteen fatties taking off their clothes [...] was a knockout.”<sup>65</sup> Is the presentation of the fat body something activists desire to be a spectacle? One must look at how the body is being viewed, is it just another deviant body on display or is the cultural ideal being defied in a productive way.

McAllister seeks but does not explain what she means by “fat liberation” which obviously means different things to different people. Fat liberation is the goal of fat

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<sup>63</sup>Heather McAllister, “Embodying Fat Liberation,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 311.

<sup>64</sup>Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and The American Cultural Imagination*, (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>65</sup> Heather McAllister, “Embodying Fat Liberation,” *The Fat Studies Reader*. ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), 307.

activism. Fat liberation includes the end of oppression of the fat body, the end to medicalization and pathologization of the fat body, and end to stigma. Fat activism seeks to end the oppression of fat. Similarly, there are also different definitions of what the “embodiment of fat liberation” looks like. When speaking of embodiment, the word literally means a representation or manifestation, so to “embody fatness” is to manifest fatness through action. Hyperfeminization is just one way in which fatness can be embodied and to limit fat liberation to hyperfeminization is a significant mistake. Fat embodiment can begin with confidence in one’s self; hyperfeminization does not have to be a part of this. To view hyperfeminization and over sexualization as the only way to truly embody fatness and to fight for fat liberation is to exclude fat women who do not wish or refuse to conform to the cultural definition of femininity. Hyperfeminization is not the only way in which to manifest self-confidence.

Samantha Murray writes about her incremental experience of fat embodiment, which differs from McAllister’s. First she had to speak her fatness, to come out.<sup>66</sup> By the simple act of not being afraid of the word “fat” the process of fat liberation begins. Murray states that she had to begin to claim the word “fat”, even when people would tell her she wasn’t fat, she corrected them and said that she was fat and that it was not a bad thing.

Embodiment of fatness, however, must be more than just making a statement; it is the taking on of a new person. Murray had to in her words, “stop trying to pass as skinny”

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<sup>66</sup> Samantha Murray, “Doing Politics or Selling Out? Living the Fat Body,” *Women’s Studies* 34, (2005): 266-268 accessed December 11, 2014, <http://kl6fz4nh2b.scholar.serialssolutions.com/?sid=google&auinit=S&aualast=Murray&atitle=Doing+politics+or+selling+out%3F+Living+the+fat+body&id=doi:10.1080/00497870590964165&title=Women%27s+studies&volume=34&issue=3-4&date=2005&spage=265&issn=0049-7878>.

and truly embrace her own body.<sup>67</sup> She was no longer a skinny woman stuck in a fat woman's body, she was a fat woman. To truly embrace the embodiment of fat, we must embrace take the negative power away from the word "fat". This is toofat liberation.

Robyn Longhurst looks at fat embodiment via Judith Butler's argument of performativity. Longhurst states that "the materiality of differently sized and shaped bodies cannot be separated from the ways in which bodies are culturally constructed. It is possible to argue, therefore, that body size and shape are performative [...] I perform my body size and shape just as much as I perform my sex and gender, that is, I repeat or reiterate norms surrounding my body size and shape."<sup>68</sup> Many times, the performative aspect of fatness, the way that we perform stereotypes of body size that are perpetuated within society, is able to be seen, especially in media stereotypes: the fat best friend who is deemed asexual because of their weight, the funny fat person, the gross, lazy fat person. Often, fat people attempt to live up to these culturally perpetuated stereotypes.

Hyperfeminization is more the performance of gender than the performance of fat because it rejects the cultural ideals of body size and shape, while embracing narrow gender expectations for women. The fat women boldly reinforce the fact that they are women, desirable and sensual, but challenge the notion that their bodies are excluded from the socially constructed norm of heterosexual attractiveness. Much like Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, some cultural ideals are challenged, while others are

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<sup>67</sup>Samantha Murray, "Doing Politics or Selling Out? Living the Fat Body," *Women's Studies* 34, (2005): 274, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://kl6fz4nh2b.scholar.serialssolutions.com/?sid=google&auinit=S&aualast=Murray&atitle=Doing+politics+or+selling+out%3F+Living+the+fat+body&id=doi:10.1080/00497870590964165&title=Women%27s+studies&volume=34&issue=3-4&date=2005&spage=265&issn=0049-7878>.

<sup>68</sup> Robyn Longhurst, "Queering Body Size and Shape: Performativity, the Closet, Shame and Orientation," *Queering Fat Embodiment*, ed. Cat Pause, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 15.

reinforced, embraced and even celebrated. Performing gender in a way that sticks close to the cultural ideals of what womanhood should be allows for body size deviance.

Basically hyperfeminization says, “If you ignore my size, I will keep my gender where you want it.”

Does fat embodiment and fat liberation require hyperfeminization? No. There are many ways to embody fatness, and hyperfeminization is only one of the ways that this embodiment can occur. In addition, this form of embodiment is only available to certain subsets of people, specifically white women who desire to be feminine in a more traditional understanding of what femininity means and desire for their bodies to be sexual objects. This does not allow for gender fluidity or make room for any other type of identity within this movement.

In the 1980’s, *The Journal of Sex Research* looked at the ever changing trends in U.S. feminine beauty and what Allan Mazur called the trend for women to “Overadapt”.<sup>69</sup> Mazur writes that with every changing beauty standards women have constantly attempted to adapt their bodies to whatever the cultural ideal was for that time period. Most overadaptation, the attempt by women to make their bodies more in line with cultural ideals of beauty, is the product of women wanting to be considered heteronormative.<sup>70</sup> Hyperfeminization is an example of overadaptation, the desire to be found attractive by being in accordance with the cultural ideals in a very heteronormative way. The willing objectification of the female body is part of both overadaptation, hyperfeminization, and heteronormativity.

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<sup>69</sup>Allan Mazur, “U.S. Trends in Feminine Beauty and Overadaptation,” *The Journal of Sex Research*. Vol. 22, No. 3, (1986): 281-303, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3812567>.

<sup>70</sup>Allan Mazur, “U.S. Trends in Feminine Beauty and Overadaptation,” *The Journal of Sex Research*. Vol. 22, No. 3, (1986): 282, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3812567>.

Allyson Mitchell argues that the conscious decision to play up femininity by fat women can be transgressive when it is done not to reinforce female stereotypes and ideals, but instead to show femininity as a social construct. “We call it ‘fat drag’ to highlight the made up nature of fat. Think about how drag queens ‘perform’ femininity. They exaggerate it. They parody it, partly to show how femininity is something constructed, something made up.”<sup>71</sup> This form of activism is performed on stage in front of an audience, welcoming stares. Within this form of embodiment the performative nature of fat and gender is used very deliberately and consciously to point out the both fat and femininity are cultural constructs. This type of fat activism, fat drag, keeps the cultural ideals a part of the activism in order to use the ideals to show how narrow they really are. The difference between clinging to hyperfeminization and using it as an example of how gender and size are social constructions lies within the attitude and the purpose of the women participating in the activism; the women who participate in fat drag very publically show the ridiculousness of cultural ideals, while individuals who use hyperfeminization desire to be included in the cultural ideals.

Some fat activists and body advocates use hyperfeminization, but not exclusively. Like Tess Holliday, Jes Baker is a “body advocate” who participates in the trend of fat embodiment via hyperfeminization. Examples of hyperfeminization within Baker’s blog can be seen in her blog posts, one of these posts is entitled “7 Tips for Taking Your First Ever Boudoir Photos” gives step by step instructions on how to successfully pose and photograph boudoir photos. Baker shares the photos on her blog, offering a “bonus tip” that encourages women to “Show them to someone else.” Baker writes, “When you get

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<sup>71</sup>Allyson Mitchell, “Pissed Off,” *Fat: An Anthropology of an Obsession*, ed. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley, (Penguin Group,2005), 219.

your images back, sit with them [...] and then show them to someone [...] just show them. I had a terrifying experience with the last Expose shoot, where in a moment of encouragement for others to do the same, I stripped down to nothing and struck a powerful pose.” Here, Baker embodies her fatness and her femininity. “After I saw the image [...] well, I lost it; I hated it more than I’ve ever hated an image of myself before. It felt masculine and my short hair only seemed to exacerbate this. I saw the ‘flaws’” Baker sought to avoid masculinity in these photos. Her goal was to feel and appear feminine. She even considered her short hair a hindrance to the femininity. Baker continues to say, “We certainly don’t need to define our worth by what others think of us, but we also don’t need to pretend that support can’t be helpful. Our perception of ourselves is often skewed because of our lifetime of shame, and sometimes an outside perspective can be wonderful.”<sup>72</sup> Femininity is her strategy to fight shame, yet another way in which fat is used as a political weapon.

Baker posts pictures of her body on her blog in order to fight shame. In 2013 after the news reported controversial statements made by Abercrombie and Fitch CEO Mike Jeffries that degraded fat people Baker wrote an open letter as a response and also included photos of her posing (wearing an Abercrombie and Fitch shirt, or shirtless) with a male model. By using her fat body and the typical sized male model together, Baker hoped to “challenge the separation of attractive and fat, and I assert that they are compatible regardless of what you believe. Not only do I know I am sexy, but I also have the confidence to pose nude in ways you don’t dare.” Baker dared Jeffries to pose

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<sup>72</sup> Jes Baker, “7 Tips for Taking Your First Ever Boudoir Photos”, *The Militant Baker: A Blog About What Everyone is Thinking, but No One Will Say*. (blog) January 27, 2015 <http://www.themilitantbaker.com/2015/01/8-tips-for-taking-your-first-ever.html>.

Abercrombie models with “a hot fat chick” saying “it would thrill me to see such a shoot.”<sup>73</sup> When interviewed about the photographs in an appearance in the *Today Show*, Baker was asked if she did this for shock value or to specifically target and embarrass Jeffries. Baker replied that she saw Jeffries’ comments as an opportunity for her to challenge the assumption that the words fat and attractive do not belong together. Baker felt that this was an opportunity to show just what fat bodies were capable of and that she took this route because “Fashion is political.”<sup>74</sup>

Beyond what Baker does in her use of fashion and hyperfeminization as a form of fat activism she also used her online popularity to start the Body Love Conference. Baker calls the conference “The physical manifestation of the growing international Body Love movement: a safe, supportive space where participants can celebrate and inspire themselves and each other to change their world, not their bodies.” The conference description welcomes “People of all sizes, shapes, shades, ages, sexes, genders, and abilities.”<sup>75</sup> While Baker’s personal blog tends to focus on hyperfeminization as a means of fat embodiment and liberation, the Body Love Conference goes beyond hyperfeminization to show many different types of bodies, genders, and abilities. The Body Love Conference 2015 theme is “Love the Mirror” and its advertising includes a broad array of images. These images feature people with disabilities, fat women, fat men, people of different gender identities, and fat women who aren’t hyperfeminized standing in front of a mirror and explaining why loving the mirror (loving themselves, their

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<sup>73</sup> Jes Baker, “To: Mike Jefferies, C/O Abercrombie and Fitch,” *The Militant Baker: a Blog About What Everyone Is Thinking, But No One Is Saying* (blog), May 19, 2013, <http://themilitantbaker.com/2013/05/to-mike-jeffries-co-abcrombie-fitch.html>.

<sup>74</sup> “Blogger Takes On Abercrombie Over Weight Comments,” *The Today Show on NBC*, NBC, Toledo, Ohio. WNWO May 22, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> “What is the Body Love Conference?” accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.bodyloveconference.com>.

bodies) is important to them. The Body Love Conference focuses less on hyperfeminization and more on inclusion and loving all forms of embodiment as a way to bring about social and cultural change and acceptance.<sup>76</sup> Including all forms of embodiment is a powerful act that does not allow for exclusion, thus ignoring the cultural ideal completely.

What all of these different forms of fat activism have in common is the claim that the first step to changing the cultural ideal is to for people to accept and love their bodies. Fat activists today argue that refusing to accept the stereotypes and lies that are being told regarding the fat body are the first steps to liberation. This claiming of fat identity is up to the individual, which treads on dangerous grounds in terms of making fat an individual problem. However, with the ongoing community effort of fat activists, this is not something individuals have to discover on their own. As the social climate changes, so does the ability to claim fatness and as fatness is claimed, the social climate is able to change. It is a cyclical effect. Self-acceptance and self-love are crucial steps in bringing about social and cultural change, and there doesn't seem to be one correct way of doing that. For many this is done strictly through hyperfeminization and embracing a femininity that tends to stay within the cultural beauty norm. For others it is refusing be confined and defined by the cultural ideal.

Positive embodiment and acceptance of fat by fat individuals is a crucial step in fat liberation and acceptance. In addition scholars and activist are critically discussing what viewing fat as a form of disability would mean to the fat community. Disabled individuals are still fighting against the medicalization of their bodies; fat individuals also

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<sup>76</sup> “What is the Body Love Conference?” accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.bodyloveconference.com>.

deal with this. It is unclear whether claiming disability would open fatness up to further medicalization. However, with discrimination and oppression such a part of fatness in America, legal protection offered within the Americans with Disabilities Act could assist with equality and fighting discrimination.

Would placing fatness under the scope of disability allow an acceptance of fatness as another body type or would this perhaps do an injustice to fat individuals or to disabled individuals? Fatness enters disability legal discussions mostly in the form of accommodation, discrimination, and the over-medicalization of fatness. Accommodation and discrimination are addressed by the Americans with Disability Act. These issues spill over into the conversation around fatness. As Anna Kirkland argues, “Rather than asking what’s wrong with fat people, a legal regime built on the social model of disability would simply require that their bodily difference not stand in the way of work opportunities, travel, and enjoyment of public places.”<sup>77</sup> Here Kirkland states that there would be greater protection and freedom for fat individuals if fatness was considered a normal bodily variability or disability. This statement makes the assumption that disability is currently considered another form of being within our culture. While that is the ultimate goal, we are not to that point yet, and stating that considering fatness as a disability would also make it “just another body type” or more acceptable within culture is also a huge leap. Kirkland argues that “the ADA currently offers strands of both a medical and a social model to describe why fatness might be disabling.”<sup>78</sup> So, the question must be asked whether or not we are further medicalizing fatness by having it fit under the

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<sup>77</sup>Anna Kirkland, “What’s at Stake in Fatness as a Disability?” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Volume 26, No. 1, (2006): 5, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/648/825>.

<sup>78</sup>Anna Kirkland, “What’s at Stake in Fatness as a Disability?” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Volume 26, No. 1,(2006): 5, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/648/825>.

umbrella of disability, specifically in regards to the ADA. Or would it offer legal protection for fat individuals in regards to employment and accessibility? It is important to not undermine the work of organizations such as Health at Every Size that have worked to fight the myth that fatness is a threat to health. The myth that fat is unhealthy is the most widely used to discriminate and shame fat people. However, the discrimination against fat people in the work place, specifically fat women, is an issue that needs addressed through legal protection. The discussion continues as to what is the best way to accomplish these things.

As a woman who identifies as fat, I have a difficult time with the concept of fatness as a disability. Claiming fatness is a difficult step in and of itself; to additionally claim disability brings up a lot of conflicting feelings. First, I am overly aware that ableism may contribute to my hesitancy. What is wrong with disability? What makes me afraid to claim the identity of disability? I don't see myself as disabled, but at the same time realize that I am looking at disability in a medicalized way when I am unable to identify as such. My identity is that of a fat, able-bodied woman, which rejects the medicalization of fatness. However, when looking at the medical model of disability and also the medical model/construction of fatness, the similarities of the process of exclusion resulting from unnecessary medicalization are alarmingly similar. The refusal to hire due to fear of high insurance rates is just one example. In the same way, when looking at both fatness and disability as social issues that needs to be addressed as systematic forms of oppression that are placed upon fat and disabled people, the ways in which they overlap are much the same. Amber Cantrell states, "I can...claim fatness as a disability because it

does fit within the definitions of disability offered by certain scholars.”<sup>79</sup> Being able to claim fatness as a disability matters when combating oppression.

Additionally, why do I care what identity or label I take on, if it allows other fat individuals to receive the civil rights they deserve? If hyperfeminization is used as a strategy to fight fat stigma and oppression, why not use disability as well? If fat is protected under the ADA, employers cannot discriminate based on weight. Currently there is no such law protecting fat individuals from being discriminated against because of their weight. As Kirkland points out, the only way to win a court case on the basis of discrimination as a fat person is to prove that there is a medical reason for the fatness.<sup>80</sup> If fatness cannot be proven to be medically caused there is no case for discrimination. Fat individuals need protection from discrimination. Is this discrimination able to be eliminated with legal protection or would the problem still remain that as a culture we are uncomfortable with the fat body? Ideally, it would be great to say that as long as fat individuals are given legal protection that social discomfort isn't an issue, but I believe that social discomfort with fat is the driving force behind discrimination; one feeds the other.

An alternative way to think about fatness as a disability is offered up by Zoe Meleo-Erwin. She argues that “fat embodiment in a fat-phobic environment [is] disabling.”<sup>81</sup> Due to the fact that American culture fears and stigmatized fat, fat is

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<sup>79</sup> Allison Piepmeier, Amber Cantrell, and Ashley Maggio, “Disability is a Feminist Issue. Bringing Together Women’s and Gender Studies and Disability Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2014): 9, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4252/3592>.

<sup>80</sup> Anna Kirkland, “What’s at Stake in Fatness as a Disability?” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Volume 26, No. 1, (2006): 5-6, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/648/825>.

<sup>81</sup> Zoe Meleo-Erwin, “Queering the Linkages and Divergences: The Relationship between Fatness and Disability and the Hope for a Livable World,” *Queering Fat Embodiment*, ed. Cat Pause, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 101.

disabling. When individuals embrace fatness, embrace bodies that are seen as deviant, bodies that are criticized and rejected by many, they engage in a political act and an act of distancing from the ideal. Embracing fat is a form of embodying disability. Embracing fatness is a choice to become disabled in a fat fearing society. Embracing fatness is a very purposeful positioning of one's self outside the cultural ideals.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Meleo-Erwin also states that while identifying as disabled fat activists and individuals need to acknowledge that they do not have shared histories of institutionalization. And while fat people do have interactions with medical professionals, it is not typically to the same degree as people with disabilities. The two identities share many intersecting similarities, but not as brutal of history.

## Chapter 6

### **Futurity: Are We Thinking Big Enough?**

The social construction of fatness is seen via medicalization, political rhetoric, mother blame, and media representations. However, there exists an additional form of social construction, the social construction of imagined futures. Socially constructed imagined futures use arguments that contain pieces of other social constructions within them. Kafer writes about futurity and argues that what we imagine our futures to look like will greatly shape the way we form coalitions and participate in activism. In order to have meaningful action and impact on the future, people must be able to imagine a positive future. Kafer tells the story of Ashley X where the conflation of medicalization (specifically around the conversations regarding her quality of life), a political rhetoric that focuses on child well-being, and a negatively imagined future is shown. Ashley, a disabled young woman whose parents decided to remove her uterus and breast buds to prevent puberty. Told by medical professionals that their daughter's cognitive functions would never develop beyond that of an infant they felt that her body should not reach adulthood. The surgery caused her body to cease in maturing. Ashley X will be the size of a child for the rest of her life. Her parents stated that they were worried that in the future, she would get too big for them to care for; easier lifting and repositioning were reason enough to stunt her growth and keep her a smaller size for the rest of her life. They also brought up their fears that she would be treated less affectionately if her body was adult sized. They feared that if her body did not match her cognitive level, people would look at her with disgust rather than seeing her as adorable. In this case, the failure

by her parents to recognize a future for Ashley that involved her being able to experience growing up lead to this drastic surgical measure.<sup>83</sup>

Futurity also dominates the conversation of fatness in America. However, the only future that Americans seem to be able to imagine for fat people is one of doom and gloom for them and for the nation. The Trust for America's Health released a report in 2013 warning that "Thirteen states now have adult obesity rates above 30 percent. 41 states have rates of at least 25 percent and every state is above 20 percent." The report goes on to say that if obesity rates remain the same that it will result in a "cost crisis for the healthcare system and Medicare." The TFAH then calls for greater policy at every level to fight against obesity.<sup>84</sup> Military leaders are worried that the higher levels of obesity will mean that no one will be able to meet the physical requirements necessary to join the military. Because the military "may not be able to avoid messy, on the ground conflicts in countries where there are massive humanitarian violations or other lawlessness." the armed forces must recruit fit and able-bodied members. If there is no on the ground combat, "Troops need to be in good shape [...] Service members on ships need to be able to nimbly climb vertical ladders from deck to deck [...] personnel [...] need to be fit."<sup>85</sup> The implication is that, not only does our future consist of rising health cost crises, but we are also in risk of not having enough "fit" individuals to protect the country and fight wars. Amy Erdman Farrel argues that the dialogue around fat that currently exists in our country identifies "Fat is a threat greater to the United States than

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<sup>83</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 47-68.

<sup>84</sup> "F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future 2013," *The Trust for America's Health*. (2013) <http://healthyamericans.org/report/108/>.

<sup>85</sup> Allison Linn, "Retired Military Leaders Fret Kids Will Be 'Too Fat to Fight'," *NBC News.com*, May 2, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/economy/retired-military-leaders-fret-kids-will-be-too-fat-fight-n95956>.

any political enemy or terrorist.”<sup>86</sup> Too often the media argues that “The greatest threat to our society is not al Qaeda and it is not North Korea and it is not Iraq. It is the way we choose to live. How much we choose to sit, how much we choose to eat.” In the current cultural and political climate, leaders image the future of fatness to coincide with the downfall of the country. Fatness is blamed for the inevitable rise in healthcare, the demise of the United States’ supreme military, and is on a higher level of impending danger than terrorism. This imagined future is a pretty grim one. Does it need to be?

Is this the future of America? Fear of fatness and claims of its debilitating nature? More and more money is poured into the diet and weight loss industry in the name of health. Women constantly shamed about their bodies until that shame causes them to go to drastic measures in attempts to fit into the cultural ideal of beauty and fitness. Americans do a terrible job of imagining fat futures. As Kathleen LeBesco argues, “We haven’t reached a place where fat is just another way to be, where fatness has come unmoored from connotations of sickness, immorality and undesirability.”<sup>87</sup> Fat activism needs to continue to get to a place where “just another way to be” is an acceptable answer to a child who asks what it means when they are called fat.

While it is impossible to know exactly what type of future Tess Holliday is imagining, we can conclude based on the information about her life that it is one where fat girls are not bullied and mocked. Perhaps it is a future where fat girls are not forced to take on masculine roles, unless this is something that they desire. Maybe Holliday’s

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<sup>86</sup>Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, (New York University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>87</sup>Kathleen LeBesco, “On Fatness and Fluidity: A Meditation,” *Queering Fat Embodiment*, ed. Cat Pause, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 57-58.

imagined future is for every woman to feel comfortable and beautiful in her own skin, and to embody that and exert confidence. Jes Baker, I'm certain, has an imagined future, that accepts all forms of body types, fat, queer, disabled. Both of these women hope for the positive future of fatness and for young girls to be able to grow up in a world which does not demean them and tells them they are not enough, or worse, too much.

Fat girls deserve better than to be constantly worried about whether they will ever find love because of their body size. I wish I could go back and tell my younger self to not feel ashamed of my body and that wrapping ace bandages around my stomach to make it appear smaller was not necessary in order to be successful. I wish I could make my mother understand that I wouldn't have a life of being hurt by people's comments so she could stop putting me on diets and pointing out the rolls on my body as if I were unaware of them. I wish there were a way to go back and tell my old roommate, who suffered from feeling unattractive and inferior her entire life, until she finally gained fifty pounds in order to under-go gastric bypass, that she didn't need to worry about how much she was feeding her infant daughter...that she didn't have to constantly fear that her daughter would be fat and be made fun of. I wish that mothers didn't have to fear having a chubby daughter would be used against them as evidence of bad parenting. I wish that my fat friend didn't have to explain that she was trying to lose weight because that is what others felt she should do, because she felt sexy and confident, but other people told her she wasn't. Knowing that fat future shouldn't look like this is an important part of imagining what fat futures should and can look like.

More than being sexy and being wanted, the fat future that I imagine is one where the word "fat" has no negative power. It is one where "being healthy" has no connection

with a number on a scale, a future where fat bodies are not looked at with disgust or fat jokes are not the only type of jokes a fat comedian knows. Fat activism is growing and expanding; feminists, disability activists, and queer theorists are becoming more and more interested in the intersection that fatness has with their fields of study. People are becoming more aware of the oppression and the discrimination that fat women face on a daily basis. This new awareness gives great hope for the future of fatness. While recognizing hyperfeminization as one mode of activism, it is vital that it is not the only mode used due to its narrow and exclusionary nature. Fat activism must not let fat future become too narrow, but continue to fight to abolish the cultural ideals that narrowly define beauty, fitness, or job ability as thin, white, and heterosexually available. To see the future of fat for American women it is an inescapable fact that we must imagine bigger.

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