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# Fat activism and collective accountability: from virtual community to embodied coalition

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Running Head: FAT ACTIVISM AND COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY: FROM VIRTUAL  
COMMUNITY TO EMBODIED COALITION

Fat Activism and Collective Accountability: From Virtual Community to Embodied Coalition

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An Abstract of

Fat Activism and Collective Accountability: From Virtual Community to Embodied Coalition

By  
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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of  
Liberal Arts Degree in Women and Gender Studies

DePaul University  
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The paper examines the “fat body” in the United States, and the fat acceptance grassroots community and fat activist resistance, as they exist on the social media site Tumblr. Blending feminist ethnographic fieldwork with post-structuralist and intersectional theoretical analysis, I interrogate fat positive identity formation, Tumblr as a site of resistance and the representational politics embedded in the fat activist Tumblr community. I conclude by offering the possibility of a “collective accountability” as the means to move from virtual community to embodied coalition. I assert that the sustainability of the fat acceptance grassroots community is contingent on the collective shift towards fat activist efforts and coalition practices that are intersectional approach and multi-issue in framework.

Keywords:

Fat activism

Body acceptance

Fat acceptance community

Collective accountability

Tumblr

Feminist ethnography

Dedication

My thesis is a contribution to the fat acceptance grassroots community and a tribute to my  
fellow fat activists' incredible strength amidst immense vulnerability and alienation.

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In Pursuit of Collective Accountability

I joined the fat acceptance community years ago—Like many, I was completely exhausted by the energy it took to hate my fat body and was left with only one choice—to accept my body and all of its fat glory. Instead of loving my body first, defeat came first, and after a time acceptance and eventually celebration. For me, coming to acceptance continues to be distinctly different than loving and celebrating my body. Loving my body is the daily acts of care I provide for myself. These acts range from going to get a massage, partaking in exercise, allowing my partner to hold me, getting a new haircut, etc. I continue to nurture acceptance of my own body and meet prejudice head on. I strive to remain committed to loving my body, regardless of social stigma or upsetting interpersonal exchanges. Fat activism and the fat acceptance community has provided me and other fat activists a support system and the means in which to continue fostering body positivity and self worth.

It has taken me years to decide to celebrate my body, fat and all. As a fat woman living in the United States, I am constantly bombarded by fat stigma. Each and every day I am reminded that my fatness carries with it a heavy connotation of shame and ugliness. My presence is often met with unwelcome exchanges and negative reinforcements. Yet, I have chosen to exist as both fat and proud. Perhaps proud is not the most fitting word to describe the complexity of my identity as a fat activist. However, the marriage of the two words “fat and proud” most closely resembles how I feel and connotes a particular shock value that I feel my existence represents. The choice to love my body and own my fatness is a radical act to most people and I must constantly negotiate this decision alongside daily hardships and acts of discrimination. As such, this negotiation is extremely personal and not without moments of intense doubt, defeat and other complex emotions as well as difficult questions.



I work as a waitress part-time in downtown Chicago. Most, if not all, of my income comes from the tips that customers give me. As a woman in the service industry, I have learned that my tips are increasingly dependent on appearing feminine and the ability to hold a smile for an unnaturally long period of time. Moreover, I have learned that my fatness negatively affects my income because as a fat person, I represent the opposite of femininity. It is a flawed, sexist system, and unfortunately, fat stigma is intertwined and embedded in it and other systems of oppression. Subsequently, my experience as a server personifies fat stigma and the struggle in cultivating fat body acceptance.

My job requires me to occupy and move within very small, narrow spaces alongside other people of all different shapes and sizes. Additionally, the aisles between the tables at my restaurant are incredibly narrow and all of my co-workers are much thinner than me. As such, my thinner co-workers constantly push into me, forcing me to rub up against the customers I am speaking with. As my body brushes up against a customer and our conversation breaks momentarily, there is always a noticeable pause where either their focus shifts uncomfortably to various parts of my body or their gaze immediately darts down and away and my fatness can no longer go unacknowledged, un-judged. My perceived fatness is exaggerated in contrast to my co-workers' thin bodies particularly in the lack of physical space and the amount of space my body takes up in it. More times than not, these moments pass by quietly, quickly and are relatively painless. But occasionally, these moments are not so subtle and can be brutally awkward and profoundly degrading.

One Saturday afternoon, I served a father and his two children. I greeted them cheerfully as I dropped glasses of water at their table. As I turned to walk back to my serving station, I heard the little girl loudly exclaim, "Gross! Daddy, she's fat!" Her father was confused as to

whom she was talking about and like many other customers nearby; he looked around the room for me. All at once, I felt thirty sets of eyes lock on to my backside, and again the little girl snickered, “Daddy! She’s really fat,” this time pointing directly at me. The tables of people watched in amusement and fascination as her father broke into laughter and encouraged his children to take my picture. I was incredibly embarrassed and uncomfortable by the negative attention. But my income is dependent on whether or not this family enjoys their dining experience, so I swallowed my pride and walked back over to their table. I maintained a professional and bubbly persona and asked for their order. I looked directly at the little girl’s father, but he quickly looked away, unable to meet my gaze. Midway through entering their lunch order into the computer, I broke down and cried. I was too upset to continue serving them and they sat at their table unattended for nearly thirty minutes. Long story short, the father continued to encourage his children’s misguided behavior until they received their food and when they were finished eating, the father voiced frustration by how flustered I had gotten resulting in “poor service” and refused to pay. At the end of my shift, my co-workers tried to hug me and apologize for what they had witnessed but their condolences only furthered the alienation I felt.

I was and still am frustrated by how easily hurt I felt by their actions. I had hoped that the love I have for my body would outweigh the shame I felt in that moment. I wanted so badly to strike a confident model pose for the camera and transform the hostility and shame I felt into strength and beauty. After all, I was made to feel like a freak on display, so why not give them a show? I tried to call upon my fat positive identity in that situation but in the end, I was unable to. As a result, I struggled to feel completely comfortable at work for some time afterwards. I

am sad to say, I do believe that it has affected how I approach customers and has resulted in lesser tip earnings as well as tremendous self-doubt.

Regrettably, my experience that day is not an isolated incident nor is it particularly unique to me. I have heard an endless array of similar experiences from fat-identified friends. Just as “obesity” is said to be an epidemic, fat stigma is equally contagious. The little girl at the table could not have been more than seven years old. Her ideas about my body and my fat presence were not necessarily her own, but rather that of her father’s and those closest to her. Yet, even at such an early age, she had been socially conditioned to call negative attention to the fat body in the room, knowing on some level her actions would be condoned and even well received. The people sitting nearby watching our interaction unfold that day were not just bystanders but were equally receiving and propagating the same social conditioning, spreading fat stigma like an airborne disease. That Saturday afternoon is only a symptom corroborating what other fat activists and I have come to know to be the real epidemic—not obesity, but oppression and discrimination.

My thesis is the gradual culmination of my lived experience as a self-proclaimed fat activist and fat-identified woman and in the United States as well as my interpretation of those experiences as a feminist scholar. My thesis developed organically from my time spent online on the social media site Tumblr.<sup>1</sup> I followed fat activist Tumblr sites for years prior to beginning my graduate work at DePaul University. However, it wasn’t until the end of my first year of graduate school, when I wrote a short paper for the Netherlands Association for Gender Studies &

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<sup>1</sup> Tumblr is a social networking website founded by David Karp and owned by Yahoo! Inc. The site allows users to post multimedia and other content publically. It is considered an alternative to other social media websites where users can discuss a myriad of topics in a visual and creative manner.

Feminist Anthropology 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual International Conference, that I began interrogating my experience as a fat activist on Tumblr in any tangible and scholarly manner. The paper incited the scholarly inquiry that is taken up in my thesis.

The paper was titled “The Legitimacy of Bodies within a Fat Activist Framework.” The paper focused on observations I had made about particular ongoing group dynamics in the fat activist circles I belonged to. I had found that many fat activists tended to self-identify as fat and most, if not all fat activists associated as part of the larger collective. However, I had also observed the fat activist grassroots community divide themselves into subgroups. This was especially true for the fat activists who used Tumblr. Fat activists Tumblr users tended to congregate together based on how they chose to compartmentalize their identities. The subgroups were often insular, based on one other aspect of self; sexuality; race and ethnicity; gender; and body type. These subgroups tended to develop informally as fat activist Tumblr users’ shared their identities and conversed with one another about their lived experiences as fat-identified individuals. The subgroups were easily identifiable based on the various Tumblr sites that framed fatness as it related to the other aspect of self and was evident in the textual conversations and visual images, pictures and graphics shared by the fat activist Tumblr users. I became aware of a significant lack of visibility amongst particular fat activists, particularly those that self-identified as fat-identified men, fat-identified women of color and gender non-conforming fat-identified individuals. I also observed a lack of communication and cohesion amongst these subgroups that seemed to reinforce the divisions in this community.

Ultimately, the paper was a quantitative study about these specific observations and the representational politics in the fat activist grass roots community, as it exists on Tumblr.<sup>2 3</sup> The outcome of the study was limited in scope because of its small size and the use of quantitative research did not sufficiently account for the complexity of the users' posts. However, these limitations were valuable because they prompted more questions to explore in future papers.

It was a variation of the same paper that led me to the National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference the following fall. It was there that I met other feminist scholars who were engaging in similar work and aligned themselves with a growing field of inquiry called Fat Studies. At one point during the conference, a group of us had gathered and began talking about our current scholarly interests and ongoing projects. An individual asked the group where she could find scholarly sources written by fat-identified women of color as well as scholarly sources that speak to the experience of fat-identified women of color in the United States and women of color that also identify as fat activists. After a long contemplative pause, Dr. Amy Farrell responded. She is a tenured professor in the History Department at Dickinson College and considered by many fat activists as one of the founding mothers of Fat Studies. Dr. Farrell divulged that much of the scholarly work that currently exists and is readily accessible is

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<sup>2</sup> In the paper, I selected fifty pages at random from the ten fat activist Tumblr sites I followed, five pages from each Tumblr site. From the data I collected, I was able to track who was visibly pictured or represented on those fifty pages. The fifty selected pages displayed 517 visual posts from fat activist Tumblr users. I found that seventy-eight percent of the images collected were of self-identified fat women, who also identified as Caucasian and/or White. Ninety-six percent of the images collected were of self-identified fat women who displayed high feminine gender characteristics (i.e. proportional hour glass body frame, make up, dresses, skirts, long hair, sexual and or submissive gestures in facial expression and body language). Of the four hundred and seventy-nine images of fat-identified women, twenty images were of individuals with either androgynous or traditionally masculine gender presentations. Gender characteristics defined based on United States' beauty consumer culture.

<sup>3</sup> The referenced fat activist Tumblr sites are the same ten fat activist Tumblr sites referenced in my thesis.

homogenous in content. She reiterated that fat studies, fat activism and fatness in the United States are spoken about from within an extremely white supremacist, heteronormative lens. Her response reinforced what many of us already knew, or were coming to know. It isn't to say that fat-identified women of color do not experience fat stigma in the United States but their marginalization is complicated. Furthermore, Fat Studies, fat activism, and fatness have been taken up as feminist issues but have not been interrogated through an Intersectional framework, or in a manner that accounts for their complex experiences as of yet.

These scholarly experiences served to substantiate many of my previous observations and eventually steered me towards refocused points of inquiry and a new methodological approach that I have taken up in my thesis.

My thesis seeks to examine fat activists' strategies to reclaim a "fat" identity, and demonstrate the significance of choosing to cultivate agency by nurturing, accepting relationships with our bodies, in spite of our socially prescribed "negative" bodily attributes. At the same time, my thesis is a discussion written for and directed to the fat acceptance grassroots community, my community. It serves as an intervention, urging the fat acceptance grass roots community to expand our individual resistance efforts to include politics of collective accountability.

"Collective accountability" critiques American beauty consumer culture and asserts that it is problematic to use White supremacist and heteronormative American ideals as tools for fat activist resistance. "Collective accountability" is the aim to disrupt the reification of bodily hierarchies and heteronormative, racist, ableist ideologies that we often unintentionally rely on and perpetuate as we negotiate a positive sense of fat self and unconditional love for our fat bodies. It is the honoring of unique experiences of an individual while also asserting that the

experiences are tied with and connected to the greater community's experience and survival. "Collective accountability" acknowledges that, as fat-identified individuals in the United States, we experience external pressures from contemporary American society that attempt to devalue our lives simply because we are fat. While also acknowledging that fat stigma is experienced differently across axes of difference and that we must be mindful of this when engaging in fat activism. "Collective accountability" refers to fat activists' expanding their understanding of wellness and wellbeing without being complicit in our own marginalization and the marginalization of others. "Collective accountability" asserts that fat positive identity formation and fat activism are not solely individual processes but rather communal endeavors. In turn, our ability to sustain and maintain individual agency and collective justice for fat identified individuals is dependent on the refusal to reinscribe body stratification and discriminatory practices as we negotiate our individual fat positive identity and co-construct fat activist community. "Collective" refers the community as a whole and "accountability" refers to the ways in which individuals in the community can be accountable to each other. "Collective accountability" refers to the ways in which fat activists cultivated by intentionally shifting the ways in which we understand fat activism, shifting to activist strategies that are intersectional in approach and multi-issue in framework. "Collective accountability" is not just a shift in intention but it is also the embodied practice of that intentionality. It refers to the ways in which we can adjust the way we converse with each other, act towards each other and live with each other in a way that honors these intentions.

My thesis expands on the manner in which collective accountability can and must be implemented. I have organized the paper into several sections to better attend to the complexity of this project. I first clarify the theoretical framework and research methodology I have

employed to embark on such a project. Then I define fat stigma and contextualize the societal landscape in which fat activism has emerged in the United States. I demonstrate ways the medicalization of the fat body, in tandem with American consumer beauty culture's commodification of the thin ideal consumer beauty culture, perpetuates fat stigma.<sup>4</sup> I make the case that fat-identified women are uniquely marginalized within this atmosphere, which has precipitated fat-identified women's engagement with fat activism and their overwhelming presence in the fat acceptance community. In order to do this, I define fat activism and trace the origins of our resistance efforts online.

Based on these understandings of the social terrain, I then discuss my experience as a participant observer while in community with other fat activists online. I place my personal fat positive experience alongside other fat narratives that have been presented publicly on the social networking site Tumblr. Tumblr is a site of ethnographic research that I argue has the potential to be a uniquely feminist and fat positive space and exemplifies the broader fat acceptance grassroots community. As such, it is an ideal setting in which to explore how community is built and how fat activists produce knowledge(s), as well as interrogate how community and knowledge(s) contribute to and inform fat activist resistance efforts on the Internet and in embodied practice. In analyzing our community, I have been able to then interrogate fat positive identity formation, fat positive representation and fat activist coalition practices. Lastly, and most importantly, I demonstrate the need for and the practicality of cultivating collective accountability. Our community needs to acknowledge intersectional aspects of fat identity, welcome body diversity in the fat acceptance grassroots community, and ultimately, strengthen our resolve. I conclude by pointing to future fat activist explorations.

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<sup>4</sup> This paper engages the term "fat" as it is presently understood in popular societal and medical discourse as argued by many fat activists.



### A Fat Activist Framework

This paper grounds the fat body and fat activist resistance in a theoretical framework that blends feminist ethnographic research with post-structuralist and intersectional theory. Once placed within this framework it becomes clear that the fat body is a site of struggle and a site of resistance. This theoretical framework also permits a closer look into the complexity of fat activist resistance and coalition practices. For example, how individual resistance positively or negatively informs and affects the collective effort, and vice versa. These theories work together to create a foundation in which to best approach and attend to the complexity of my research focus and further elaborate on what I mean by collective accountability.

### *Ethnographic Fieldwork & Tumblr as a Site of Observation*

This paper's emphasis on accountability is reflected in using feminist ethnography as a methodological approach and compliments the other tenets of the theoretical framework. Feminist ethnography is a form of anthropologic research that asks questions about the social and cultural practices of communities of people (Lather & Smithers, 1997). Feminist ethnography is the method in which I hold myself accountable in this work. I remain critically conscious of my multi-faceted role in this community, as both a fat activist and academic scholar. Feminist ethnography recognizes and works to disrupt harmful discursive power dynamics between researcher and subject while striving towards an egalitarian model of community (Lather & Smithers, 1997). As such, feminist ethnographic practice is itself a form scholarly resistance. By no means am I an objective participant observer in this fieldwork and I do not wish to speak for the fat acceptance community as a whole. Quite the contrary, I write this paper in conversation with other fat activists and strive to avoid any reductive accounts of identity politics. I make

clear my rationale, positionality, experiences as they relate to this community and this work. The choice in displaying fat activist stories and thematic analysis places fat activists, myself and the reader(s) of this paper as co-contributors and co-producers of knowledge towards coalition and solidarity (Farah, 2003).

My fieldwork began organically from my own participation in the fat acceptance grassroots community and my personal negotiation of fat positive identity. The participants in this fieldwork snowballed from existing relationships I had built along my journey of self-acceptance as fat on social media site Tumblr.<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork consisted of regularly observing ten fat activist Tumblr sites for nineteen months. Tumblr limits each site to 250 daily posts. Considering those numbers, I estimate that I sifted through nearly one million posts during my time as a participant observer.

Tumblr is a popular interactive social networking and blogging website dedicated to showcase individuals' journeys, thoughts, and questions through interactive text and other multimedia content. Tumblr has and continues to be the epicenter of the fatosphere and the fat acceptance grassroots community. Tumblr has become one of the largest, most concentrated sites for fat activists to gather in community. There are thousands of Tumblr sites dedicated to "fat liberation" and "body acceptance." Tumblr has become the gateway and portal to fat positive resources, online and offline. Moreover, many notable figures, organizations, and fat activist

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<sup>5</sup> Tumblr allows its users to create individual blogs or "sites." Each Tumblr site consists of "pages." A Tumblr site can have anywhere from one page to one thousand pages or more. Similarly, a page can display one to one thousand or more "posts." A "post" refers to the images, text and multimedia images shared by the user. A "host" refers to the Tumblr user who created and/or administers a particular site. Tumblr users can "follow" a particular user and their site. "Following" allows Tumblr users to quickly find and see the particular Tumblr sites and are notified when a new post is made. A popular tool is the "re-blog" button. Users can click on a post they like and it will be published to their own Tumblr site for their followers to see.

projects in the fat acceptance grassroots community have gotten their start through the use of Tumblr, gaining national and international visibility by way of their large Tumblr following.

Tumblr has become a public archive for fat activists to document their activism efforts and discuss their experiences as fat-identified people, sharing personal issues, resolutions and solutions with each other.<sup>6</sup> Fat activism, as it exists on Tumblr, reflects and exemplifies the broader fat acceptance movement online and offline, and has provided a wealth of knowledge worth observing. This online landscape has fueled my ethnographic research for the better part of two years and provided me with a rich fat epistemology to draw from and analyze.<sup>7</sup>

The ethics of working within an online community and identifying peoples' voices in a virtual community are complicated and still very unclear regarding scholarly research and Tumblr. Tumblr sites are Tumblr is structured to give its users autonomy and privacy. Tumblr does not require its users to disclose their personal information and understands that the anonymity of its users is essential in constructing a safe space in which users can disclose information and share photos of themselves. This made it difficult to credit ideas to specific individuals. Instead, I referenced their Tumblr user names and the specific Tumblr sites when crediting an idea or referencing a Tumblr user's quote. Fat activist Tumblr users refer to their account names when engaging with others on the site. They have complete agency in what and how much they disclose about their personal identity. The fat activist Tumblr users rarely gave

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<sup>6</sup> The hosts of the ten fat activist Tumblr sites chose to customize their sites to include an archive of posts and highlighted key words. An archive invites followers to look at posts and comment on content from any given page over the course of the Tumblr site's existence. The key words are links to categories of specific discussions (i.e. activism, body image, cultural attitudes, plus-size, fat stigma, fat acceptance, respect, assumptions) and/or content (i.e. artistic renderings of fat bodies; photos of plus size models, clay sculptures, cartoon images).

<sup>7</sup> My ethnographic fieldwork began in September 2013 and ended March 2015.

their birth names, age, specific weight, sexuality, ethnicity, or other personal identifiers.

However, aspects of their identities were implied in their posts.

The multitude of posts in conjunction with the virtual anonymity of Tumblr made it difficult to locate a comprehensive identity for each of the fat activists that either hosted or followed any of the ten fat activist Tumblr sites. Instead, I collected information about their identities from observing their posts that either explicitly stated or implied their socio-economic status, weight, body type, ability, gender, sex, race, ethnicity and any other aspect of self-identity. Tumblr hosts did publically disclose general disclaimers of self-identity and reasons for hosting and posting content that were visible at all times on the page. The hosts also shared rules for their sites, rules that described to their followers what was allowed and what was not allowed in the space. The identities of the ten Tumblr page hosts and their objectives varied. But the hosts of the ten fat activist Tumblr sites did share similar intentions and common characteristics. The table below that states the ten Tumblr site and the hosts’ self-descriptions and/or their intentions in creating the Tumblr site.

Table 1. Tumblr Name and Intention

Tumblr Site	Introduction Post & Intention of Tumblr Site
Fat Heffalump	<p>“My name is Kath and I’m a fat activist and feminist. I talk about life as a fat person and work towards obtaining the basic human right for fat people to live their lives in peace, dignity and with respect, without fear of vilification, ridicule or discrimination.</p> <p>This space is a fat positive space. Fat hate and shaming will not be tolerated. Proselytizing of diets or weight loss is not welcome. I no longer allow comments unless specified.”</p>
Reimaginefat	<p>“I’m an artist and printmaker, currently working towards a more open and generous understanding of fat embodiment. Initially this work began as exploration of my own body, and what it might mean to try to make images of it, as a woman and a fat person. Gradually, I have come to realize that I need to reach out beyond myself in my studio. I began exploring the fat acceptance community online, which lead me pretty quickly to Tumblr and the many body-positive blogs to be found here. This blog is my effort to reach out to that community, a cry for help, for</p>

	empathy, for a deeper and fuller understanding of what it means to lead a fully embodied life, even and especially if that body is fat.”
Thisisthinprivilege	“This blog showcases examples of thin privilege in order to illustrate fatphobia and fat discrimination.”
Ilofefat	“A fat acceptance and feminism blog.”
Fatfromtheside	“See yourself from a different angle. This is a photo project started by Kyla, a body positive and fat acceptance community member from San Diego, who wants to familiarize the masses with a side of themselves they don’t often see. The seed for Fat From The Side was first planted in my mind when I noticed myself thinking about my own body differently when seeing the profile of it. It sprouted as I discovered I wasn’t the only one out there who was unfamiliar with this view of their body and had less than great thoughts about it. To put it simply, Fat From The Side is a project meant to familiarize and empower. Our bodies are all amazing from every angle”
Marshmallowfluffwoman	“Cutie with a booty, Chubby with a hubby. Name is Autumn, 23 years old, Napa Valley, CA., Birth doula, fat acceptance activist, happily married feminist, college student, soon to be teacher.”
Fatbodypolitics	“Scholar, writer, activist, unapologetic fat lady. I am the blogger at Fat Body Politics. Full time graduate student. Part time social media and online community builder.”
Fatoutloud	“Fat, unapologetic, unashamed”
Lovethechub	“This is a place for body positivity of all bodies [...] feel free to submit.”
Fatspired	“Fatspired was started as a response to the negative, insensitive, and cruel portrayals of fat in the media. The goal of Fatspired is to create a place where fat is simply commonplace; not something to be vilified or disparaged, but instead something that is accepted and embraced.”

While observing fat activist Tumblr sites, it became obvious that some fat activist Tumblr sites were more popular than others. I began collecting Tumblr sites to observe based on the amount of “notes” a Tumblr site had acquired.<sup>8</sup> I then found the host of that popular post which led me to the host’s personal fat activist Tumblr site. One Tumblr site linked me to another popular Tumblr post, which then linked me to the host’s site, which then linked me to another popular Tumblr post. This cyclical process continued until ten popular fat activist Tumblr sites emerged. My research method did not consist of direct interviews with Tumblr users. Rather, I

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<sup>8</sup> “Notes” refer to the amount of times followers have re-blogged, commented or liked a particular post.

followed ten fat activist Tumblr sites hosted by self-identified fat activists and observed conversations as they were posted publically and archived on the ten Tumblr sites.

The ten fat activist Tumblr sites are co-constructed by both the host and the followers. Followers submit content to the host of a particular Tumblr site, and the host will either accept submissions and post them or deny submissions and not post them. The host can also respond to their followers' questions and statements in separate messages. A follower's submission can and may include questions for the Tumblr host, or brief statements of gratitude for the shared online space and statements describing personal struggles with fat stigma. Albeit, the host does make the final decision with regards to what content is posted and whose positive fat narratives is displayed on their particular page. The Tumblr followers can make requests for a post to be taken down if they found it offensive. The Tumblr followers can also repost content on their personal Tumblr site.

Additionally, many of the followers of the ten fat activist Tumblr sites were in communication with each other and thousands of other fat activists on similar Tumblr sites. The ten fat activist Tumblr sites display page after page of posts. Each page holds hundreds of posts, of those posts; hundreds of posts have been noted over 10,000 times. The ten fat activist Tumblr sites share many of the same images and share followers. One particular post can be posted and reposted on to several of the ten fat activist Tumblr sites I observed. For example, the host of [Fatbodypolitics.tumblr.com](http://Fatbodypolitics.tumblr.com) is also a co-founder and contributor for [Thisisthinprivilege.tumblr.com](http://Thisisthinprivilege.tumblr.com). I selected quotes based on the amount of notes it had. I also selected quotes to exemplify major themes that emerged from the posts' discussions.

As members of the fat acceptance grassroots community, we share an understanding that fatness does not justify mistreatment nor do we deserve to be degraded or physically,

emotionally, economically discriminated against. Yet, our messages of body acceptance are stifled by society's acceptance and encouragement of fat stigma. Fat stigma is deeply embedded in our society so that even the most passionate fat activist may struggle disengaging from it and maintaining a positive sense of self. These constant daily occurrences have long term effects on our self-esteem and ability to function in the world, as well as adversely affects how I and other fat activists support one another. The fat acceptance grassroots community is growing in number and visibility, but it is not without struggle. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed the splintering of fat activist communities and I fear the resulting consequences of our alienation and lack of coalition.

The fat activist Tumblr users repeatedly voice their need for community and inclusion in their posts, explicitly inviting fat activists of all body types, ability, race, ethnicity, and sexual preferences to contribute. Consequently, I had anticipated the fat activist Tumblr sites to be a place of camaraderie, inclusivity and diversity amongst fat activists. I had equally anticipated a diversified collection of fat activist identities and fat positive content.

However, I came across many striking posts from fat activist Tumblr users that expressed frustration at not seeing images of fat positive identities that they could relate to, that they embodied. Some of these posts were re-blogged over 10,000 times, representing a growing concern about the fat acceptance Tumblr community and the exclusivity of fat positive representation.<sup>9</sup>

“Tumblr, I’m gonna need you to stop posting pictures/drawings of the same type of fat body that you find acceptable. You think you’re so rad and body positive because you’ve reblogged a

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<sup>9</sup> “Re-blogging” refers to users taking the post and re-posting it to their site. For example, if a particular post was re-blogged over 10,000 times means that the post has been viewed by 10,000 users and re-posted to 10,000 users’ Tumblr sites.

couple of pictures of size 16 ladies with hourglass shapes? No. You're not. You're just annoying me. See, those of us who are fat know something y'all don't. Sometimes it doesn't even matter how much you weigh or how big you are. Sometimes the difference between being celebrated and being ignored is a distribution of body fat. There are acceptable fat bodies and there are unacceptable fat bodies. Guess which one I live in?

Here are the qualities of an acceptable fat body for ladies/femmes/non-dudes:

1) White (pretty obvious), 2) Non-droopy breasts for folks who have 'em, 3) Comparatively smaller waist than hips and chest, 4) Proportionate butt and hips, 5) Thinner looking face/no double chin.

Here are unacceptable fat body characteristics (aka I look in a mirror and list all the things I feel dysphonic about erryday): 1) Double chin/fat face, 2) Shaped like a rectangle with no discernible waist, 3) No ass, 4) Back fat, 5) Droopy breasts (for those who have 'em).

Fat kids with acceptable bodies, I love you too. I ain't mad that you get the 'nicer' bod. And I know y'all get hella sexualized and fetishized too so it's not all of bed of cakes. But hey, how about some solidarity with the rest of us? I don't have any other analysis, really. I'm not gonna tell y'all that all bodies are beautiful and body shape diversity is important in fat liberation because whatever, you know? Anyway seriously Tumblr I'm calling you out for your weird bodyshape politics. Knock it off, dude"

--(Datingdisastersofaqueergirl.tumblr.com)

"Don't get me wrong, I'm proud to be part of the fatosphere, and I think amazing work is being done. But too many fat people are being left behind. We spend far too much time trying to accommodate people who hold us back from our rights. We make space for people who refuse to acknowledge that fat stigma exists. We allow diet and weight loss rhetoric in our spaces, despite the fact that both are the product of fat hate. We fold the minute a thin person says 'But what



about skinny shaming?!’ as though they’ve ever been there for us while were dealing with people who would eliminate us altogether, the same people whose silence in the face of the hate and bullying fat people receive is deafening. We rush to prove that fat people can be healthy, pretty, fit, fashionable, successful, which on the surface is stereotype-busting, but is only a thin veneer over the stigmatization of less privileged fat people. We don’t have to be health, fit, pretty, fashionable, successful etc. to earn our rights as human beings. We have rights by default. They are not something that has to be earned. There needs to be room for more than just young, white, affluent, able-bodied, straight, smaller-fat, femme presenting, cis-women showing how beautiful they can be and how they’re ‘valuable’ to others. Because by focusing on the ‘acceptable fats’, we are inadvertently drawing a line that creates ‘unacceptable fats’”

--(SleepyDumpling.tumblr.com).

“When I say I want more fat acceptance I don’t mean I want to see more hourglass shaped, cellulite free white girls rocking 50s pinup style. Give me fat people with different fat distribution. Give me fat people in bathing suits. Give me fat people with no sense of style. Give me fat people of color. Give me fat trans people and fat gender non-conforming people. Stop making one narrow body type of fat people the only ‘acceptable’ fat body. You’re all body acceptance or you’re not really body acceptance”

--(Iamatinyowl.tumblr.com).

Moreover, the posts awakened me to my own privilege in the fat acceptance community. It evident now that I was initially preoccupied and distracted by own privilege because I had not yet fully realized that resistance praxis does not exist outside systems of power and domination. In order to sufficiently examine Tumblr, as a site of fat activism and resistance, I had to also examine all other axes of difference, the systems of power that constructed them, and how they informed fat identity formation and participation in the fat acceptance community. If the fat

acceptance grassroots community and fat activism is in part a question of accessibility and acceptability, my ethnographic fieldwork had to examine not only resistance as it is practiced on the fat activist Tumblr sites but also the politics of coalition and accountability embedded in this community.

I began to take inventory of how fat activism, fat positivity was portrayed, articulated and acted upon on the ten Tumblr pages, as well as the goals, values and attitudes that were apparent in the posted content on fat activist Tumblr sites. I observed powerful and transformative embodied practices of fat positivity and fat activism on the ten fat activist Tumblr sites. However, my observations did substantiate the frustrations and concerns of the fat activist Tumblr users. I observed bodily hierarchies, racist, heteronormative ideologies that had embedded themselves in the fat acceptance community. There tended to be a particular acceptable proud fat body archetype, one that is white, female, and highly feminine in gender presentation.

Upon viewing these posts and others like them, my approach to this fieldwork shifted—shifted from *how* fat positivity was represented to include *who* was represented and who was not represented. I had initially begun my fieldwork with the intentions of broadly exploring the use of Tumblr as a source of resistance and a site refuge in defiance of dominant body norms and fat stigma. I sought to make sense of my observations, the segregation and lack of variety of fat-identified women as well as the abundance of white, hyper feminine gender presenting fat-identified women on the ten fat activist Tumblr sites.

*Theoretical Analysis*

I contextualize my fieldwork within post-structuralist and intersectional theory. I make the fat activist narratives and the thematic analysis that has developed from this analysis as the central focus. In doing so, the narratives collected in this process and the knowledge they produce are the means to make meaning of any internal dissonance in the community. As fat-identified individuals, our identities are often mapped onto us. In online spaces, like Tumblr, fat activists are invited to work to decode and detangle the intersecting and compounding parts of our selves. Our stories are puzzle pieces looking to fit or not fit, resist or succumb to ideas and ways of fat stigma. The stories and images we share reflect how we grapple with our bodily location in this world; help us find ourselves and find validation alongside each other. In sharing fat activists' narratives and exploring how they are presented and received in community with one another there can be healing and solidarity.

In her book, *Medicine Stories*, Aurora Levins Morales (1998) speaks to such a mode of solidarity, one that builds coalitional healing through the use of personal narrative in the face of trauma and alienation. Morales (1998) asserts, "Healing takes place in community, in telling and the bearing witness, in the naming of trauma and in the grief and rage and defiance that follow" (p. 16). In weaving together and showcasing the myriad of experiences and identities within the fat acceptance community, we share our collective "[...] refusal to cooperate with our own dehumanization" (Levins Morales, 1998, p. 17). It is through "[...] listening to [each other, interrogating our] discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened" (Levin Morales, 1998, p. 68) that we may build a critical

consciousness so that systems of domination and oppressive power can transform into systems of healing, resistance and solidarity.

A post-structuralist theoretical analysis asserts that our bodily locations and understandings of self are inseparable from the societal contexts in which we live. Michel Foucault's (1977) conception of the "docile body" further illustrates this notion. The docile body targets the human body as an object to be socially manipulated and regulated (Foucault, 1977). Foucault asserts the human body is a site onto which society projects dominant cultural norms. The individual internalizes the societal norms and becomes a disciplined and productive social actor by enacting and reenacting normative behaviors (Foucault, 1977). Moreover, individuals become implicated in their own "normalization to the extent that they become invested in and their identities become dependent on the enactment and embodiment of these social norms" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) builds on this concept and states that the docile body is inherently gendered. Bartky (1990) claims the human body is not treated as if it were one. Instead she writes it is "[...] as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life" (p. 447). Bartky claims men and women are uniquely disciplined. Bartky examines the subjectivity of the feminine body as it is forced to enact modern disciplinary practices such as dieting, exercise, and beauty regimens. She suggests these disciplinary practices subjugate women, not by explicitly taking power away from them, but by generating identities that depend on the maintenance of dominant feminine embodied identity. The anonymity of disciplinary power creates the illusion that the reproduction of femininity is organic. Further, women who fail to

reproduce this particular feminine norms are then seen as inherently flawed, lesser, and even masculinized (Bartky, 1990).

This paper begins by placing fat stigma within Bartky's (1990) understanding of gender, the docile body, and US consumer beauty culture's reliance on heteronormative ideals to make evident that when fat stigma collides with gender, fat identified women are uniquely marginalized. In demonstrating the ways in which the thin ideal is constructed and internalized as fat stigma, I can establish the basis in which to define the social terrain within which the fat acceptance movement exists. Moreover, I clarify the reasons why many fat activists are women so that I may later complicate and critique this idea with an intersectional analysis. As such, I am able to make the case that fat activism is more than the convergence of gender and fat embodiment, but rather the weaving of multiple aspects of self and identity.

Intersectionality is a feminist sociological theory that suggests socially constructed categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual preference, age and other components of one's identity exist simultaneously and intersect to shape one another which contribute to and perpetuate systematic harm and social injustice (Dhamoon, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991). Further, the components of one's identity are not singular fixed entities but rather are relational. One's identity or identities are informed and compounded by one another and co-determined by the values attached to them as dictated by the societal, cultural context or social systems of power in which they exist (Collins, 1991). Moreover, just as an individual's identity is not fixed, the value attributed to an individual's identity(s) is rather relational as well. An individual may have identity components that are privileged or oppressed or, privileged and oppressed simultaneously. These power dynamics are also dependent on the location and space the individual occupies and the other individuals who share that space. Not only is intersectionality a

foundational feminist theoretical framework, but it is also a “research paradigm” (Dhamoon, 2011). As such, “intersectionality foregrounds a rich ontology than [other] approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time, it treats social positions as relational and it makes visible a multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relation that central to it. As well, in addition to producing new theories of discrimination and important epistemological insights” (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 230). As such, intersectionality becomes essential when imagining future possibilities of the fat acceptance community, fat activist resistance efforts and collected accountability.

The addition of an intersectional analysis makes evident that not only is heteronormativity embedded in fat stigma, but racist, sexist, ableist, ageist ideologies are as well. Therefore, the decision to self-identify as fat or identify others as fat is deeply impacted by an individual’s understanding of self and their perceived social location within systems of power. Consequently, one’s relationship with their body and the fat acceptance movement is negotiated differently based on the race, gender, sexual identity and body type of the fat identified individual. Further, the fat acceptance Tumblr community is influenced by its’ participants’ various compounding intersections of identity, and the societal, cultural context but also by the power dynamics inherent within the shared virtual space. Accordingly, I utilize an intersectional analysis to complicate and critique the post-structuralist analysis and also make meaning of my fieldwork with the goal of making clear that accountability and coalition does not mean negating difference, nor does it mean inclusion by means of shared experience alone.

Fat Stigma & The Medicalization of Fatness

Today, in the United States, the pervasive stigma surrounding fat bodies differs from past understandings of fat embodiment. Fatness has historically signified aesthetic value, happiness, and success in particular societies and cultures. For example, Venus figurines, the earliest known depictions of women's bodies, made during the Paleolithic Period, sometime between 24,000 BC and 22,000 BC, artistically portray fat embodiment as ideal. The figurines' expansive, large breasts and buttocks arguably illustrate a correlation with fatness and feminine beauty with prosperity (Dixson & Dixson, 2011). During the age of ancient Greece, round, stout bodies were synonymous with wealth, power and fertility. For centuries, in parts of India, women would strive to maintain a certain heaviness; overeating in order to maintain their adored plump figures (Mohanty, 2011). Even today, in some cultures, women submit themselves to "fattening periods" to increase their beauty and fertility (Mohanty, 2011).

Fatness has traditionally indicated a multitude of empowering qualities in American popular culture as well. Fatness was at one time an indication of wealth and power. Fatness signified the ability to afford food and avoid physical labor, while thinness indicated an individual's poverty and physical weakness. As recently as 1968, the back of women's magazines were littered with ads criticizing women for being too skinny and promoted products that gave a woman curves and a certain thickness as a means to attract a husband (Farrell, 2011).

The paradigm has now switched. The term "fat" is a stigmatized label used to describe perceived obese bodies; individuals with a body mass index (BMI) of 25 or higher (Hopkins, 2012). In contemporary American society, fatness is framed by medical discourse as a disease and is strongly associated with laziness and moral weakness while thinness suggests success and health. With the help of popular phrases like, "obesity epidemic" and the "war on obesity,"

fatness is now associated with death, illness, and injury as well as economic strain (Farrell, 2011). These phrases are scare-tactics and rhetorical devices that assert that fat bodied individuals are a direct danger to themselves, their surroundings and others. The phrases “war on obesity” and “obesity epidemic” relates fat bodies to plague-ridden bodies, insinuating that fat bodies are contagious and enemies to wage war against. Fat individuals are viewed as contagious (physically and morally) and direct danger to non-fat bodies’ wellbeing and the wellbeing of the nation—wellbeing encompassing economic wellbeing, individual health, and politics of beauty and success (Wheeler, 2012). Medical discourse has claimed fatness as a social crisis and has triggered a deep pathological anxiety and fear of fat bodies (Wheeler, 2012).

Fat stigma refers to the stigmatization of fatness as well as the social control and discrimination of perceived fat embodied individuals. Fat stigma situates the fat individual as the source of infection and also the solution to the disease. Once a person is labeled as fat, they are obligated to do the work of regulating, disciplining themselves and thus de-stigmatizing themselves (Farrell, 2011). In other words, the perceived fat individual can combat this disease by acknowledging their fault by means of diet and exercise. De-stigmatization and a “normal” life can only occur once a person transforms their fat into a thin and “healthy” body. As such, it is socially acceptable for non-fat-identified individuals and societal structures police and survey fat individuals’ bodies as a means of assistance towards a normal life. Fat stigma is internalized as shame and self-hatred thus triggering self-policing and ultimately allowing for these disciplinary practices to continue (Farrell, 2011). Fat stigma transforms fat individuals’ personal and bodily space into public property in which to be remarked on and fixed. Once society identifies an individual as fat, they no longer have autonomy or individual agency.



Commodification of Fat Stigma and The Fat-Identified Woman

A thin body continues to be an integral part of dominant white feminine tropes in the United States. The American beauty industry has historically been and continues to be culturally seen as a woman's wheelhouse (Bartky, 1990). However, it was not until American consumer beauty culture capitalized on and commodified the fat body that thinness was solidified as the absolute standard of beauty and success in the United States, securely positioning fat stigma as a woman's issue (Kirkland, 2008).

Beauty is a vital attribute to attain and maintain in American society and is often the first attribute others seek to invalidate when justifying harm to an individual, or groups of people. American consumer beauty culture mandates women be beautiful, confining notions of beauty to white supremacist, heteronormative standards of femininity and thinness, and asserts the status of woman is derived from her ability to reflect a sense of said beauty and sex appeal (Gailey, 2012). However, fat-identified women are incapable of fitting into this beauty ideal. A woman's identity as fat is confused and compounded by American gender ideals that define women as beautiful, associating beauty with femininity and femininity with thinness, while also placing the work of becoming beautiful on women. Additionally, current medical discourses present fat as ugly, diseased, amoral and an inherent personal flaw. It is clear then, when these two discourses intersect, fat-identified women are no longer socially legitimized women.

American consumer beauty culture sells products to the "average" woman to encourage economic consumption. The "average" woman is thin in size, if not extremely thin. Flawless thin models and mannequins represent the average woman in advertisements and storefront windows. However, American consumer culture cleverly presents thin as average when fat is a better representation of average. Studies have concluded that the average woman in the United States is

a size 12 to 14 (Cooper, 2010). Other studies have shown that the average model's weight is currently over 20 percent underweight and that only five percent of body types are positively represented in the media (Kwan, & Trautner, 2009). By creating a monolithic average body archetype that is inevitably rare and unattainable, this scheme ensures constant profit for the diet industry and other industries that sell products to better reach this unattainable standard. In 2005, the United States weight loss industry made over 46 billion dollars, and this number has grown by 6 percent each year since (Kirkland, 2008). By maintaining that women's average size is rigidly thin, accompanied with projecting fat women as abnormal, department stores are no longer obligated to concede to a reality where in fact, women's sizes are not dichotomous but rather diverse in shape and size.

Instead, plus size clothing options are sold as a way to cater to fat identified women.<sup>10</sup> But it is done so by further shaming them. Plus size clothing is a category for clothing sizes only for women. There is no clothing category equivalent for fat-identified men. Likewise, very few stores and clothing lines even offer "plus" size clothing options. If and when "plus" size items are available, "plus" size sections of department stores are often hidden in the back of the store, or mixed in with maternity clothing. "Plus" size clothing is always limited in selection and shapeless, insinuating the need to cover and not flaunt their bodies. Clothing options are typically made from cheap fabric, limited in option, and not as trendy as other "straight" sizes.<sup>11</sup> As more and more stores are adopting plus size options, straight sizes become smaller, creating a wider gap between "normal" size and "plus" size.

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<sup>10</sup> Plus size clothing is a category of clothing for fat-identified women. There is no clothing category equivalent for fat-identified men.

<sup>11</sup> "Straight size" is a term used by fat activists that refers to clothing size options that are not plus size.

Additionally, plus size clothing is overpriced, especially compared to “straight” sizes. Clothing stores justify the high prices by pointing the finger back at the fat woman. “Plus” size clothing uses more fabric to cover a body, which equates to more expense and, therefore, high priced clothing. However, this is unfair and untrue. The cut off between “straight” and “plus” sizes depends on the particular store and clothing line and is never consistent. Moreover, many clothing lines and department stores sell the same clothing item in a “plus” size and “straight” size simultaneously. But the “plus” size option is always cheaper in quality and higher in price. For example, in a recent shopping expedition, I noticed a store offering two dresses, the same in color and measurement, but one dress is offered as a “straight” size 16 or 18 and the other is a “plus” size x1 or x2. The “plus” size version is double the price of the “straight” size and made of an itchy cheap polyester or jersey fabric while the “straight” size is a comfortable, durable cotton and polyester blend.

It is extremely difficult to participate in beauty culture as a fat-identified woman or present ourselves in a way that is positively received by society when we cannot find clothing options that flatter our bodies, let alone fit our bodies. Fat-identified women are forced to scavenge for clothes only to find clothing options that are not as trendy or durable as straight size options and are more expensive to boot. They must also continually spend more money to replace items more frequently because they are not as sturdy in fabric quality. This social conditioning discourages fat-identified women from partaking in social requirements like shopping and dressing up, as well as it inhibits them from accessing an image that is required of them as women in order to successfully interact in the world as women (e.g., date, job search, etc.). As such, American consumer culture has polarized them towards deviancy with an association of overconsumption and masculinity.

American consumer beauty culture promotes a narrowly defined and limited representation of fat-identified women, one that relies on heteronormative and White supremacist standards of beauty (Gailey, 2012). If and when a fat-identified woman of color is represented in American consumer culture, they are hyper sexualized and exotified (Hobson, 2003). The United States has a, “[...] history of enslavement, colonial conquest and ethnographic exhibition- variously labeled the [fat-identified] black female body ‘grotesque,’ ‘strange,’ ‘unfeminine,’ ‘lascivious,’ and ‘obscene.’ (Hobson, 2003, p. 87). Furthermore, the longstanding fascination and appreciation with fat-identified women of color’s alleged hyper sexuality is often symbolized in the “emphasis on the black female rear end, with its historic and cultural tropes of rawness, lasciviousness, and ‘nastiness’,” (Hobson, 2003, p. 97). This so-called “appreciation” is often used to refute the ways fat-identified women of color are marginalized by fat stigma. However, fat-identified women of color’s bodies do not necessarily challenge ideas of the grotesque fat body or deviance associated with fat-identified women of color’s sexuality in the United States (Hobson, 2003). Rather, the “compliment” stems from a history of and only perpetuates the othering and “exotifying” women of color’s bodies.

These cultural tropes make it difficult for fat-identified women to partake in romantic heterosexual relationships. Not only are fat-identified women deemed nonsexual and masculinized or hypersexual and hyper feminine, they are ultimately deemed unworthy of dating. Often fat-identified women are seen as easy, because their non-dateable status makes them desperate and insecure. A woman labeled as fat loses most, if not all, sexual agency.

In her study, Gailey (2012) interviewed thirty-six fat identified women in hopes to better account for and document their personal experiences in romantic relationships as “fat women.” The women in her study described feeling fetishized for being fat. Gailey (2012) reflects on the

consequences of fat fetishes, “[fat women] become a fetishistic object by men who [...use them] as a means to an end. With a fetish, the fat woman becomes an object, not a person, and is no longer an autonomous body, or equal to the man” (p. 119). A participant named Patty described instances when men, overcome with a mix of fascination and lust, would pinch and poke her body because she was fat. Gailey studied “hogging;” a practice in which men sometimes place bets on who can take home the largest woman or state they will settle for a fat-identified woman at the end of the night because they know these women are desperate. Gailey’s results reflect the obvious: women who self-identify as fat and women who are labeled as fat agree that the discrimination they experience is directly linked to their perceived low self-esteem, sexual dysfunction, and struggle to maintain agency in their daily interactions (Gailey, 2012).

Fat stigma is embedded in daily interaction between a fat-identified woman and contemporary American society. Fat stigma refers to the visibility of an individual’s large body size in contrast to average thin norm. The visibility of a person’s fat thus makes this stigma impossible to conceal (Goffman, 1963). Fat stigma disproportionately marginalizes women. Once women are perceived as fat are constantly are typically seen first as fat, if not only as fat. Research has shown that perceived fatness on women is overwhelmingly seen as deviant and grotesque, and thin individuals tend to tolerate and care for fat-identified women by policing their weight with demands of diet and exercise in fear for their wellbeing (Wheeler, 2012). Moreover, if they do not display remorse about their fatness or an open commitment to diet and fitness, they are punished.

A fat-identified woman’s racial identity and socio-economic status further influences and compounds her experience as a fat-identified person in the United States. Fatness is received differently and fat-identified women’s bodies are policed differently based on the race, class and

gender as well as other aspects of an individual's identity. For instance, hyper sexuality is a dominant trope of fat-identified women of color, while sad comic relief is a dominant trope of fat-identified white women (Gailey, 2012; Hobson, 2003). Research has shown that fatness amongst women of color is indeed linked to poverty and poor access to quality food and other resources—making it exceedingly difficult to access ways to combat fat stigma through diet, exercise or presenting an overtly feminine gender presentation by searching for and purchasing fitted, trendy clothing (Hobson, 2003). Moreover, the inability to combat fat stigma or present a fat positive identity accumulates into serious psychological and emotional harm, and lack of sexual and economic agency (Gailey, 2012).

### Fat Activism & The Fatosphere

Fat activism and the fat acceptance grassroots community (also known as the fat liberation movement, size acceptance movement) are umbrella terms that contain a multitude of voices that seek to combat fat stigma and activist projects that exist to reduce the emotional, physical, and psychological harms caused by fat stigma.<sup>12</sup> Fat activism seeks to expose the social construction of the negatively charged fat body and deconstruct dominant societal narratives that define “fat” in opposition to health, wellbeing, and beauty. Fat activists problematize the dominant meanings of “obese” and “fat,” moving from personal disability (generated from a diagnosis on the body mass index (BMI) scale), to include systemic societal, political, and economic implications of race, class, ability, sexuality, and gender that contribute to becoming “obese” and shape the individual's subjectivities. It is from this understanding that fat activists work to recover the word “fat.” Fat activists use the term “fat” as a way to assert agency and

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<sup>12</sup> This paper speaks about fat activism, the fat acceptance community and fat stigma, as they exist in the United States and the “fatosphere.”

reclaim the power that has been taken away from them. Fat activists' reclamation of the term "fat" signifies the reimagining of the self and self-worth. It is the choice to de-stigmatize their body's presence and validate their existence in contemporary society. There becomes a clear distinction between the words "fat" and "obese." "Fat" symbolizes the complex subjectivity and humanity of a person. While "obese" refers to medical discourse and the objectification of fat-identified individuals, quantifying their worth based on a number a scale and rendering their bodies and identities as diseased.

Fat activists reclaim the term "fat" by developing a fat positive identity through presenting re-imagined fat identities that are both beautiful and diverse (Saguy & Ward, 2011). A fat positive identity is the refusal to think, act, or dress in any socially prescribed way, and the decision to exist as a fat-identified person and cherish their bodies with confidence in all its complexity (Saguy & Ward, 2011). It is the affirmation to oneself and others that our fatness is nonnegotiable aspect of oneself, rather than a temporary state to be improved by weight loss (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Developing a fat positive identity rebuilds a relationship the body, as it exists now, as overweight, rather than waiting until their bodies becomes thinner or "more ideal" (Saguy & Ward, 2011). In doing so, fat activists transform their bodies from site of struggle to sites of resistance. This transformation is in and of itself fat activism as well as a working foundation in which fat activists engage resistance.

There is no single approach to fat activism. However, the fat acceptance grassroots community does draw much of its strength from the Internet. The rise of the "fatosphere" has contributed greatly to fat activist resistance efforts and is often considered by fat activists as the

origin of and nexus of the fat acceptance community.<sup>13</sup> The fatosphere is the space in which many fat activists choose to present a fat positive self and practice fat positivity. The fatosphere permits fat-identified individuals to ease into the practice of fat positivity from the privacy of their own homes, negotiating fat positive self-identities with little risk of shame, punishment and physical threat (Dickins, Thomas, Lewis, & Holland, 2011). In this online landscape, fat activism and fat positive identity formation tend to blend together and occur simultaneously, often through subtle, inconspicuous individual acts of resistance — wearing a swimsuit at the beach, organizing a clothing exchange, writing fat positive affirmations in diet books, unapologetically refusing to participate in diet culture, speaking out against fat-phobic language and interrupting sizeist practices, positively acknowledging fellow fat-identified people on the street, and producing fat positive art, fashion and culture. However, fat activism is not always individualized. As the fat acceptance grassroots community grows in number, fat activists have begun to join together, organizing fat activist conferences, lobbying committees, academic research, national campaigns and boycotts.

The fatosphere provides an accessible location in which to gather and organize towards a social change. Fat activist can send mass invites to social gatherings quickly and easily, raise money for fat positive projects, hold publicized activist symposiums via video chat forums. As their individual stories become interwoven with others and it becomes evident that individual experiences can be interpreted as, to a large extent, socially patterned and characterized by social and cultural marginalization. This welcoming and safe virtual community is a powerful resource

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<sup>13</sup> The “fatosphere” is a broad term that refers to virtual fat positive spaces, online articles, social media outlets, interactive forums and other online venues (Dickins, Thomas, Lewis, & Holland, 2011).



for individuals who feel isolated and alienated from having internalized fat stigma as an inherent personal flaw.

### Exposing *The Proud Fat Body*

Many fat activist Tumblr users spoke about and defined fat activism as an “embodied practice.” Embodied practice refers to fat activist Tumblr users understanding fat activism as bodily experience, rather than solely an intellectual experience. For instance, Reimaginefat explicitly created her page with the intention to document and discuss fat activism as an embodied practice. Reimaginefat invites her followers to embody fat positivity and rebuild a relationship with their bodies by guiding them through a ten step mediation ritual and then asks them to submit their results so that she may document their experiences on her site.

- “1. Find a private place, a place where you feel safe, secure and loved.
2. Remove all of your clothing and get comfortable: sit or lie down on the floor, or stand up, tall and relaxed.
3. Look at yourself, either using a mirror or simply glancing down at your body, for no longer than 30 seconds. Notice as much as possible, as objectively as possible.
4. Now, close your eyes and take 10 deep breathes, counting each one on the exhale. 1...ah...2...ah...3...ah... etc
5. Release any negative thoughts, especially judgmental feelings about your body. Imagine these thoughts floating away on a boat, or blowing away on the wind or simply disappearing like a popped bubble. Instead, focus on the materiality of your body, the feeling of sitting or standing, the temperature of the air. If you feel any pain or tension, release that as well. Try to feel from every direction.
6. Keeping your eyes closed and remembering to release toxic thoughts as they occur, start to touch your body with affection and intention. Run your hands over your face, noting the texture of your skin,

the shape of your features, eyes, nose, mouth and cheeks. Note the shape of your skull, the length, texture, or absence of hair. Touch your shoulders, neck, arms and chest, noticing how the texture and feel of your body changes.

7. Now, really start to feel the fat and flesh of your body. Lift your breasts, if you have breasts. Squeeze and notice the softness and lumpiness of them. Test their weight. Move your hands to your belly, lifting and squeezing the rolls of meat and exposing all your skin to the air. Try to feel your flesh with your hands, but also feel your hands with your flesh. Feel from every direction.

8. Try to feel your back and your legs and your buttocks. Run your hands over the creases and cracks. Feel any old wounds that your hands encounter. Prod your flesh with your fingers, notice its textures and layers. Trace the limits of your fingers' reach.

9. Feel your muscles expanding and contracting. Feel your lungs filling and emptying. Feel your blood moving through your veins and arteries, and your intestines gurgling. Feel your pulse, and your heart beating.

10. Continue this feeling, touching meditation for as long as you wish to do so. Breathe deeply and slowly, and try to feel the world around you as your body, not through your body. When you feel that you are finished, wrap your arms around your torso, embracing your flesh, fat, flaws and all. Embrace yourself. Breathe for ten more deep breathes, counting and gradually lifting yourself out of the practice. Then you may open your eyes, dress yourself, and go.

(OPTIONAL STEP) 11. When you are finished with the practice, please document it. Using an 8.5" by 11" sheet of standard printer paper, try to channel whatever emotions the performance awoke in you into the documentation. Your documentation may take a number of different forms: writing, photography, drawing, comics, collage, origami, ripping or burning the paper, paper mache etc. Trust your intuition and be honest. You may spend as little time on the documentation as you like, but do not spend more than an hour on it: the point is to notice and record your feelings immediately after the embodiment practice. Your only limitations for the documentation are the requirement of using the sheet of paper in some way, as well as limiting the time you spend on it. Then, if you wish to do so,

please send a scan or a digital photo of your response to [reimaginefat@gmail.com](mailto:reimaginefat@gmail.com), and keep the original in a safe place. I will post the digital images on this website”

--([Reimaginefat.tumblr.com](http://Reimaginefat.tumblr.com)).

As a result, Reimaginefat’s Tumblr site is home to thousands of pictures of individuals’ physically holding and caressing their bodies alongside comments describing their emotions and ideas about the embodied process as well as visual and verbal announcements of fat body pride. The majority of the pictures posted are of fat-identified women who submitted pictures of themselves embodying a fat positive identity or images of other fat-identified women whose fat positivity they wished to emulate. In doing so, embodying fat activism becomes both a personal and private experience as well as a public display of resistance.

Fat activist Tumblr user Fatadditives has her picture on Reimaginefat’s site. The picture is of a woman staring into the camera as she holds her chin in her hand. The caption reads:

“Because this body I live in has been pinched, prodded, bound, wrung-out, starved, and even scarred in my efforts to destroy it.. and it still keeps fighting.

Because I am always the most AND LEAST visible person in the room.

Because there isn’t a fat joke I haven’t heard in surround sound.

Because I had to learn to love myself before my hands ever noticed how soft I am to touch.

Because I take up space they believe I don’t deserve”

--([Fatadditives.tumblr.com](http://Fatadditives.tumblr.com)).

Fat activist Tumblr user Mooninherhands posted a picture of a fat-identified woman in a bikini happily floating on a raft in a lake. The woman seems excited as she smiles with her arms stretched above her head. The caption reads:

“Fat babe on a floatie.

This looks like heaven - I can't wait to swim in lakes and the ocean again”

--(Mooninherhands.tumblr.com; Littledeepseaprincess.tumblr.com;  
Lovethyfatness.tumblr.com).

Fat activist Tumblr user Shewhorollswithrolls posted a picture of herself sitting topless with her back to the camera. She is staring at a painting, with her hand gently caressing her head. The caption reads:

“A little gift to my new thinspo follower. Enjoy ma back rollz and don't let the door hit ya on your way out! Such Beauty”

--(Shewhorollswithrolls.tumblr.com).

The posts demonstrate that the posts are shared and viewed in a virtual space but the practice of fat positivity is always embodied. The documentations of embodied practice serve as affirmation to fat-identified individuals to---

“Live your fat life. Right now. It is the only one you get. Live your fat life. Take vacations. Buy yourself clothes that you want to wear. Live you fat life. Do all the things you want to do. Go all the places you want to go. Live your fat life. Eat good food. Splash in the waves. Capture your favorite moments on film. Live you fat life. Live it proud, and loud, and without apology. Live fat. Love fat. Be fat. Live your fat life”

--(Lovethyfatness.tumblr.com).

Reclaiming a fat positivity is an individualized experience but as Tumblr exemplifies, fat activism is also a communal embodied practice. The multiplicity of fat positive images, images

of happy, prideful fat bodies create its own narrative. Viewing a myriad of fat positive individuals disrupts society's dominant fat phobic narrative—that fat is abnormal, deviant or shameful.

“Just a few short months ago, Googling Fat From the Side, pulled up pages and pages of “how to get rid of side fat” results. I’m happy to say, today, when you Google Fat From the Side, not only does FFtS come up first – but even when you Google Side Fat, FFtS is the first search result! Fuck yeah, fatties! Keep loving your bodies, and the world will follow <3”

--(Fatfromtheside.tumblr.com).

The sheer quantity of the pictures offered hope and associate fat embodiment with normalcy and pride. As well as invited others to mirror and replicate the positive images in their daily lives.

“Its tough these days to realize that you should be comfortable and proud of you are no matter your size. your body is yours. it may take one person you really trust telling you how amazing you are. it may take one person getting close allowing you to open up in your entirety to them for you to realize you're beautiful. no matter when or how it happens. it is an amazing feeling to find that moment when a whole new feeling is open to you. all you can do now is try your best to love yourself. take selfies. share them. act confident. in time it will come!”

--(Mycatsneezeslikealot.tumblr.com).

Fat-identified individuals are socially conditioned to hide their fatness by posing in pictures, angling the camera, or cropping the picture so that their bodies seem thinner (Fatfromtheside.tumblr.com). These posts demonstrate fat activists' attempts to embody fat activism and fat positivity by dissociating themselves from body shaming practices

and embrace their fatness through sharing pictures of themselves and their bodies, as they exist outside these fat phobic practices. Additionally, the pictures are typically followed by a caption—either a description of what they are wearing, why they decided to post the picture and the mixture of feelings attached to this action, and/or how the picture post affirms their fat positive self-identity.

“It wasn’t until I went to post this on my tumblr that I noticed by visible belly lines, ‘spare tire’ etc. I refuse to crop this photo just because my stomach, which ISN’T flat, is visible in all its glory, as it really is IRL. I’ve been waiting for a photo that I felt really stoked about body-wise to post here, and I can’t think of a better image. Here I am with one of my idols, a woman whose teachings have taught me that the media has shamed me away from self-love and who, today, said that “self-esteem” should be called ‘self-authority’ instead. I love this picture, belly and all”

--(Delicatelymine.tumblr.com).

“It has been so hard to practice what I preach. I am trying.

I went Monday, May 14, 2012 and had professional pictures done, something I have never done before. I begged the girl not to any full body shots of me. She got one, the very last one, this picture is it. When I saw it I cried. I cried because I realized that even though I am big, I am beautiful and I need to start realizing it. I need to start practicing what I preach. So here it is: a full length body shot of me without some big ol’ baggy shirt to cover my fat. I am proud of this picture so I am putting it here for the world to see”

-- (Stophatingyourbody.tumblr.com).

“I’ve been trying to muster up enough courage to submit.... I can finally say, I don’t like this angle, but I’m learning to love it”

--(Nicegirlscamelast.tumblr.com).

“Six months ago, this candid photo would have absolutely horrified me; I would have instantly untagged myself on Facebook and I would have sulked for the rest of the day. but when i saw this picture yesterday morning, I didn’t freak out. I saw it and saw me and saw who I am, and I saw how much I was enjoying everything when it was taken. My fat is awesome. My body is awesome. I love me rolls. And I love myself”

--(Fanzzi.tumblr.com).

“I am a sexy motherfucker and I’ve learned I don’t have to suck it in. This is one of my favorite pictures that has ever been taken of me”

--(Onejediswore.tumblr.com).

“This is my fat from the side. I have ‘fabulous’ tattooed on my hip. Why? Because I am fabulous. I am fat and fabulous. I am proud, and confident, and not a snide comment, or a hateful glance from another person could make me feel any different about myself”

--(mspauline89.tumblr.com).

“My body worship is about reclaiming vanity and surviving everyday”

--(Lovethechub.tumblr.com).

Fat activist Tumblr users’ displays of fat pride and fat positivity possessed sexual and heteronormative connotations. The fat-identified individuals in the pictures were often shown naked or barely covered—describing themselves and their fat positive embodiment with words like “sexy.” An overwhelming amount of the pictures were of seemingly Anglo-American women who displayed traditional feminine traits (i.e. proportional hour glass body frame, make

up, dresses, skirts, long hair, sexual and or submissive gestures in facial expression and body language). This images showcase a common fat activist tactic--the shift from hiding their fat bodies to flaunting their figures—decorating their fat bodies with beautiful clothing and accessories as any “normal” thin-bodied woman would.

Fat activist Tumblr user Sassyandfat posted a full length picture of herself with her backside to the camera. In the picture, she is wearing a pair of pink lacy underwear.

“My big ass is the best ass..because it’s MINE!”

--(Sassyandfat.tumblr.com).

Fat activist Tumblr user Saintlaurentkidd posted a picture of herself in a bright magenta dress. The dress is frilly and appears tight and short on her body. She is leaning into the camera to show her cleavage. The caption reads:

“I absolutely love this dress, and I love how tightly it fits me. I love how you can see every curve of my body, and how unashamed those curves are. I love how big my hips and ass look. I love how sexy I feel in it, it’s a feeling that is rare for me. I might lose weight in the future, I might gain weight, *whatever*- this is my body right now so I might as well rock it. Be proud of what you have, and never hide yourself. Xoxo”

--(Saintlaurentkidd.tumblr.com).

Additionally, many posts spoke to fat activism and fat positive embodiment in relation to “fat fashion,” presenting a “fatshionable” sense of self. In doing so, Tumblr fat activist users exert the right to wear any article of clothing and discuss how to avoid and/or stop others from policing or surveying their bodies.



“So... how do you compliment someone without accidentally putting body judgment on there? Well... it’s actually pretty easy! The best way is to keep it simple.

DO compliments on people’s skills. A talent in styling an outfit or choosing fabulous colors or accessorizing is a fabulous thing to have. ‘I love the way you’ve styled that outfit!’ or ‘You have accessorized fabulously!’ are great compliments that don’t load body judgment in there. You can even say “You have fabulous style!’

DO say you like an outfit, garment or accessory. ‘I love your shoes!’ or “Great dress!” “Those earrings are awesome!’ Keep it simple.

DON’T mention people’s bodies. Unless you are engaging in sexy-times with them, it’s not really anyone’s place to comment other people’s bodies. Don’t say ‘That dress makes your waist look small/legs look long.’ etc, instead just say ‘I love that dress on you.’

DON’T state your ‘approval’. Whether you approve of someone’s outfit or appearance is irrelevant.

DON’T use the ‘I wish I could wear... like you.’ line. Drawing comparisons between bodies is pointless.

DON’T use words like ‘slimming’ or refer to the persons shape. Again, a simple ‘You look lovely’ will do the job.

DON’T assume that an hourglass shape is superior to any other shaped body. Firstly it’s not and while maybe the outfit they are wearing does give them an hourglass shape, they can look just as fabulous in an outfit that highlights any other shape they happen to appear.

FUCK FLATTERING! Seriously, just fuck it. Don’t use it, it’s shitty.”

--(Sleepydumpling.tumblr.com).

“Body policing / shaming is real and I, among others, experience it all the time in this society. One thing that has always bothered me is when people try to restrict or shame other body types from clothing because it’s ‘not flattering’ to them. What is flattering? Why should we commit

to a life of putting on clothes to soothe other people's eyes? Why does the amount of space my body takes limit me from wearing comfortable clothing? This design will be a series of I don't know how many yet, based on my experience as a fat woman, but anyone is welcome to support my quest to body acceptance, positivity and representation!"

--(Gldneye.tumblr.com).

"I walked to the office this morning, noticing how much I did not fit in with the neutral clothes and stoic faces around me. But I know the stares I receive are not from my clothing. And my choice to wear bright pink leggings is one related to the fact that 1. I do what I want and 2. I'm utilizing the inherent hyper-visibility that comes with being super tall and super fat. And I'm taking power from it, rather than shrinking away from it. So let them stare. I'm ready"

--(Shewhorollswithrolls.tumblr.com).

"I genuinely do not understand how people cannot get how fucked up the whole IDEA of 'flattering' clothing is. Like just stop for one second, step outside of your closed-minded Vogue or Cosmopolitan magazine ideas of what you've been told is good/bad fashion and actually think about the crap you are thinking/saying. WHY are we told that a 'flattering' outfit is one that accentuates certain body parts and attempts to hide others? WHY are we told there are 'good body parts' and 'bad body parts'? WHY DO YOU WANT TO LISTEN TO BULLSHIT MAINSTREAM MEDIA FASHION RULES?! Why should anyone not wear whatever the hell they want to wear?"

--(Shewhorollswithrolls.tumblr.com;

mistressmary.tumblr.com; infinitetransit.tumblr.com; bon-bon.tumblr.com).

“Mainstream fashion doesn’t care about me – it actively despises my body. I don’t despise my body – in point of fact, I think it’s pretty freaking awesome. Because it’s mine. It’s part of me and my identity. You can’t remove who I am from the fact of my body and its various conditions over the years. Mainstream fashion doesn’t care about me and I’ve got better things to do with my time than moon over it like an unrequited love. That’s not to say I’m not into pretty things – I like looking at dresses, y’all. I like seeing what is on the couture runways. But I don’t feel bound by any of that because my resources do not, as a general rule, reflect any of that. And I refuse to feel bad about that. I know a lot of people are upset because they ARE interested in dressing in clothes that are on-trend. I get pissed off at retailers and manufacturers because there is no excuse for on-trend plus sizes not to be available. But I am not going to treat myself like a failure because other people don’t think I’m worth dressing. I’m going to wear things I love, and, most frankly, fuck anyone who doesn’t like it”

--(Bookmarklet.tumblr.com).

“While fast fashion chains like Forever 21 (their sub-brand Faith 21), Torrid and the UK-based Evans have heeded the call of the fat by offering more fashionable clothing in large sizes, the high-end designers have remained steadfast in their refusal to go above a size 8 in most cases. In fact, the mainstream fashion industry as a whole has been slow to catch on to the “fatshion” movement; only now are more so-called straight size magazines and labels showing plus sized models on their pages and in their runway shows. Even then, the acceptance has been limited to the smaller plus sizes, 12-14. You would think since (as the oft-repeated statistic goes) the average woman in the U.S. is a size 14, designers and fashion magazines would be more excited about tapping into this vast market. But the reality is, their business model is based on keeping women in the hamster wheel of constant dieting. Self-acceptance is bad for business”

--(Haphazardry.tumblr.com).

The term “fat fashion” refers to fashionable, trendy clothes and accessories that are made solely for fat-identified women. “Fat fashion” is slightly different than “plus size clothing.” Fat fashion connotes a sense of empowerment and choice in unique wardrobe while plus size clothing typically refers to particular clothing lines that are drab and limited in selection. Moreover, crafting, selling, purchasing, and wearing fat fashion garments is often done so with the intention to defy or reject current plus size clothing lines, or lack thereof and demand more from clothing stores, clothing lines, and American beauty consumer culture overall.

“Couldn’t find a plus sized Poison Ivy costume, so I fucking made my own! In your face, retailers”

--(Beautyofthesoft.tumblr.com).

One of the more notable members of the fat acceptance grassroots community, Chastity Garner, has built a career around fat fashion and discussing fat fashion clothing lines, and how to embody confidence and pride through fat fashion on her blog “Garnerstyle.” Chastity Garner is a fat fashion icon and was often spoken about on the ten fat activist Tumblr sites. Chastity Garner spearheaded a nation wide boycott of popular clothing stores Old Navy and Target after the stores’ blatant disrespect towards fat-identified women and inconsideration of the “plus size” population. Without explanation or notice, Old Navy and Target drastically reduced plus size clothing options and hiked up the prices of the remaining plus size clothing items—clothing items doubled, and even tripled in price. Additionally, both clothing stores began to only carry plus size clothing items online. As a result, fat-identified women could not find clothing items that were accessible, readily available or affordable from either store. The boycott triggered massive response on Tumblr and the broader fat acceptance grassroots community. There tends

to be a silencing around class issues as they relate to fatness and fat activism. However, the boycott has forced both stores to initiate a conversation with Chastity Garner and other fat fashion bloggers and address issues around fat fashion, affordability and class.

“Dear Target,

For so long, I loved you. I always went above and beyond in our relationship. I'll visit you to get a couple of items and more than a couple hundred dollars later and a cart full of products, I have left giving you way more than I ever planned to. No matter how much I give, you never seem to appreciate me. All I want is the clothing you offer all your other regular sized customers, but you always leave me out. With that being said, I have to end this relationship. It's you, not me and for my own well-being and my self dignity I have to sever ties between us.

This may seem a little dramatic, but the recent release of the photos of Altuzarra for Target collection has me feeling slighted. I'm up late, working as usual, and I see Refinery 29 post 50 photos of the newest designer collaboration. Literally 50 pieces of beautiful (and I mean beautiful) affordable clothing and none of it will be remotely close to the size that I wear. The collection consists of deeps hues of burgundy, fabulous snakeskin prints, and fall worthy silk-like maxi dresses...enough to make any fashion lover lust. My heart sinks. You have once again made me feel like a second-class customer and because of that I'm going to have to discontinue my relationship with you altogether.

Year after year, season after season, you put out these gorgeous designer collections and you almost never include a plus range. Every time each of these collections is about to be released it feels like a slap in the face. To add insult to injury, over 6 months ago, you took most of your plus size clothing out of the store, promising me something new and improved and that has yet to happen. I've been in this abusive relationship with you for far too long. I can't do this anymore. I will be personally boycotting Target altogether. No more housewares, grocery shopping, electronics...nothing. I'm done.

You may ask, ‘Is there any way I will take you back?’ I will take you back, when and only when, you include true plus sizes in your designer range collaborations. Until then, I will take my money elsewhere.

Your Scorned Lover,

Chastity of Garnerstyle”

--(Anomalousallure.tumblr.com; Garnerstyle.blogspot.com).

“An Open Letter to Old Navy.> Not including your plus size customers in today’s sale goes beyond oversight into straight up discrimination. Which shouldn’t surprise me. Your company refuses to sell plus size clothes in store, forcing your larger customers to have to buy online without any way to try on the product or judge the quality without spending money first. Your practice sends a very clear message: ‘If you’re fat, we will take your money, but we don’t want to see you in our stores’”

--(Fatoutloud.tumblr.com).

It was rare to observe posts from individuals that identified as fat-identified men on the Tumblr sites. Rather, the ratio of fat-identified men to fat-identified women was exceedingly disproportionate—for every fifteen or twenty images of fat-identified women there was one fat-identified man. When a fat-identified man was present in the pictures or text discussions, they positioned themselves physically in the image or wrote about themselves in a manner that highlighted their partner, a fat-identified woman and her sexual desirability.

Fat activist Tumblr user Kristenfuckinlangstrand posted a picture of herself and her boyfriend kissing on a park bench. The couple was Anglo-American and fat-identified. The caption read:

“I felt quite uncomfortable with side pictures of myself next to my boyfriend Zach, he’s several pants sizes smaller than me. When this photo was taken, however, I fell in love. I love that he loves my body, every lump bump and roll”

--(Kristenfuckinlangstrand.tumblr.com).

Fat activist Tumblr user Embodystyle posted a picture of herself and her boyfriend. In the picture, he is holding her and she is kissing his cheek. The couple is also Anglo-American and fat-identified. The caption reads:

“Myself and my handsome boyfriend!”

--(Embodystyle.tumblr.com).

Often, pictures displayed a fat-identified woman and a fat-identified man, but the man was never acknowledged in the text. Fat activist Tumblr user Red3blog posted a picture of herself and her husband on their wedding day. In the picture, their bodies similar in size as the couple were dressed in traditional wedding attire. The caption read:

“Here is my fat profile from my wedding. My side view is one I’ve probably struggled with the most because its not something I see regularly and have been able to get used to. Looking at this photo, though, all I see is happiness and everything just looks beautiful as a result.

--(Red3blog.tumblr.com).

However, there was the occasional deviation from this theme. Self-identified fat, queer, men infrequently posted pictures of themselves with captions that reiterated a fat pride narrative.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The fat-identified queer men disclosed their sexual identity either in the post itself or in their Tumblr profile.

“I’m a 25-year-old fat, brown, queer cis dude. This is what I look like expressing frustration at poorly-worded nature trail signs. ‘Cause sometimes it’s just a really pretty day and even fat people want to go for walks”

--(Queerandpresentdanger.tumblr.com).

“Here is a fat from the side self portrait in a fitting room. I found this awesome top a couple of weeks ago with the cutouts in the sleeves (perfect for my tattoo) and how could I not get a from the side photo of that?”

--(Wordsandloveandoveandwords.tumblr.com).

“I’ve hated my body all my life. I was a fat kid, bullied and teased; in adolescence I became anorexic and was never satisfied no matter how thin I became. As an adult I’ve yo-yo’ed up and down the scale. Although I have embraced fat-poz activism in recent years, I still feel ashamed for myself – I can love any fat body but my own, it seems! Sharing pictures of my body is a big challenge for me, but it helps to know I’m in such good company”

--(Redgaurd.tumblr.com).

Tumblr visual images and textual conversations about fat-identified men in fat activism were not as popular as other posts but the conversations seemed to grow in number as my fieldwork progressed.

“Fatphobia in so many ways is about hating and policing women and our bodies, but what I’ve realized recently is that the fatphobia that fat men experience is also a result of misogyny. I have found many themes that pointed to fatphobia toward men, at its roots, being about anxiety that men were becoming woman-like. Ultimately, I believe that the treatment of fat men is a feminist issue”



--(Fatoutloud.tumblr.com).

The ten fat activist Tumblr sites showcased a significant amount of images and discussion posts from Anglo-American women. However, Tumblr posts from fat-identified women of color were more frequent than fat-identified men, their presence was less visible than the standard fat-identified Anglo-American woman. It was rare for fat activist Tumblr users to explicitly discuss their racial identity on the ten Tumblr sites. Fat positivity was frequently addressed on the ten fat activist Tumblr sites as it related to the individual's gender rather than their ethnicity or racial identity. Tumblr sites that visually and textually represented fat-identified people of color were infrequent at best and rarely used the terminology "fat activist." However, the sites did slowly increase in number as my fieldwork progressed. The underrepresentation of fat-identified individuals was a point of contention in the fat activist Tumblr community and was discussed often by fat activist users.

"I was looking through my archives today, trying to find a quote, and I noticed something. This blog has been very VERY white. I have a problem with that. I want to represent fat bodies of all shapes and sizes and colors on this blog. Women of color and the FA movement have had their problems and the FA movement as far as I can tell is headed by lots and lots of white women (myself included) but I don't want to continue the trend of only expressing the concerns of fat white women of a certain social class. Unfortunately, tumblr has not been very helpful. I do a LOT of reblogging, and most of my own content is quotes, articles, and things like that. I want to find some beautiful fat women of color to reblog. So, lovely followers, I would love it if you would submit submit submit! Or, alternatively, if you could recommend some new tumblrs for me to follow with lovely fat women of color for me to reblog the shit out of! Good night afternoon and good luck! <3s and kisses"

--(Fuckyeafatpositive.tumblr.com).

“Tumblr is overall a space that has safe and unsafe subspaces for fat activists of color but as a whole is not a safe space due to the fact that it does contain these unsafe subspaces and does not gear itself toward active participation in feminist and anti-racist activity. Rather, it is a microcosm that reflects the attitudes of its many diverse users. Some spaces are specifically pro feminism where as others some are specifically anti-feminist. Other spaces celebrate people of color and fat activist of color while others choose to remove themselves from any politically charged dialogue and focus on personal issues, thoughts, feelings and inspirations”

--(Fatbodypolitics.tumblr.com).

The fat acceptance Tumblr community values inclusivity and aims to accept all fat-identified bodies as beautiful and equal to the ideal thin norm. However, from the abundance of posts that displayed images of fat identified, Anglo-American, hyper feminine women, it would seem that individuals that fit within the heteronormative, White supremacist American beauty ideals are deemed acceptable and others are not. Yet, the ten Tumblr pages explicitly invite bodies of all shape, color, ability, sexuality and gender. There is a clear dissonance in who is invited and who is participating. How are we to make sense of the hyper visibility of a particular proud fat body?

### Making Meaning of *The Proud Fat Body*

The contextual foundation in which this study was established examined American consumer beauty culture’s reliance on White supremacist heteronormative ideals, the ways in which the thin ideal is constructed and targets women. American consumer beauty culture constructs fat in opposition to dominant conceptions of beauty and femininity while simultaneously correlating a woman’s worth to her beauty. Therefore, fat connotes ugliness and

masculinity. It then becomes clear that fat stigma is internalized differently across gender.

Dominant heteronormative ideals align men with masculinity, thus regardless of a man's weight, fat or thin, a man will connote a sense of masculinity and therefore a legitimate suitable identity.

Thus fat-identified women are seen as possessing deviant gender identities due to their bodies' association with masculinity and ugliness.

This may also influence the abundance of high feminine presenting fat-identified women. Fat-identified women adorn themselves with feminine aesthetics, makeup, dress, hair and gesture as a way to compensate for their bodies' masculine connotation. High feminine gender presentation is therefore a way to have others' perceive their identities as properly gendered. High feminine gender presentation is also then an act of resistance to their prescribed masculinity. Fat stigma disproportionately marginalizes women and therefore, there may be more women fat activists, more Tumblr images of fat-identified women and may justify why many fat activists speak about fat positivity as it relates to their gender identity.

Although, gender identity seems to be a defining influence and characteristic of fat activism, "[...] racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1283). Fat stigma cannot be disrupted without also attending to the implications of the other contributing systems of domination. As Crenshaw (1991) claims, "the failure [...] to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies [...] will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women" (p. 1252). One's relationship with the fat acceptance community is negotiated differently based on the race, gender and sexual identity of the fat identified individual. Fat-identified individuals negotiate a fat activist identity and a relationship with their fat body while negotiating understandings of multiple self-identities and

multiple aspects of self (Crenshaw, 1991). Moreover, fatness, fat stigma, and fat positivity, is translated differently across the various aspects of self-identity. For example, the term “thick” is often used in reference to women of color as a sign of their larger frame, signifying sex appeal. Similarly, fat bodies are praised more frequently within queer and lesbian communities (Gailey, 2012). This does not negate the ways women of color and queer women can be and are discriminated against based on their weight, rather it addresses the complexities of fat stigma as it translates across race, gender and sexuality.

Smith (2007) describes some Native American women’s apprehension to join forces with women in feminist coalition. Smith argues that these Native American women’s apprehension stems from their location as Native American women and compounding, intersecting systems of oppression. Due to the way Western society has historically oppressed Native Americans and continue to do so, Native American women seek sovereignty as “Native American” first, and “women” second. Therefore, they are discouraged from participating in feminist movements that seek empowerment for “women” first. A parallel argument may also be made for women of color and fat activism. Fat activism focuses too narrowly around (assumed White or Anglo-American) fat bodies and does not sufficiently address the racial implications of being fat embodied.

The fat activist Tumblr community and the broader fat acceptance community are not impervious to White supremacy and “[...] virtual spaces [...] tend to reinforce existing inequalities, and propagate already dominant ideologies” (Nakamura, 2009, p. 666). The underrepresentation of fat-identified women of color in this study’s ten fat activist Tumblr sites mirrors the underrepresentation of women of color in consumer culture and may speak to society’s substantial racist underpinnings (Kwan, & Trautner, 2009).

“So why are black, female, fat fashion bloggers, many of whom drive considerable income towards the plus size fashion industry via their blogs, not seeing themselves adequately represented in this new curvy trend? The ‘fatshion’ movement has made it obvious to the mainstream fashion establishment that there is a market out there for fashion-forward clothing in larger sizes. Any survey of the fatshion blogosphere will tell you that a great percentage of that market is black. Why are mainstream fashion mags so reluctant to include black plus size models in their spreads, and why do the ‘high fat fashion’ retailers use all white faces as their representatives? It definitely has something to do with the aversion to using black straight size models on runways and in fashion spreads. Unless you’re Alex Wek and the photographer needs the color of the clothes to ‘pop’ against your dark skin. If thin blackness is unwelcome, imagine a double-whammy of fat blackness. Since black women’s bodies tend to have an exaggeratedly feminine shape, it could be the tendency of fashion designers to pick androgynous shapes to model their clothes. Plus size white models don’t usually have a very exaggerated sexualized shape. So this goes back to society’s issues with black women’s bodies in general. Since black women are stereotyped so often as being loose or hypersexual, any emphasis placed on sexualized body parts due to their size compounds the problem. Better to leave that can of worms alone and just work with the non-black models”

–(Bookmarklet.tumblr.com; Racialicious.com).

The lack of diverse fat bodies represented on the ten fat activist Tumblr sites alongside the numerous images with a particular body type perpetuates exclusivity and constructs a dominant proud fat body archetype. Consequently, an exclusive representation of fat pride and fat positivity stops dissimilar fat bodied women from participating in the fat acceptance community, or at the very least the ten fat activist Tumblr sites. Many of the fat activist Tumblr participants encouraged others to follow their lead and mirror their fat positive posts in image

and discussion. However, the presence of a particular body incites others who identify with that body type to also post on the Tumblr site (Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis, & Holland, 2011).

“I have spent the past year or so learning to love my body fat included... Tumblr has helped me do that and more...Embracing myself like this has completely changed my life, My marriage is better because of it and this photo was taken before our date night complete with visible belly outline :D So when I saw my friend Alibuttons post on here I just had to follow suit! Stay beautiful!”

--(Thesweettomymean.tumblr.com).

“It’s quite scary uploading a photo from this angle—especially as my stomach is larger than my breasts, which had been a ‘problem’ for me when I was younger. But you know what, I felt like a goddess when this photo was taken, and looking at it now I think its pretty awesome. I hope this can help others with similar bodies to me to accept themselves as they are and not how they may possibly be in the future. Love to you all”

--(lapocketrocket.tumblr.com).

As well, a fat identified person’s ability to pass as thin may also impact their decision to post Tumblr submissions. Fat stigma refers to an obvious amount of extra weight on a person that is not concealable (Goffman, 1963). However, individuals are able to pass by openly working towards the thin ideal through exercise, diet and self-preservation (Farrell, 2011). Moreover, fat is not just a number on the body mass index. “Fat” is also a feeling of incompetence in contrast to the thin ideal and is significantly influenced by the identity of those occupying the individual’s immediate social surroundings (Hopkins, 2012). Therefore, a fat body is not limited to a body that is obviously overweight, but rather, a fat body may be a body that is not thin enough.

“Yes I would LOVE to see sizes 26+ getting this recognition too. Completely agree with that. But if someone with my height and weight doesn’t ‘qualify’ as fat, then where exactly does that line begin?”

–(Marchmallowfluffwoman.tumblr.com; Dreamland51.tumblr.com).

“I’m 5’ 2”. Never been skinny enough for most people’s standards, never been heavy enough to have my doctor give me a lecture. Stuck in that awkward middle zone. Not skinny enough for guys who like skinny girls, not heavy enough for guys who like heavy girls. I wished for a long time in high school that I was taller, because in my mind taller girls could get away with being heavy, but short girls couldn’t. And for a while I blamed my weight for the fact that I’ve never had a boyfriend.

But fuck that. Art school and the people I have met there and here on Tumblr have helped me (although they may not know it) become exponentially more happy with myself. My body, my life. Who cares if I’m in the middle? I don’t need to be skinny or fat to be content. I just need to be me”

--(Ladybonerforvangogh.tumblr.com)

Tumblr gives its users tremendous freedom as it regards the disclosure of personal information and invites “[...] unprecedented possibilities [...] for controlling the conditions of [...] self-representations in ways impossible in face to face interactions” (Nakamura, 2009, p. 660). Moreover, because “users of the internet represent themselves within it solely through the medium of keystrokes and mouse clicks, and through this medium they can describe themselves and their physical bodies any way they like; they perform their bodies as text [and picture]” (Nakamura, 2009, p. 660). Fat acceptance Tumblr community is “dynamic, constantly changing and being merged into one another. Anonymity is not a polarity online, but a sliding scale that people adjust for different communicative uses and their relationships with different users”

(Kozinets, 2009, p. 178). As such, fatness is performed and embodied through their virtual interactions, the fat activist Tumblr users have complete autonomy with regards to what personal information they disclose and how they disclose it—which complicates any notions of passing as thin or fat. Furthermore, if an individual is able to pass, as they are on Tumblr, they may choose not to risk stigmatization and discrimination by “outing” themselves as fat. Passing negates the perceived purpose of or perceived need to out oneself as fat and therefore, may contribute to the proud fat body archetype found in this fieldwork.

#### Embodying Collective Accountability: The Process of Belonging to a Fat Activist Coalition

My fieldwork has left me with two concerns that urgently need addressing. The first is the focus on self, rather than community, in the fat acceptance Tumblr community. The fat activist Tumblr users’ posts showcase fat activism as it emphasizes an individual’s self-empowerment—praising the individual at the expense of the collective, rewarding individual episodes of catharsis and valuing them over the work that sustains a community (Levins Morales, 1998, Fatheffalump.tumblr.com). The second issue is the matter in which fat activism reinforces harmful ideologies. This is evident in the lack of diversity with regards to who is represented in the fat activist Tumblr community and broader fat acceptance grassroots community. Equally significant is fat activist Tumblr community’s dependence on American consumer beauty culture. The majority of the Tumblr posts defined and interrogated fatness as it is informed by and relates to their gender identity. Additionally, their resistance efforts relied on and reiterated the United States’ beauty consumer culture’s understanding of fat stigma and its marginalization of women. Further demonstrating the immense ways US consumer beauty



culture has been internalized and its significant promotion of fat stigma and the harmful impact of heteronormativity and White supremacy.

By relying on individualistic, heteronormative, White supremacist definitions of fat positive identity and fat activist resistance, fat positive identities have become essentialized. The acts of resistance generated from this limited understanding have become equally insular and essentialized (Crenshaw, 1991). Numerous Tumblr posts urge the fat activist Tumblr community to focus on individual catharsis and lack an intersectional analysis. Consequently, fat activism does not account for the broader community's needs---resulting in exclusivity, lack of coalition and the continual perpetration of hurt within the fat acceptance community (Fatheffalump.tumblr.com).

“No fat person is unacceptable in fat activism. It is important that when we take up the challenge of demanding dignity and respect for fat people, we need to include ALL fat people, especially those people who aren't considered 'valuable' to society. When it comes to fat activism, we need to make sure we're not walking over other fat people to raise ourselves and our own needs higher. We need to examine our own preferences and tastes – why do we share the things we share, and follow the people we follow? Do we uphold the very prejudices that we're supposedly fighting against, because we have internalized the same societal bullshit as everyone else? Are we making sure we represent a diverse range of fat people in all of our work? What are we doing for the older fatties? The fatties of color? The super fatties? The ones that don't care about fatshion? The ones that can't afford fatshion, or basic things like medical care and food? The disabled or chronically ill (physically or mentally) fatties? The queer fatties? The trans\* fatties? We need to move beyond focusing on just the cuties, the fatshionable, the young, the social butterflies in the fatosphere. We need to make it clear that fat rights are for **all** fat people. There will be no real valuable social

change until we do”

--(Sleepydumpling.tumblr.com).

Although, individual catharsis and healing are necessary and are courageous acts, it is through community that healing can be sustainable.

“Support fat girls that have double chins and don’t have hourglass figures.

Support fat girls that are super curvy.

Support fat girls that eat junk food and don’t exercise.

Support fat girls that eat healthy and workout.

Support fat girls who want to lose weight.

Support fat girls who don’t want to lose a single pound.

We’re in this together, they’re no exceptions”

--(Openemptythoughts.tumblr.com).

The fat acceptance community cannot sustain itself without first being accountable to the complex ways fat-identified individuals are marginalized. The community must also diversify understandings of fat stigma and fat activism. As Suzanne Pharr (1996) eloquently states, “to live in authentic community requires a deeper level of caring and interaction than many of us currently exhibit in our drive for individualism and self-fulfillment. That is, it calls for living with communal values. And we face a daunting challenge here because we all live in a culture that glorifies individualism. Creating community requires seeing the whole, not just the parts, and understanding how they interrelate. However, the difficult part is learning how to honor the needs of the individual as well as those of the group, without denying the importance of either” (p. 98).

We are fortunate enough to have built a community through our individual stories and acts of resistance. However, we must now move “beyond the illusion of ‘self,’[...shifting] from a notion of identity that begins with ‘I’--as does the inscription ‘identity,’ which announces ‘I am...’—to a sense of ‘self’ that is radically inclined toward others, toward the communities to which we belong, with who we long to be, and to whom we feel accountable” (Rowe, 2005, p. 18). Refocusing fat activism towards building a coalition rather than solely individual empowerment, this shift changes how we interact in fat positive spaces while also redefining what we qualify as a fat positive space. Fat positivity is as much a tool for personal empowerment as it is a communal act of resistance against the systems that marginalize us as fat-identified individuals. Once this is understood, we can easily problematize resistance strategies that rely on harmful heteronormative and racist systems. To do so, we must disrupt resistance strategies that assert fat is as good as thin, and problematize the construction of and the social, cultural complexities of the dichotomy of thin and fat.

By defining fat stigma and embodying resistance practices that are intersectional and multi-issue in agenda, we can “[... expand our] understanding of power so as to capture the ways in which processes of differentiation and systems of domination interrelate. The focus of analysis is thus not ‘just’ domination but the very interactive processes and structures in which meaning of privilege and penalty are produced, reproduced and resisted in contingent and relational ways” (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 238). Moreover, it is counterproductive to define our positive fat identities by relying on society’s one-dimensional definition of fatness. It is equally insufficient to rely solely on intentionality—prefacing a post or a Tumblr site with a brief sentence or two about the intentions of inclusivity and community. By relying solely on intentionality, the discomfort and hurt of those around us becomes theirs to bare alone which negates the ways in which our hurt

and discomfort are shared and intertwined as well as erases pathways towards accountability and healing. Just as fat activism is embodied, and the fat body is understood as a site of resistance, inclusivity must also be acted upon and embodied.

### Future Fat Activist Explorations and Conclusions

My fieldwork reflected the overarching trends I observed over the course of my participation in the Tumblr community. However, it is possible that the amount of Tumblr sites and the methodological process may have contributed to the exclusive nature of the results and the overall scope of this paper. Moreover, my gender, socioeconomic, sexuality and racial identity likely influenced the fat activist Tumblr sites I followed.

It is also likely the identity of the Tumblr site hosts influenced the identities of their followers. The particular identities of each Tumblr host were not explicitly stated. Although their gender was shared, the ten Tumblr hosts did not all disclose their ethnicity, sexuality, age, or body type. The shared gender identity of each host could have attracted more women than men and thus contributed to the underrepresentation of fat-identified men. Moreover, the ten fat activist Tumblr sites shared many of the same followers and posts. The ten fat activist Tumblr sites shared community may have influenced the exclusive nature of collected posts.

Despite the potential limits of this study, it does mirror the broader fat acceptance grassroots community and is indicative time spent as a participant observer in the fat activist Tumblr community. However, the specificity of this research encourages further explorations. How does a fat activist intervene and build an embodied coalitional community on Tumblr? The question does not suggest there is one way to be a fat activist, or that fat activism must be done “right,” but rather it asks how can we heal and feel empowered in a way that engages a critical

communal consciousness? How do we unlearn heteronormative, racist ideas of what a body should look like and (re)-learn to celebrate the diversity, resilience, wisdom and beauty of all bodies? How can we work together to deconstruct fat stigma and other forms of marginalization while building a stronger inclusive fat community? How can we challenge ourselves to decenter whiteness, capitalism, ableism, heterosexism and classism while we explore what it means to be fat? These questions must be interrogated as we post content on Tumblr pages, as we construct fat positive identities for ourselves.

As this paper comes to a close, the conversation is just beginning.

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